FIELD NOTES FROM A WORLD ON FIRE

five acts of hope-filled resistance for unsettled times

MICHAEL FROST

Part lament, part practical guide, part love letter to the church—Michael Frost has given weary Christians exactly what we need: wisdom to see clearly, courage to be bold, and reason to keep hoping in Christ. A wise, timely book.

NIJAY K. GUPTA, Julius R. Mantey Chair of New Testament at Northern Seminary

Field Notes from a World on Fire names what most people are trying to avoid: the sense that everything is unraveling and there is nothing we can do. What I love about this book is that it refuses the two most popular Christian responses right now, outrage addiction and holy disengagement. It offers something far more demanding and far more hopeful: a way to stay human in a dehumanizing moment. Michael offers us what he lives best—resistance practices for people who refuse to give up on the world! It's honest without being cynical, hopeful without being naïve, and brave without being obnoxious. In other words, it's a field guide for faithful people who are done watching from the sidelines!

DANIELLE STRICKLAND, advocate, author, and holy disrupter

Michael Frost refuses the easy exits: panic, silence, despair. With a missionary's instincts and a prophet's clarity, he helps us read a world on fire without looking away. These field notes reclaim the gospel's full scope, sharpen our discernment, and summon us to courageous, grace-filled action for the world God loves. Read it; then join the resistance.

JR WOODWARD, national director of the V3 Movement, author of *The Scandal of Leadership* and *Creating a Missional Culture*, and writer of *Faithful Resistance* on Substack

We are living in an era of unprecedented disruption, but Michael Frost reminds us that a world on fire is exactly where the gospel shines brightest. Frost challenges us to stop focusing on what we can't control and start faithfully living as everyday missionaries right where God has placed us. He shows that when ordinary people embrace humility, pay attention to where God is already at work, and take simple steps of obedience, God multiplies the impact in extraordinary ways. This book is a catalyst for raising up a movement of disciplemakers and hero makers who will bring hope, light, and the transforming power of the gospel to a world that desperately needs it!

DAVE FERGUSON, CEO of Exponential and author of *Multiplier* and *Hero Maker*

In a world in crisis, it's easy to either despair or numb. What's harder is finding a truly hopeful way forward. Through honest storytelling, invitation into new habits, and Scripture's expansive imagination, this book helps us embrace the possibility that God is still in control and inviting us to participate in his purposes.

MANDY SMITH, pastor and author

In a time when fear, outrage, and cynicism seem determined to shape our souls, Michael Frost offers a wiser path, one grounded in hope, animated by love, and attentive to the presence of God amid the turbulence of our age. Rather than retreating from the world's crises or surrendering to despair, Frost calls us to the faithful practices that have sustained God's people across the centuries: courage, memory, humility, compassion, and action. This is exactly the kind of book the church needs right now.

ALAN HIRSCH, cofounder of 100Movements, author of *The Forgotten Ways*, and coauthor of *Reframation* and *Metanoia*

In *Field Notes from a World on Fire*, Mike Frost names the darkness without surrendering to it. This is no breezy call to "just trust God." Instead, Frost offers hard-won, theologically grounded wisdom for Christians who want to remain faithfully engaged with a world careening from crisis to crisis. Drawing on a remarkable range of voices, he charts a path between naïve optimism and cynical retreat, calling us to remember God's faithfulness and hold fast to the risen Christ, in whom God's triumph is won.

REV. DR. MICHAEL F. BIRD, deputy principal at Ridley College

Field Notes from a World on Fire is a wise, grounded, and profoundly hopeful guide for Christians who want to engage with the world's brokenness without losing their joy or their souls. But make no mistake—this is not a comfortable read. Frost refuses to let us settle for cynicism, apathy, or the false security of aligning ourselves with one political tribe or another. His five postures call us beyond the easy categories of our age and into a way of life that is both deeply challenging and deeply lifegiving. This book invites us to resist despair, cultivate holy attentiveness, and participate faithfully in God's renewing work with courage, humility, and resilient hope.

AL ENGLER (The Navigators), author of *A Vital Movement*

In this book Michael Frost offers skills to live well in a world on fire. Not a diatribe but guiding wisdom that soothes the soul. Never shrinking back from the evils and brokenness we face, he guides us into the "gentle gaze of hope" (page 5). Having read it, we leave ready to live differently, steady in resistance, bearing hope in the everlasting God, who holds the future. *Field Notes from a World on Fire* is a profound read of our cultural moment.

