



BLUE RIDGE CHRISTIAN NEWS



Morganton Seventh Day Adventist

How Much Did Christmas Cost?

By Steve Bietz
Burke County

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." John 3:16, KJV



Have you ever sang "The Twelve Days Of Christmas"? The song is not only interminably long--it is unabashedly materialistic in its obsession with gift-getting. Since 1984 PNC Wealth Management has been calculating the costs of Christmas via these 12 gifts ("a partridge in a pear tree," etc). They have calculated that if you buy each item in the song just once it will cost you \$38,993. You will spend \$170,298 if you buy the gifts the songs prescribed number of times! So how much does Christmas really cost? How much was spent that first Christmas some 2000 years ago?

Let's see. We had a blue-collar self-employed carpenter and his pregnant fiancé, both of the lower class, whose income no doubt was best rendered "hand to mouth." Because of the Roman tax edict, the couple locked up his carpenter shop (planning to be back in a few days) and journeyed to "O little town of Bethlehem," where all they got was a string of "No Vacancy" signs. So in the damp smelly darkness of a backyard cave stable the woman's Babe was born, His crib a prickly box of cow feed, His visitors a motley band of unsavory shepherds who, in astonishment, bowed before this Baby the herald angels declared to be the Messiah. But angelic pronouncement notwithstanding, the Baby-makes-three little family was still dirt poor. Had it not been for the extravagant gifts of the band of nomadic Arab sages, the family would never have financially survived their flight to Egypt as impoverished migrants. The first Christmas could hardly be described as much more than a bargain-basement bust.

Unless, of course, you calculate the costs from the other side of the universe, the astronomical costs of the One who did all the giving that one-star night long ago. "For God so loved the world that He gave..." Wooden manger, wooden cross, He gave it all. In the book *Desire Of Ages*, written by Ellen White, she describes the price of the first Christmas in this manner."The gift of Christ reveals the Father's heart." On Christmas, God emptied His treasury for us.

The young mother, frazzled and spent from hanging on to her two children and all their Christmas shopping bags, stepped into a crowded elevator. The holiday mania had taken its toll. Even the cost of her purchases had left her dizzy. As the doors closed, she blurted out, "Whoever started this whole Christmas thing should be found, strung up, and shot." From the back of the elevator car, a voice responded, "Don't worry; we've already found Him and strung Him up and crucified Him." I am told that the rest of the way down you could have heard a pin drop. How much will Christmas cost you and yours this year? Even if you went out and purchased the products of The Twelve Days of Christmas, you could never come close to what heaven spent for you and me. Maybe a partridge in a pear tree would be a great gift.

But may we lift our voices and sing a song that goes way beyond The Twelve Days of Christmas. I want to sing "Joy To The World, The Lord Is Come!"

Steve Bietz, Pastor, Morganton Seventh day Adventist Church.



Christian ADD and ADD-iction -
An Explanation, Not An Excuse

By Lawrence Traylor
Jacksonville Beach, Fla.



Best day of my life? Getting diagnosed with ADD. Worst day? The same day.

I am a Christian and have attention deficit disorder (ADD). Learning that you have ADD in adulthood can be a bit startling. Although I have always had ADD, I was not diagnosed until 1992, the same year I got sober, 28 years ago.

ADD has been around for centuries. The symptoms of ADD have been with us as long as history has been recorded. The term attention deficit disorder was coined in the 1970s. It is only recently that this genetic, neurological syndrome has been identified and diagnosed within the adult population. This was a tremendous breakthrough for adults previously thought to be lazy, stupid, and crazy. Approximately 5% of the adult population in the U.S. has ADD.

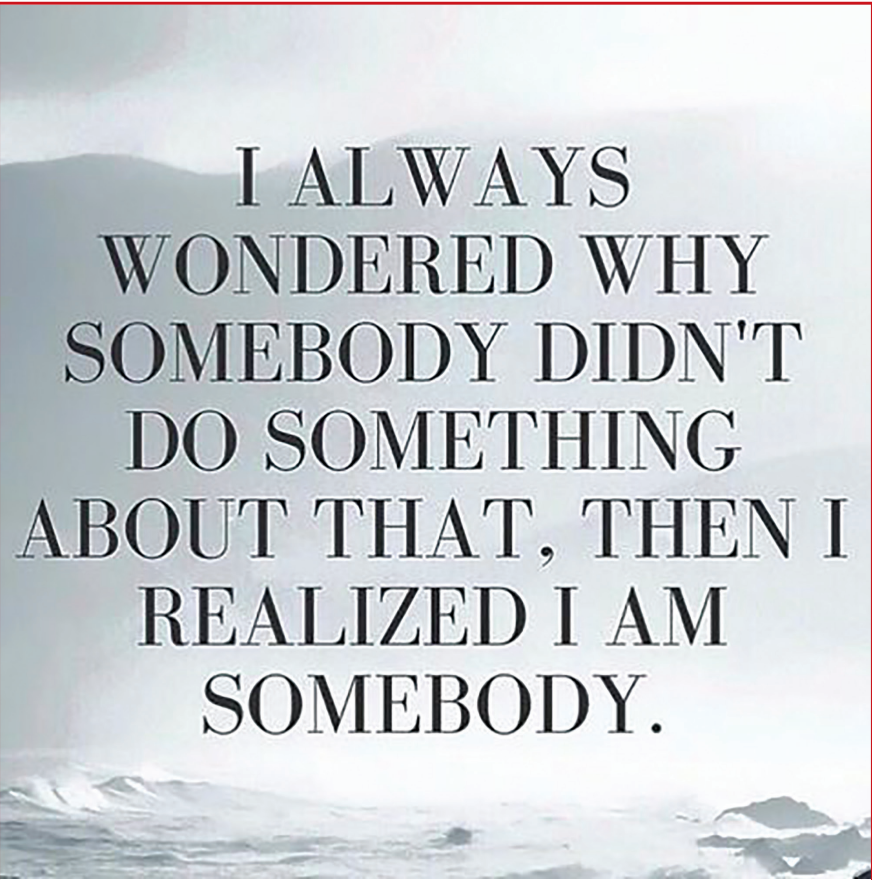
ADD is not a fad but rather a medical diagnosis. Although attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is the term used by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association, I prefer to use the term ADD. You, like me, may have ADD with no hyperactivity-related symptoms.

Undiagnosed, ADD can cripple Christian adults socially, emotionally, and professionally. My personal diagnostic triad of ADD symptoms may also include distractibility, impulsivity, and restlessness. Symptoms may also include an inability to focus, information processing difficulty, forgetfulness, a preponderance for daydreaming, underachievement, and disorganization. Ask someone with ADD the answer to the question of what is 1 + 1, and you may hear an answer of 11.

Many Christian adults with ADD are drawn to high stimulus situations as a means of alleviating boredom and clearing their minds of distractions. The dominant feature of the adult ADD brain is the inability to inhibit or to put the brakes on certain thoughts, feelings, behaviors, or cravings.

For the ADD-er, the associated high of seeking excitement is intoxicating and paradoxically, therapeutically calming, giving way oftentimes to what is known as hyper-focusing. Impulsivity, high energy, frustration, risk-taking behavior, and low self-esteem all add to the likelihood that the ADD-er can end up in troubling situations.

Since childhood, I have suffered from chronic frustration, low self-esteem, and feelings of failure. Before my adult ADD diagnosis, my whole life had been that of searching, knowing something was wrong but unable to identify the cause. My distress, anxiety, and history of failure, confusion, and unhappiness resulted in deep-rooted pain and low self-esteem. I felt the pain of being emotionally and mentally different, of missing what others got and of getting what others missed.



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ADD caused me to struggle socially, always feeling like the red-headed stepchild at a family reunion. I felt like I was the third monkey running to get aboard the Ark.

My ADD drove me to the brink of suicide as I suffered dark, interminable moods where all I could think of is what a rotten, worthless man I was.

Since a concise definition does not exist, we must rely on descriptions of symptoms to define ADD.

People with ADD love to play and hate being bored and, consistently, misperceive, mishear, and misunderstand others. We ADD-ers simply find distractions impossible to resist and can spend a lifetime dodging the necessity of organizing ourselves. An invisible shield of procrastination separates us from the completion of the simplest assignments and tasks at hand.

I was fortunate to attend a small, Rhode Island prep school. Parent-teacher conferences each year yielded the same result, “Laurie is a smart boy if he would only apply himself.” I was much more interested in looking out the classroom windows. To this day, I never met a window I didn't like.

I thought myself a fraud and survived by continually winging it. “Fake it till you make it” was my adolescent mantra, sprinkled with a propensity for under-achieving.

My life dramatically changed in 1992 after reading Dr. Edward Hallowell’s ground-breaking book, *Driven to Distraction*.

Everything suddenly made sense.

Once my ADD diagnosis had been confirmed, my next step was to learn as much as possible about this condition. As I studied ADD, I learned that it manifests itself differently in different people with varying degrees of intensity. I learned that ADD does not go away and if one has it as a child, one has it for life.

Alcohol was my drug of choice, I relied upon it to self-medicate in treating my dark, depressive, ADD-related moods. Because it feels so good to be focused and calm, the ADD-er becomes highly vulnerable and risks becoming addicted to this self-medicating behavior.

Similar to alcoholism, many people with ADD have trouble accepting this syndrome as being rooted in biology rather than a weakness of self-control and character.

A neurological syndrome, ADD again similar to alcoholism, is one of the most inheritable of all psychiatric conditions. An inherited, genetic syndrome with an exceptionally low tolerance for frustration and boredom, 90 - 95% of people diagnosed with ADD have inherited it.

Coexisting anxiety and depressive disorders among Christian adults with ADD are as common as drug and alcohol abuse. The connection clinicians observe with ADD and subsequent addiction is striking. Most clinicians working with and treating the adult ADD population observe higher than usual rates of alcohol and drug abuse. Because the dominant feature of the ADD brain is the inability to inhibit or to put the brakes on certain thoughts, feelings, behaviors, or cravings, the ADD-er is prone to developing addictions.

Many scientists believe that self-medication with a substance such as cocaine, marijuana, or alcohol is based on biological processes. The introduced substance interacts with various neurotransmitter systems and consequently reduces symptoms of anxiety, depression, or distractibility. The addiction-related problems surface when the brain starts craving the substance to maintain its preferred balance. Since individuals with ADD are at much greater risk for developing problems associated with addiction, it would be wise for anyone who suffers from ADD to be aware of this inherent predisposition.

Many adults with ADD who don’t know they have it but have successfully obtained years of continuous sobriety often realize after reading a story similar to this one, that they too may be an unknowing victim of undiagnosed ADD.

The starting point for all treatment for ADD is getting an accurate diagnosis. An evaluation by a medical doctor is required to confirm a positive diagnosis. There is no one recipe for treatment nor definitive test for ADD. The diagnosis of ADD is based first and foremost on sharing an individual's history or life story with a medical doctor. Christian adults historically stumble into an ADD diagnosis by word of mouth, reading an article, or by hearing and learning about it through their children.

There is a distinct difference between ADD and pseudo-ADD. Pseudo-ADD is having ADD symptoms without the actual ADD diagnosis. What differentiates ADD from pseudo-ADD is a matter of duration and intensity of symptoms. Feeling disorganized, being prone to procrastination, and having trouble with relationships may simply be pseudo-ADD. The person with true ADD experiences the symptoms most of the time and experiences them more intensely. Most importantly, the symptoms of an adult with ADD tend to dramatically interfere with everyday life.

In many ways, the most dangerous aspect of undiagnosed and untreated ADD is the continued assault on one’s self-respect and self-esteem.

The longer the diagnosis of ADD is delayed, the greater the risk becomes of alcoholism, drug addiction, and additional secondary problems.

ADD is similar to being nearsighted as both deal with focusing-related problems and no more to be ashamed of than having to wear eyeglasses. Having ADD is nobody’s fault, and when adult ADD is detected and appropriately treated the results, are often dramatic and life-changing, as mine has been.

If you can relate to any of my stories and would like to talk, please call me or call Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. (CHADD) is a non-profit founded in 1987 with volunteer-managed chapters throughout the U.S.

Lawrence (Laurie) Traylor lives in Jacksonville Beach, Florida — a member of the recovery community and volunteers his time free of charge in helping addicts and alcoholics, their loved ones and their families locate drug and alcohol assistance resources, (904) 553-1600

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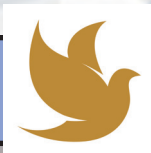
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“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace: that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation: that saith unto Zion. Thy God reigneth!”

Isaiah 52:7 KJV



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Landis Orthodox Presbyterian Church

4975 US 221
Marion NC 28972
(828)-756-7470
www.landischurch.org

Elder Mike Cloy
opcmikecloy@gmail.com

Sunday School 10:00 AM
Worship Service 11:00 AM
Fellowship Meal Following Worship
Thursday Bible Study & Prayer 6:30pm

*Come Celebrate the Glory of God in Reverent
Worship Ps. 96:3; John 17:1*

Bear Creek Baptist Church

327 Bear Creek Road
Bakersville, NC 28705
www.bearcreekbaptist.com

Reverend Bruce Cannon

Sunday School 9:45 AM
Worship Service 10:45 AM
Discipleship 6:00 PM
Evening Worship 6:45 PM
Wednesday Worship 7:30 PM

*"For God so loved the world, he
gave his only Son..."*

The Bridge Church of WNC

207 Pinebridge Avenue
Spruce Pine, NC 28777
www.bridgewnc.org

Pastors - Tom & Tammy Anglin

Sunday Service 10:30AM
Wednesday Service 7:00PM
Church Office M-F
9:00AM-3:00PM

"Home of Tri County Christian School"

Our passion is to help connect the Body of Christ in this area in order to see the Fire of God transform our community, state, nation and world! (See John 17:21)

Berry Chapel Baptist Church

280 Chapel St.
Spruce Pine, NC 28777
828-765-6590
www.berrychapelbaptist.com

Pastor - Steve Williams

Sunday School 9:45 AM
Worship Service 11:00 AM
Sunday Evening Care Meal/
Ministry - 5:30 PM
Wednesday Evening
Service 7:00 PM

*Where Everybody is Somebody
And Jesus Christ is Lord!*

The Rock Church

4806 US 64
Morganton, NC 28655
Phone: 828-334-3193
www.trcmorganton.com

Pastor - Billy Chapman

Sunday Morning – 10 AM
Sunday Night – 6 PM
Tuesday Night – 7 PM

*Come Join Us
Tent Revival 2020*

Grassy Creek Baptist Church

793 Old NC 226 Hwy
Spruce Pine, NC
828-765-4620
www.grassycreekbc.org

Sunday School 10:00am
Morning Worship 11:00am
Sunday evening 6:30pm
Wednesday:
J.A.M. (Jesus and Me) 6:30pm
Mid-week worship 7:00pm
*"That Mitchell County
may know Christ"*

Morganton Seventh-day Adventist Church

2187 Jamestown Road
Morganton, NC
828-584-8212

Pastor Steve Beitz

Sabbath (Saturday)
Bible Study - 9:30 am
Sabbath Worship - 11:00 am
Vegetarian Buffet after church
Wednesday
Praise, Prayer & Proclaim -
7:00 pm
www.morgantonsda.org

Altapass Baptist Church

3631 Altapass Hwy
Spruce Pine, NC
828-765-0660
altapassbaptistchurch@ccvn.com
www.altapassbaptistchurch.org

Dr. Marcus R. Benfield

Sunday School - 10:00am
Worship -11:00am
Sunday Evening - 7:00pm
Sunday Youth Program - 7:00pm
1st & 3rd Sunday
(Conductors for Christ ages 5-11)
2nd & 4th Sunday
(Teen Discovery ages 12-18)
Wednesday - 7:00pm

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Plumtree Presbyterian Church

4527 Hwy 19E
Plumtree, NC 28664
828-765-6919
www.plumtreechurch.com

Pastor Ryan Bridgeo
pastor@plumtreechurch.com

Sunday School 9:45 am
Worship Service 11:00 am
Life Groups Tuesday-Thursday evenings, 7:00 pm
Fusion Youth Wednesday's, 6:30 pm
Healing Services 2nd Sunday of each month, 6:30 pm

John 15:16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.

