



"Trying to determine what is going on in the world by reading newspapers is like trying to tell the time by watching the second hand of a clock."

—Ben Hecht

30-Dec-16

Our Historical Myopia

As the days have wound down toward the new year, the media have been saturated with news of woe. Many people would say that sorrowful tales have filled the Internet and the airwaves to such an extent that it has been the absolute worst year in living memory. The general feeling seems to be that so many iconic celebrities have died this year that the arts and entertainment industries will never be the same. Another large segment of the population is still depressed over the results of the 2016 presidential election—either that a certain shoo-in candidate actually lost ("But it was her turn!") or that the reality-show candidate actually won ("But he says such mean things!"). We should not fail to mention all the truly horrible events taking place around [the world](#): the war in Syria, terrorist attacks around the world, Europe's migrant crisis, Venezuela's meltdown, natural disasters, etc.

Granted, 2016 will not win any "best ever" awards. To many people, it was a miserable year, whether personally, politically, or socially. They will be overjoyed to turn the calendar page over to 2017. Even so, in historic terms, 2016 was a fairly normal year—and better than many. The problem is that our perspective on things is skewed.

Despite its exponentially increasing access to knowledge, the modern Western mind suffers from a disorder that we can call "historical/cultural myopia" or perhaps "temporal bias." As radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh frequently observes, our thinking tends to reach only as far as our personal experience, that is, our lifetimes. If something bad happens to us, our first reaction—and sometimes our only one—is that it must be the worst thing that has ever occurred. In the same way, we believe that our culture is the epitome of all cultures because before us, nothing worth noting was ever produced. Most people's window of experience and knowledge—their perspective on life—does not stretch beyond their own memories.

Granted, this is not confined strictly to us in the West or even to our day. Such biased thinking has likely occurred in every generation and everywhere on earth, but it is particularly noticeable now because of our society's rapid advancements in technology and communication. Social media, the gregarious child of those two advancements, lets us know in poor spelling and grammar, exclamation points, and emojis that we are in the midst of the worst times ever because we have never experienced such terrible and horrible events before. The new year cannot help but be better.

Sadly, living memory—longer than the average Facebook or Twitter user's—recalls much worse years. December 7, 1941, made that year—and the three years after it—dreadful years, when nearly a half-million of our men and women (and *millions* of other nationalities) died in bitter fighting all over the world. Millions died in concentration camps. Who knows how many died of starvation and disease? It took the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japanese cities to bring that horrible debacle to an end. In subsequent years, the world had to clean up and rebuild whole nations to return to any semblance of normalcy. And the historically myopic think that 2016 was bad?

Before that, there was the Depression and Dust Bowl. Before that, nearly three million died in the Russian Civil War between 1917 and 1923. Before that, the Spanish Flu, a horrible influenza pandemic, killed as many as 100 million people worldwide. Before that, the world's nations fought "the War to End All Wars," four years of combat in which as many as 17 million people lost their lives to bullet, bomb, shell, disease, and new mechanized or

chemical weapons like tanks, airplanes, and poison gas, which had never been seen in the history of human warfare. Before that, the Galveston, Texas, Hurricane of September 8, 1900, destroyed the city with a 15-foot storm surge (the high point of the island city was only eight feet above sea level), leaving as many as 12,000 dead, the deadliest one-day event in American history.

This returns us only to the beginning of the last century! We could go farther back in history to find plenty of horrible times: the American Civil War, the Napoleonic Wars, the French Revolution, the English Civil War, the Thirty Years' War, the Wars of the Roses, the Hundred Years' War, the Crusades, and many others—not to mention frequent natural disasters, famines, plagues, and oppressions. And many are depressed about a year that, despite its inconveniences and disappointments, will go down in history as a year of relative [peace](#) and quiet for most of the world.

Christians cannot afford to fall victim to this self-centered myopia. Why? Beyond the fact that it weighs current circumstances to be far greater than past ones just because *we* are experiencing them, we should take a broader view of life and history because [God](#) Himself does. Of course, He has perfect perspective. [Isaiah 57:15](#) enigmatically tells us that "the High and Lofty One . . . inhabits eternity," suggesting that God's relationship to time goes far beyond what we can understand. Yet, even though we are now bound to a specific span of years, we need to expand our perspective so that we can learn to see matters more as He does.

In at least three places, God instructs us to be keen observers of the past so that we can benefit from the experiences of historical figures and peoples. In [Isaiah 51:1-2](#), He commands the righteous: "Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness, you who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were hewn . . . Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you; for I called him alone, and blessed him and increased him." The New Testament advises something similar:

» [Romans 15:4](#): "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the [patience](#) and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope."

» [1 Corinthians 10:11](#): "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come."

We need to have a working familiarity with history so that we can make accurate comparisons between the events of our time and those of the past. This is especially true when contemplating prophecies such as [Matthew 24:21](#). Such a broad perspective will allow us to see the matters presented to us as "news" in their wider contexts, and more importantly, to keep us from reacting out of proportion to them. We will see breathless, superlative-flinging reporters and commentators for what they are: hucksters and provocateurs. We will, as the saying goes, be able to keep our heads when everyone else is losing theirs.

Yes, 2016 may not have been the best of years for some, but it certainly was not the worst. Now may be a good time to take a deep breath and take a new look at the bigger picture.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Fully Accepting God's Sovereignty \(Part Four\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh (1932-2023)

God is unparalleled in leadership, jurisdiction, and wisdom. We are not individually sovereign over much, but we are commanded to give ourselves over completely to God's sovereignty. If we do this, we will reap unfathomable blessings. We should develop a fear of God, which acts as a magnet to draw us toward Him. We discover that our pride gradually begins to disappear, displaced by humility. Knowledge of God (understanding and wisdom) is progressive; it does not happen all at once. As occurred to Isaiah, Job, and Daniel, we will feel a sense of our total unworthiness in the light of God's splendor when we come to see God. As we develop a relationship with Him, we begin to make better choices, yielding to His correction. Irreverence of God invariably promotes pride; knowing God promotes submission and

humility. If we yield to God's sovereignty, we choose life and will develop the ability to make lifesaving, though admittedly difficult, choices. Then, only God's standard will be acceptable to us. Implicit obedience (as is displayed by the writer of Psalm 119:35-48, 132-133) will lead to greater spiritual growth. Murmuring and complaining appear to be an inborn trait of Israelites, as seen in the insatiable drive toward entitlements we witnessed in the recent presidential election. As God's called-out ones, we need to realize that we are in His view at all times, and that He is able to protect us and safeguard us. Consequently, we need to refrain from complaining, realizing that God is justified in everything He does or allows. God is the Potter; we are the clay. God intends that we devote our lives to seeking Him. As we do so, He will produce quality fruit in us.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Christian Myopia](#)

by Staff

Myopia, or nearsightedness, is not just an eye condition. It also describes a worldview that is quite limited and limiting. Understanding Christian myopia can help us to see the "big picture."

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