DAVID FITCH, Betty R. Lindner Chair of Evangelical Theology at Northern Seminary and author of *Faithful Presence*

Beginning with the pressing question of *What is wrong with the world?* Michael Frost delivers five wise and doable practices, not only helping us cope with our fears and uncertainties but also offering insights that add spiritual and cultural significance to our lives. This book is honest and hopeful and a valuable contribution to being a cooling influence in a world that feels like it is burning up.

BOB FRYLING, former publisher of InterVarsity Press and vice president of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and author of *The Leadership Ellipse*

NavPress™
Published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

FIELD NOTES FROM A WORLD ON FIRE

five acts of hope-filled resistance for unsettled times

MICHAEL FROST



NavPress.com

Field Notes from a World on Fire: Five Acts of Hope-Filled Resistance for Unsettled Times

Copyright © 2027 by Michael Frost. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers

NavPress and the NavPress logo are registered and/or common law trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO, in the USA and various other jurisdictions around the world. All rights reserved. *Tyndale* is a registered and/or common law trademark of Tyndale House Ministries in the USA and various other jurisdictions around the world. All rights reserved. See tyndale.com for a full list of trademarks owned by Tyndale House Ministries.

The Team: David Zimmerman, Publisher; Deborah Sáenz, Acquisitions Editor; Elizabeth Schroll, Copyeditor; Lacie Phillips, Production Assistant; Dean H. Renninger, Cover Designer; Cathy Miller, Interior Designer

Cover and interior photograph of fire copyright © by mitza/iStock. All rights reserved.

Author photo copyright © 2025 by Gavin Fuller. All rights reserved.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® *NIV*.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations marked ESV are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

URLs referenced in this book were verified as live and accurate source material prior to publication. Some links may have expired or redirected since publication.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Tyndale House Publishers at csresponse@tyndale.com or call 1-855-277-9400.

ISBN 979-8-89802-211-2

Printed in the United States of America

33 32 31 30 29 28 27
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

Introduction *1*

1 What Is Wrong with the World? *9*
2 Do What's Possible *21*
3 Remember God's Faithfulness *35*
4 Look for the Light *47*
5 Manage Your Emotions *61*
6 Be Humble and Contrite *77*

Conclusion: Everything Is Going to Be All Right *91*
Questions for Reflection and Discussion *105*
Acknowledgments *115*
Notes *117*

To those who do not know that the world is on fire, I have nothing to say.

ATTRIBUTED TO BERTOLT BRECHT

Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs inexorably into the flesh of every unfulfilled present.

JÜRGEN MOLTMANN

Introduction

The world, over the course of a few short months, moved from tumultuous to an all-out dumpster fire. . . . We're living in a time where the small are made to feel smaller and those with power loom large.

DAME JACINDA ARDERN

I first sat down to write this book in January 2025. I had a flight booked to Los Angeles that month, and I was keeping an eye on reports of wildfires threatening the city. Those reports only seemed to worsen as the days passed. Drought conditions, low humidity, and a buildup of vegetation, together with hurricane-force Santa Ana winds were whipping up more than a dozen fires across Southern California, especially in LA neighborhoods like Altadena and Pacific Palisades. When I flew in, most of the fires had been contained, but not before burning over 50,000 acres, destroying more than 16,000 buildings, forcing more than 180,000 people to evacuate, and most tragically, killing 30 people[1] (some estimates suggest up to 440 deaths are attributable to the blaze).

Los Angeles is a huge city. We often think of big cities being immune from such devastation. But no doubt you've seen photos and news footage of burned-out neighborhoods, scorched canyons, and the smoldering ruins of seaside homes. How could such carnage happen in a city like LA? When I put this question to one of my hosts, she replied, "It feels like the whole world is on fire right now."

And it did. In January alone of that year, there were mass killings in New Orleans, Montenegro, and Tehran. There was a constitutional crisis in South Korea, threatening the stability of North Asia. There were full-scale wars in Ukraine and Gaza and civil wars in Chad and Colombia. In the US, the second presidency of Donald Trump had just begun, with a wave of protests across the country. There was a mental health crisis among young people, and a burned-out workforce laboring in health care, education, ministry, and nonprofit service. There was crushing loneliness, mass incarceration, environmental destruction, and rising fascism, all of which find fuel in economic despair.

Sure, there are *always* wars and disasters threatening people somewhere in the world, but many people feel the 2020s have been particularly tumultuous.

