SOLVE Your Money Troubles!

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BY ROBERT MORLEY

Printed in the United States of America
Scriptures in this publication are quoted from the
King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

With the world locked in the constricting grip of recession and hurtling toward the biblically prophesied days of reckoning, you urgently need to put your financial house in order.

Regardless of financial condition, and regardless of surrounding economic conditions, *you can prosper!* But to do so, you must take certain concrete action. Sacrifices must be made, at least for a short while. But the result will be a happy, reduced-stress lifestyle.

Are you ready to experience the financial freedom, the peace of mind and the abundant, joy-filled life that directly result from practicing God's laws on finance?

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Chapter 1
How to Keep Your Job in a Recession

In the United States, the employment situation is terrible regardless of where you look. Millions of people are struggling. In Great Britain and Europe, millions more are out of work. Australasia is suffering too. And the world is still only in the early stages of an approaching Great Depression.

There has never been a more important time to increase job security.

Let's open our Bibles to learn what *God* has to say about how to succeed in the workplace. Let God show you how to strengthen your likelihood of keeping your job—even as times get worse.

DOES GOD WANT YOU POOR?

First, know that God wants you to be happy and prosper. Somehow, many people equate Christianity with poverty. This is wrong.

The Bible contains several examples of wealthy men whom God describes as righteous. Abraham had hundreds of servants he was able to arm to battle the king of Assyria; counting their wives and children, Abraham's household would have numbered more than a thousand. Job was so humanly perfect that even the devil couldn't find fault in him—and he was possibly the wealthiest man of his age.

God does not intend His people to be poverty-stricken, dressed in rags, living in penury. In fact, God challenges each of us to see whether, if we obey Him, He will not open up the storehouses of heaven and shower down riches upon us! (Malachi 3:10).

Jesus Himself said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it *more abundantly*" (John 10:10). "*I wish above all things,*" the Apostle John said, "that thou mayest *prosper* and be in health" (3 John 2). It is God's desire that we have happy, healthy, *abundant* lives!

But in order to have this kind of life, you *must* obey God's laws—including His laws of financial success!

WORK HARD

If you were to survey the world's most successful "self-made" billionaires, you would find one commonality: diligent, hard work. Lots of it. This is a trait all successful individuals have, regardless of income bracket.

From the beginning of human life on Earth, God purposed that man should work diligently and thus reap the benefits.

On the seventh day of creation week, God created the Sabbath by resting. But the commandment for us to follow His example and rest on the Sabbath has another, often overlooked side. The Fourth Commandment (Exodus 20:9) also says, "Six days shalt thou LABOUR, and DO ALL THY WORK." That part of the command is also important to obey.

The intent of this law shows that although man is commanded to rest on the seventh day, he is to keep busily engaged in gainful work during the first six days of the week.

God gave this commandment to keep us in a right relationship with our Creator. He *works*. He created and now *sustains* His creation. God intends us to become like Him. God *produced* His wealth—His creation—through labor during the first six days of the week. We are to do likewise.

The Bible is also clear on *how* to work. "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might," wrote King Solomon, who possessed phenomenal wealth (Ecclesiastes 9:10). Solomon said the slothful and sluggards should study the ant and how that tiny insect works hard to save up food for the winter, even though it has no taskmaster forcing it to do so (Proverbs 6:6-8). The Apostle Paul said professing Christians who will not work are worse than unbelievers (1 Timothy 5:8). A Christian ought to be a diligent, hard worker at whatever type of work is available to do. Hard work is evidence of a true Christian!

Henry Ford, car manufacturer and industrialist, wrote in the introduction to his book *My Life and Work:* "There is no reason why a man who is willing to work should not be able to work and to receive the full value of his work. There is equally no reason why a man who can but will not work should not receive the full value of his services to the community. … If he contributes nothing he should take nothing away. He [the sluggard] should have the freedom of starvation."

Mr. Ford had no patience with people able but unwilling to work. He paid the highest wages in the auto industry, but he would not tolerate laziness!

Contrast Ford's historic success with the state of the U.S. auto industry today. Believe it or not, for some years now, thousands and thousands of unionized employees have been paid to sit idle and do nothing. There is no work to do, but they cannot be fired due to union rules. This is not a recipe for success for either companies or individuals.

There is no way around it. Becoming a success at anything requires diligent work.

BECOME MORE VALUABLE

Some people are offered jobs just because of their reputation as hard workers, but most are sought because they are also *skilled* in their field. Becoming highly skilled at something obviously requires hard work, but the rewards are obvious: "Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men" (Proverbs 22:29). The word *diligent* in this verse can also mean *skillful*.

Prepare for the best job you can. The extra hours of study or training will pay off later. A second job, or even night classes, may be required for a time. Be creative. Consider all your options. "Be thou diligent to know the state of thy flocks [or whatever occupation you have], and look well to thy herds. For riches are not for ever …" (Proverbs 27:23-24).

The Apostle Paul gives further instruction regarding making yourself a more valuable employee. He says to be cooperative and zealous on the job, conscientiously *serving* your employer or supervisor (Colossians 3:22-23; Titus 2:9). Be alert to please your foreman or boss. Do the job *his way.* Show your willingness to *go beyond* what is required, and work extra hours if necessary to complete a job on schedule. Remember that good personal relations on the job are vital to assured employment.

Valuable employees get paid more and have greater job security. The way to receive a greater reward is to be *worth more*. So make yourself a valuable employee. Don't just plod along in your job with a ho-hum, humdrum, every-day-the-same-routine attitude. Be a fired-up go-getter! Grow! Produce! Apply yourself and *prove* to your employer that you earnestly desire to do more and to have more responsibility, and that you have the capacity and the will to work! (Matthew 25:15-28; Mark 4:24).

By working hard and becoming more valuable, you are doing everything humanly possible to not only keep your job, but to advance and flourish.

DO YOUR PART—GOD WILL DO HIS

Many nations are heading into the worst economic times since the Great Depression. The struggle to keep your job will only intensify. But if you do your part and follow God's laws, God *will* bless you and provide for all your needs. As Christ said, "[S]eek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these [material] things shall be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33).

Pray for favor. Unemployment may reach 50 percent or more, but there is no reason that you cannot be one of the 50 percent with a job.

Consider Joseph. He was sold by his brothers into slavery. He was taken captive into a foreign country. He was wrongly accused of a heinous crime. He was thrown in jail. He was forgotten by a man who said he would help. Yet through it all, Joseph ultimately attained the second-highest position of power in the land.

When you obey God, nothing can impede ultimate success. Even an economic cataclysm is nothing against the power of the God who wants you to *prosper.*

Chapter 2
How to Save Money During a Recession

IF YOU ARE LIKE MOST PEOPLE, YOU HARDLY KNOW WHERE YOUR LAST paycheck went.

You might be flabbergasted to see just where your money disappears—the wasted dollars, pounds or euros that could have been put to good work elsewhere.

Every successful business operates on a budget. Whether you are with or without debt, in a low-income bracket or high—if you would rather live on Boardwalk than the poorhouse on Baltic Avenue, *you need to establish a budget.*

But how?

THE NECESSITIES

Here is the basic rule for sensible budgeting: Never plan to spend more than you can afford.

The basic essentials are housing, food and clothing. (There is also another, biblically mandated claim on your income that you must factor into your budget. For more information on this, the most important and fundamental financial law of success, request a free copy of our booklet *The Financial Law You Can't Afford to Ignore*.)