Pleasant Hill Baptist Church

2396 Enola Road
Morganton, NC 28655
(828) 437-4082
www.pleasanthillbc.church

**Senior Pastor
Dr. Jack Hodges**

Sunday School: 9:30 am
Sunday Worship: 10:30 am
Sunday Evening: 6:00 pm
Wednesday Evening 6:30 pm

"Love All, Reach All, Teach All, Send All"

West Burnsville Baptist Church

222 West Burnsville Church Rd.
Burnsville, NC 28714
(828)-682-3990

Pastor: Terry Long

Sunday School: 9:45 a.m.
Morning Service: 11:00 a.m.
Evening Service: 6:00 p.m.
Wednesday Service 6:30 p.m.

Church vision: Glorifying God through knowing, growing, going, to build the church and impact the world.

Burkemont Baptist Church

4668 Burkemont Rd.
Morganton, NC 28655
828-437-2357
For more information,
please visit
www.burkemontbaptist.org

Dr. Luke A. Lane

8:30am - Early Worship
9:45am - Sunday School
11:00am - Worship
6:00pm - Evening Worship

Marion Seventh-day Adventist Church

188 Ward Dr.
Marion, NC 28752
(828) 668-4018

Pastor Tim Sheridan

Sabbath (Saturday)
Bible Study - 9:15 am
Sabbath Worship – 10:50 am
Reaching the World with the Everlasting
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www.marionnc.adventistchurch.org

First Baptist Church of Spruce Pine

125 Tappan Street
Spruce Pine, NC 28777
828-765-9411
www.sprucepinefbc.com
www.spfbc.blogspot.com

**Dr. Rocky Branch
Senior Pastor**

Sunday School - 9:30 am
Sunday Worship - 10:45 am
Sunday Evening - 6:00 pm
Wednesday Evening - 6:30 pm
*Knowing God, Seeing God, Serving
God, Submitting to God!*

Great Hope Seventh-day Adventist Church

2907d US Hwy 70 E
Morganton, NC
828-475-2040

Pastor Barry MaHorney

Sabbath (Saturday)
Bible Study-10:00am
Sabbath Worship - 11:30am
Vegetarian Buffet after church
Wednesday - Praise, Prayer &
Proclaim - 7:00pm
www.greathopesda.com

Pine Branch Baptist Church

48 Church Road
Spruce Pine, NC 28777
Phone: (828) 765-9101
www.pinebranchbaptist.net

Reverend Bobby Joe Greene

Sunday School • 9:45-10:40am
Worship Service • 10:45am
Sunday Evening • 6:30pm

A Bible-believing Fellowship
Loving God and Loving People

Spruce Pine United Methodist Church

11090 Hwy. 226 South
Spruce Pine, NC 28777
www.sprucepineumc.org
spumc3@bellsouth.net
828-765-7446

Pastor Rick Schilling

Sunday School - 10:00am
Sunday Worship - 11:00am
Choir Wednesday - 7:00pm

The mission of Spruce Pine United Methodist Church is to be a beacon on a hill spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ through: Worship, Fellowship, Education, and Nurturing Service

Newland Christian Church

2800 Millers Gap Highway
Newland, NC 28657
Phone (828) 260-1404
www.newlandchristianchurch.com

Pastor - Phillip Greene

Sunday School: 9:45 am
Sunday Worship: 11 am
Sunday Evening Bible Study: 6 pm
Wednesday Evening Prayer Meeting: 7 pm

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Iron Sharpeneth Iron Proverbs 27:17

What Does the Bible Say About Israel's Recent Peace Agreements?

“For the essence of prophecy is to give a clear witness for Jesus.” Revelation 19:10 (NLT)

In recent decades, no area of the world has been home to more conflict and ongoing animosity than the Middle East. A cauldron of ethnic, political, and religious clashes, many believe the spark that ignites World War III will come from the Middle East. Central to the region’s ongoing conflict is Muslim hostility toward Israel and disputes over control of Jerusalem and the Temple Mount. These are the exact events the Bible says will happen in the last days. The Bible says Jerusalem will be “like an intoxicating drink that makes the nearby nations stagger” (Zechariah 12:2-3). That’s precisely what we’ve seen.

The re-establishment of Israel in 1948 led the neighboring Arab nations to declare war. In the years that followed, Israel fought no less than four conventional wars with its neighbors and has spent every moment preparing for all-out war. For all of its 72-year history, the Arab nations of the Middle East have viewed Israel as a mortal enemy. The lone exceptions have been peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994). Yet despite those treaties, many of the citizens of those two countries remain hostile toward the Jewish state. Is that changing? Some say it is, and they point out recent events that promise to transform the Middle East.

One of those events took place last month. That’s when Israel entered into its first peace agreement with an Arab neighbor since the 1994 treaty with Jordan. On August 13, President Trump announced the Abraham Accord – a peace agreement between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. The Abraham Accord is notable because the UAE is the first Persian Gulf state (and only the third Arab state) to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel.

Ultimately, the agreement promises to build deeper cultural, economic, and military ties between the two nations. Diplomats claim the agreement is a template for establishing a new era of peace and prosperity in the Middle East.

Less than a month after breaking news of the Abraham Accord, President Trump announced a similar peace agreement between Israel and Bahrain. Like the UAE, Bahrain will establish full diplomatic relations with Israel. As if that weren’t enough, in between the UAE and Bahrain deals, Trump brokered another deal that led Serbia and Kosovo to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

What do these agreements mean? Do they herald a new era of peace in the Middle East? Some think so. But it’s more likely they herald a growing recognition on the part of many Arab Muslim nations of their common need to counter Iran’s growing influence in the region. All these nations have a shared interest in thwarting Iran’s regional ambitions, even if it means partnering with Israel to do so. For that reason alone, many people believe we’ll soon see similar peace agreements between Israel and other Arab nations, such as Oman and Saudi Arabia.

So is any of this in the Bible? And if so, what does it mean?

The Seven-Year Treaty

Students of bible prophecy immediately take notice of any peace deal involving Israel. Why? Because the Bible says an Israeli peace treaty plays a central and pivotal role in the end times. Over 2,500 years ago, Daniel said a mighty ruler will enter into a covenant or a treaty with Israel for seven years (Daniel 9:27). This treaty kicks off the seven-year Tribulation and makes the ruler behind it a major player on the world stage. Who is this ruler? None other than “the man of lawlessness” (2 Thessalonians 2:3) himself – the Antichrist.

Do any of the recent peace agreements qualify as the Daniel 9:27 treaty? Some say yes. They point out that the Daniel 9:27 treaty is a covenant made “with many,” and in this case, we see agreements between Israel and many nations – the UAE, Bahrain, Kosovo, and Serbia – with the prospect of more nations joining soon. But that’s where the similarities begin and end.

The treaty outlined in Daniel 9:27 is set for a specific period – seven years. None of the recent peace deals with Israel mention seven years. Also, the man behind the treaty of Daniel 9:27 is a specific individual – the Antichrist. This is important to note.

Because when it comes to the recent peace agreements with Israel, the driving diplomatic force has been the Trump administration, and Donald Trump is not the Antichrist. Despite what many of his political opponents may think or say, he simply doesn’t fit the profile. The Bible describes the life and times of the Antichrist. It provides details regarding his ethnic background and political career. Like Barack Obama before him, Donald Trump doesn’t fit the description.

While people have accused every U.S. President of the past several decades of being the beast of Revelation, the Bible says the Antichrist will be the leader of a revived Roman Empire (Daniel 7). He will come from among the people of the Italian peninsula (Daniel 9:26), and He will be called the Assyrian (Isaiah 10:12; Daniel 8:9). Furthermore, the Bible says the Antichrist will emerge from a group of ten kings (Daniel 7:7-8), and not all of

these ten kings will willingly cede their power. Three will oppose him (Daniel 7:8).

None of these verses describe Donald Trump.

So unless a dramatic change takes place, the recent Israeli peace agreements are not the treaty described in Daniel 9:27. However, that doesn’t mean they don’t have prophetic significance. In all likelihood, they lay the groundwork for the treaty Israel will eventually sign with the Prince of Darkness.

A Time of Peace

While the Bible doesn’t cite any end times peace agreements other than Daniel 9:27, it does mention a time of relative peace Israel enjoys in the last days. The prophet Ezekiel described this time of peace as a time when Israel will be an unprotected land of unwallled villages – a time when Israel will live in great confidence in its safety (Ezekiel 38:11). During this time, a massive coalition of armies will invade Israel from the north (Ezekiel 38:15; Ezekiel 39:2), and Russia will lead them. Known as the Gog of Magog War, the invading nations are as follows:

Rosh = Russia

Magog = Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan

Persia = Iran

Cush = Sudan, Ethiopia

Put = Libya

Meshech, Tubal, Gomer, and Beth-togarmah = Turkey

While the recent peace deals with the UAE and Bahrain aren’t the covenant mentioned in Daniel 9:27, I believe they’re setting the stage for the fulfillment of Ezekiel 38-39. The battle lines of the Middle East are being drawn, and nowhere is that more apparent than in the official response to the recently announced deals.

Most predictable among them was Iran’s reaction. According to Al Jazeera, Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei accused the United Arab Emirates of betraying the Islamic world and the Palestinians. He promised the Emiratis will be disgraced forever, and the stigma of their betrayal will always be remembered.

It’s clear Tehran stands against this alliance, but the most revealing reaction came from Turkey’s President – Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Erdogan threatened to suspend diplomatic ties with the UAE and withdraw its ambassador after the Gulf state and Israel agreed to normalize relations.

Until recently, this would have been a surprise. After all, Turkey is a longtime ally of Israel. However, since Erdogan rose to power in 2003, he’s slowly dismantled many of Turkey’s democratic institutions. He’s taken an antagonistic stance toward Israel and strengthened Turkey’s ties with Russia and Iran. All that’s left to permanently move Turkey into the Russian/Iranian sphere of influence is a clear break between Turkey and NATO.

While we wait for that moment, the military forces of the three most powerful members of the Gog of Magog alliance – Russia, Iran, and Turkey – are now cooperating in Syria. This puts their joint military forces right on Israel’s border. And not just any border – Israel’s northern border. This is where Ezekiel said the invasion force will come from – north of Israel (Ezekiel 38:15; Ezekiel 39:2). Is this a mere coincidence? I don’t think so. Never in history have these three nations formed an alliance. Now, they’re stationed directly to Israel’s north.

God continues to set the stage for the fulfillment of the Ezekiel 38-39 prophecies. Turkey has made a strategic choice to align itself with Russia and Iran. The UAE and Bahrain have made a strategic choice to align themselves with Israel. If Oman and Saudi Arabia follow suit as expected, it explains why these nations aren’t part of the Gog of Magog alliance. Eventually, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and their allies will launch an overwhelming invasion force against Israel (Ezekiel 38:8-9). When they do, God will destroy them and display His power and glory for all the world to see (Ezekiel 38:23).

The Bottom Line

We’ll have to wait and see what further developments take place before we can know for sure what the prophetic significance of these peace deals will be. None of these agreements are explicitly mentioned in the Bible, and none of them qualify as the covenant mentioned in Daniel 9:27. However, collectively they’re setting the stage for a prophetic event that will soon take place – the Gog of Magog invasion.

Never in world history have the invading nations of Ezekiel 38-39 banded together. Today, they have. Never before have Russia, Iran, and Turkey posted armies on Israel’s northern border. Today, they have. Israel enjoying peace with its neighbors and a false sense of security is the only missing ingredient. Once it’s in place, the stage will be set for the fulfillment of the events described in Ezekiel 38-39. It’s just the latest sign highlighting how close we are to the end of the age and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

What do you think? Do you think Israel’s recent peace agreements are a fulfillment of bible prophecy?

This article first appeared in the ‘End Times Bible Prophecy’ newsletter, and was written by Britt Gillette



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By Jim Denison



Singer rejected for "The Voice" wins Vocalist of the Year: The peril and promise of persistence.

Luke Combs auditioned for The Voice several years ago but was turned down before he made it to the televised competition. A letter from the producers explained that he wasn't "interesting" enough for their show. Last week, Combs won CMA Male Vocalist of the Year and Album of the Year.

PDustin Johnson won the Masters yesterday on his tenth try. He previously led going into the final round of five other majors, but his only win was at the 2016 US Open. Tiger Woods, last year's champion and one of the greatest golfers of all time, made a ten on the twelfth hole yesterday after hitting his ball into the water three times.

In other words, persistence is essential to purpose, but it's not enough by itself. I was privileged to attend the Masters several times when we lived in Atlanta, but all the golfing persistence in the world would not have enabled me to compete in the tournament.

Persistence would not have been sufficient if I had met the monster alligator that prowled a Florida golf course during Tropical Storm Eta. Or if I were a victim of Hurricane Iota, an "extremely dangerous" Category 4 hurricane that is expected to make landfall in Central America tonight. Or if I were to join the more than eleven million Americans who have contracted COVID-19 since the pandemic began. (For more, see my latest video, "What does the Bible say about death?") It has been said that there is no courage without fear. But it is also true that courage is not enough to defeat fear. persistence is essential to a purpose.

"How's that working for us?"

I've been thinking about the peril of persistence in light of a remarkable essay I quoted last Friday. Biblical scholar Carl Trueman explains how our culture has become so self-centric to the rejection of orthodox morality. He then describes our need to model "true community, oriented toward the transcendent," that can "show a rapidly destabilizing world of expressive individuals that there is something greater, more solid, and more lasting than the immediate satisfaction of personal desires."

Here's the part of Dr. Trueman's essay that troubles me personally: he warns that Christians are in no sense immune from this quest for such "satisfaction." He notes: "Every one of us is an expressive individualist now. So comprehensive is the revolution that we are all affected by it and all are at some level complicit." We might be tempted to point to those who reject biblical morality and pray with the Pharisee, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men" (Luke 18:11). But we can be as consumeristic and individualistic in our spirituality as others are in their sexuality.

For example, Dr. Trueman writes, "There is a sense in which we now choose our religions as others might choose their gender or sexuality." Many choose the church they attend and religious content they consume based on what meets their personal needs. God is a means to their ends. They have imbibed the self-centric ethos of our day with its claim that persistence and courage are sufficient to fulfill our deepest hopes.

In light of our worsening mental health and the "deaths of despair" all around us, we might ask Dr. Phil's question: How's that working for us?

"Life is so precious and it's so fleeting"

When we develop such a lifestyle of persistent dependence, we experience the heavenly presence of God even while on earth. In The Great Divorce, C. S. Lewis writes: "I think earth, if chosen instead of heaven, will turn out to have been, all along, only a region of hell; and earth, if put second to heaven, to have from the beginning been a part of heaven itself."

We can and should settle for nothing less.

The time to start is today. Curtis Almquist of the Society of St. John the Evangelist notes: "The energy in Jesus' teachings is about our being prepared: being prepared to die, but, in the meantime and more importantly, being prepared to live. You don't want to miss a moment of it—your life—because life is so precious and it's so fleeting."

Are you "prepared to live" today?

Jim Denison Ph.D speaks and writes on cultural and contemporary issues. His daily column is distributed to more than 113,000 subscribers in 208 countries. See more on the website www.denisonforum.org. Copyrighted and printed by permission from Denison Forum.



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Foothills Baptist Bible College

What Christmas Is All About

By Dr. Tom Walker
McDowell County



Luke 2:10-14 says: “10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

This is a very familiar passage to the believer. Even many who are not saved are familiar with the words of the passage to which we have referred. The Christian life begins with a right view of who Jesus is and what He came into this world to do. People have different views of Christ. Some say He was just a good man. He was, but His identity goes far beyond that concept. He did go about doing good, helping the helpless, and healing the sick, but that does not go far enough. Some say He was just a martyr. That line of thinking says He had a cause and Christ was merely willing to die for a cause and lay down His life. Why Jesus came goes far beyond martyrdom. It was not so much a cause for which He died, but it was all about people for whom Jesus died. Others say Christ was just another man. But wait a minute! I do not know of a perfect human being in life that I have ever met. When it comes to Christ, the Bible says of Him that He was, “*holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens*” (Heb.7:26). He definitely was more than a mere man. I believe that the Lord Jesus Christ was the God-man. He was 100 % man without a sin nature and 100 % God in His essence and being.

If you are to begin your journey in the Christian life, then you must see Jesus as God in the flesh. Mary was merely the one God used to bring His Only-Begotten Son into the world. Remember, Jesus had no earthly father. Our Lord was a biological miracle. Never before had a woman given birth to a child without the involvement of a man.