But on top of wars and natural disasters, like those destructive Santa Ana winds in LA, there are also hurricane-like cultural headwinds blowing in the opposite direction to the values of Jesus. So much of what the West has assumed to be good and proper behavior—truth telling, justice seeking, kindness, mercy, humility—is being overturned by those winds of change. This realization peaked for me recently when there was actually a cultural debate about whether empathy is a sin. This was set in motion by two interlocking cultural moments—the publishing of Joe Rigney's book *The Sin of Empathy* and Elon Musk's much-quoted statement "The fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy."[2]

Empathy! Weakness? A sin? How did we get here?

As perplexing as that debate was, it was symptomatic of a broader cultural malaise that views things like feeding the hungry, preaching about mercy, hiring women as pastors, and advocating

for refugees as suspicious political activity. Of course, such a cultural shift doesn't happen overnight. These are long-held views by many in society, but by the mid-2020s it had become apparently acceptable to voice these beliefs and (sadly) behave accordingly.

During my January 2025 visit to California, I met with church leaders who were running workshops to train their neighbors in their legal rights when ICE agents knock on their doors. Shortly after, I read that Trump's border czar, Tom Homan, had expressed frustration that it slows down his deportation program when immigrants know their legal rights. That same month, leaders of three Catholic organizations spoke out against the treatment of immigrants only to be condemned by Vice President JD Vance, who accused them of simply being worried about losing funds in the immigration crackdown. Now even compassion and mercy are viewed suspiciously. As historian Diana Butler Bass bemoans, "You have been politicized. You are now a target. For your good works of service. For your denominational stances on things like human rights. For welcoming those who have been marginalized. For caring about the poor."[3]

With the announcement in May 2025 that Bishop Robert Prevost would become the new pope came a barrage of criticism from people on the right of politics. He was denounced as "woke," "anti-Trump, anti-MAGA, pro-open Borders, and a total Marxist."[4] All this because Prevost had advocated for stronger support for migrants, increased access to mental health care, and stronger, sensible gun control laws, something Catholics have supported for decades. All of a sudden, though, it had become a negative thing for a papal candidate to advocate for mercy and compassion.

In the 2020s the rest of the world is now talking openly about

the end of the American century. The nation that was once a beacon of freedom, opportunity, and democracy has faltered. As theologian Hanna Reichel says,

> *As a scholar, I have closely studied this nation. It prided itself in its influence in the world, its intellectual leadership, its technological innovation, its economic prowess. But as global orders shifted, its social and political system, built for simpler times, crumbled. Political and economic crises damaged trust in the government. Polarization increased and made coalition building ever less feasible. Widening gaps led to social unrest, economic instability, and even violence in the streets.*
>
> *The nation was overwhelmed and disoriented.*[5]

Maybe you've seen one of those Venn diagrams with the overlapping circles labeled with book titles like *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Brave New World*, et cetera, with the main intersection announcing, "You are here!" It feels like that sometimes.

How are we as Christians to respond to these headwinds? How do we deal with all the tragedy and tumult? We can't simply ignore it, although I'll confess to wanting to do so at times. Sometimes it feels like news broadcasts are too much to bear. Having said that, I was chastened by a *New Yorker* cartoon by Barbara Smaller recently, depicting a wife telling her husband, "You do realize that just because you stopped watching the news doesn't mean it stopped happening."[6]

I know withdrawal isn't the answer (although you might want to ration the amount of mainstream and social media you

consume—more on that later). I can't bury my head in the sand. Indeed, the temptation to do so is an indication of my privilege. I need to remain informed and attentive to the needs of the world because for many in our society these aren't simply events to be observed but survived. This cultural moment has immediate bearing on the lives of women, immigrants, and people of color, who experience the rising tide of misogyny, xenophobia, and racism as a direct personal threat. The world is on fire, and some people are much closer to the flames than others.

The danger for me, though, is that I can find myself either becoming very angry about the horrors going on at the moment or, alternatively, I can slide into cynicism and apathy.