In the past, financial planners in the U.S. said to spend no more than 20 percent of your income on housing (rent or mortgage). During the housing bubble years of the late 2000s, many planners adjusted that estimate up to 40 or even 50 percent.

In the post-bubble era of recession and contraction, it is prudent to spend no more than 25 percent. Figure in another 5 to 10 percent for utilities. (All the percentages given here are to be figured on your *net* income—after taxes have been taken from the *gross* amount of your check.)

Food and groceries will generally take up 10 to 15 percent of your net income. Add another 5 percent or so for miscellaneous items purchased at the grocery store such as toothpaste, hair products, soap and so on. Those with large incomes can apportion a smaller percentage here and a larger percentage to some other category. Larger families, on the other hand, may have to increase their food budget to be sure their budget allows for an adequate, wholesome diet.

Shoppers are often too hurried to notice prices. Many are unaware of the high cost of certain *kinds* of items. But it is also important *not to skimp on food.* Don't let the price drive you to eat unhealthy foods. Instead, cut down your other expenses to allow enough money for a healthful diet.

To get the most healthful food for your money, be bargain conscious and watch for specials.

One easy way to save on the food bill is by not buying the most expensive cuts of meat. You can also extend or substitute higher-priced meat with plant proteins such as whole grains and legumes.

Practice proper food storage, plan for leftovers and eliminate waste. Try home cooking "from scratch" as opposed to using more expensive convenience foods (make your own bread, yogurt, granola, etc.). A bread machine can save you a lot of money over the course of a year—but if you buy one, make sure you follow through and use it.

Buy produce in season. Go to the local farmer when possible. Better yet, plant your own garden. A $1 tomato plant can produce many dollars' worth of tomatoes.

Learn how to properly preserve food you have grown or picked yourself—by canning, freezing or drying.

Use coupons efficiently. Many websites explain how the "grocery store game" works and how to save money. SuperCouponing.com is an example.

By being careful and prudent, you can cut down your grocery budget considerably and still eat healthfully.

Your clothing budget may range from 4 to 8 percent of your net income, depending on regional climate, season and occupation. Buy only the type and quality of clothing that your budget will allow. Control your desires for expensive clothes if you cannot afford them. Be *very* careful about using that department store credit card; it can ruin you before you know it. Utilize thrift stores and learn to sew so that you can make your clothes last longer.

AFTER THE NECESSITIES

Next after these three basic necessities comes transportation. Car payments, if any, gas and oil, insurance and repairs must be included. Don't forget that cars need repairs and preventive maintenance to keep them in safe running condition. Be very careful about purchasing a car that you cannot pay for in cash. Find a carpool partner and explore the availability of public transportation. Endeavour to keep your transportation costs between 10 and 15 percent. Be sure you carry at least the minimum auto insurance required by your state.

You should also carry life insurance. God's Word testifies that certain events will transpire and befall all men. It's appointed to man once to die (Hebrews 9:27). And "time and chance happeneth to them all" (Ecclesiastes 9:11). Therefore, faith, wisdom, common sense and prudence alike dictate that we should be prepared for unforeseen eventualities. In fact, it is showing love toward your neighbor and family.

It is recommended that you purchase *term* life insurance for the breadwinner of the family that will pay out 10 times your yearly gross salary in the case of death. This type of insurance is inexpensive and may literally cost less than a dollar per day. If you have children and your spouse does not earn a salary, it is still prudent to take out a policy on her to cover expenses that would arise in the event of death. But don't let the combined premiums for all insurance (excluding health insurance) to climb beyond 5 percent or so of your net income.

Other smaller items that you are apt to overlook are *entertainment* and *pocket money.* Don't think that entertainment and recreation are luxuries you cannot afford; the truth is that some form of diversion is necessary to maintain a happy family. Plus, *budgeting* for these expenses keeps them from consuming more of your income than they should.

Pocket money for *miscellaneous* small expenses not included elsewhere in the budget—such as haircuts and newspapers—is also important. Without money in your pocket to buy what you need when you need it, you can *feel* like a pauper even though you have a comfortable balance in the bank.

TWO CATEGORIES OF SAVINGS

It has been said that a good rule for wise financial management is to save something for a rainy day. A companion rule is to distinguish between light sprinkles and heavy showers.

Every family budget should provide for two kinds of savings. Though your initial amounts will be small, you need to develop this habit of saving.

One type of savings is for expected expenses. It is called *operational savings*. Special expenses like maternity bills, a major furnishing, new shingles for your roof, or preparing for winter should be paid for from such a fund. This savings fund is for things not regularly budgeted out of each check.

The other kind of savings is for totally unexpected, unpredictable emergencies. This is your *emergency savings,* a built-in safety valve for your budget. Authorities recommend you budget approximately 5 percent of your net earnings each pay period until you have accumulated six months' worth of emergency savings. Then, when an emergency occurs that reduces your reserve, build it back up with the same diligence as before. An emergency fund reduces the stress resulting from any future financial problem. Anything we can do to prepare for tomorrow in a regular, consistent manner will help diminish some of the emotional impact that might result from an emergency.

If you are currently in debt, continue to make all your minimum payments, but put aside additional money to save up the first $1,000 of your emergency fund. Take an extra job if you need to. It is imperative to have some emergency money on hand. Once you have that $1,000 saved, then go back to paying off the debt before finishing your six-month emergency reserve. This is cash that should be placed in a savings account, or money market account. *It is not to be invested.*

These overall guidelines will help you establish a practical, balanced budget.

BUDGETING

Here is how to begin setting up a budget. First, sit down and make a complete list of *all* ordinary monthly and yearly expenses, including any monthly debt payments you might have.

Next, apportion the correct amount from each check for each expense. If you are paid on average twice a month, simply *divide* monthly bills in half and *double* any weekly bills to arrive at the amount to be taken from each check. Divide yearly bills by 26 to determine how much money to set aside each 14-day pay period. Make a list.

If you are spending more than you are earning, cut out less important expenses until you balance your income and outgo.

Then compare the amounts you are setting aside from each paycheck for each expense to the percentages for each category outlined above (housing, food, clothing, debt, etc.). Consider any adjustments you might want to make.

There are two ways to handle the money itself. One is to turn it into cash and keep it in separate envelopes for each budget category. The other is to use a record book or computer program, and keep the money in the bank.

You may want to use a combination of these two methods. For those expenses most conveniently paid by check or automatic bill-pay, the bank method is probably *safer* and therefore recommended. You will have to keep detailed records, however, whereas no written records are necessary when you keep your cash in envelopes. The separate envelopes are their own record.

Since keeping large sums of money at home is rather risky, extreme care should be taken to keep any cash—and the knowledge of it—safe. And don't take the whole envelope with you to the store, just the rough amount that you will need. The envelope system should be kept away from children and possible burglars and in a fireproof box if possible. If you are struggling to keep to your budget due to uncontrollable credit card spending, cutting those cards up and using envelopes might be your best option. The only things you can buy are the things you have cash for.

Plus, studies have shown that people who pay cash for everything (as opposed to credit cards) actually spend 12 to 18 percent less per year on average. There is psychological pain associated with paying cash. This makes cash buyers less prone to casually spend.

Once properly set up, your budget will be simple to maintain each time you receive your check. You will always know that you have not overlooked any items and where your money is coming from and going to. You will be able to spend your money with the reassuring knowledge that it was intended for that purpose, and that it was spent the wisest way possible *within the bounds* of your income. You will experience new joy and peace of mind, and you won't feel guilty spending for extras and even luxuries—because those expenses will come out of the funds specifically prepared for that purpose.