The Bible gives us some information on how the virgin birth happened. The Bible says in Luke 1:35: “*And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.*”

Good Tidings

It is always a wonderful thing to hear good news. The news media feeds more on bad news than they do good news; however, when it comes to the Lord Jesus Christ we are given good news. What is it? It is that Jesus came down from Heaven, to take upon Himself a human body so that He could die for man’s sins on the cross.

This news was to bring “great joy.” Man’s biggest problem has always been sin. There had to be some solution for it, but only God could solve the problem. It was planned in eternity past, before God ever laid the foundations of the earth, that His Only-Begotten Son would come to die in the sinner’s stead on an old rugged cross. Unforgiven sin and unbelief has the consequence of being separated from good things in the future and Hell unless a remedy for sin was given. Jesus Christ is that remedy. That fact should bring us great joy.

The news was to be to “all people.” The Bible says clearly and plainly that Jesus came to take the place of everyone born of Adam’s race on the cross. The Scripture says in Hebrews 2:9—“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.” Don’t miss those three important words “for every man.” There is not a person born of Adam’s race that Christ did not die for at Calvary. If that be so, it is possible for all who come to God through Christ to become a child of God; that is glad tidings of great joy for all people.

Great Picture

Observe the words in verse 12 that says, “And ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” On a trip to the Holy Land many years ago I found out something that I had not read or heard about before. Our guide was a man by the name of Joseph Assad. He informed us that swaddling clothes could be considered grave clothes. If they were grave clothes, then it would signify a prophecy, that one day Jesus would die a special kind of death for sinners.

Some seek to deny this viewpoint, but I would think that those who were raised in and live in the Holy Land should be more of an authority on the subject than someone who may have never even been there.

The only way Jesus could save sinners would be to die in their place that they might go free. I do not believe the “swaddling clothes” just happened. It seems there is an element of prophecy in the clothing of the Christ child.

The Bible pointedly says, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15). The justice of God could only be satisfied if His perfect son died in the sinner’s place as his substitute.

I love that verse which says the following: “*For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him*” (2 Corinthians 5:21). God caused Christ, who knew nothing of personal sin, to be sin for our sakes, so that in and through a perfectly righteous Christ, we can be accepted as righteous, in the sight of God. Glorious Celebration

According to verse 13, there was a multitude of the heavenly host praising God. They were saying, “*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.*”

The Savior coming to earth brings glory to God. God put the man on our planet but man failed and sinned, but God receives glory and praise because He did not leave the man on the earth with no Savior and no way to be saved. He sent His darling Son, the best Heaven had, to make it possible for us to have peace. The only real, lasting, and true peace is the peace that Jesus gives. Because I have the Saviour, I have peace deep in my soul. There is a sense that all is well because I know Christ as Savior and Lord. No one can begin the Christian life who does not know who Jesus really is. Do you know Him personally? If not, He can be real in your life. Receive Christ as your Savior (See Romans 3:10,23; 5:8; 10:9,10,13). Have a Christ-filled Christmas!

Tom Walker is President of Foothills Baptist Bible College and Pastor of Zion Hill Baptist Church in Marion, NC.





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Snow Hill Baptist

A Phone Call from Oregon

By Dean Honeycutt
Mitchell County

This past week I received a phone call from an 80-year-old woman living in Oregon. I hesitated to respond to the phone call because I do not know anyone in Oregon, and I have never received a phone call from Oregon in the past. This woman left two voicemails saying she really needed to talk with me. So, I called her back and sure enough, this was a legitimate phone call. This woman had received my number from her nephew who lives in Nebo, North Carolina. This nephew reads the Blue Ridge Christian News and had sent a copy to her. It is amazing how God uses this newspaper.

As I began this conversation with an 80-year-old woman, I heard the concern in her voice and the fear she had. She began to share with me the concern she had for our nation and our President. She shared with me the riots that have been taking place in Portland and that her car had been vandalized in her parking space at her apartment complex. She told me she was afraid to say anything about her support for the President in fear of retaliation. I could tell this woman was afraid and genuinely concerned about our nation.

My heart began to hurt for her as she shared concerns for her son and family. I began to understand that Christian influence and Christian people she could confide in were scarce where she lived. As we continued our conversation, I shared the hope of Jesus Christ with her and the sovereignty of a loving all-powerful God who is in control of all things. Yes, God is in control of all things. Even in things that may appear to be chaos, God is in control. God is not the author of confusion or fear. In God, our Father we have peace, not chaos, hope and not fear, love and not hate, and assurance in the all-knowing and all-powerful Father which is in heaven. Heaven is His throne and earth is His footstool. God rests His feet upon the earth.

Proverbs 19:21 (KJV 1900) 21 *There are many devices in a man's heart; Nevertheless, the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand.* “

As we continued to talk about God and the Bible a calmness began to come over this dear woman. A conversation that started very anxious became calm and peaceful. I asked her if she thought God might be protecting President Trump? Because God's ways are higher than our ways and that God might be doing something that we cannot understand or see right now. She asked, "What do you mean?" I told her some presidents have been assassinated and other lives have been targeted. I shared with her that God is doing something, and we need to trust him, and the best thing we can do is pray. God never makes a mistake, and no one is fooling God. We need to trust God and what He does is always for our benefit even when we do not understand. This woman replied; "I never thought about that."

I asked if we could pray together over the phone and she said yes. So, we prayed together trusting in God for all things. I felt a peace about our conversation, and I believe she did as well. She thanked me for calling and spending time with her on the phone. She asked me to pray for her son. We said goodbye and hung up. I believe many people are afraid just like this woman. But what can we do to help? May I suggest the following?

At a perfect time in our past, the Father sent His Son Jesus. The world at the birth of Christ was extraordinarily complex and difficult, to say the least. King Herod was a ruthless leader. It has been said it was better to be Herod's hog than one of Herod's sons. The truth being a pig is safer in Herod's house than one of Herod's sons. Remember it was Herod who had all the male children two years and under killed for fear of the newborn Messiah King Jesus. What may have appeared to be a hopeless situation for many people the Father gave us Jesus. The Prince of peace and the King of kings took on flesh. Praise the Lord. Galatians 4:4 (KJV 1900)
4" But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,"

Our good and gracious Father is still in control. What may appear to be hopeless is not hopeless with God in control. God is at work and He is always at work around us. God is bringing his plan and His purpose together. God never fails and never makes a mistake. I trust Him. Our job is to tell others about Jesus. And when Jesus is in your heart, what do we have to fear?

Merry Christmas



High Country Prison Ministry

By Jody Griffin
Avery and Mitchell Counties

"He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8)


Ever wonder what might have happened if certain people who played significant roles in the Biblical narratives had responded to their circumstances differently? How might that have changed the trajectory of history and what effects might have been caused for others? What if Moses had chosen to run from the bush that was aflame and never heard the Call of God? What if Joseph had sent Mary away “privily”? What if Saul had chosen to reject the Voice that directed him when he was blinded on that Damascus road and thus never received his ‘new’ name?

As a Chaplain, I have the privilege of speaking with men often who speak of how they wish that they had made other choices in their lives and how they think these other choices will have created different outcomes.

Passing me in the breezeway he asked if he could speak to me. From an appropriate distance, he said, “Pray for me Chap! I’m leaving here next week and I don’t know what God wants me to do with my life.” I responded by sharing this Scripture with him.

Do justly. Love mercy. Walk humbly with God. He admitted that he had not really thought of his release from that perspective and thanked me for the words of encouragement. Then the next week as he was leaving I happened to be nearby and he was escorted out the door.

“I have been thinking about what you said, Chap! I’m gonna do just like it says. Do what’s right, forgive the people that have hurt me, and walk with the Lord from here on out.” I smiled and congratulated him on his decision. And I pondered how his choice might impact his future, his family, and on and on. Of course, we all play a role in the course of history. Many see themselves as small and insignificant. But lives that choose to walk in the ways of God... lives that are moved to follow the Truth found in God’s Word are lives that will ultimately be lives of purpose!

A close-up photograph of a metal grate, likely part of a prison cell or a secure enclosure. A heavy metal chain is attached to the grate with a large padlock. The grate is made of dark, weathered metal with a grid pattern. In the background, a blurred cross is visible on a wall, suggesting a religious or institutional setting. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and shadows, emphasizing the texture of the metal and the symbolic nature of the scene.

Meditate on the different narratives of the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and you will find that each one describes the decisions of people who participated in the miraculous Incarnation and ministry of Jesus in the world. His decision to follow through with God's redemptive plan means that every single person has the opportunity to experience freedom from the 'prisons' created by our choices!

Yes, we can be a part of the Great Work of God bringing Light and Love and Peace, and even Joy to a world that seems dark and dangerous. I can't help but smile as I ponder how we together will impact the future of our families and the world...

2020 has been hard. 2021 can and will be better if each one will choose to hear God's call to faith that moves us to live justly, to be models of mercy, and humbly follow the One Who leads us.

These decisions led Joseph. Joseph led the animal that carried Mary. Together Joseph and Mary led Jesus to understand and live the very words that would one day lead the world to know Jesus as the “Word” become flesh to dwell among us. Where might the “Word” take us? Merry Christmas!

Jody Griffin is pastor of Central Baptist Church in Spruce Pine and Community Funded Chaplain at Avery-Mitchell Correctional Institution.





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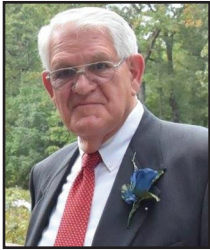
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By Doug Harrell
Mitchell County



As you are reading this we are in the month of December, the month that we celebrate the birth of Jesus our Savior, the month that we should be proclaiming joy to the world. Instead of many of us are facing the month with fear in our hearts and minds. We are worried about COVID-19, we are worried about being with our families, especially those that are confined in nursing homes and hospitals where we are not allowed because of the virus. We are afraid to go to our house of worship, sometimes because of governmental regulations that prohibit our going, and at times because we fear the virus. Fear that our government is not being truthful with our elections, that our leaders are heading down the wrong path, and that we cannot trust them or our media. Living in constant fear is not how God wants us to live and face life. He wants peace in our hearts, minds, and soul.

“Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.” Isaiah 41:10 KJV

In times of darkness all around us, we need to strive to be the light for others. I truly believe that now is one of the greatest opportunities to be a witness that you and I have ever had. Have you ever sat outside on a dark night around a blazing fire and watched the flames leap into the air, and be drawn closer to the flame to feel the warmth that is radiating from it? I am sure that most of us have had that experience. Now is the time to be the light in the lives around us that draw people to us. When people are hurting is the time that they are looking for answers and the best answer in the universe is trust and faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Be the lighthouse that guides those around you in your daily walk today. If you are a born-again Christian you should be a full-time missionary for Christ, and do that where you are planted. You do not have to go to a foreign country, just step out your door and bring the light of Jesus with you to your workplace, your friends, and neighbors.

“Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” Matthew 5:14-16 KJV

Imagine being in a dark room and you are the one with the lamp. You trim the wick and light it and make sure that the globe is clear and clean so the light will shine on those around you. They will come to the light. In the scripture we see the great commission to go forth and testify to all the world that they may know Jesus. The word “go” in the Hebrew and Greek language means in your walk, not to travel afar. Determine that in this world of doubt and uncertainty, you will be like a tree planted by the river, that you will bear good fruit and stand strong against the winds of evil that might be brewing all around you.

“Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.” 1 Corinthians 16:13 KJV

May your Christmas be blessed with the warmth and love of Jesus surrounding each of you and your families this joyful time of the year, God's Blessings to each of you. Be the LIGHT OF JESUS in your personal world.

Doug Harrell is a life-long resident of Mitchell County, Owner of Harrell Hill Farms, Inc, a member of Bear Creek Baptist Church and Publisher of the Blue Ridge Christian News.

Merry Christmas!

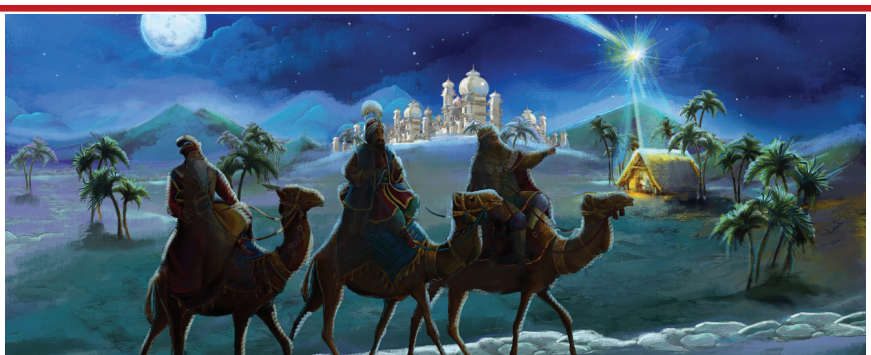


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Humor - Laughter is Healthy for You

By Buddy Freeman
Madison County



A young couple moved into a new neighborhood. While they were eating she sees her neighbor hanging the wash outside. She said, “That laundry is not very clean. Maybe she needs a better laundry detergent.” He said nothing. About a week later the young woman made the same comments. About a month later, the woman was surprised to see a nice, clean wash on the line. She said, “Look, she has learned how to wash correctly.” The husband said, “I got up early this morning and cleaned our windows.”

In Sunday School a boy answered a question on marriage by saying, “In Christianity, people can have only one wife or husband and they call it monotony.”

A little girl had been warned not to say anything about the new minister’s big nose. He was coming over for dinner. When the doorbell rang, she opened the door and said, “Oh, how do you do, Mr. Nose?”

The great baseball catcher Yogi Berra said, “Always go to other people’s funerals, otherwise they won’t come to yours.”

A Swahili Proverb says: “The laughter of a child is the light of a house.”

Isn’t it amazing that college students who pay their way through college never flunk out!

Dr Buddy Freeman is the former pastor of the First Baptist Church of Marshall, NC.



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Grand View Baptist Church

“Fear Not”

By Glenda Ward
McDowell County



“Fear Not!” The angel of the Lord spoke these words to Zachariah, to Mary and Joseph, and a group of shepherds on a hillside near Bethlehem.

During this Christmas Season, the entire world is caught up in a pandemic as we have never seen before. Fear grips us in ways of paralyzing our thinking including nationwide panic as we all face the unknown and uncertainty of life as we know it. We can see the fear in people’s eyes. Fear and worry capture our hearts as we see ourselves caught up in a whirlwind of circumstance that is beyond our control. People are losing their jobs and homes. Factories and businesses are closing. Food costs, building materials, and living supply expenses are rising beyond comprehension. Daily necessities are becoming scarce and hard to get. Families are losing loved ones to this virus amid the pandemic that is causing all this fear throughout the world. Fear drives us into a downward spiral. The entire world is caught in the grip of fear – fear of the unknown.

Therefore, let it be known that a nation that has feared for itself constitutes a large part of the problems they face. Isaiah 41:10 says, “*Fear Not! For I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God.*” In Matthew 6:25-34 read and study the meaning of this scripture. Know that “*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. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.*”

“Sufficient unto this day is the evil thereof,” trouble, adversity, and misfortune. Our circumstances of today should make people everywhere realize that there is a God, One True God, and He is in control of all that happens upon this universe. It should bring everyone’s attention to the realization that there is a God and He is REAL! He is in control of what happens with the situation our world is in today. Jesus pointed out a list of commonsense reasons for us not to be in fear and worry. We are to seek out God, keep an open mind, and follow where He leads, taking one day at a time. Current circumstances are forcing those who know Jesus to lean on Him – trusting Him more than ever before. Having faith doesn’t mean doing nothing, but rather prayerfully doing what we can today and recognize what we cannot do. When we let go, don’t worry – trust God, and be obedient to Him life becomes far more serene. Underlying all the reasons we shouldn’t worry in fear... is simply Trust in Jesus.

This Christmas season is no different than that “First Christmas.” On that first Christmas, the world was in desperate times too. Today we should all do as Mary did all those years ago; recall an echo of the words of God’s Angel to her, “Do not be afraid.” Our fears should turn to joy as we look and celebrate this Christmas Season with immediate family.

Our world is gripped by fear. People think that Christmas is about gifts under a tree and a spirit of good cheer, with Christmas dinner, and family and friends around the table. But all this isn’t nearly as good as the real reason we celebrate Christmas. JESUS IS THE REASON!