The late Pope Francis once said,

> *Even though we do not know what tomorrow may hold for us, we should not look to the future with pessimism and resignation. Wars, social injustices, and the many forms of violence we are exposed to every day should not dishearten us nor draw us towards scepticism and discouragement.*
>
> *We choose love and love makes our hearts fervent and hopeful. Those who love, even if they find themselves in uncertain situations, always view the world with a gentle gaze of hope.*[7]

I desire that gentle gaze of hope. I don't want to be infected by either anger or indifference. I mentioned this to one of my friends, who suggested I listen to the Resistance Revival Chorus's album *This Joy*. The album is comprised of original songs and protest classics and is utterly uplifting. The seventy-person choir sings triumphantly about how much our world needs joy in resistance.

And it really resonated with me. I think they're right. We need to find joy in our response to a world sliding away from the values we Christians should hold dear. Writer and activist Rebecca Solnit writes, "Joy doesn't betray but sustains activism. And when you face a politics that aspires to make you fearful, alienated, and isolated, joy is a fine initial act of insurrection."[8]

Ethicist and theologian Andrew DeCort puts it more simply when he says, "Cheerfulness is . . . the energy of prophetic witness."[9]

We need to get more cheerful, folks, even while resisting the cultural trends around us.

I've always loved Paul's impassioned pastoral prayer for the church at Colossae. It's the one that begins, "Since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you" (Colossians 1:9). It's such an exquisitely written prayer, in which he asks that God might fill his readers with knowledge and wisdom and understanding and endurance and patience so that they may devote themselves to "every good work . . . giving joyful thanks to the Father" (Colossians 1:10, 12).

"Every good work" and "joyful thanks"—that's the combination we should strive for. And it emerges from God's gift of knowledge and wisdom. We are not to become political creatures in any craven, partisan fashion. We are to grow in the knowledge of God, which propels us into a broken world ready to serve the lost and the least and be filled with joyful gratitude.

But how?

These are my field notes, my suggestions for how to traverse a world on fire, for how to remain resistant, humble, generous, and joyful when it feels like the world is trying to sap our strength and quench our hope. And as we begin, let's pray this beautiful

prayer by my friend Mandy Smith from her book *Confessions of an Amateur Saint*:

God of all joy,

I believe that even as you see the brokenness, violence, and despair of this world, there is something bubbling up in you, greater than all the pain.

May I learn your capacity to hold joy.

Help me get over my fear of being disappointed, of looking naïve.

And when I no longer feel the joy, give me courage to live it anyway.

Amen.[10]

1

WHAT IS WRONG WITH THE WORLD?

If you've been feeling confused and as though everything is impacting on you all at the same time, this is not a personal, private experience. This is actually a collective experience.

ADAM TOOZE

Some issues are not about left and right, Republican and Democrat—they're about our deepest moral values. And we believe that you have to have a campaign, a movement, that seeks to reshape the moral narrative.

WILLIAM BARBER

In 1905, *The Daily News*, a London newspaper, ran a letter to the editor, which apparently was in response to a request to answer the question *What is wrong with the world?* It is conjectured that prominent leaders were invited to write a diagnostic piece identifying the causes and potential cures for the ills society was facing at that time. Clearly, the editors of *The Daily News* felt their readers were aware that all was not well in the world.

But this was 1905. Not 1917, when Europe was inflamed in war. Not 1929, when the global economy collapsed. Not 1942, when the world was at war in Europe, Africa, and the Pacific. Not 1968, a year of unprecedented social and political upheaval. Not

2001, the year of the September 11 attacks. Not 2020, with the devastating global COVID-19 pandemic.

1905.

Look it up. It was no better or worse than most years. The Russian Revolution began. The Russo-Japanese War was raging. Albert Einstein burst onto the world stage by publishing the equation $E = mc^2$. A motorcar reached a speed of one hundred miles per hour for the first time on American soil.

But overall, 1905 wasn't a standout year when it came to tragedy and mayhem (except for the Russians). And yet *The Daily News* must have believed there was a general sense of malaise among its readers, a fear that the stitching that held the fabric of society together was fraying or unraveling. People needed to know what was wrong with the world.

I can't help but wonder whether we're living in a similar time. God forbid there should be a world war or a global financial crisis or a monumental climate disaster. But we still have a general sense of unease about where the world is headed, and it seems as if things will continue in this direction for a while. The reasons are not hard to find. Many of us feel this is a time of unraveling. Karl Marx said, "All that is solid melts into air,"[1] and while he was referring to the dissolving of the old social and economic structures of feudalism, the phrase is relevant again today. A sense of darkening and foreboding has overcome Western societies. Cascading threats are feeling overwhelming. Creation is groaning, and we're no longer confident that we have the answers. As Alan Roxburgh and Roy Searle conclude, "What lies before us is a dark night, not a new dawn."[2]

A TIME OF POLYCRISIS

Some commentators have referred to this as a time of *polycrisis*, a situation where multiple, interconnected crises converge and worsen each other, creating a complex and challenging predicament that is difficult to manage. The term was popularized by historian Adam Tooze to describe the intertwining of crises like climate change, economic instability, and political polarization. But more recently, the language has shifted from *polycrisis* to *permacrisis*.