DISCIPLINE

Using a budget to guide our financial lives requires diligence, thorough accounting and fortitude. Society throws many materialistic temptations our way, and human weakness is hard to overcome. But we must be disciplined throughout the year to stick to our budget. A well-managed budget accounts for our needs and helps us fulfill some of our desires.

We should review and change our budget whenever circumstances change, such as a pay raise at work or an increase in insurance costs. At least once a year, we need to review its accuracy. Throughout the year, we should evaluate our position to make sure we are consistently living within our means.

Don't view budgeting as restrictive. It is a practical, real way to ensure freedom from financial worry. As Jesus Christ said about God's way of life, *happy* are we if we *do* it! If we live a balanced lifestyle and are financially responsible, then even the emergencies that might arise will be less troubling, and we will certainly have more financial freedom and peace of mind day to day.

Set yourself the goal *now* to establish a well-balanced budget! Determine to live according to it and to not let anything distract you! Doing so will prevent your tumbling from circumstance to circumstance and will lead you into financial freedom. It will eliminate needless worry and concern. Take charge of your financial future. That is what God desires for all of us!

USE THESE TOOLS

Use the following tables to help you set up a budget and keep track of your financial progress.

Use the Income Planning table (Figure 1) to total up all sources of income. Remember to use after-tax amounts. The total will be the amount you use when creating your monthly budget.

INCOME PLANNING (Figure 1)

	Amount Expected	Actual Amount
Net Salary, husband		
Net Salary, wife		
Interest Income		
Dividend Income		
Social Security		
Disability		
Proceeds From Sale		
Other Income		
Gifts		
Total Income		

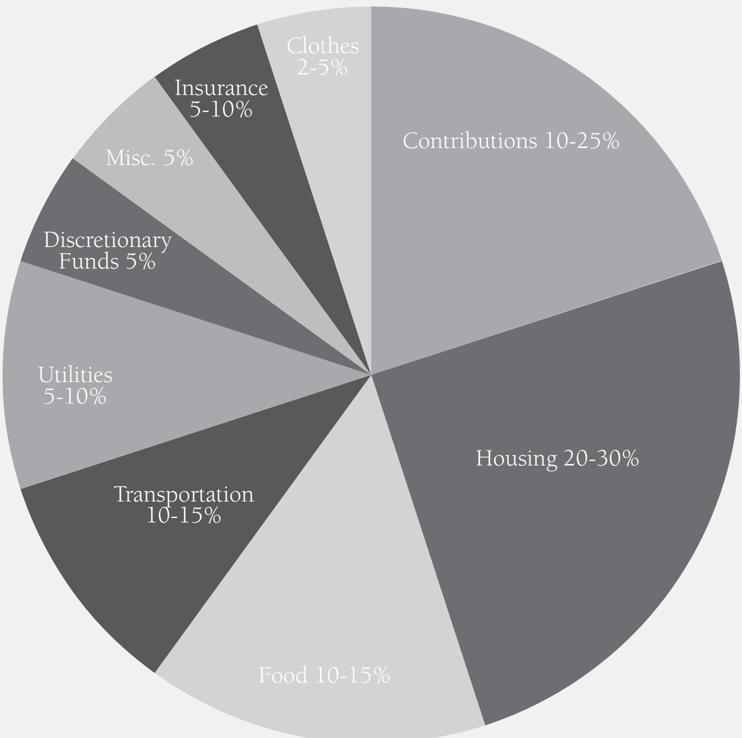
Keep track of your spending for each month by using the Monthly Expense Plan (Figure 2, next page). Prior to each month, you should "spend" each month's income on paper by assigning every dollar to a budget category. Then at the end of the month, go back and review your spending. Adjust categories as necessary. It may take three or four months to get your budget balanced.

MONTHLY EXPENSE PLAN (Figure 2)

BUDGETED ITEM	SUBTOTAL	TOTAL	ACTUALLY SPENT	% OF TAKE-HOME PAY
Tithes and Offerings		______	______	______
Payroll Deductions				
Taxes	______			
Social Sec./ Pension Fund	______			
Other	______			
TOTAL		______	______	______
Housing				
Rent/Mortgage	______			
Utilities	______			
Telephone	______			
Furnishings	______			
Maintenance	______			
Other	______			
TOTAL		______	______	______
Food		______	______	______
Transportation				
Fuel	______			
Maintenance	______			
Public Transport	______			
Car Payment	______			
TOTAL		______	______	______
Insurance				
Life	______			
Health	______			
Homeowners/Renters	______			
Automobile	______			
TOTAL		______	______	______
Clothing		______	______	______
Medical/Dental		______	______	______
Discretionary Funds				
Vacation/Travel	______			
Recreation	______			
Education	______			
Savings	______			
Gifts	______			
Personal	______			
Allowances	______			
Other	______			
TOTAL		______	______	______
Total Expenses		______	______	______
Amount Left Over		______	______	______

The accompanying pie chart (Figure 3) suggests what percent of household income should be spent on various budget items. Remember, these are suggestions and may vary according to income, living location and other factors.

SUGGESTED MONTHLY OUTLAYS (Figure 3)



Use the Net Worth Statement sheet (Figure 4, next page) to keep track of your financial progress. Remember, that any money owed on an asset should be subtracted from the asset's value. For example, if your house is worth \$300,000, but you owe \$240,000, your equity, or net value, is only \$60,000.

NET WORTH STATEMENT (Figure 4)

Item/Description	Value	Debt	Equity
Real Estate			
Home			
Other Properties			
Personal Property			
Automobiles			
Household Items			
Collectibles/Art			
Jewelry			
Long-term Assets			
Equity in a Business			
Life Insurance Cash Value			
Annuities			
Retirement Assets			
Vested Portion of a Company Plan			
Other Vested Benefits			
401(k)/IRA			
Other Long-term Assets			
Securities			
Stocks			
Bonds			
Government Securities			
Mutual Funds			
Gold/Silver			
Cash			
Cash on Hand			
Checking Account Balance			
Savings Account			
Money Market Funds			
Debt			
Credit Cards			
Personal Loans			
Student Loans			
Other			
Other			
Other			
Totals:			

Chapter 3
Flee the Credit Trap

Do you have trouble with credit cards? If so, you are not alone.

David and Lisa have a problem. They both have university degrees. They both earn decent salaries. And they both recently turned 31. Their problem is that they also have $40,000 in credit card debt.

Their story is all the more tragic considering that *after seven years* of marriage they still haven't made a dent in the bill. In fact, it keeps growing.

When asked about why they were in so much debt, David said much of it was "unavoidable" because it came from traveling around the country to friends' weddings, holiday trips to visit their families and the cost of clothing and feeding their two children. David admits that going to weddings and visiting family is a major source of their debt, but he and Lisa believe seeing friends and family is more important than staying out of debt.

Now David and Lisa are trying to move into a bigger house, with bedrooms for each of their boys. But with the new expenses, their debt burden looks set to increase some more, despite their $86,000 cumulative income and the fact that their salaries have risen over the years.

And David and Lisa have plenty of company.

Meet Ellis and Becky, two lawyers with a dilemma similar to David and Lisa's—but with one major difference.