God sent His Son, Jesus Christ – the Messiah – a Savior for you and me; to save us from our sins and to help in this life to lift our burdens and ease our fears. Think about it...God uses situations to teach us priceless lessons about Him, His provision, His sufficiency, and His faithfulness. Don’t you think God just may be trying to get the attention of all those who have forgotten Who He is and what Christmas and the birth of the world’s Messiah is all about? Maybe, just maybe, God is limiting family gatherings this year with the Corona Virus for immediate families to be together and refocus on the meaning of the Christmas Season and put Christ, our Lord, and Savior in the center of their life.

As we learn to stay in the present day, entrusting uncertainties to our faithfulness in Jesus Christ – believing in Him and the Cross of Calvary; identify healing Scriptures in the Bible. Quote them daily and pray to God – the Great Physician for healing from pain, illness, and suffering. Read Matthew 11:16. This is saying for someone who lacks conviction they are easily swayed by public opinion – unbelievers. In His day Jesus portrayed His unbelieving contemporaries as spoiled children who whined when they did not get their way. Isn’t this exactly what is happening in our world today with all the negative reports in the media, in demonstrations, and rioting? Read and think about what Jesus said in John chapter 10: verses 25-30.

Again, God uses situations to teach us priceless lessons, to get our attention, and most importantly to get the attention of all those unbelievers who reject Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. What is happening in this world today are things No One can prevent.

IT IS GOD WHO IS IN CONTROL OF OUR WORLD!

Glenda Ward is a member of Grand View Baptist Church in McDowell County. She is the mother of five grown children. Glenda is a Christian writer/author of “Something to Think About” – weekly Christian Articles. She writes Church Programs & Bulletins, VBS Material, Christmas and Easter Programs; all material based on the KJV of the Bible. Also testing the field in tributes, individual memorial writings, etc.



By Terry Cheek Th.D.
McDowell County

I find myself struggling to write this month. So much has happened and continues to develop. We with COVID-19, social tensions, violence from socialists and extremist agitators, unheard of assaults, distractions, and frustrations. How do I write about the spirit of Christmas? Where do you find the encouragement to read about Christmas? I find the strength to write, preach, teach, and even worship in HOPE through Jesus Christ. I pray you to find HOPE in Him as well this Christmas season.

From Luke's gospel in chapter two, we read about the birth of Christ. Before the incarnate birth, we read beginning with verse 8 the account of angels coming to the Shepherds. What a blessed event this was. The common man, tending their flock, then suddenly the sky opens and a glorious light shines around them. The heavenly conversation is amazing to read repeatedly. But, one word stands out in my mind as I write this article. The word eudokia, or translated in English as "goodwill." There is no better time to spread goodwill than Christmas.

God spread goodwill to humanity with the birth of Christ, our messiah. Goodwill is understood to be a delight in the life of another or others. Over thousands of years, mankind had waited on their redeemer. Now, we read He has arrived, and with Him comes goodwill.

This year Christmas will more than likely be much different for most of us. Typically, the Church will share the goodwill of God's word every day of our lives. With the gospel, we have practiced the opportunity to meet, in some way, the material needs of those around us. However, this year we may not have the opportunity to visit. If we look around, there remain families struggling, children having to suffer because of the bad decisions of adults. There are elderly living next door to us who only need a friendly visit. The nursing homes and hospitals are full of kind, loving and lonely folks wishing they could hear a Merry Christmas and have someone ask if they could pray with them. This year pray and think about ways to provide the Good Will of God's grace to another person. Send cards and letters to the shut-ins. Continue to provide your Christmas outreach in the form of gift cards, gift certificates, nonperishable food items, and even toys by dropping them off at the door with a loving card or letter letting them know you or your church hasn't forgotten them. Neighbor, we can think outside of the box this Christmas. You know it very well could be God's desire that we continue to live through the issues I stated above to get the church out of our comfort zone and out into the highways and hedges with the Gospel in word and deed.

I'm not trying to guilt-trip anyone into anything. I realize Christmas is a busy time of the year. The shopping and cooking and gatherings are going to continue in some way shape form or fashion; can you find time to spread goodwill in someone's life. If you really want to find HOPE in the worldly mess around us, try first giving of yourself and try spreading goodwill. Once you see that it really works you will want to find a way to do this every day throughout the year. Merry Christmas everyone and look for HOPE from goodwill!

Until we meet again in print or person may God bless you is my prayer!

Terry is the Executive Director and broadcaster of The Inspiring Word media ministry. You can contact Terry by email at theinspiringword@gmail.com Or by visiting www.theinspiringword.org



Christmas with Jesus

By Chris Rathbone
Mitchell County

This time of year is very special for a lot of families. These last 2 months of each year allows many to spend time with family and friends. We all know that the many responsibilities of life leave us with precious little time to spend with the family and friends we love. It shouldn't be this way, but it is. In my family, we are so busy in life just in our little family that we often don't get to see our parents, siblings, and extended family as much as we want. So, the Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations allow us to get together.

Just a few days before Thanksgiving a family in my church had a loved one pass away. Another family I know had a young family member who was tragically killed in a car accident. One of my boys' basketball games was canceled when a player on the other team had a family member pass away. More than likely you've also heard of several instances where tragedy has come into a family and perhaps it was even your family. No family is immune to the fact that death can come at any time, whether it's the holidays or not.

As I sat in the church during the funeral service today, my heart went out to all the families that have experienced loss. This year families will go through the many traditions that they share during the holidays without someone they love. As a pastor, I often hear how the "first" special occasions without a loved one are the hardest. Whether it's the first birthday, anniversary, Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas, etc. they are all hard to get through. When my grandparents passed away a lot of things changed in my family. We were accustomed to always going to their house at certain times. Every year was the same and we all knew we were going to get together with family and celebrate. Over the years, God has allowed us to form new family traditions that are a blessing, but I always remember those wonderful times from years gone by.

This year many of you are facing a first in your family. It was the first Thanksgiving without your loved one. Christmas is not far away and, in your heart, you're already dreading not being able to share those special traditions with your Dad, Mom, spouse, child, sibling, best friend, etc. The special days that you shared with them just won't be the same. Every one of us has gone through these feelings.

Let me share something that touched my heart. Driving down the road last year, my wife and I were talking about how the 1st anniversary of my father-in-law's death was coming up and how it was going to be a tough day. My oldest son overheard us talking and spoke up. He said, "You know what helps me? I don't think of it as the 1st anniversary of Papaw's death, but that Papaw has been in heaven with Jesus for a year!" (Out of the mouth of babes!)

Friends this year may be a tough year for you and your family. These will be the first of many occasions your family will go through without someone you love dearly. Just remember that those who belong to Jesus are with Him now! This Christmas will be the best one ever for those who are spending it with Jesus. Because He was born into this world, lived, died, and rose again, we have a hope that cannot be taken away from us. One day Jesus will come to get all of us, and we will never be separated again. Trust your Savior to help you and your family to form new traditions beginning this year. Let us look forward to the time when our Lord comes, and we will all spend Christmas with Jesus for eternity! Praise God!

Preacher Chris Rathbone serves as Pastor at Mine Creek Baptist Church.



Merry Christmas!

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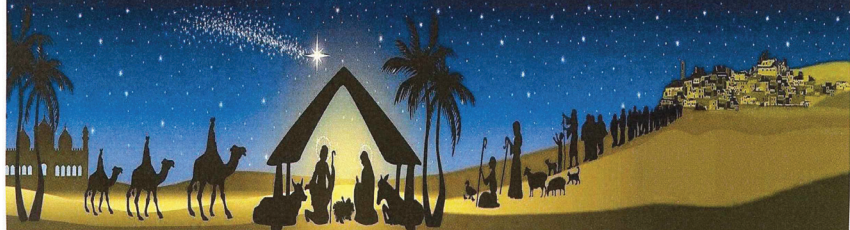
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Unspeakable Joy this Christmas Season



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Christmas and blessed New Year

And the angel said unto them, fear
not: for, I bring you good tidings of
great joy, which shall be to all people.
Luke 2:10

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The Lesson of the Little Stones

By Tracy Jessup



“Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:14-15)

In his book, *Impossible People* (InterVarsity Press, 2016), Os Guinness tells about growing up in a China that had been ravaged by two centuries of European and American exploration, and then by World War II and brutal civil war. “We lived in Nanjing, which was then the nation's capital, but there were few good schools to go to, so at the age of five I found myself setting off by plane to a boarding school in Shanghai.

Obviously, the conditions behind the decision to send me out at that age were extreme, and I was not the only one launched on that path so young. But it was the first time in my life that I had been away from my parents and on my own. So, to give me a constant reminder of the North Star of the faith at the center of our family life, my father had searched for two small, smooth, flat stones and painted on them his life motto and that of my mother. For many years those two little stones were tangible memos in the pockets of my gray flannel shorts that were the uniform of most English schoolboys in those days. In my right-hand pocket was my father's motto, ‘Found Faithful,’ and in my left-hand pocket was my mother's, ‘Please Him.’

Many years have passed since then, and both of those little painted stones were lost in the chaos of escaping from China when Mao Zedong and the People's Army eventually overran Nanjing, returned the capital to Beijing, and began their iron and bloody rule of the entire country. But I have never forgotten the lesson of the little stones (p. 28).

Today's passage is part of Joshua's closing address to the people of God in which he concludes that the gods of the Egyptians, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites - all completely defeated - offer no credible alternative to serving Yahweh. Joshua compels the people to “revere...and serve” the Lord God “in sincerity and faithfulness,” worshipping him alone. And the memory of what God has done for them in the past is an important reason to be faithful to God in the present as well as in the future.

However, God does not twist anybody's arm to serve him. We are called to make a conscious choice to serve God, and God alone. Oswald Chambers writes, “Your choice must be a deliberate determination – it is not something into which you will automatically drift. And everything else in your life will be held in temporary suspension until you make a decision” (My Utmost for His Highest: An Updated Edition in Today's Language, July 8).

Prayer: Lord, we have made our choice to follow You. In all we do, may we be found faithful and please You.

Dr. Tracy Jessup serves as vice president for Christian Life and Service and senior minister to the University. He is a graduate of Gardner-Webb with a B.A. in Music and earned his M. Div. degree at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School. He completed his Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He also teaches in the undergraduate department of religious studies and enjoys the opportunity to serve the local church through interim pastorates, pulpit supply, and preaching revival services. He and his wife, Teresa, have two children, Christian and Anna.

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Worship in Reverence and Awe

By Michael Cloy
McDowell County

Who is the most famous person you have ever met? I remember meeting the wife of a seated President of the United States. When I approached her, I was purposefully respectful. I wanted to honor and respect her as the First Lady. Why did I honor her, especially since I did not vote for her husband? The simple answer is the Bible states we are to outdo one another in showing honor (Romans 12:10b). I also honored her because of the high office that her husband held. But most importantly, I wanted to honor her as a person made in God's image.

The Bible has a lot to say about honor. For example, we are first to honor God (Revelation. 4:11), but we are also to honor our father and mother (Exodus. 20:12), the elderly (Leviticus. 19:32), rulers (1 Peter 2:17), church leaders (1 Timothy. 5:17), and others who serve Christ faithfully (Philippians 2:29). The purpose of honoring someone means to esteem and treat others with respect because of who they are or what they have done. Honor has a sense of value, price, or quality. That which is valued and esteemed is "honored." The biblical use also means to seek to enhance the reputation of someone.

Expressions of honor might be communicated in a firm handshake and looking at the other person in the eye or even as simple as waiting to listen to what another person has to say and not interrupting them. Saying "thank you" and "you are welcome" and even "please" is a means to honor another person. Honoring or respecting has its origins with being made in the image of God. Each person has a fundamental value or worth because we have been created in the image of God. So God has told us we are to honor each other because we reflect God's honor as human beings.

God also describes how we are to honor Him. The best way of honoring God is in reverential worship of him. Reverential worship means we approach God as He describes, so we respect His honorable character and do not offend Him. Listen to this description of God's character and think of how high and majestic He is when we compare who we are to Him.

There is only one living and true God, who is infinite in being and perfection. He is a purest spirit, invisible, with neither body, parts, nor passions. He is unchangeable, boundless, eternal, and incomprehensible. He is almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, and most absolute. He works all things according to the counsel of His own unchangeable and most righteous will, for His own glory. He is most loving, gracious, merciful, long-suffering, abundant in goodness and truth, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. He is also most just and terrifying in His judgments, hating all sin, and will by no means acquit the guilty. God has all life, glory, goodness, and blessedness in and of Himself.

- Westminster Confession of Faith Modern English

Wow, imagine standing in the presence of the God of the Bible as just summarized above. If we were brought before God almighty, we would be in awe of Him. That awe is one of reverential fear. That reverential fear would be so real that our soul would be extremely aware of our sinfulness with respect to God's holiness, much like Isaiah expressed in Isaiah 6:5 when he realized he was in the presence of God, "And I said: *"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"* Isaiah experienced the awe of God and was immediately aware of his sinfulness, his smallness, and, therefore, his mortality. The good news is God sent His Son to intercede and to help us approach God almighty in proper respect and awe, so we honor God and not dishonor Him. His Son's righteousness allows us to respectfully express how much we are in awe of God by being in awe of His Son, Christ Jesus. Hebrews 12: 28 summarizes our response to God's awe when it states, *"let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe."*

At Landis Presbyterian, we reverently worship God. We approach God in awe. We then reverentially sing about God's awesomeness. We humbly pray to God in awe because He is pleased to hear and answers our prayers. We listen to the awe of God's revealed will in His scriptures through expository sermons. We participate in God's awe, inspiring visible commitment to His people in the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. The honor we bring in the worship of God is established upon the rich grace God the Father freely gives us. This grace creates peace in our souls, leading to reverent joy in the salvation that God the Son has secured for us, and God the Spirit has applied to us. In our worship, we *"make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth! Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!"* Psalm 100: 1-2

Do you desire to worship God in reverence and awe? We invite you to come and join us in the reverence and awe of God in public worship at Landis Presbyterian. You can contact me to discuss our order of worship or any other questions you might have regarding the Church. We look forward to meeting and honoring you as one of God's image-bearers.

Mike Cloy is an Ordained Ruling Elder on the Session of Landis, OPC. You can contact him at opcMikeCloy@gmail.com



Take Your Stand and Conquer Your Enemy

By Joyce Meyer

As children of God, we have power and authority over the devil. And we are to use that power and authority for good...and for service to others. That almost sounds like something you could say about a superhero, doesn't it? It reminds me of a letter I once received from a woman, telling me about her four-year-old son and his cousins playing together one day. They were all pretending to be superheroes. One of them exclaimed, "I'm Superman!" Another said, "I'm Superwoman!" And this lady said her son proudly wielded his imaginary sword and proclaimed, "I'm Joyce Meyer!" What a compliment to the Christ in me! That child saw something in me that he thought was "super" and wanted to imitate! What he saw is simply a result of the work God has done in my life through His Holy Spirit. And isn't it interesting that while the other kids' superhero gear included a cape, his little weapon was a sword! (See Ephesians 6:17.) We are often referred to as soldiers in the Word of God. Soldiers are well trained in combat; they carry all kinds of offensive, as well as defensive equipment, and are taught to be vigilant, alert, and aware.

No matter whether we view ourselves like soldiers or superheroes or whatever, our warfare is spiritual. And our weapons and armor are also spiritual.

Doing Warfare God's Way

In this spiritual war, we fight on the battlefield of the mind. Every day we are subjected to unrelenting attacks in our thoughts, such as worry, fear, doubt, and other concerns. The devil is behind many of our problems, and some we create ourselves.

But Ephesians 6:11 tells us to *"put on the full armor of God, so that [we] can take [our] stand against the devil's schemes"* (NIV). Our thoughts are very important in this warfare...what we think of ourselves as well as what we think of others or our circumstances. The reason is that *"our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms"* (v. 12).

So, while the devil may have power, we have the power and authority of Jesus Christ at work in us by His Holy Spirit. Our job is to get to know God for ourselves—get to know who we are in Him and the power that is available to us through Him. We need to learn how to follow the Holy Spirit because He wants to lead us in our individual battles according to what is right for each of us. The truth is God is on our side, and that already makes us more than conquerors in Him! (See Romans 8:31, 37.)

What to Wear to Battle

In this war, there's both offensive and defensive equipment. With our weapons, we fight the enemy. And we are protected from him by our armor. Both are vitally important to our success.

Colossians 3:12-14 (NIV) says, *"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."*

These verses reveal the weapons and armor of our spiritual warfare. We defeat the enemy's tactics every time we forgive instead of hold a grudge...every time we have patience with someone rather than rush them...every time we speak with humility rather than arrogance.