Economist Nouriel Roubini refers to a permacrisis as a time of swirling "megathreats"—wars, climate disaster, inflation and crippling debt, and the emergence of AI technologies. He writes, "Severe megathreats are imperiling our future—not just our jobs, incomes, wealth, and the global economy, but also the relative peace, prosperity, and progress achieved over the past 75 years."[3]

As soon as you start listing the worrisome trends we're facing, it gets scary.

Roubini says that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 sent a worrying message that threatened the security and the economic, financial, and geopolitical order that the United States and its allies created after World War II. But lining up behind Russia are China, Iran, and North Korea, all with designs of their own to destabilize the current world order. China's interests in Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and the South Pacific are deeply concerning. Iran might soon develop a nuclear bomb they could use in response to bombing by Israel (and perhaps the US). And nuclear-armed North Korea has been firing rockets over Japan and South Korea. Roubini concludes, "There is a sharply rising risk not only of war among great powers but of a nuclear conflict."[4]

Then there are the indisputable reality of climate change and the increasing number of climate disasters flaring up around the globe. In the introduction to this book, I mentioned the unprecedented Los Angeles winter wildfires of 2025, but by the time you read this, they might well have been forgotten in light of the next disaster. Indeed, the LA fires seemed to supersede our memory of similarly disastrous fires in Hawaii, and before that Greece, and before that Australia, and before that Canada. Each outbreak or fire or flood or hurricane is deemed "unprecedented," so much so that we lose all sense of perspective on the scale of these horrors (unless, of course, we survived them personally). The pervasive sense is that the world is literally on fire, the climate system is straining, the planet is overheating. Meanwhile, pundits and commentators argue over who's to blame and what we should do about it, leaving us feeling all the more hopeless about the situation.

Related to climate change, there's the unrelenting loss of biodiversity across the planet. *Biodiversity loss* refers to the decline or disappearance of the variety of life on Earth, at various levels, from genetic diversity to entire ecosystems. The loss of biodiversity has significant consequences for ecosystems and human well-being, since it affects things like pollination, climate regulation, and food security.

Also related to this is the increased chance of catastrophic pandemics. Evidence suggests that the likelihood of pandemics has increased over the past century because of increased global travel, urbanization, changes in land use, and greater exploitation of the natural environment. In 2025, we saw a measles outbreak in the US, having emerged from the COVID-19 global pandemic not long before. According to the World Health Organization, tuberculosis,

which became an epidemic in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, still exists globally. Over ten million new tuberculosis infections occur every year, and more than a million people die from it each year.[5] Prior to COVID-19, tuberculosis was the primary infectious killer worldwide,[6] making COVID-19 among the top seven deadliest pandemics in history.[7]

Wars and rumors of wars, climate change, pandemics, biodiversity loss, and violent conflict have only increased global poverty and widened the gap between the rich and the poor. It is now acknowledged that there is widespread inequality in the world, which only increases political instability and contributes to uprisings and civil wars like those at the time of this writing in Ecuador, Haiti, Colombia, Syria, and Sudan.

I could go on: There is a chronic lack of access to health care across the planet, including in many wealthy nations; we've seen growing political instability and polarization, even in otherwise stable liberal democracies; in the UK, civil unrest has been caused by the English Defence League's claims that immigrants have been inciting what they call a clash of civilizations and that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with British values. There are the influence of social media and fake news, the rise of American and European oligarchs, unending cycles of violence against women and minorities, renewed anti-Semitism in response to the Gaza conflict, and unimagined risks from the development of artificial intelligence tools. And I write all this from the perspective of the midpoint of the 2020s. Given that we find ourselves in a time of accelerated, continuous culture change, who knows what else will be occurring by the time you pick up this book.

The world, it seems, is in the grip of permacrisis.