On the surface, Ellis and Becky live a great lifestyle filled with exotic vacations and lots of "stuff." They have university degrees. They drive nice cars and live in a big house. They like to eat out, and are happy to send their children to private schools. And like David and Lisa, they also have thousands of dollars of credit card debt—$52,000 worth to be exact.

The main difference between the two families is that Ellis and Becky earn a whopping $400,000 per year—over 4½ times as much as David and Lisa. And despite the fact that Ellis and Becky are in the top 5 percent of wage earners in America, they still can't seem to get a handle on their bills.

The moral of the stories? Much of the financial trouble plaguing families today is not the result of low wages.

The basic cause for money problems is what some financial advisers call the Joneses syndrome—that is, the "keeping up with the Joneses" syndrome. According to the Bible, it is human nature for people to compare themselves with each other (2 Corinthians 10:12) and envy one another (James 4:5). If Jones drives a Buick, there is a natural desire to "one up" and drive a Cadillac even though your finances dictate you should drive a used Chevy.

Overextending a normally adequate income for *luxuries* and *personal indulgence* is a leading cause of money problems.

Society is geared toward immediate self-gratification. People are constantly deluged with advertising that appeals to human nature. Ads urge consumers to "buy now, pay later." Even the federal government tells people that national *deficit* spending is a good thing to get prosperity rolling again. It has become a national fixation in America, and the national economy has become absolutely dependent on it.

God knew that coveting would be such a big problem for people that He devoted one of the "Big Ten" Commandments to this credit-enabled, I-want-it-now spending mentality.

THE "EASY CREDIT" MISNOMER

There is nothing easy about "easy credit." The Bible warns about the dangers of debt. Proverbs 22:7 says the borrower is a servant to the lender. When you borrow, you become a slave (Nehemiah 5:4-5). People do not seem to understand or even consider that when you are in debt, you are just one illness, one recession, one loss of a job, one paycheck away from virtual serfdom—where *everything* is "in hock" to your creditors and in danger of repossession!

You might be convinced you can*not* do without your credit cards or other sources of borrowed money. But the fact is you *must learn* to get along without them, or at least *strictly control* them, or you will *never* experience true financial security!

Start today to exercise the strength of character to *wait* until you save the cash before you make purchases! A person without self-control is like a city that is broken down and without walls—easily plundered (Proverbs 25:28). Lack of self-discipline in handling money can prove very costly.

Another underreported problem associated with the "buy now, pay later" culture is that of working mothers. The wife and mother *should not have to* go to work to keep up the payments for things that should not have been bought in the first place. The resultant neglect of children by millions of working mothers and selfish fathers has been a prime cause of juvenile delinquency in the United States.

Your standard of living is probably already beyond the wildest dreams of the typical inhabitant of this planet. Few realize that the *average* person on this Earth has *worn out* shoes, *little* food and no fine furniture or appliances of any kind!

GOING INTO DEBT IS EASY— BUT GETTING OUT ...

Meet John. John was doing all right financially. He usually had a few dollars left over at the end of the month. So he rented a nicer house. His friends had nice homes, and he felt he "deserved" one too.

Soon afterward, the family car needed major repairs. A salesman persuaded him to try out a newer model. Its luxurious "feel" and the offer of a low interest rate "sold" him at once. John reasoned that the amount he would have had to spend to fix the old car was enough for the down payment.

John's family began to feel pinched financially. But they "just had to have" some rugs and leather furniture for that nicer house. A dealer cheerfully told John these "needed" items could be paid for by the month. So he bought them without hesitation. Since nothing was said about interest or finance charges, he *assumed* the installment “privilege” was simply a courtesy of the dealer.

Months later, John finally read the contract he had signed, only to discover that he was being charged an annual interest rate of 33 percent! To keep up the installments, he started putting everyday expenses on his credit card, thus paying more interest on money to pay interest. Finding the minimum payments increasingly difficult to repay, he transferred his balance to a new credit card, all the while racking up more credit card debt. Soon all his credit cards were maxed out and then, facing an unexpected expense for dental work for his children, John missed a payment. All of a sudden he was hit with late payment penalties and a 15 percent interest rate hike on all his credit cards.

The credit trap had slammed shut. In just a few months John was hopelessly caught in a tangle of debt. And the debt collectors were on their way.

This happens to people every year. But it is clearly avoidable.

NOT ALWAYS WRONG TO BORROW

The Bible shows it is not wrong to borrow under certain circumstances (Luke 19:23; Deuteronomy 28:12). The above verses would not be there if God prohibited all borrowing. But some have misunderstood Romans 13:8. Paul did not forbid borrowing when there is a real need. However, he commands us to “Render therefore to all their dues” (verse 7) and not to owe anything that is *overdue*. The only thing we should owe continually is *love toward one another* (verse 8).

But a person should borrow *only after wise counsel and proper planning*. Before making any financial decision, make sure you have “counted the cost,” especially when contractually binding yourself to make payments (Luke 14:28; Proverbs 27:12). Most people have never thought of Luke 14:28 as a *financial* principle—yet it certainly is!

Like millions of others, John did not “count the cost.” He and his family were victims of their own foolishness and lust. However, they were also victims of a credit system designed to deprive you of your money.

The world's present system of deficit financing and high taxation has been developing so long that it is virtually impossible for the vast majority of people to pay cash for a home.

But historically, outside of real estate, most other purchases depreciate over time. (In today's climate, even real estate is depreciating in many cities.) A rule of thumb is that if you are buying a depreciating asset, do without it until you can pay cash. Rent instead. Note that new cars on average lose 70 percent of their value after just four years.

That is why credit can be so dangerous to your financial health. It is so easy to spend hard-earned money, plus possibly years of interest, for things that break down, are consumed, and that depreciate in value. In the end, often all you are left with are the bills. Instead of helping solve financial problems, credit cards and installment plans often create them, keeping people in the *habit of overspending* and paying out interest. Is it any wonder those who are in debt often remain so?

That is not to say that credit card use is wrong. It can be a very useful tool, especially to avoid carrying large sums of money. Unlike other borrowing, no interest is charged on credit card purchases—if you pay at the first billing. Also, many credit cards offer valuable cash back or travel reward points as bonuses that can be beneficial. Just make sure to pay the card off every month.

If you don't have the character to control your buying, then *don't have* credit cards, and *don't* open any type of charge account! If you are already *in* debt, then strive to get out as soon as possible.

PAYING IT BACK

If you are in debt, the Bible says you must do everything in your power to repay. God holds you strictly responsible for paying your debts (Psalm 37:21).

Meet Mr. and Mrs. Muldoon. The Colorado residents took three years, but they did it—they paid off nine cards and $46,244 in credit card debt.

"We changed everything … to bare-bones minimum," Mrs. Muldoon told CNN. "Basically, if it wasn't essential to support life, we didn't do it." They took extra jobs, they clipped coupons, they grew their own food; a couple of times all they had for dinner was white rice and gravy, but they did it—they became debt free.

"When we mailed that last check… I sat down in the car, I looked over to my husband and I just burst out into tears," she said.

Analyze your recent purchases, and your present "possessions." How many of them do you really need? Are they absolutely necessary for the health and welfare of your family? Are they a genuine help in serving God and His Work? You need to answer these questions for yourself so you can have a happy, healthy, prosperous, bill-collector-free future of financial freedom.

Chapter 4

Getting Out of Debt: An Emergency Crash Course

Debt years are depressing years. You want to travel to educate your children, but you can't. You want to send your friend something special to encourage her, but you can't. You want to buy something nice for your spouse, but you can't. Your family desperately needs to purchase a functional appliance, but you can't. The list of financial can'ts reaches into every part of your day-to-day existence, it seems. Family arguments result from the financial strain.

