



"A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education."

—Theodore Roosevelt

**04-Nov-05**

## **What We Don't Know**

During its approach to a mooring mast at Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey on May 6, 1937, the German dirigible *Hindenburg*, filled with hydrogen, went up in flames in less than a minute. Thirty-six people - 13 passengers, 22 crewmembers, and one member of the ground crew - died in the disaster made famous by a newsreel dubbed with the radio commentary of eyewitness Herbert Morrison. In it, he uttered the well-known cry of despair, "Oh, the humanity!"

It is commonly thought that the *Hindenburg* conflagration killed the majority of those on board, and the newsreel footage certainly makes such an assumption plausible. However, only a little more than a third died in the disaster, as there were 97 people aboard the giant airship when it ignited. In addition, most people believe that these deaths were caused by the terrible fire, seen so vividly against the evening sky in the film, but this, too, is a myth. Most of these people died because they jumped to the ground in their fright.

In a sense, what they did not know, or failed to realize, killed them. Hydrogen, being the first element on the periodic table, has an atomic weight

of one. As such, it is lighter than air, composed predominantly of heavier nitrogen and oxygen, so when it combusts, the explosion and flames shoot upward. In other words, the fire on the *Hindenburg*, for the most part, remained above the passengers and crew, who were confined to the gondolas and cabins in the lower part of the ship. Had they just kept their heads, they would probably have glided down to an albeit bumpy landing, yet suffering only bumps and bruises and a few burns.

[God](#) makes a similar declaration in [Hosea 4:6](#): "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge." Of course, the context makes plain that He means Israel will undergo disaster after disaster because she rejects God's knowledge, the truth about moral conduct and right relationships that produces a stable, prosperous, peaceful society. Yet the principle stretches to cover more than just spiritual knowledge. What we do not know about physics, biology, medicine, economics, politics, business, and so many other matters can land us in a heap of trouble.

Within this truth, however, is a paradox: We do not know what we do not know. How, then, can we avoid disaster due to our ignorance? There are two steps we can take to lessen our chances of being bitten by our lack of knowledge: 1) We can develop a habit of learning, of seeking knowledge, and 2) we can admit that we do not know everything. The first is an action and the second is an attitude, and they must be put into practice together.

One of mankind's greatest fears is of the unknown. This is what makes death, darkness, and many other phobic things so terrifying; people have no idea what to expect from them, so they allow themselves to imagine bogeymen at every turn. Yet knowledge about these "unknown" matters can alleviate our fears and enable us to conduct ourselves with poise and confidence when they confront us. Thus, with the knowledge provided by God's Word, death, though it remains a hated enemy, becomes, in Paul's more comforting term, "sleep" (see [1 Corinthians 11:30](#); [15:51](#); [Ephesians 5:14](#); [1 Thessalonians 4:14](#)). Without this truth, as we witness in the actions of men ignorant of it, there is no telling what people will do with their lives.

Human beings do and say stupid things out of ignorance all the time, and it often comes back to bite them. A recent example from the news illustrates this point. Though Americans live in the most prosperous nation on the face

of the earth, they are among the most ignorant when it comes to economics. Even the simplest workings of supply and demand seem to be beyond them, as we can see in the strident calls for price controls on gasoline and/or punitive regulations on oil companies for taking "exorbitant" profits during the recent run-up in gas prices.

A little knowledge of basic capitalism, however, puts what has happened over the past months into perspective. If either supply falls or demand rises, prices will naturally edge upward. In the present situation, supply has been reduced due to the destructive power of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita (among other factors), while demand has remained essentially constant (it has actually *decreased* slightly). Thus, when the supplies were tightest - right after the storms struck - prices rose, and now that new supplies are coming online, prices are falling back toward their previous levels, though it will take some time for that to occur completely, if ever. This is how a market economy works. If there were a glut of oil, or if demand fell precipitously, the gas price would plunge, and the oil companies would take a financial drubbing.

The most recent financial statements of oil companies belie the accepted [wisdom](#) concerning their "outrageous" profits: They are making about ten cents of profit per gallon of gasoline. In percentage terms, they make single-digit profits. In comparison, a profitable stock or well-managed mutual fund will garner 10-15% earnings for the investor over a year's time. One could easily conclude that the oil companies are, in fact, bringing in only mediocre returns for their stockholders. (By the way, the government makes an average of forty-six cents on each gallon of gasoline in taxes.)

What happens if the government places price controls on gasoline? When this was tried in the 1970s, the price of gas actually doubled as supply shrank (nobody wanted to produce gasoline anymore, since there was no profit in it). Lines of cars [waiting](#) to fill up their tanks stretched down the road and around the corner. Despite their promise, price controls end up hurting both businesses and consumers.

What happens if the government punishes oil companies for windfall profits by raising their taxes? The same thing. If selling gasoline is not profitable for the oil companies, they will cut production, and the motorist will suffer higher prices and dwindling supplies.

This is Economics 101, but most Americans seem to know little about it. In their ignorance, they could listen to populist politicians who want to pass legislation instituting price controls and/or taxes on windfall profits - and end up worse off than before!

What we do not know - about the properties of hydrogen, the principles of capitalism, or some other matter - could destroy us. This is especially dangerous spiritually, which is why Peter urges us to "grow in the grace and *knowledge* of our Lord and Savior [Jesus Christ](#)" ([II Peter 3:18](#)). Similarly, Jesus commands us to "seek first the [kingdom of God](#) and His righteousness" ([Matthew 6:33](#)), and to ask, seek, and knock ([Matthew 7:7-11](#)). God promises to answer our requests with gifts that will help us unlock the shackles of ignorance, producing the confidence to live by [faith](#) even while [the world](#) falls to pieces around us.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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## From the Archives: Featured Sermon

### [Don't Be Indifferent \(1995\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

We need to be sober and alert, realizing that we don't have an infinitude of time to prepare for Christ's second coming. We cannot allow ourselves to become surfeited with the world's distractions, being lulled off to sleep as the foolish virgins, wasting our precious time. We need to exercise steadfast faithfulness, exercising vigilance as we approach the Day of the Lord in order that we don't let it take us by surprise. Living righteously on a

continuous basis will put us in the right attitude, keeping us prepared for this event, causing us to properly have love for His appearing. Sorrow, fear, anguish, and dread characterize those who are unprepared.

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## **From the Archives: Featured Article**

### **[God Our Provider](#)**

by Charles Whitaker

The story of building the Tabernacle serves as an encouraging example for us today as we collaborate with God in building His church. God will provide what we need to finish the job to His specifications!

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