Ephesians 4:25 says to *"put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor...."* Verse 31 goes on to say, *"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."* These are things that will hinder and weigh us down in life—and certainly a spiritual battle.

The Battle Plan

To win our battles, we have to learn to cooperate with the Holy Spirit as He leads us, according to His purpose and plan for our lives. Practically speaking, we do this as we commit to seeking God in prayer and by studying His Word, and then choosing to trust what He says above and beyond anything else. That means we believe the Truth of who God is and His promises to us in the Bible no matter what our circumstances look like, what we feel, or what lies the enemy is trying to put in our mind.

So, tighten up your belt of Truth (Ephesians 6:14). In other words, learn the truth of God's Word, especially what His Word says about you. Then do what you know to do...what you can do...and God will do what you can't. Don't be so concerned about how everything will work out; just trust God to do what's right for you!

Joyce Meyer is a New York Times bestselling author and founder of Joyce Meyer Ministries, Inc. She has authored more than 100 books, including *Battlefield of the Mind* and *Overload: How to Unplug, Unwind and Unleash Yourself from the Pressure of Stress* (Hachette). She hosts the *Enjoying Everyday Life* radio and TV programs, which air on hundreds of stations worldwide. For more information, visit www.joycemeyer.org.



Crossword Solution

A	L	A	W		M	O	R	A	L		A	B	L	E
R	U	S	E		O	W	E	S		S	H	E	E	R
A	R	E	A		U	N	I	T		H	A	G	A	R
B	E	A	T	E	N		N	E	B	O		E	V	E
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Sudoku Solution

1	7	6	3	2	4	5	9	8
9	5	2	8	1	7	6	3	4
3	4	8	5	9	6	1	2	7
8	9	7	2	5	1	3	4	6
4	1	3	7	6	9	8	5	2
2	6	5	4	3	8	7	1	9
7	8	1	9	4	5	2	6	3
6	3	9	1	7	2	4	8	5
5	2	4	6	8	3	9	7	1

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The Great Harvest

By Christy Lowman
Burke County



You are probably just finishing a great feast from Thanksgiving with your family. Did you know that God is preparing a great feast and harvest for us?

I didn't think about it until a neighbor brought three boxes of tomatoes for me to put up for my family. Someone had given her a bunch and she kept what she needed and shared the rest with my family. I washed each one and froze them anticipating the many meals to come.

This got me thinking about God's great harvest and how He needs our help. He needs us to go out and reach as many people as we can and tell them about Jesus. If they don't accept Jesus right away that's okay. He just wants us to plant seeds about Him and He will take care of the rest. See when we plant the seed, it gets the person thinking, and God will send someone else to water the seed we planted and it will start to grow. God will use us to help draw them closer to them until that person accepts Him. That's why it is so important for us to strive to always be Christlike. We want others to want Jesus in their hearts. If we act poorly it reflects on God and they might decide they don't want anything to do with Him.

When every people group in the whole world has heard about Jesus, He will do His great harvest. Jesus will come back and harvest us. He will take us back with Him to heaven to live with Him. Then later we will join Him and live with Him on the new earth. Is that not great? It is great for us but we need to make sure we help others become believers too so they can be there as well.

Did you know that Jesus is preparing a great feast and a mansion for us in heaven? What a glorious day it will be when we get there! No more pain, no sin, no sickness, no worries, no death, just a peaceful, wonderful time we will spend with Jesus for the rest of eternity! I can not wait for that glorious meal and harvest! And I can't wait to see you there!

Dear Lord, as our time draws near, help us get out of our comfort zone and tell others about You. Please help us plant seeds and help others come along behind us to water them. As these seeds grow, please draw each person closer to You to where they accept You as their Savior. Thank you, dear Lord, for the great feast and harvest, and for the mansion, You have prepared for us! In Jesus's name, I pray, Amen.

"In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." John 14:2 NKJV

Christy Lowman is a Christian author and illustrator that lives in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains with her husband and two children. She enjoys writing and illustrating books for all ages. Some of her short stories are published with Guideposts and HCI.. Christy gives all the glory to God in everything she does. A portion of every book sold from the Small Bible Character Series will be donated to battle human trafficking. If you enjoy her books, 'like' her author page on Facebook and let her know! You can buy her books at https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_1?ie=UTF8&field-author=Christy+Lowman&search-alias=books&text=Christy+Lowman&sort=relevancerank You can reach her at <https://www.facebook.com/authorChristyLowman/> or christyssoaps@yahoo.com.



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Marlene’s Meditations

Four Secrets to Wise Waiting

By Marlene Houk
Burke County

2 Thessalonians 3:5 “And the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ.”



We wandered through the apple orchard, the sunshine cradling our cheeks. A perfect fall day full of promise, crackling, crunching autumn sounds, and the pleasure of cooked apples with ice cream awaited us.

The gnarled branches, twisted into mysterious symbols and outlined in black against the crystal blue of the sky drew my gaze to a lone apple. A tasty orb, its golden sheen reflecting the sun, unblemished and fully ripe, awaiting harvest. I feel like that apple sometimes. Everything is in place. I’m ready. Waiting, waiting, waiting. But nothing happens. We are waiting for that phone call or text. Waiting for the doctor’s report. Waiting for matrimony. With only four scant letters, the word, wait, can slowly erode our faith, our serenity, our trust in the Lord, and our focus on Christ.

Like that lone apple, starkly contrasted to the absence of the other 500 plus apples that can be harvested from a single tree, we may feel that we hang alone in life, lagging behind countless others who have reached their goals.

We mark time until our dreams, live until God plucks us from the bare branches of life and plops us into the harvest basket of happiness. But the in-between times that we want to end holds a treasure-trove of spiritual riches.

The Bible reveals four secrets about waiting for that scrape away our angst and frustration, revealing the riches that we can access during the silence.

Waiting in the Bible occurs often; Significant messages await us within Scripture simply by repeating the idea of waiting many times. Sarah waited 25 years for baby Isaac, probably being the midwife on her vast plantation and hearing the tiny mewling cries of the newborn as they rested on her flat stomach. Rebekah, her daughter-in-law, waited for 20 years to birth Jacob and Esau. And the Israelites waited 400 years in the great silence between the Old and New Testaments. Many Bible stories emphasize that waiting throws a wrench in people’s plans. Waiting is a command from the Lord, an experience, an absence of stunning significance, and a pointer to eternity.

But the surprising observation about the word, wait, in the Bible, is that, often, it is connected with activity. Our waiting for our hopes and desires need not be still. We can be actively pursuing God’s activities while we wait.

Washes away fret

Psalm 37:7 “Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass.”

Fortunately, the command to avoid fretting follows the preparation of resting in the Lord and waiting patiently for him. Wise waiting empowers us to cleanse ourselves of fretting about the dreaded what-ifs, the ache of unfulfilled aspirations, or the echo of a cold heart as our longtime friend slams the door to decades of precious friendship. When we focus on the Lord, reclining upon His promises, believing His Philippians 1:6 plan for us, and pouring our heart out in prayer to Him, the fretting fades and the resting begins. Acknowledge and pursue help for our problems, yes; dwell on them, no.

Adds strength to our faint hearts

Psalm 27:14 “Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD.”

The word, LORD, is a relational title, and the first mention of this name is, appropriately, when a man is created in Genesis chapter two. It carries the idea of the God who seeks us and reveals Himself continually as He creates us, allows us to enjoy His world, and offers to save us to live with Him eternally. While we wait for our redemption, we focus on knowing Him.

In my 57 years of experiencing salvation, I’ve noticed that my relationship to the Lord as His forgiven child redirects my focus to God’s divine Word. The living Words transform my unbiblical thoughts and create His peace and rest within my storm of sadness. Most of the time, I don’t realize the power of that change until much later, but I’ve come to trust the process and the power of His presence and Word to strengthen my resolve to focus on the LORD.

Ignites a passion for obedience

Psalm 59:9 “ Because of his strength will I wait upon thee: for God is my defense.”

When we wait on the Lord, our desires, like a dawning sunrise, change to a longing to glorify Him. Like the majestic hues spreading as the sun climbs the horizon, God’s perspectives spread across our days, illuminating His Word in our hearts and, slowly, changing our gaze from our troubles to His glory. As I’ve watched the Lord work in my life, I’ve noticed within myself a desire to rely on Him when I can’t change minds or control others. When I obey His command to rest in Him, follow His precepts and relax in His plan, my focus on Christ creates a flame of zeal to follow Him.

As we wait on the Lord, rich and satisfying things fill our horizons. Strength and protection (Psalm 59:9), purified expectations (Psalm 62:5), hope (Psalm

39:7), guidance (Psalm 25:5), and righteousness (Galatians 5:5), arise in our lives, brilliantly coloring our world with His glory.

Trains us for future victory

Psalm 25:5 “Lead me in thy truth, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day.”

Life is circular. Husbands and wives give to each other and draw strength from each other. Sometimes, a beloved grandparent dies within days of their precious newborn grandchild’s birth in the cycle of life and death. Or, the bread of His Word that we cast upon the waters of life returns to bless us.

Trials produce strength when we wait upon the Lord; strength for future needs and survival wisdom for others. As the mother needs to nurse her baby, and the baby cries for nourishment, so we receive what we need in the waiting for future waiting. As has been often said, God never wastes our pain and sorrow. And He does the same with waiting.

Waiting yields rich spiritual harvests.

When viewed as an opportunity to wash away our undesired feelings by snuggling closer in Jesus’ arms, reading His love letter to us, and being soothed by His promises and His people, we receive hope and peace.

Adding strength to my weakened heart when bidding my time, God’s faithfulness ministers to me as He sings over me (Zephaniah 3:17). He weaves His majestic threads of beauty into my sorrows, making them glint with His glory.

In the stillness of the interludes of life, tiny sparks of intense focus on my Lord ignite with a greater desire to serve and obey my Redeemer who identifies me as His child.

Tutoring me in the wisdom of being still and knowing that He is God, the Holy Spirit builds up my ability to endure potential trials in the future and to understand how closely He guides my life.

I left the apple, still hanging, knowing that one of its purposes in the waiting were these reminders that the fruit of waiting produces a spiritually mouth-watering deliciousness. Wise waiting gifts me with energy to serve the Lord. The ultimate wait is for our dear Savior, the Christ who redeemed us and longs to glorify us and present us as His Bride. Our waiting on earth simply mirrors the best wait of all—the rapture of those who are beautified with salvation to be with Jesus for all eternity! (See Romans 8:23.)

Marlene Houk is a regular contributor to Blue Ridge Christian News. Her passion is to delve deeply into the truths of Bible women and to discuss those in Bible Studies called Backstage Pass to Bible Women. She and her husband discover joy, nurture, and challenge in their church. Her contact is marlenehouk@bellsouth.net Learn more about women in the Bible at Marlene's website: www.MarleneHouk.com

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. Luke 2:11



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May You Receive Peace

By Steve Gaito
McDowell County



To say that 2020 has been an interesting year is an understatement. We have seen a pandemic, toilet paper shortages, required masks in public, stock market volatility, and an election like we have never seen before. As a financial planner, I never imagined that I would have to contend with so many variables in one year. I hope that I don't have to go through this ever again in my lifetime, but one thing I know is that history repeats itself. So, in this month's column, I want to focus on something different. Peace. I am not talking about financial peace or even peace between political parties or countries although all of these would be nice. I want to share the Peace that only comes from knowing my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. His Peace passes all of the other peace that the world offers. Because He has paid the price for me and you once and for all.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to travel to Africa on a mission trip to provide a camp for missionary kids. It was a great experience. We played with the kids and had a great time. Near the end, one of the missionaries asked me a question. "Are you going to come all the way to Africa and not see anything?" Without understanding his question I responded with- well we are going on a safari on Saturday and flying out on Monday. He responded with I mean seeing the people of Africa and their faith. Curious, I said how can we do this, to which he said I would like to invite you to worship with a tribe in the bush. Not knowing what I was agreeing to I said sure and arranged transportation for our group to go. It was a long van ride for our group on "roads" that were anything but smooth. Finally, we turned at a tree and headed into the unknown. This is where our guide explained the circumstances of the people we would worship with. The drought in the area was severe and they had little to eat. In fact, they were delivered rice twice a month and that was the main part of their diet. He also said that he did not know if they would feed us, but if they did we should graciously accept. I must admit I had no idea what to expect. When we pulled up to the compound I saw a fire and an elderly lady cutting up a goat. I realized we would be eating the goat. At the service, there was joyful singing and dancing for over an hour and then it was time to share my message. With a translator, who to this day I have no idea what he said, I shared the love of Christ which brings us all together. The time flew by and we then ended with a meal of goat, rice, and bread. I remember asking the pastor how everyone could be so happy with so little and he quickly corrected me and told me that they had everything because Jesus is everything. Humbled I realized at that point that this tribe in the middle of Africa had what we so desperately need in our country and that is Peace. You see Peace does not come from a large house, a stock portfolio, or even political results. Peace comes from knowing that you are adopted by a King and he has already given you all that you need.

So, this Christmas time my wish for you is that you receive this Peace and enjoy what God has given you. The Peace that passes all understanding and that you will pass this along to all of your family and friends.

Have a wonderful Christmas and New Year

Steven W Gaito is a certified financial planner, owner of Faith Based Health Care and Retirement Resource Management, National Speaker on the topic of Social Security optimization, quoted in national publications like Money Magazine, US News and World Reports and Fox Business. Loves to educate and teach on financial topics like taxation of retirement accounts, long term care, healthcare, and efficient savings plans for small businesses. Has provided financial planning for missionaries through the International Mission Board.

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and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

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Habits of the Heart: A Study of the Spiritual Disciplines - "Celebration"

By Dr. Jack R. Hodges, Jr.
Burke County



With this issue, we come to the end of a year-long study of Spiritual Disciplines. The Blue Ridge Christian News has offered me an opportunity to share with you an in-depth look at one of the most important aspects of living the Christian life, that is, growing in Christ. Growth takes work. Any follower of Christ must be committed to the process of learning and being equipped to be a faithful witness to the Lordship of Christ. Just as constant exercise is crucial to maintaining optimum physical health and fitness, so also practicing spiritual disciplines fundamental is to maintaining spiritual health and fitness. Committing yourself to and practicing these twelve spiritual disciplines will keep you fit and allow you to be a powerful witness of Jesus to a lost and dying world.

The disciplines that we have already covered include meditation, prayer, fasting, study, simplicity, solitude, submission, serving, confession, worship, and guidance. The final "habit of the heart" is a celebration.

Richard Foster, from whom I have borrowed these twelve discipline titles (Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth, Richard Foster. HarperCollins Publishers, 1984), says "Celebration is at the heart of the way of Christ. He entered the world on a high note of jubilation: *"I bring you good news of a great joy," cried the angel, "which shall come to all the people"* (Lk. 2:10).

When God sent His Son into this world, He declared once and for all that He was not giving up on His wayward creation. Through countless generations, God had shown them His love, mercy, grace, and His character of love, patience, kindness, forgiveness, as well as strength and authority. And yet, mankind still didn't get it. They continually tried to make their own way to live and survive. And they continually tried to find their own way to God. Mankind's efforts helped them to survive—but kept them separated from God as sin and rebellion propelled them towards destruction. And time and time again, God would bring them back and offer them forgiveness and renew His invitation to know Him and serve Him alone. When God, in the fullness of time, offered His Only Begotten Son, Jesus, there was cause for celebration. Once and for all, God made a way where there was no way for His precious creation to find and receive forgiveness and be reconciled to God for all eternity. God offered them eternal salvation and the promise of the right relationship that would last for all eternity.

We offer gifts to honor the one whom we are celebrating. Often, one of the greatest problems in life is that we do not celebrate accomplishments, much less the blessings and gifts that God pours out upon us. In our busy, demanding, and the self-driven world, we usually get trapped into going from one task to another. As soon as one job is successfully completed, we immediately jump into another. In so doing, we have become trapped by Satan's lie that we have to prove ourselves (over and over again). The result is that we are never satisfied—so we never rest! We are never quenched or filled—so we keep on searching! We are never content—so we never celebrate. We never celebrate—so we don't experience "joy unspeakable and full of grace." For as Foster correctly observed, "Celebration brings joy into life and joy makes us strong." Joy is what keeps us and sustains us through all of the difficulties of life and joy is the foundation of celebration. Foster argues that it is "central to all the Spiritual Disciplines." "Without a joyful spirit of festivity," he declares, "the Disciplines become dull, death-breathing tools in the hands of modern Pharisees."