Life is too short and too precious to grind under the financial and mental burden of debt for years on end. But it will take *drastic* action for you to get out.

Buy nothing more on credit. Budget payments to pay off all your previous debts. Yet, this *alone* may not be enough if you are heavily in debt. For example, while you might repay $100 or more a month, on debts now totaling $5,000 that wouldn't get you out of debt *for a decade!*

To *really* make headway in getting out of debt, you must *cut your standard of living* to "state of emergency" levels. By switching to emergency mode, you can be debt-free (excluding mortgage debt) in perhaps less than two years.

EMERGENCY MODE

Scrutinize your expenses. Look for ways to make emergency cuts in spending in order to live far *below* your present income.

Decide what you can cut out entirely. Really *sacrifice!* The more you sacrifice NOW, the sooner you will be out of debt.

Consider your vehicle first. Ask yourself if you could possibly get along without it. A car can cost you as much as it costs to support another member of the family. So it might be a good idea to get rid of your car altogether if possible. Perhaps it may be less expensive to carpool to work. Maybe you could even walk or ride a bus or bicycle. The money you receive for your car—plus the amount you save from insurance, gasoline, licensing and maintenance—will go a long way to help you get out of debt *a lot sooner.*

At the very least, if you drive an expensive car, consider selling it to get something more modest. And if you drive your vehicle "into the ground," instead of trading it in every few years, you will save yourself thousands more.

Remember, you are in *debt!* This is an *emergency!*

You might also be able to move to an area closer to your job and/or near a store to which you could walk to shop. You could conceivably cut your rent hundreds of dollars per month by renting a less expensive house. Paint and elbow grease are not very expensive. Dirty, dingy rooms can be made very livable and attractive with a little cleaning, paint and inexpensive curtains.

Pets are another area where some people spend thousands of dollars per year. Yes, they may be cute and cuddly, but they aren't people, after all. If you can find them a loving home, maybe it is time to let someone else enjoy them so you can work your way out of financial crisis.

Now consider your food bill. Do not skimp on your health. Doing that would cost you more—in more ways than one—later on. However, while you *must* provide for adequate nutrition, you can accomplish it using much less money than you think. Eliminate all food expenditures not essential to maintaining good health. Go back and review the food-budgeting tips in Chapter Three.

And if you are in dire straits, the government offers food stamp programs and other assistance. If there is a need, take advantage—that is what the programs are there for.

Recreation expenses can temporarily be cut too. A family dinner at a restaurant can become a family picnic at a nearby park. A trip to a major-league ballpark can become a nine-inning nail-biter at the local high school field. An excursion to the movies can become games at home and family conversation—far cheaper and far better for you spiritually.

Don't give up after a month or two. Set your will. Determine to stick with it. Seeing your debts melt away month by month will be *worth* the effort and sacrifice!

The Bible says if you faint in the day of adversity, your strength is small (Proverbs 24:10). Be strong. Finish the course. Oftentimes people quit when just a few more steps would reveal rays of light on the horizon. Saving money and reducing debt can seem overwhelming. Do not give in. Hebrews 12:1 tells us to run our spiritual race with patience, and smartly—casting off those things that impede our progress. The same principle applies in our financial "race."

Seek God's guidance. See your employer. See your creditor. Talk your situation over with them. Don't sit at home and say, "It's no use!" Don't procrastinate. Keep thinking. Keep planning. Keep working.

It will take some austere living to get completely out of debt, but rejoice in the progress you make. Don't fix your attention on the long way to go, but on *how far you have come*—and on the value of reaching the ultimate goal!

Technically, to get the most bang for your buck, pay off the debt with the highest interest rate first, while maintaining minimum payments on all your other debt. But if you need a psychological boost, consider the snowball method. Begin by paying off the loan that has the smallest principal. Once that debt is paid off, use the money you were putting toward that debt to help pay off your next smallest debt. Whichever method you choose, *keep moving forward!*

GET DRASTIC—DON'T GET STUPID

When you are in debt, the allure of certain promising investments can be strong. Be very careful! "[E]veryone who is hasty comes surely to poverty" (Proverbs 21:5; New American Standard). Money does not come easily, so don't be tricked into carelessly throwing it away. Read Psalm 37:7. Don't waste hard-earned dollars on gambling, lotteries or get-rich-quick schemes.

Keep your integrity and honesty. Follow the law and stay away from unethical businesses and practices (Proverbs 22:16; 28:6; Romans 13:1, 7). "A faithful man shall abound with blessings: but he that maketh haste to be rich shall not be innocent. … He that hasteth to be rich hath an evil eye, and considereth not that poverty shall come upon him" (Proverbs 28:20, 22). Faithfully stick to the plan of reducing debt and increasing savings until you have enough to meet your needs, emergencies, and *then* wants.

The way to prosper is to work diligently, plan ahead, invest wisely—not follow some wild idea, no matter how easy it may sound. Many men have gone broke, ruined their health and brought needless hardship and sorrow upon their families trying to get rich quickly.

"Are you willing to get another job and work a few 80-hour weeks?" asks well-known debt consultant Dave Ramsey. "If you are in financial stress because of something you've done, you need to get yourself out of the mess by working. If you think that it is too hard, you will never get out of the debt that you brought upon yourself. Laziness … will get you absolutely nowhere in life. We all make mistakes, but the question is whether you are willing to take responsibility for your mistakes! You need to learn from your mistakes or you—and your children—will be doomed to repeat the cycle."

The question you need to ask yourself, says Ramsey, is this: "How badly do you want to be out of debt?"

Remember: God *wants* you to prosper. He wants you to be able to live the debt-free way of life and experience the blessings that come as a result of obeying His financial laws. So keep working, get creative in finding ways to save money, and persevere through the drastic action and emergency cuts you have decided to take.

Chapter 5
Investing for the Future

THERE ONCE WAS A RICH BUSINESS BARON WHO DECIDED TO GO on an extended trip to a foreign country. He called his most trusted lieutenants to a meeting to divide up his assets to manage until he returned. To the first he gave the equivalent of five bars of gold, to the second he gave two bars, to the third he gave one.

The first lieutenant went off and *wisely* invested the five bars and, *in time,* doubled it. Likewise, the second lieutenant went and traded and *eventually* turned the two bars of gold into four. But the third lieutenant went and hid the money and did nothing.

When the businessman finally came home after his long absence, he called his servants to give an account of their work. To the first two lieutenants, the businessman said, "Well done! I will make you chief executive over many things."

Then he turned to the third lieutenant. "How did you do?" he asked. The man replied, "I knew you were a hard man, who drives a hard bargain. I was afraid to do anything with what you gave me. Instead I just hid it, so I wouldn't lose it. Here is your money back."

The rich man looked at him with disdain. "If you knew I was a hard man, why then did you not at least put the money in a bank account where it could earn a little interest?" he asked. "You're fired."

As is illustrated in this Matthew 25 account, to those who faithfully use what they are given, even more will be entrusted.

But those who are unfaithful, even what little they have will be taken away.

The Bible teaches a principle of *building wealth over time* to take care of your financial needs as you grow older. It is also biblical to leave an inheritance for your family if possible.

Yet, planning for future financial stability is a difficult prospect in today's uneasy economic climate. Financial earthquakes have rattled investors and made it difficult to discern where to put your money.