THE CHURCH ISN'T IMMUNE

And this isn't to mention the specific challenges faced by the Christian church in the West, where we have been buffeted by decades of post-Christian secularism. The most obvious effect of this has been a sustained decline in church attendance and in the number of people self-identifying as Christian, which has in turn resulted in widespread church closures across places like the US, the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

The existence of fewer and smaller churches has resulted in a developing crisis in theological education. There is not only less demand for theologically trained pastors but also an associated disinterest among younger Christians in vocational ministry or overseas missions. The reasons for this are contested, but the result is that it has led to many theological schools shuttering, selling their campuses, or amalgamating with other schools to remain afloat.

Another unexpected challenge has been a kind of cultural post-COVID-19 funk that seems to be affecting people generally. Some of us who have contracted the disease since March 2020 will know about the brain fog that often follows the period of sickness—feelings of sluggish, fuzzy thinking and a lack of sharpness. But sociologists suggest that a general cultural fogginess has also occurred, possibly as a result of the long periods of lockdown during the pandemic. Related to this, it seems, has been the emergence of a general sense that it is an unacceptable intrusion to be expected to take some responsibility for people around us. Some suggest that this is an overreaction to the prescribed restrictions that were introduced as a way for people to look out for each other during the pandemic. Whether that's true or not, it does seem that many people are allergic to any call to act for the greater

benefit of everyone. Some have even equated such calls with their rights being impeded upon. One of the symptoms of this has been a sharp drop in levels of altruism and volunteerism.[8] It seems that people are less likely to join committees or serve in organizations, and the effect of this on churches, which have traditionally run on volunteers, has been significant.

But the church's woes haven't all been of society's making. We have also been the architects of our own undoing. For most of the twenty-first century, we have heard about one church leadership scandal after another. Churches large and small, from every denomination, have seen their leaders unmasked for a lack of transparency, abuse of power, financial misconduct, or sexual abuse and impropriety. It has been a shameful period that has resulted in both church members and the wider community losing trust in the church. Naturally, this loss of trust has led to a further decline in attendance. There have also been legal consequences for the church when its leaders or the institution itself faces criminal proceedings and civil lawsuits. In many places, churches have had to liquidate assets in order to make redress payments for the victims of their past leaders. But most concerning has been the harm to those victims, who suffer significant emotional and psychological harm and may not have access to support or justice.

As if scandals haven't damaged the church's reputation enough, the clearly established link between conservative evangelical churches and the rise of Christian nationalism and Donald Trump's MAGA movement has only worsened the way we are viewed in society broadly. When I was a young man, preachers used to refer to a "great apostasy" happening just before the return of Christ. They drew this idea from 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12, where a falling away occurring during the reign of an Antichrist at the end of time

is foretold. Those old preachers from my youth usually identified such an apostasy as coming from liberal theology and universalism. But if there is a great falling away occurring today, it isn't the direct result of Western liberal theology (although that plays a part). It appears to be coming from a renewed Christian nationalism that embraces an aggressive form of cultural dominionism as well as from charismatic prosperity preaching, both of which seem to have hijacked the evangelical movement.

HOW ARE WE TO LIVE IN SUCH A WORLD?

For those of us who want to remain true to the teachings of Jesus, to be part of a joyfully thankful community of Jesus followers, devoted to good service and acts of kindness, the challenges feel enormous.

Let us return to the original question posed by *The Daily News* back in 1905—"What Is Wrong with the World?" It's tempting for Christians to say rather glibly that the answer to that question is that there's not enough Christianity in the world. And that might be true in one sense, depending on what you mean by the need for "more Christianity." For some people, a certain form of Christianity has in fact contributed to the wrongness of the world.

The prominent writer G. K. Chesterton was inspired to write a book titled *What's Wrong with the World*, published in 1910, that addresses his views on the woes facing humankind. His conversion to Catholicism wouldn't happen for some years after the book came out, but discriminating readers can find the seeds of that conversion throughout *What's Wrong with the World*, in which he argues that the problems the world was facing stemmed from a decline in faith and a failure to understand the importance of

moral and social responsibilities. Two lines from the book have become much quoted:

> *The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.*[9]

and

> *Men [*sic*] have not got tired of Christianity; they have never found enough Christianity to get tired of.*[10]

For Chesterton, what's wrong with the world is the vacuum left by the withdrawal from public space by true Christians, who have abandoned culture to the worst excesses of the far right or the far left. It was his contention that Western society had lost its "soul," placing all its hope in government to make us good and happy. Chesterton believed that all secular government could ever hope to achieve was to secure what he called "external decency," not "internal honesty and peace."[11] What was wrong with the world, he believed, was that we were expecting bureaucrats and oligarchs and military leaders to make us good, something that is beyond them.