The word "joy" is found no less than 180 times in the Scriptures. Here are just a few:

In 1 Chronicles 16, we read that when David succeeded in bringing the Ark of the Covenant back to the city of David. We read in 13:8, *"They carried the ark of God on a new cart from the house of Abinadab, and Uzza and Ahio drove the cart. David and all Israel were celebrating before God with all their might, even with songs and with lyres, harps, tambourines, cymbals and with trumpets."* When the Ark arrived, David assigned Asaph and his relatives to give thanks to the Lord. Thus, began a great song of praise and adoration ("Oh give thanks to the Lord..."—what has been called a "sacred song" or "song of God"). A song of God brought joy and celebration and a song of praise always brings joy and celebration. If our praise doesn't bring joy, then the chances are that we are not singing "God's song" but our own!

In Ezra 6:16 we find that when the sons of Israel completed the house of God, they *"celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy."* And they then observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy (cf. Ezra 6:22).

In Nehemiah 12:43 we read that when Nehemiah and the workers had finished building the wall around Jerusalem, that *"on that day they offered great sacrifices and rejoiced because God had given them great joy, even the women and children rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard from afar."*

Over and over in the Old Testament, God's people celebrated God's goodness and blessings, His manifest presence and power, and His glory and honor by celebrating with joy.

In the New Testament, there was exceedingly great joy surrounding the birth of the Savior, the promised Messiah. That joy was announced, was seen, and witnessed, and was experienced deeply and profoundly. Jesus lived that joy and proclaimed that joy. He said in John 15:11, *"These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full."* In John 16:22 Jesus foretold, *"Therefore you too have grief now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy away from you."* And in John 16:24, Jesus spoke of the joy that was theirs in Him. *"Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full."* He spoke of that joy again in John 17:13, *"But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves."*

Paul filled his letters and epistles with references to joy and the joy of the Lord. In Romans 15:13, *"Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."* In 2 Corinthians 2:3, he wrote, *"This is the very thing I wrote you, so that when I came, I would not have sorrow from those who ought to make me rejoice; having confidence in you all that my joy would be the joy of you all."* And in Galatians 5:22-23 Paul described joy as one of the fruits of the Spirit, *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."*

God has offered the greatest gift that was ever given, Jesus—and He invites us to celebrate His Son and the salvation and freedom that He offers each one of us through Him.

Twelve Habits of the Heart—twelve spiritual disciplines for all Christians. Let me end by paraphrasing Foster's eloquent summary and synopsis of the twelve (p. 171):

We have seen how méditation prepares us to meet the Lord and leads us into His presence through prayer. When we find ourselves in Jesus' presence, the discipline of fasting calls us to release all that stands between us and our Lord. Those three disciplines move us into the study, which gives us discernment about ourselves and the world in which we live. As we study God's Word, we get to know who He is and who we are as His people, His spiritual children. Through simplicity, we live with others in integrity, rather than for ourselves. Solitude allows us to genuinely be present with God and with others. Through submission, we are called to live free and practice giving and sacrificing (just as Jesus did). Simplicity, solitude, and submission allow us to serve the Lord and one another out of our love and giftedness. We, then, become blessings to others. Confession frees us from our bondage to sin, guilt, and allows us to worship the Lord with thanksgiving and gratitude. As we worship the Lord, we are called to guide others to know Him, know His love, and know His healing and restorative power. And when we practice all of the spiritual disciplines, our joy will overflow with celebration.

Our goal as believers and followers of Christ our Savior is to live for Him and for His glory. As you and I live out our calling, we join all the saints before us in answering Paul's challenge found in Philippians 3:14, *"I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."* Blessings and peace as you live out these habits of the regenerated heart.


Dr. Jack R. Hodges, Jr. is the Senior Pastor at Pleasant Hill Baptist Church in Morganton, Burke County. He has served as a pastor, a biblical counselor and a International Mission Board missionary.


And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 2:11


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By Wayne King
Cleveland County



As Christians all over the world are fretting about the confusion of the election of November 3rd; we must remember this election did not catch God by surprise. God is an all-knowing and all-powerful supreme God. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 14:33, "For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace."

Many scriptures address trusting God in the Bible. In Proverbs 3:5, "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding." Despite what we see all around us, we have the assurance that all of this is going to turn out alright in the end.

In John 14:27, the Bible declares, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." When we as believers see things going so haywire in our country and we do not understand or have the answers; do not you dare be afraid.

No matter who God puts in authority over this country, we must respect and pray for our leaders. God has called on every believer to pray for our leaders (1 Timothy 2).

Let us commit to hold strong to the unchanging, infallible, inherent word of God. For we can find peace amid the chaos as we cling to the holy word of God. I have read the back of the book and we win!

Wayne King currently serves President of Old North Strategies, Partner of Fidelis Government Relations in Washington, DC, previously served as Deputy Chief of Staff for Congressman Mark Meadows from 2013-2019 and as Vice-Chairman of the North Carolina Republican Party from 2011-2013. Wayne currently makes his home in Kings Mountain, North Carolina.

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Free Virtual Workshops for Seniors
By Carol Layton

North Carolina Baptist Aging Ministry is offering FREE virtual workshops for seniors and senior adult leaders in December. The workshops will be held on Google Meet and can be accessed via computer or phone. Register at www.ncbam.org/events.



Disaster Preparedness for Aging Adults will be held December 2, 10:00 am – 11:00 am. Individuals 65+ are disproportionately affected during disasters or other emergencies. This workshop explores why each church needs to have a preparedness ministry for aging adults, how to plan, implement, and maintain a preparedness ministry, and practical ways churches can help seniors prepare for emergencies. This workshop will be hosted by Yvetta Smith, northeast regional director for NCBAM.

Staying Safe and Helping Others During COVID-19 will be held December 8, 10:00 am – 11:00 am. Volunteers are needed now more than ever to provide services to older adults impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This workshop offers clear details for using PPE (personal protective equipment) in specific situations such as transportation assistance, errands, serving food, ramp construction, and when entering homes of older adults. It also covers how churches can create “help from home” projects, reinvent the drive-through, and develop guidelines to keep volunteers safe. This workshop will be hosted by Angie Gregg, west regional director for NCBAM.

Reducing Stress in the Golden Years will be held December 15, 10:00 am – 11:00 am. Has stress, anxiety, or worry crept into your life this year and taken up residency? During times of crisis, we have an immense opportunity to cultivate resilience and deepen our reliance on God our Father. To help develop healthy habits, attendees may opt to receive 10 weekly emails with strategies for building better resiliency to stress. This workshop is hosted by Samantha Allred, north-central regional director for NCBAM.

Register today at www.ncbam.org/events. After registering, you will receive information for connecting to the workshop via computer or phone.

Carol Layton is the Director of Communications and Administration for NCBAM at Baptist Children's Homes of North Carolina



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Blinded by Twinkling Lights?

By Jim Huskins
McDowell County



John Kennedy ran for president when I was in first grade. The interstate highway system was barely started, the only McDonalds in Western North Carolina was on Tunnel Road in Asheville, and every December the old, downtown-Asheville Sears store became a land of enchantment.

In those ancient days, a black and white Zenith television with three channels was high technology. “Personal computer” was a nonsense statement. Homes had one telephone, and its wiring was shared with several families on a “party” line. The closest thing to the World Wide Web was an enormous, printed volume called the Sears Catalog.

Our deprivation of cell phones, tablet computers, video games, and pop culture gossip forced us to settle for a genuine experience. We played in the woods and fields, fished, built forts and tree houses, played basketball and softball, camped, played board and card games. Boy Scouting opened a world of adventure and growth. Armed with books and chalkboards, we learned reading, writing, mathematics, science, and history in that backward, little school.

In December, my family made our annual trip to Asheville. We ate at McDonald's: no drive-thru, no inside seating, fifteen-cent hamburgers. The thrill of spending an hour at Sears came with rare treats: hot gingerbread, fresh, roasted cashews, creamy eggnog with nutmeg. The decorations, tinsel, and colored lights intoxicated me as we were released to ride the escalators and wander all three floors.

In those days before my tool addiction, I drooled over electric guitars and amplifiers before descending to a toy department that filled the basement. I fondled model car kits, Zebco fishing rods, baseball equipment, camping gear, and cap pistols. Electric trains ran constantly on elaborate track sets. What a marvelous celebration of the birth of Baby Jesus!

Sears Roebuck was a cultural icon long before I was born. Through the 1980s, they were the nation's largest retailer. Their store brands were ubiquitous: Kenmore, Craftsman, DieHard. I could not have imagined life without Sears, but that retail empire fell to the barbarian horde including Walmart, Kmart, and the slimy pervasive Amazon. Sears still exists but only as a hollow shell. My adjustment to a post-Sears world has been jarring. A greater shock, however, was learning the truth about the “holly, jolly season.”

Since I have become convinced that the entire Bible is both true and relevant, I find it impossible to escape the realization that God does not change. Before the events described in the book of Exodus, the land of Canaan was populated by Gentile tribes who all practiced some form of Babylonian sun-god worship. Of course, they did. Worship of the sun was universally dispersed after the Tower of Babel.

Before Israel was allowed to enter the Promised Land, they were given clear instruction to not worship God in the ways that pagans worship false gods. Deuteronomy twelve covers several specifics. It culminates with verses 30 and 31. “Be careful not to be trapped into imitating them after they have been destroyed before you. Do not inquire about their gods, saying, ‘How do these nations serve their gods? I will do the same.’ You are not to act like this toward YHVH your God! For every abomination of YHVH, which He hates, they have done to their gods.” Should believers participate in worship rituals that God hates? Most Christians would assert that they do no such thing, but is that true? The holiday universally celebrated near the end of this month is not mentioned in scripture. It was never celebrated by Jews or the early Church. It is a modern expression of solstice rituals found in ancient, pagan, sun god worship. December 25 is the supposed birthday of the sun deity, Tamuz. Do the research. Every “holiday tradition” that I once treasured is rooted in some pagan worship practice.

Satan is skilled at twisting the truth. He tricked Eve into doubting God. Most believers insist that Christ has “redeemed” those pagan solstice practices, but how can that be possible? Jesus insisted that God's instructions for living will last as long as heaven and earth remain. God never changes. How can the things He hates not still be abominations? Both Israel and Judah took up pagan worship practices. The result was that both nations were exiled from Canaan. Israel never returned. As a child, I never questioned the strange rituals we observed near the end of each year. I was told that we were celebrating the birth of Jesus. I trusted those who taught me. Now I am forced to reexamine verses such as Jeremiah 16:19, “Our fathers have inherited nothing but lies, futility and useless things.” Those who passed to me “the holiday traditions” did not realize they were instructing me in pagan worship ritual. Now that I understand the source of those traditions, I can no longer follow them.

Caroling began as an attempt to protect crops from evil. An evergreen tree decorated with bright balls is an ancient fertility symbol. Romans honored Saturn by having intercourse underneath the mistletoe. Holly supposedly drives away evil spirits. The yule log is a vestige of human sacrifice. The similarity between Santa and Satan is no accident.

I hated to lose Sears, but it had no eternal significance. When I learned the truth about solstice celebrations, I joyfully repented. Many believe that these rituals are a core element of the Gospel. Some insist that the instructions in Deuteronomy 12 do not apply because we no longer sacrifice children. When I ask for Biblical justification, I am called legalistic and anti-Christian. The universal defense is that “God knows my heart.” That is certainly true. Why, then, is it so difficult for us to acknowledge His?

Obedient Heart Fellowship believes that the entire Bible is both true and relevant. We accept salvation by grace through faith in Jesus, and we attempt to love and serve Him by keeping his commandments. See Revelation 14:12. lostranger@mindspring.com

Jim & Beverly Huskins are members of Obedient Heart Fellowship.

Beloved Social Worker Retires
After 25 Years of Service!

By Alice Horton
Burke County

The gratitude we have for the incredible dedication and loyalty that Rosemary Ohnesorge has shown for clients, volunteers, and staff at Burke United Christian Ministries is difficult to fully express. The compassion she has shown to the homeless and people living in poverty for the past 25 years has been profound as it has changed the lives of many clients and co-workers.

Rosemary first came to Burke United Christian Ministries in 1995 as a volunteer. For six years she volunteered with the ministry doing whatever was most needed until a position came open in 2001 as a social worker.

While at BUCM, she worked with homeless clients and individuals living in poverty to ensure their essential needs were met which included, food, clothing, and listening to their hardships to determine how we could help financially and, most importantly, to offer friendship.

As the ministry has grown year after year Rosemary’s flexibility and Christ-like patience have been put to the test. While the ministry has worked toward necessary change, Rosemary has been the glue that has held together with the historical information about the agency.

Rosemary’s leadership skills have been called upon multiple times as she has been given the title of Interim Director twice during her career at BUCM. Although Rosemary has been capable she has never desired the full-time role of Executive Director. While we know she would have led with poise and grace, she never saw that position as her goal. She felt the call to lead as a social worker to ensure that we were being true to our mission as she “restored resilience” in the people that come to our agency for services.

Rosemary’s passion for learning and supporting the agency is as strong today as it was 25 years ago. We are proud of the work that Rosemary has done with our agency and although she is retiring she has no intention of quitting; we will continue to look to her for help as needed and volunteer support as well as historical agency guidance.

Rosemary will be spending her retirement days with her husband Steve and her new grandbaby Henry!

Rosemary may the Lord give you peace in your retirement. You are LOVED!

Alice Horton is the Executive Director of Burke United Christian Ministries. She is a graduate of Appalachian State University and has worked in the nonprofit field for the last 20 years. If you are interested in learning more about Burke United Christian Ministries or volunteering. Please call us at 828-433-8075.



Rosemary Ohnesorge

“Something to Think About” -
Are You a Gnat or A Bee?

By Dennis Love
McDowell County



I’m positive you have never been asked this question until now! Are you a Gnat or a Bee? Most people would quickly respond by saying neither. Nobody would really want to be a Gnat and nobody would really want to be a Bee. But in reality, we are like one or the other. NOW, if I were to ask my wife Vicki which she had rather be, a Gnat or a Bee----She would look at me like I had two heads. She doesn’t like gnats and she doesn’t like bees. Matter-of-fact, both of them can aggravate the daylights out of you, Amen! You know the difference between the two, don’t you? A Gnat bounces all over the place. One moment it will be trying to get in your ear---then it will be trying to get up your nose---then it will try to get in your eyes---and if you open your mouth, it will try to fly down your throat. In other words, Gnats are bouncing all over the place. They are small pesky critters that will drive you up the wall.

NOW a Bee, on the other hand, will fly straight to a flowering bush and it will stay there until it draws all the sweetness out of that bush it wants, and then it will fly away. NOW, listen to what the Bible says in James 1:23-24 and see if you don’t see a Gnat bouncing around here. Here’s what it says----“For if you listen to the word of God and don’t obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, you walk away, and then you forget what you look like.” Do you see what James is saying? He’s saying if you’re in a hurry, and you have a lot on your mind, and if you are stressed to the max, then you are going to be prone to simply take a glance at yourself in the Word of God. BUT let’s not stop here because we need to read verse 25 and see the Bee. James 1:25 says, “But if you look carefully into the Word of God and you do what it says and you don’t forget what you have heard, then God will bless you for doing it.” Do you see the Bee in verse 25? The Bee hangs around long enough to get what he needs.

Here’s the question. Are we like that? Are we more like a Gnat or more like a Bee when it comes to the Word of God? Do we bounce in and bounce out? Do we take a glancing look at the Word of God and then move on to the next thing on our “TO DO” list for the day? Or do we hang around long enough in the Word of God to really get what we need?

Which sounds more like you? Hey, let’s spend some time this month being more like a Bee than a Gnat. We all need more than just a passing glance at God’s Word. Let’s make sure we take the time to get in His Word and stay there until we get what we need. I grant you if you really take the time to read the Christmas story slowly and carefully, the Holy Spirit will give you just what you need to get you through this COVID Christmas season. Hey, have a great COVID Christmas folks diving into God’s Word and getting all the sweetness you need to get you through each day. Be blessed this month folks being more like a Bee than a Gnat. Now that’s something for all of us to think about!

Dr. Dennis Love is the Senior Pastor at Glenwood Baptist Church in Marion, NC. He and his wife Vicki have been married for 40 years, and they have lived in Marion for six years. They have two sons and four grandchildren and two step-grandchildren.



Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again. Luke 6:38

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Merry CHRISTmas

By Bruce Cannon
Mitchell County

“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:10,11)

Merry CHRISTmas everyone! What a wonderful time of the year it is in the heart of every true believer. For on this occasion we celebrate the greatest gift ever given.... JESUS! Gifts are exchanged, Christmas cards are sent, pleasantries are shared by one and all. And, it's all because of a Baby Boy born 2000 years ago who has had a lasting effect upon people, circumstances, time, and so forth.

We love because He first loved us. We give because He gave the greatest gift. His gift was a perfect size – it fits everyone. His was a gift that was so desperately needed by all because we were lost in sin and had no way of helping ourselves. His gift will never wear out, never go out of style, and is one that makes such a wonderful change in the hearts of everyone who receives it! And, the very best part, is that this gift is FREE! Free to us; though it cost Him everything to give! In a COVID-19, crazy and mixed-up world, let me share a few things this gift does for the one who receives it:

- 1) It brings peace. Though problems may abound this gift speaks peace to the heart and tells us that God is in control and that we can trust Him to see us through every situation and difficulty.
- 2) It brings strength. We literally can do all things through Christ which strengthen us. His power is poured out upon all those who will walk with Him.
- 3) It brings hope. This world is not our home; we are just passing through. There is a better day coming all because of this tremendous gift.

4) It brings joy. Joy, not the absence of problems, but the attitude of the heart who knows the love, grace, and mercy of the Lord.

5) It brings help. What a great time it is when we realize we can't handle life on our own, but don't have to! He will always be there for us.

6) It brings encouragement. He is constantly speaking to our hearts "Lo, it is I. Be not afraid."

7) It frees us up from the bondage of death. The wages of sin is death, but this gift provides eternal life through Jesus! There are so many more things we could say about this gift, but you get the picture. This gift was desperately needed, completely undeserved, and such a blessing! I pray you have received it. If not, ask Him to come into your heart today. Tell Him you are sorry for your sin and that you accept His free gift. He will, as He has done for so many others, make such a difference in your life. Amen!

Merry Christmas from Wendy and me!

Rev. Bruce Cannon currently serves as the Senior Pastor of Bear Creek Baptist Church in Bakersville. Formerly he served as Director of Missions for the Bladen Baptist Association and has served on the General Board of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.



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Redeemed Free Will Baptist Church

Ananias, An Ordinary Man

By Patricia Jackson
McDowell County

Some of my favorite stories in the Bible are about dramatic events that occur when a relatively ordinary person follows God's will. Ananias is one of those. Acts 9: 4 – 19. Saul had been given the authority from the high priest to stop or imprison those who were believers. He made havoc of the Church, entering into every house and haling men and women, even committing some to prison. He stood by as Stephen was stoned and consented to his death. We might compare Paul's deeds to Hitler, who was determined to annihilate the Jews. But God had other plans. Saul had done all the damage to believers that God was going to allow him to do.

We recall how light from heaven shined round about him, and Jesus spoke to Saul. When Saul opened his eyes, he was blind and was led by his men into Damascus. For three days and nights, he did not eat or drink. What these days were like, we can only imagine. Perhaps Saul was filled with confusion or despair. It's no accident he waited for three days and nights. The number three in the Bible represents divine wholeness, completeness, and perfection. The fulfillment of God's work.

As Paul waits, we learn of a disciple named Ananias, a devout man, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there. (Acts 22:12). We don't find that Ananias was wealthy or had a high position in society or educated. He was a simple ordinary man, but more importantly, he was a devout man. (Note) Ananias was a common Jew name, not to be confused with the scriptures about Ananias and Sapphira. The third Ananias mentioned in the Bible was a high priest in Jerusalem, appointed by Herod Agrippa II, and involved in Paul's trial before the Sanhedrin council. Why did the Lord speak to this ordinary man, Ananias? 1 Corinthians 1: 26-28 tells us that God has a divine way of accomplishing his work. He uses the foolish things of the world to confound those who think they are wise. He uses the weak things to confound those who think they are mighty. God will only use those people whose lives are consistent and glorifying to him. You might be an ordinary person, but God can use you too.

V 9. "Ananias said, "Behold, I am here, Lord." Ananias lived so close to God; he could hear him speak. God does and will speak to us also. He calls us by name and gives us specific work to do for Him. We have the choice of saying like Ananias, "I am here, Lord," or we can ignore His call.

Ananias is given specific orders in the vision, "Arise and go to the street called Straight and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. And in a vision, he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him so that he might receive his sight." I like to think that suddenly Ananias became just like you and I would be. He forgot who was speaking to him and looked at the reality of the situation. Saul might kill him, or at the least, imprison him. Ananias began telling the Lord the evil Paul had done to the saints and how he hath authority from the chief priests. Jesus already knew who Saul was; how Saul had zealously persecuted Christians. The Lord reassured Ananias, telling him Saul was a chosen vessel unto him and that he would bear his name before the Gentiles, kings, and children of Israel. Saul, a great and mighty man of position, would be used by God as a missionary because an ordinary man obeyed God's orders.

Ananias obeys, appearing before Saul, telling him the same Jesus that appeared unto him three days ago, hath sent him to receive thy sight.

We only know about Ananias in these brief verses. We do know he was an ordinary man, a devout and Godly man, extraordinarily used by God. Many became believers as a result of his act of obedience. In our church lobby hangs a plaque: "The will of God will never take you where the grace of God will not protect you." Perhaps the writer of this plaque was thinking of Ananias.

Patricia Jackson is the Assistant Teacher for the Ladies Class at Redeemed Free Will Baptist Church, Glenwood, NC. She is a grant writer for non-profits, a published author and retired Nursing Home Administrator. She lives in Rutherford County with her husband. Contact information: email address: wyo2go@bellsouth.net.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. John 3:16



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Poem

The Great I Am
By Joy Baldwin
Madison County

Jesus was born long ago in the town of Bethlehem.
He was the son of Mary and The Great I Am.
Overshadowed by The Holy Spirit she brought forth a son;
And laid Him in a manger, The Precious Holy One.

He was baptized by John, His work on earth began,
The spotless Lamb of God, who paid for all our sin.
The cross won the victory, His love had overcome.
The empty tomb was evidence, that Jesus was God's Son.

He is Alpha and Omega, our soon coming King.
When He reigns on His throne, His praises we will sing.
As we celebrate His birthday, we could hear the trumpet
sound.
The babe laid in a manger----
BEHOLD THE GREAT I AM.

Joy Baldwin is a resident of Madison County, where she now lives with her husband Danny Joe Baldwin. As a previous member, she calls Forks of Ivy Missionary Baptist Church in Weaverbill, "home away from home." She is currently singing with the Gospel Group "Jonah's Voice" out of Mars Hill, NC. Her latest song "Homecoming" will soon be heard by many.



His Place Worship Center
Reaps a Harvest for the Unborn

By Marion Stephan
Burke County



In Leviticus 23:39, God calls on the children of Israel, after they have "gathered in the fruit of the land," to hold a seven-day Feast of Tabernacles or booths. When Marian Boyd taught on this festival at His Place Worship Center in Marion on September 27, the message reaped a harvest of its own: two truck-loads of diapers, baby clothes, wipes, and other baby items for the McDowell Pregnancy Care Center.

Boyd, who serves as co-pastor at His Place with her husband Paul, was delivering the second segment of a two-part message on the Hebrew fall festivals. She invited the congregation to fill a booth with offerings for the McDowell Pregnancy Care Center, in the spirit of the Festival of Booths. For each of the seven days of this festival, she pointed out, the Hebrews were to present "an offering made by fire to the Lord" (Leviticus 23:36).

A wooden structure used by the church for nativity and Resurrection Sunday displays became the "booth" to hold the offerings. During the month of October, the 20 or so members of His Place brought baby items "into the storehouse." The donations were presented on Sunday, November 1, to Denise McCormick, director of the McDowell Pregnancy Care Center.

"It took two pickup trucks" to deliver the items to the Center, notes Pastor Paul Boyd.

Among the donations were a red maple wood crib, a family heirloom given by George and Kathleen Busch, and a hooded bassinet donated by Austin Furniture in Marion. His Place member Alan Heckman describes the donation of the bassinet: He and his wife, Alice, went into Austin Furniture looking for "a bassinet or a crib" to donate. They found a slightly used bassinet on sale for \$100.

However, says Heckman, when owner Joel Austin found out the item was for the Pregnancy Care Center, he gave it to them free of charge. Heckman "took it apart a little bit," sanitized it, washed the plastic covering, and added it to the donations that were already filling the booth.

Also, he says, his wife Alice, using her skills as a "super couponer," rounded up about "300 to 350 diapers" for the Center.

The maple wood crib, according to George Busch, "was my first crib" when he was born in 1933, and it had remained in the family since then. "Some of our kids and grandkids slept in it."

Bush says he "didn't know what to do with" the crib. Then he learned His Place was seeking donations for the Pregnancy Care Center. However, "it was the Lord who spoke to us." The couple subsequently "cleaned, dusted, polished, and donated it."

Denise McCormick notes that His Place "really has a heart for the unborn." She says the church's attitude was reflected in the signboard she saw as she turned into the church lot on November 1. On one side, the sign reads, "All lives are essential, born and unborn," and on the reverse side, "Aren't you glad your mom was pro-life?"

McCormick says that as she entered the church, she saw, inside the booth, "the most beautiful display of baby items I have ever seen. It was awesome to see the many items they had collected for the Pregnancy Center."

She says that community support for the Center, which relies entirely on donations, has not ceased during the Covid-19 crisis. The Center's Annual "Walk for Life" was converted into a drive-through event this year, and it raised roughly the same amount of money as the 2019 Walk for Life.

The McDowell Pregnancy Care Center, per its website, is "a Christian ministry promoting the sanctity of life by offering help and hope to women, men, and families dealing with an unplanned pregnancy." With mask and social-distancing precautions in place, the Center continues to offer pregnancy tests, ultrasounds, peer counseling, parenting classes, Bible studies, and other services.

The Center is located at 40 South Main Street in Marion. Additional information is available on its website at www.mpcnc.org, or by calling (828) 652-7676. Information on His Place Worship Center, located at 1423 Highway 70 West in Marion, is available at www.hisplaceoutreach.org, or by calling (828) 652-9583 or (828) 925-9583. Interested persons may also email the church pastors at abide@charter.net.

Marion Stephan is retired and is active in His Place Worship Center, Marion, North Carolina.

South Toe Baptist Church

Dedication Service for Marvin Dale Silvers

Mitchell County

A special time of memory was observed at South Toe Baptist Church on Sunday, November 8th, for Pastor Marvin Dale Silvers who passed away on May 30th as a result of a 4-wheeler accident on April 7 near his home in Burnsville. A Church sign, purchased by his wife, Marleena Reavis Silvers, was also dedicated during the service.



Luke 2:11 - For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

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A Gathering to Remember: Sled Hill Revisited

By Timothy W. Tron
Burke County

As the coming holidays approach, Thanksgiving and Christmas, there seems to be a sense of melancholy that has begun to permeate through the din of the incessant roar of this tumult our society has become. In my mind, there is a desire to reach back in my memories and dwell upon a time when life was simpler when the so-called advances in technology had yet to be developed. Because of the threat of lockdowns restricting these beloved reunions, those distant memories have become even more cherished. One such date that comes to mind coincides with a memory that our family holds dear to their heart.

It was the late 1960's. Back then, we survived without non-stop news coverage, without updates from our social media accounts, and without the fear of dying from a virus, let alone anything else that existed at the time. It's not to say there wasn't death nor dying, for there had yet to be the advances we have today in the fields of heart disease and cancer. Both of these maladies took many lives before their time, and still do today, but not nearly as severely as in those days. No, we feared not because we had a faith that was the bedrock of our existence.

That faith was taught to us through our elders, passed down from one generation to the next – a thread of belief that was built upon an unending truth – Christ is indeed the Savior of the world. So, it is in this vein that once more my heart reaches for a well-worn story that is based on an actual event whose legacy has lasted for many years in our family. It is like the cup of an instant drink, void of the liquid to make it real – once the hot water is added, the story being recalled becomes the sustenance that warms our being. Like that beverage, the Spirit enters into our soul, and we are warmed from within to that which is without. Herein lies the beauty.

Looking back through the shadowy fog of time, those distant memories are like the passing clouds overhead. They are here but for a moment, and then cross over the mountaintops before we realize they are gone. As we near the season of holidays and family gatherings, it seems that those ancient days of yesteryear are ever more treasured. As the value of a tattered cloth that once was held in the dying grasp of a loved one, its price to most would be nothing, but to those who knew its connection to the soul of the other – it becomes a priceless object.

That year when the snow fell around Christmas would become one such moment in time for me.

The classic event which unfolded is still known to this day, by all that attended, as the Sled Hill Christmas. Of all my childhood holiday experiences, it will forever be the most memorable in my mind. To read the entirety of the original story, you can find it online at <https://timothywtron.dreamhosters.com/sled-hill-life-more-abundantly/> But this article looks at that event from a different perspective; one of how the warmth of a loving family and faith carried us through what may have been considered just another dark winter.

Like a revival, a truly epic event can only unfold when it is least expected. So it was that overcast December day so many decades ago. Several of us grandkids were staying at Grandpa and Grandma Tron's house, there on the outskirts of New Harmony, Indiana. The town itself was in the season of slumber. Farming was still the driving industry, and the fields were now silent in their winter sleep. The hay had all been stored in the barns and the silos were filled to capacity with grains and silage to last until the next growing season began. A feeling of hibernation overtook one's soul, making those opportunities to warm by the woodstove or to huddle close around a cup of hot chocolate all the more permanent upon the creature within. Gathering with others was the only natural thing to do in a time such as this – it was who we were, it was what we were. In those precious slices of time, we fellowshiped without knowing that's what it was called. Visiting with others when the work in the fields slowed was just as natural as splitting your firewood by hand – we all did it.

When those first few snowflakes began falling the night before what would become the day to remember, we went to bed not expecting anything more than just a typical Midwest December dusting. When we awoke the next morning to the sounds of someone rattling around downstairs in the kitchen, it was as if Christmas had come early. Jumping from underneath the multiple layers of quilts, which weighed nearly as much as another cousin, we raced down the icy narrow stairs from the unheated upstairs bedrooms down to the kitchen where the pot-belly woodstove in Grandma's kitchen was already red hot. We shivered and shook the remnants of chill from our bones, as our bare feet fought to find the warmth emanating from the scant linoleum floor by the stove. Excitedly, we peeked through the threadbare kitchen curtains that hung over the sink. The window faced grandma's kitchen garden. Outside, the world was no longer the muddled gray of winter, but instead, was a brilliant whiteness, even in the pre-dawn, early morning hours.

About the time we had settled down around the table, after getting out of our bedclothes, Grandpa came in from the morning milking. We could hear the creaky old porch door slam behind him as he walked down the long back porch, from the barn end, up to the door of the kitchen, where he paused and took off his boots. The confines of that narrow passage clothed in clear plastic, a feeble attempt to thwart the cold winds of winter. The repurposed material was clouded with age, giving off a soft sheer grayness within the tomb of the veranda's confines. The oft sound of rippling plastic slapping the screen made thoughts of warm summer nights, fresh tomatoes, and fireflies come to mind. Needless to say, those were but a distant rumor as the snow continued to fall.

With all eyes upon his entry, the vacuum of anticipation cut the air, like the cold wind that followed him inside. Snowflakes fell off his outer coat confirming what we already knew. Before he had time to take note of his unexpected audience, the



questions began to roll off our lips.

“How deep is it grandpa?”

“Does it look like more's coming?”

“Where are the sleds?”

“Were the cows cold?”

He turned and smiled, looking toward grandma. Victor Tron never was a man of many words, So, when he replied with, “It looks like it's gonna be good,” rest assured, that was all we needed to know.

Grandma already had his breakfast ready, along with ours, and we sat down for an unusually early start of our day. We all instantly grew silent when grandpa bowed his head and reached his hand over to grandma. She grabbed his outstretched weathered hand with hers and we all joined hands and bowed our heads as grandpa said the blessing for the breakfast meal. In my mind, I can still hear that strained voice, barely above a whisper, thank God for what grandpa said was an abundance of blessings. Before us was a meager meal by worldly standards, but to us, it was Heaven sent. For we knew, even as children that every bit of it was from those two pair of withered hands that grasped one another in a love that never ended, even upon their death.