Where is the best place to invest? That is an age-old question that requires considerable research on your part.

THE STOCK MARKET

Some have asked whether it is permissible or advisable for a Christian to invest in the stock market. Romans 14:23 states that "whatsoever is not of faith is sin." That principle should guide your decision making perhaps more than anything. If you cannot invest in the stock market without violating your faith, then you should not do so.

However, if you are comfortable with taking some risk with a PORTION of your wealth, then the market *can* be a consideration. "The greater the risk, the greater the reward" is a common investing adage. Historically, the market has produced a reasonable return for investors over the long haul. Stocks have yielded an average of around 7 percent each year after inflation over the last 200 years. But don't be lulled into complacency by averages. There have been some periods, most notably the last decade, where the stock market has lost money. As Vanguard Chief Executive Bill McNabb recounted, "If you're in your 20s and are just starting to save for retirement, you've seen the market drop 55 percent, climb 88 percent, and drop again in a short span. …If you're in your 30s and have been saving for the past decade, you've seen the stock market return essentially 0 percent."

With the advent of online brokerages, investing in the stock market has become quite easy for investors. Trade commissions are relatively inexpensive. An abundance of online research can be accessed with a few clicks of the mouse. The result has been a large influx of unskilled investors making "day trading" quite popular. Day trading can be very risky and generally springs from a speculative or "get rich quick" mentality that is not biblical.

PRINCIPLES OF INVESTING

Should you choose to invest a portion of your wealth in the market, *never* invest your "emergency savings"! Investments should only be made after you have established your six-month emergency fund.

Many experts recommend investing in mutual funds or other managed packages to introduce new or inexperienced investors to basic principles of market dynamics. Mutual funds invest small portions in many companies and have the benefit of diversification, which reduces risk. If one out of 100 companies goes bankrupt, you have only lost 1 percent of your investment. Had you invested in only two companies and one went bankrupt, then you would have lost 50 percent of your money.

Mutual funds can be a safer alternative than trying to do all the research, monitoring and trading yourself. The downside is that you typically pay a small percentage in fees to the mutual fund manager.

Those with more skill, time and understanding might do better investing on their own, thus saving commissions paid to others for managing their resources. Consider a few basic guidelines if you are planning on investing in the market.

It is a good idea to only invest an amount you are willing to lose in its entirety should something drastic happen. If you can't afford to lose the money you are investing, then you probably shouldn't put that into the market.

Diversify your investments to protect yourself against catastrophic losses in case the sector you are investing in takes a dive. If you spread your holdings out, it is generally true that in the long run, you have spread your risk and should see some gain on your investment.

Don't invest all your money in just one stock. Most people who invest in individual stocks underperform compared to the general market. A balanced approach that spreads your risk over a variety of companies often leads to long-term growth.

Invest in companies after you have researched what you are supporting. Many companies produce goods or services that might violate your moral or spiritual principles. If you are careless, you may unwittingly end up helping to fund companies that, for example, distribute pornography, support bio-tech (genetic engineering), produce pharmaceuticals or manufacture military weapons. Make educated choices about where to put your money. If you believe in the product of the company and feel it has a strong, stable future (as much as you can determine), that could be a worthwhile investment.

Consider managed funds as an investment, but make sure you understand how your fund is invested. A little time spent with a broker or online research will reveal the holdings of the fund. Use the same considerations mentioned above: If the fund is invested in companies you don't agree with, don't invest in that fund.

Monitor your investments—but don't let this become a god in your life. If we are daily focusing on the movement of our investments, it will come at the cost of something in our lives. You might have to give up sleep, time with your family, prayer and study time or some other activity if you become engrossed with your portfolio. Take time to understand your investment and periodically check on its position, but don't let it preoccupy your thoughts.

The market has convulsed radically in the past several years. Greed and deceit have gripped many investors and corporate executives, leaving once-solid companies in a shambles. Corporate giants have gone bankrupt in mere days or even hours. In many countries, interest rates paid on savings accounts and timed deposits are low.

So where should you put your money? A balanced, diversified approach can hedge against this risk. It is a good idea to spread your risk over a number of investments to better insulate yourself against radical economic swings.

It might be a good idea to have a strong cash balance in savings and timed deposits. But considering that these will yield such low returns, if you can afford it you might consider other investments such as precious metals, stocks and mutual funds.

Again, however, if you can't make those investments in faith, you should avoid them.

SPIRITUAL INVESTMENT

As the world suffers through painful financial loss and restructuring, it is clear that we must first invest in our relationship with God.

Jesus Christ gave highly relevant counsel in Matthew 6. As Christ addressed a typical person's concern about providing food, clothing, health and shelter for themselves and their families, He said, "Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithall shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (verses 31-33).

Prophecy shows there is a time fast approaching when our money and investments will not be sufficient to protect us from the tribulations coming upon all the world. That is why the best investment advice we can give is to FIRST invest in your relationship with God and trust Him to take care of all your needs. He will guide your investments and help you to make wise decisions on how to protect yourself financially.

Chapter 6
Plan Your Estate

The Prophet Isaiah was instructed by the God of the Old Testament to give a specific message to King Hezekiah. It included the words: "*Set thine house in order;* for thou shalt die, and not live" (2 Kings 20:1).

Clearly, God expects us to take reasonable measures to set our houses in order in preparation for our possible death.

"You can't take it with you" is a common axiom. As Job stated, "Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21).

Simply put, our property and wealth do not join us in the grave. Therefore, most people want to give their possessions and wealth to certain other people or organizations when they die. Often they want to give it to their spouses, children or other relatives.

In fact, taking care of our families is a responsibility clearly mentioned in Scripture: "But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel" (1 Timothy 5:8; see also 2 Corinthians 12:14).

Our wealth and property are blessings from God. Of course, we are supposed to take care of them in life. Doesn't it follow that we should make plans for those blessings in the event of our death? As God expects us to be good stewards, shouldn't we make at least minimal arrangements for how our blessings will be distributed after we die?

In our complicated modern societies, the red tape surrounding death can be nearly immeasurable. Without proper planning, we cannot be certain our wishes for our estate will be carried out.

MAKE SOME DECISIONS

The first thing we must do is decide exactly what we want to happen with our assets when we die. To begin, make a list of what you have. Don't forget checking accounts, savings accounts, certificates of deposit (CDs), stocks and insurance policies, as well your physical possessions.

Now, what do you want to happen with those things if you die? Don't think you will not die for a long time and can put off making such plans. Accidents are responsible for thousands of deaths each year, so your age should not stop you from doing this.

List exactly what you want to happen if you die. If you are married, your spouse will most likely be the focus of your thinking. If not, you may have children, brothers or sisters, parents or friends you want included to receive some or all of your estate. Many people include charities or other organizations they feel are worthwhile.

Now you need to take steps necessary to see that your wishes are carried out as you would want them to be.

ENSURE THEY ARE CARRIED OUT

Many tools are at our disposal to help establish exactly what our wishes are. Some work much better than others; some cost more than others; some are much more complex than others.

At the very minimum, a person should make a will. However, a far better tool to ensure that your heirs receive what you want them to is a revocable living trust.

Creating a revocable living trust may be one of the biggest gifts you can give your heirs. It is a gift because it clearly and legally outlines what you want done with your assets when you die. It will greatly reduce the stress of those you love and will greatly reduce hard feelings and possible fighting that may result if you do not indicate what you want done with your possessions.