Chesterton was grappling with modernism and secularism. In his time, it was assumed that Western society must be neutral on religious matters. Indeed, that's what the term *secular* refers to. But in our time things are different. Today, secular governments no longer seek to be quite so neutral on matters of religion. Public spaces have been emptied of God, of any reference to ultimate reality. I'm inclined to see the rise in religious nationalism as a reaction to this. And a ham-fisted one at that. Whether it's

online fighting over the Super Bowl halftime show, Starbucks red cups, Easter eggs, green M&M's, people saying "Happy holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas," Olympic opening ceremonies, or Cracker Barrel's logo change, it comes across as a desperate grasp for control and power, not a serious response to secularism. More concerning is legislation in the works in several US states, notably Texas and Louisiana, requiring or allowing the displaying of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms. It might be designed to promote America's Christian heritage, but it feels like a way to avoid the real issues.

Philosopher Charles Taylor writes, "The shift to secularity . . . consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[12]

On the topic of presenting Christian values in a culture being emptied of God, I'm inclined to agree with novelist Kurt Vonnegut, who once wrote, "For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes. But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. . . . I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere."[13] As flippant as this might sound, Vonnegut is seeing something important. Merely nailing the Ten Commandments to a schoolroom wall will achieve little, but if American Christians would live as Christ taught in the Sermon on the Mount, then it could change everything.

Western society has shifted from a condition in which it is almost impossible *not* to believe in God to one in which believing in God is simply one option of many. According to Taylor, this

has dire consequences. He calls it a time of "disenchantment."[14] A disenchanted world worships the economy. It celebrates the power of humanity, of competition and conquest. It drains the world of mystery and wonder and sees nature not as God's creation but as a resource to be exploited.

Disenchantment gives rise to a dehumanizing value system. A disenchanted world gives rise to tyrants like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. It throws up people like Donald Trump and a whole host of authoritarian politicians. It allows the space for the immoral yawning gulf between the rich and the poor. In such a world, one man can be a trillionaire while others can barely make ends meet. Today, the richest twelve individuals have more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of people worldwide.[15] If that's not bad enough, it's even worse that very few people appear the least bit outraged about it.

In this world dominance is the key goal. And sometimes it's hard to even begin to imagine a life not controlled by its grip. Anyone who speaks out for equality and fairness and mutuality and respect is considered treasonous. That's why things like DEI, feminism, free lunches, refugee support, and Social Security benefits are considered so threatening by the powerful.

Perhaps this is an overly negative way to start a book. It is my genuine desire for you to be uplifted and motivated by reading this book. But I don't know how to avoid addressing the deeply concerning trends that affect us at this time. They aren't spot fires or small outbreaks. They are major forest fires, and they are burning on various fronts. How are we to live in such a world? Well, I don't think we should give up hope. In fact, there is much to be hopeful about. But I do think living well in a world on fire involves the cultivation of a number of core skills. We need to become content

with simply doing what's possible, remembering God's faithfulness, looking for where God is at work in the world, managing our jangled emotions, and adopting a humble, contrite posture.

It is to those skills I will now turn.

A Healthy Sense of Reality

Some people might tell you to stop being so negative, to just focus on the good things in life. By all means, remember the good things, but one thing we need to recover from a world on fire is a healthy dose of reality. We are not pessimists. We are not without hope. But we keep our eyes open. We look in order to see things as they are and to work toward them becoming as they should be.

Comparing Buddhist statues with Christian ones, G. K. Chesterton once wrote, "The Buddhist saint always has his eyes shut, while the Christian saint always has them very wide open. The Buddhist saint has a sleek and harmonious body, but his eyes are heavy and sealed with sleep. The mediaeval saint's body is wasted to its crazy bones, but his eyes are frightfully alive. . . . The Buddhist is looking with a peculiar intentness inwards. The Christian is staring with a frantic intentness outwards."[16]

Religion isn't just the sacred component of our society, separate from the secular. As followers of the triune God, we believe the secular is the stage where God plays. We need to see how God infuses everything. Seeing life that way brings everything alive, making the gospel good news for today. Looking out at the world, even when it disappoints us, is a distinctly saintly act because it reminds us this is God's world. God is at work in this world, even when it appears to be on fire, and he summons us to join him there.