It is especially important to set up a revocable living trust if you think that some of your heirs may challenge your will, or if it might be considered controversial—for example, if you decide to leave a large portion to a charity, a non-relative, or some other organization. This will *greatly reduce the risk of your estate being challenged in probate court* and your assets being disposed of in ways you do not intend.

Avoiding probate will also save your heirs a lot of time and money. Once an estate is in court (as wills are required to be), everything is at the mercy of the legal system. Courts can essentially do whatever they want to do, and the costs and delays can be massive.

If you have children, you will still need to have a will in order to designate who will look after them. If you do not have it legally documented, the state will determine who will raise your children.

AN IMPORTANT TOOL

There is another simple tool available to people in the United States (that may or may not be available in other countries) for distribution of such things as savings accounts, CDs, check accounts, money market accounts, mutual funds, most stock or bond accounts, and various other "cash"-type assets.

This tool is remarkable for three primary reasons. First, it is cost-free. Second, it is simple. Third, it works.

All it takes is a 10-minute trip to your local bank to put this tool in place for your checking and savings accounts. No hassles, no delays, no cost. You gain the assurance that if you die, any money in those accounts will go exactly where you want it to go.

The tool is called a "payable on death" benefit, though there are other names for it. It is the best way to transfer funds at death to the person, people or organization you want them to go to. If you are married and have joint accounts, it requires both of you to die before it is activated.

Essentially, you assign a new owner to the account. That owner will instantly assume ownership control at the time of your death. The assets do not go through probate, a time- and money-consuming process. They do not remain in your estate, as they are instantly, upon your death, the property of the new owner.

If you ever wish to change the beneficiary, all you need to do is make another brief trip to the bank or institution holding your account or accounts.

To "collect" the assets, the new owner will be required to provide the bank with a certified death certificate and proper identification. They may be required to show two forms of identification by some agencies, but that's all there is to it.

This is a remarkable way to ensure your assets go where you want them to go. Since ownership actually changes, it is nearly impossible for anyone to contest or interrupt the transfer of funds.

Some states also allow for the transfer of your possessions held by a title or registration—for example, cars, trucks, motorcycles, snowmobiles, boats, planes, motor homes or travel trailers. This is called "transfer on death," or something similar. In the states permitting this type of transfer, simply go to the office where titles are registered and ask for the forms to transfer title upon your death. Fill the forms out and pay any required fees. In most states, the fees are minimal for this service.

Once that has been done, when you die, the property will be transferred to the person or organization you have named on the "Transfer on Death" form. This will avoid delays, additional costs and other complications that can arise after death.

ONLY FOR THE RICH?

Sometimes people think estate planning is only for the rich. In reality, exactly the opposite is true, especially for a "payable on death" benefit. The less money you have, the more important careful planning becomes. Without proper plans in place, your money will be consumed by the courts and attorneys, leaving nothing for those you love. A payable-on-death clause attached to your accounts and other assets allows even the smallest accounts to be transferred to the person or organization of your choosing without costs and delays.

You may list more than one person or organization as owners. Some institutions will give them equal portions, while others will permit you to specify percentages or fractions to each.

If you choose to make an organization the beneficiary at your death, you may be asked to provide the federal tax number when setting up the payable on death benefit. Contact that organization to get its proper address and tax number.

It may be a good idea to let your beneficiary know about the account; however, if you decide to change beneficiaries, that can become a bit sticky. If you do not tell a beneficiary they are listed on your account, then leave a statement where it will be found when you die. Be sure to list the institution by name and address, the account type, account number and any other instructions the bank may provide. This way, if you change the beneficiary, you will not have to tell someone that you are removing them from the account and will avoid the possibility of hurting someone's feelings.

One final word of advice: When storing documents to leave behind in the event of your death, do NOT put them in a safety deposit box. Sometimes such boxes are sealed upon the owner's death, thereby denying access by trustees or executors and forcing the estate into the courts. Keep them in a fireproof, safe location at home, and make sure you tell someone where to find them. It may also be a good idea to give a copy of your estate papers to the person who would receive the trust upon your death.

A living revocable trust, a will, and payable-on-death benefits are excellent mechanisms you can use to be certain your house is in order and you are *providing for your own* as instructed by God's Word. Using them will also give you some peace of mind, knowing your assets will go where you want them to go should you die.

Chapter 7

Finding Joy During a Recession

Most people in the Western world seem rich and increased with goods. Incomes have doubled and even tripled over the last 50 years. Yet, each year, fewer and fewer people consider themselves "very happy." And with the world dealing with an increasingly bleak economic outlook, depression and frustration are affecting many more.

Are you truly happy? If so, you are one of a dwindling few.

The story of wealth failing to bring real happiness is common in the Western world. It is a sad story, because happiness is correlated to all kinds of benefits, including long life, abundant health, resilience and good performance.

Unfortunately, most people don't know what real happiness is or how to receive it. Most people think happiness comes from self-gratification, through the physical comforts, the toys, and the exotic vacations. Others seek after psychological rewards such as being accepted and appreciated. But any joy that comes from physical pleasure is only temporary.

There is, however, a formula that leads to true, lasting joy and happiness, as well as physical abundance.

WHAT TO SEEK FIRST

"Happiness is something that one can never reach out and take," wrote Herbert W. Armstrong. "It comes only by finding God's basic inexorable, spiritual law—the way of love, the way of giving, of serving, of doing good. The true basis of happiness is spiritual, not material" (*Plain Truth,* November/December 1984).

If only more people understood this basic truth. How many people have spent their whole lives in the pursuit of riches, while neglecting family, friends and their health—only to die, whether rich or not, unhappy and alone. J. Paul Getty was supposedly the 43rd richest man in human history. Yet, for all of his fabulous wealth, Getty is reputed to have said he would have given it all up for one happy marriage.

"[S]eek ye first the kingdom of God," said Jesus Christ (Matthew 6:33). Seek the government of God, the government of the Creator of the universe and everything in it. Seek first His Kingdom, and every other blessing will be added. This is the key to true happiness and fulfillment.

To do this, you will have to live by every word of God. You will have to study the Bible to find out how to live. And you may be surprised to find out how different the world lives compared to the way God commands.

If you do this, however, God will make available a dynamic power to help you. "We need to receive and be filled with this dynamic power from above—from God Almighty—the very Spirit of God, the spirit of love and of understanding and wisdom, the spirit of faith, the spirit of patience, of power for self-mastery," wrote Mr. Armstrong. "If you do, your life will be energized, it will become successful, it will become full and complete, it will become happy. And you'll be prosperous in the long run" (ibid).

You must first study to find the true way of life. (To learn God's laws of life and how to apply them, enroll in the *Herbert W. Armstrong College Bible Correspondence Course*. It is absolutely free.)

Don't allow your job, your work, your profession to take priority over God. This might sound counterintuitive, but it is a law of God that leads to real prosperity: Seek Him first, then all else will come.

What you set your hand to do, do with your might and your energy, as God commands (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

The result will be that you will free your mind from anxious concern, worry and fears. You will have faith, relying on God's guidance and help. You will always try your best, but then trust God with the result. You will find real peace, happiness and joy first of all. The consequence will be material prosperity and happiness, within God's time frame.

RULES FOR LIFE

Jesus Christ, in some of His last instructions to His followers before His death, revealed how we can be happy. "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full" (John 15:10-11).

The only way to experience true happiness is to keep God's commandments. When you do this, you invite God to put His very joy within you! The Ten Commandments are proven laws. God designed them to produce all the good that men desire. All human suffering is caused by disobedience to and rejection of those laws. Yet today, many view the Ten Commandments as a restrictive law that takes all the fun and happiness out of life. That belief is based on ignorance.

Even secular authorities and scientists see the value in keeping the commandments—although they don't often realize or admit it.

Healthy relationships with family and friends are a major key to making us happy, scientists claim. Research is now showing that just as stress can trigger ill health, deep relationships with family and friends can have a protective effect. It is even suggested that friendship can actually ward off germs. Marriage is another important contributor to happiness. Studies show that not only do married people report higher levels of happiness but even that marriage adds an average of four years to the life of a woman, and a whopping seven years to that of a man.

If you study the Ten Commandments, you will realize that God designed them to govern all our relationships. The last six are specifically intended to teach people how to love each other. Love is the deepest of all relationships. If you obey God's law—which IS LOVE (Romans 13:10)—healthy marriages and healthy relationships are the natural result.

Being content with what we have also makes us happy, say researchers.

It can be hard for people in prosperous nations to realize it, but money just can't buy happiness. High income does not equal high fulfillment. Even if we say we know that, in most cases, deep down we just don't buy it.

Surveys show that as incomes grow, the ability to discern wants from needs shrivels. Luxuries become necessities. A second car, a cell phone, a big-screen TV with satellite hookup, a laptop with wireless Internet—people think they just can't live without them. (Of course, thousands of years of human experience prove otherwise.)

How is it possible that the most prosperous people in history feel deprived? "If you start making $100,000 a year, it takes $200,000 to make you happy," explains Ed Diener, a University of Illinois psychologist. "People just start expecting more out of life."

Surely the inability to differentiate between what we *want* and what we *need* is one of the primary sources of our discontent—and one of the things we must fix if we want to be truly happy.

It was almost 2,000 years ago that Jesus Christ warned, "Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15; Revised Standard Version). This simple wisdom is easy to lose sight of in our consumerist culture—it is simply overwhelmed by precisely the opposite message.

The trouble is, "it is thought that we tend to see our life as judged against other people" (BBC: April 30, 2006). People compare themselves with each other, despite God's clear admonition not to (2 Corinthians 10:12). Inevitably, things always seem greener on the other side of the fence. It is human nature to want what others have, and then, once you have it, to want something else. It is all part of "keeping up with the Joneses"—which is COVETING, something God specifically forbids in the Tenth Commandment.

TWO-INCOME TROUBLE

This materialistic culture is destroying families across the country and around the world. To make enough money to pay for lavish lifestyles, people are working longer hours, often at more stressful jobs. Families consider two incomes a necessity. With most parents working outside the home (in the U.S., over 7 in 10 mom-aged married women), an estimated 57 *percent of our children* do not have full-time parental supervision. Many parents lament having to spend more time at work than would be ideal for their families (80 percent of Australians, in another Newspoll survey)—but far fewer cut back on work in order to prioritize their families over the additional earnings.

Choosing material goods over family also exacts its toll in another, subtler way. More and more couples are looking at the costs of having children and deciding they cannot afford parenthood. This, again, in the *richest societies in history.* Perhaps no trend exposes our skewed values more: We are simply unwilling to give up life's luxuries—fleeting and hollow as they are—for the sake of something as pricey as family—enduring and precious as it is.

Those couples who do have children fight materialism in other ways. Americans spend six hours a week shopping—compared to only 40 minutes a week playing with their children. With parental examples like these, then, it's no surprise that as children grow into teenagers, consumerist influences contribute heavily to the generation gap. Polls show that parents become substantially concerned about the effect of materialism on their children through these years as the powerful lure of youth culture divides teens from their families. In addition, as more and more families fill their homes with surround-sound theaters and other gadgets to plug into, socialization and communion dwindles. Family members become strangers.

These trends are also visible outside the home, as neighbors lose touch with one another and civic organizations wither for lack of participation. Hyper-consumerism creates a nation of selfish pleasure-seekers and loners.

Add up all these factors—including more stress, overwork, social isolation—and one begins to see why fatter paychecks have not brought more happiness. But there is a way to combat this.

Researchers say that regularly giving thanks and vocalizing the blessings you do have is another big key to happiness (Ephesians 5:20).

Simply writing down three things that went well during the day and why, or writing a note of gratitude and delivering it personally, produced better results in an uncontrolled study of 500 participants than anti-depressant medication and psychotherapy, said Prof. Martin Seligman, director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. In his study, 94 percent of severely depressed people became less depressed and 92 percent became happier, with an average symptom relief of an astounding 50 percent over only 15 days. The truth is that *being content and grateful* is really an integral part of fulfilling the Tenth Commandment.

SOMETHING BIGGER THAN YOU

There are two other commonly cited ingredients of happiness. Researchers say the happiest people are those who have a "belief in something bigger than oneself" and a long-term goal that they are working toward.

That takes us back to Matthew 6:33 and Jesus's formula for happiness and success: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." The hope of the coming Kingdom of God should be the driving motivator behind all of our actions. Seeking that Kingdom should be our goal. And then, as the rest of the scripture says, all the rest "shall be added unto you."

That is how, even during a recession, you can find true joy, happiness, abundant health and prosperity—and all you could ever hope for!

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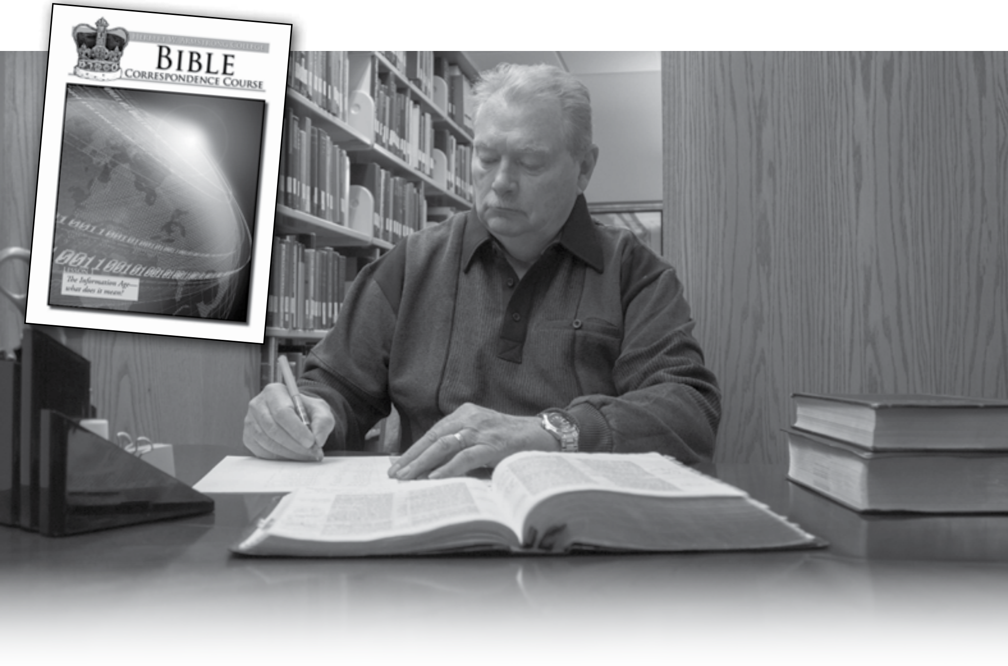

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