Grandpa's first milking was at 3:00 AM and he usually finished up around 5:00 AM. His second milking was at 3:00 PM, every day of his life. He never took a vacation that I could remember. Usually exhausted from rising early, he would routinely drift off to sleep no matter where he sat, so finding time to talk with him was rare. He milked the cows until that night he died peacefully in his sleep, never to milk again. What we didn't know as children, was how precious those few moments were with him when we were able to visit, especially that snowy morning on a cold December day so many years ago.

As soon as we were able to clear the table and bundle up, we were headed out the door. Eventually, someone asked if we could check out sled hill. An okay was given and like a herd of young calves heading for new pasture, we bolted out the back gate. Past the woodpile where grandpa's ax and splitting log were shrouded in the snow we raced. Heading for the opening to the lane, we quickly found ourselves wading through the knee-deep snow toward the iconic destination; Sled Hill. Past the milking barn, the bullpen, and Ms. Wolf's house we trudged. Each one of these structures held a plethora of memories and stories that one could sit for hours and share. Like a life of living, their collections, like the holdings of stockpiled hay for the winter, waiting for one to return and use for the giving. The bushes along the Labyrinth were blanketed in a sweet frosting of white. Our panted breaths billowed before us and were quickly whisked away in the falling snow. In our rush to find out how well the sledding was going to be, we didn't realize how hard the snow was continuing to fall. Nor did we realize how deep the snow had already gotten since sunrise. In the overcast grayness of the day, it all seemed like a dream, even when it was life.

As the story, “Sled Hill: Life More Abundantly,” conveys, the rest of the day was a multitude of adventures and excitement. With each passing moment, the tempo of the day's delight reached a fevered pitch. The enthusiasm of the children soon bubbled over into those of the adults, igniting in them the feelings of youth. Gone were the aches and pains of age. The adrenaline of living purged those boundaries of limitations that had kept them hostage. Soon, parents, Aunts, and Uncles were joining in the merriment of sliding down the hill so aptly named. As the sky began to darken as night approached, the thrill of the day and the feeling of being one with something greater than ourselves overwhelmed us. Fearing that it would end in darkness, the men created torches on the fly from used old tin cans (which we also used as drinking vessels), nailing them to poles and placing them along the sled run, all the way to the top of the hill. What started out as child's play quickly turned into a major production. In essence, a cow pasture had turned into our own ski-slope far removed from any mountaintop.

When the last vestiges of daylight gave way to darkness, there along the sled run was a perfect row of home-made flaming lights shedding an ambient glow of warmth. Off to the side, a pile of wood was set afire and a massive bonfire became the gathering spot between runs down the hill. There we regained strength to carry on from food and drink the family had brought in at a moment's notice. There, the entire family was able to make it collected. The sentinel image that remains with me to this day was seeing both grandpa and grandma's faces glowing in the reflection of the firelight. To know that grandpa had a milking coming at 03:00 AM, and yet, he was here foregoing precious sleep, standing alongside us kids around the bonfire said something more than words could fathom. Even then, the whispers of the children could be heard, “Look, even grandpa and grandma are here.” The statement was a confirmation of the significance of that moment in time, one that made a profound statement on all that were present.

That night, once our bodies had been worn to a frazzle. There was barely enough strength to make it back to the house. As we pulled off our wet, nearly frozen clothing and briefly warmed by the fire, a numbness of exhaustion began to overtake us. The enormous featherbed never looked so welcoming. Shortly thereafter, after our bedtime prayers were said, there was little more than the sweet, “Goodnight children,” from grandma as she tucked us under the pile of quilts before we fell asleep.

For once in a lifetime, there was no sweeter sleep.

As the snow continued to fall outside that night, there was warmth within that was more than physical - a love that transcends all understanding. There was something created that day that would last forever in the hearts of those who had been privileged to experience it. It became an inexplicable thread of life that would weave its way into our souls which would become part of who we were. The similarity of a feeling such as this can only compare to that of Christ's dis-



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Flu Season

By Miguel Cruz
Yancey County



Flu season is upon us. One question I believe we should be asking is, “why does it come every winter?” There are obviously lots of reasons, but among them are the fact we are getting less sunshine which means less vitamin D. We are staying indoors more and less exercise. Holidays are here and we stray from our healthy diets and end up eating a lot more sweets.

So, what can we do about it? I suggest the exact opposite of the above, we should get outside for at least a walk when the weather permits, take vitamin D supplements daily as low vitamin D levels are associated with a poor immune system. Do some sort of exercise at least 3 days a week. And lastly don’t overindulge in those holiday sweets. Too much sugar has lots of detrimental effects on our health so adding that stress to our systems is not in our best interest.

Testing is routinely available and recommended for vitamin D levels. Other specialized tests are available to assess other vitamins/mineral levels associated with your immune function.

Remember, we are the living temple of the Holy Spirit, let’s treat it with respect.

Flu shots, according to the CDC are 10%-60% effective season to season so don’t rely on that as your only defense.

One last thing, if you do get a flu shot, you are not going to get the flu from it, however, if you get “flu-like” symptoms it’s likely because you reacted to all the other stuff that is in the shot. Things like mercury, aluminum, formaldehyde, and different preservatives. You can get preservative-free flu shots, but you will have to ask for it, usually from a compounding pharmacy.

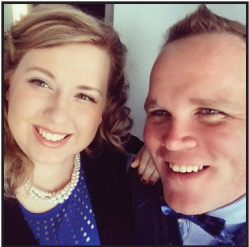
Wishing You Health and Happiness.

Dr. Miguel Cruz is in practice along with his wife of 35 years, Lesia Cruz who is a certified Integrative Nutritionist. They own Cruz Life Center in Burnsville NC. Dr. Cruz is a licensed Chiropractor since 1981. When asked what he does for a living he explains that he helps people get out of pain and improve their overall health without the use of drugs or surgery. Something everyone seems to want but nobody seems to know how to get there. Dr. Cruz accepted Jesus Christ in the summer of 1979 while in chiropractic school. He has since dedicated his life towards helping people grow in physical health and spiritual health.

Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. John 3:3

Foster Parents

Ryan and Aleigha West
McDowell County



We wanted to be parents, yet the stork never came! We grieved, we healed, we moved on, but the desire to be parents never left. We could wallow in self-pity or take the lemons and make lemonade. We chose lemonade! We looked into foster care and learned that there are children, through no fault of their own, who need a safe, loving home temporarily and that is exactly what we had to offer! So we took the classes and got licensed.

We were worried the process was too long, but it wasn’t and our licensing worker walked us through every step!

We were worried we wouldn’t know how to parent, but no child comes to any parent with instructions. Each child has different needs. We have leaned on our community of family, friends, our social workers, and the children’s biological families when we need parenting support!

We were worried biological families would dislike us, but they don’t! Understandingly, they are frustrated with the situation. They deserve our patience, respect, and above all to really love their kids well!

We were worried the children would be destructive or unmanageable, but they aren’t. They will be upset with the circumstances and that is when they need us the most!

We were worried we would get too attached and WE DO! We certainly get too attached! However, when you love a child well, you love their biological family too! And we are elated to see a family reunited and thriving!

We became foster parents because we believe that sweet endings can come from bitter beginnings and beauty can come from brokenness! Our biggest regret is not becoming foster parents sooner!

Contact McDowell DSS to learn more about becoming a foster family. 828-652-3355.

Ryan and Aleigha West have been foster parents since April 2018. Ryan works in finance and Aleigha is stay at home mom. They attend East Marion Baptist Church and are grateful for the support of family, friend, and their church family on their foster care journey.

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Blue Skies and Thin Ice

By Michael Stephanides
Burke County



This story came to me originally in Honduras, and now with my dear friend as he heard the dreaded words “you have cancer”. Reflecting back on my own occurrence, my friend, as well as others who have been diagnosed with cancer, I have come to realize that in many ways they are more blessed than many of us, as they have been given the opportunity of a deeper walk and understanding of the preciousness, salvation, and constantly found in our Lord and Savior. I dedicate this story to my friend who I love as a brother.

A day like most other days begins - and we fall into the familiar pattern of our daily lives. Do this, go here, be there, lunch at noon; on and on it goes, walking through the well-known roads and designs we have so firmly established. We are sheltered by the routine of the day, the soft footsteps of security and calm as we journey through life. Above us the warm lush Carolina Blue Sky (that’s for you my friend), so rich and deep that it blankets us with comfort and peace as we walk. Life is good! Looking up into the reassuring blue sky of our perceived self-sufficiency, it is easy to forget the thin ice we have so firmly planted our feet on.

You know but you don’t know, or better said . . . you don’t want to know. The subtle perception of an imperceptible sound. A premonition of things to come. The visceral cracking sound registers within us, and the foundations and well-known paths beneath our feet give way. As we desperately look to the deep blue sky above us, we are plunged into the frigid waters of our mortality. The arctic grip squeezes our self-sufficiency out of us as we sink deeper into the steely grasp of the dark cold water of our infirmity. Your breath is gone, the pressure is intense, and truth penetrates us to the core as we come face to face with the veracity of our mortality. The blue skies are nothing more than a distant dream now, as we come to know the depths of our fears. ‘Tomorrow’ will never be the same and has a totally different meaning now.

Everything was so great just moments ago. How can this be? What will tomorrow be like? What just happened? What happened is that we have broken through the grand illusion that we are in control; the illusion that we possess within ourselves some strength or ability that can direct or control our tomorrow. No doubt we all enjoy certain natural talents and abilities that help us in our day to day lives, but they are given to us by God. John the Baptist so clearly answered this; “... a man can receive nothing unless it is given to him by God” (John 3:27).

None of us know what tomorrow will bring. It is so easy to believe that through our connections, friends, and the modern conveniences of life that we are in control. Serving as missionaries in Honduras we were reminded daily of the uncertainty of tomorrow and the total lack of control we truly had.

I remember so clearly that day in La Ceiba, Honduras, just three weeks after we had arrived, and the reality of where we were, where we were headed, what we were doing, and the uncertainty of ‘the mission I signed up for’ came crashing through me. I brought three children, ages 4-6-8, an amazing wife, to live in the jungles of Honduras. The guttural fear was almost crippling to me as I cried out to God that Sunday afternoon. No longer were my connections, abilities, or talents going to help me. I was lost in a foreign culture, language, and place; and I was responsible for my wife and children. God’s answer came not in the deliverance out of the situation, but deliverance through the situation. That day God gave to me a very special key and a promise that He was with me.

Oh, how easy it would have been for the Israelites as they wandered through the desert to look up into the blue skies, at the multitude of shrines and gods, and be tempted to find ‘help or comfort’ in the false god’s that surrounded them. But the Psalmist answer is quickly found in the second sentence; “My help comes from the Lord, who made the heavens and earth.”

“I will lift up my eyes to the hills-from whence comes my help. My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1-2)

I remember some friends’ years back walking by our home, hand in hand, holding so close to one another as they faced the uncertainty of her diagnosis, yet walking firmly in their faith and their love for one another. A love I am sure deepened by uncertainty. You see they had broken through the ice and come face to face with how fragile and transitory life can be. As my friends walked by, I watched them draw close, share something, and laugh.

What did they say? What would I say to my wife, or son, or daughter, if I was unsure of their presence tomorrow? I do not know for sure, but what I do know is that God’s love for us is eternal and everlasting. It is constant and true. The intimacy and vastness of that love are described so well by David in Psalm 139. An unconditional love is so grand that He freely gave His only Son to die for each one of us so that we might enjoy His presence for eternity.

In times of trouble and despair, our worry and angst derive from our resolve to get our own way and the fear that it won’t be as we desire. Peace comes in our acceptance, satisfaction, and unbridled dependency in Him who is able. Is God any less when we are plunged into the depth of our mortality, or when we are walking under rich blue skies? No. How blessed are those who do break through the false thin barriers that obscure their intimate knowledge of who and what God is. The ones who stand in His loving presence, when that temple curtain is torn and they enter the Holy of Holies. The icy water can no more consume you then darkness can consume the Light.

Oh, that we could all crash through the thin ice of our imagined self-control and accomplishments to enter into the reality of our utter need and dependency on the Lord God Almighty.

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39).

Michael Stephanides is a resident of Morganton NC, and has lived there with his wife of 30 years. They have had the privilege of raising 3 biological children, and one adopted child, ages 24-29. Their daughters are married to great men, and they have 2 beautiful grandchildren. Michael and his wife are members of Summit Community Church in Morganton.

The Parable of the Wicked Husband

By Rev. Mark H. Creech



There once was a man who hated his wife. He nit-picked everything she ever did. He had friends to spy on her. With the help of others, he continuously plotted against her. He lied about her, stirring up rumors and stoking the fires of gossip. For more than three years, he abused her and grossly disrespected her person and place as a wife.

Sometimes his wife’s personality was perceived as boorish, but she proved by her actions over and again her sacrificial love for the family. But the husband wanted a divorce; he wanted her gone and destroyed at any price. His hatred was so grievously profound he wanted even her friends and sympathizers punished. Some say he corruptly conspired to steal his wife’s inheritance.

Then one day, after she was turned out, he spoke words of kindness. Yet he never acknowledged the evil done to his wife. He said to all her friends, let us get together again. But he provided no sign, other than saccharine sweet calls for unity, his hatred for her had abated, or the good for which she stood was anything but deplorable.

So, the wife’s friends feared him and his allies, and for a good reason. Because they were a peace-loving people, they were eager to extend their hand in friendship. Nevertheless, their better judgment, rather than their better angels, advised them to be prudent.

They said to one another, “There is a just God who rules in heaven. We should wait and see if He might vindicate the man’s wife. Let us not return evil for evil but let us not treat this one who has done so wickedly to his wife, and us, as though the past has not occurred. We stand ready to forgive, but not without evidence of repentance.”

So, the people waited patiently, looking to God, praying for truth and justice to prevail. They were kind to all, but committed not to the husband or his friends, for they knew how they were.

Reverend Dr. Mark Creech is Executive Director of the NC Christian Action League. You may contact him at rev.markcreech@christianactionleague.org or 919-787-0606

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Witnessing During the Holidays

By Rev. John B. Sorensen



The Christmas season is a wonderful time to share with family and friends why Jesus was born on this earth. After all, we are celebrating the birth of the Messiah. That’s good news! However, sharing our faith with family members can often be more difficult than sharing it with strangers.

What holds us back? Is it fear? Rejection? Or perhaps it’s the idea that our family simply won’t believe us?

Well, not everyone in Jesus’ family believed at first either. People in His hometown questioned Him: “*Isn’t this Joseph’s son?*” (Luke 4:22), and His own brothers told Him to leave Galilee because they did not believe Him (John 7:3-5).

But Jesus’ family did come to believe Him – later. Although we don’t know the details of how or when they came to believe, Jesus’ brothers were present with the disciples in the upper room to pray after He ascended into Heaven (Acts 1:14). They were counted among the believers.

What happened? Jesus’ brothers had grown up with Him. They had lived with Him. Yet, they did not believe. They knew Jesus, but they didn’t know Him as Lord and Savior. At some point, they met the real Jesus and had their first encounter with the Messiah.

So what can we do to reach our own family members?

1. We can pray. The Holy Spirit is the One who tugs at people’s hearts and draws them to the Savior. We can ask God to prepare their hearts to hear the Good News and to create opportunities to share the Gospel.
2. Send Christmas Cards that share a Christ-centered message. Don’t be afraid to include your favorite Scripture or prayer. More people are open to hearing about Jesus at Christmas than at any other time of the year.
3. Invite them to your church for a special Christmas program or service. Church attendance spikes at Christmas and Easter and many churches use that opportunity to present the Gospel in an easy-to-understand manner to people who don’t know Christ.
4. Ask Permission to Share the Gospel with them personally and privately. Christmas is the perfect time to share the reason why Christ was born on earth, to die for our sins and give us the opportunity to join Him in Heaven. We can offer them the opportunity to receive the greatest gift of all.
5. Be patient. Jesus’ family didn’t believe Him right away, but His four brothers did eventually accept Jesus as Christ. Keep praying. Continue sharing the Gospel. You never know, this year may be the year they believe.

Rev. John B. Sorensen, D.D. is the President/CEO of Evangelism Explosion International, headquartered in Arden, N.C. EE has been a leader in equipping Christians to share their faith for more than 50 years. For more free tips and resources, visit evangelismexplosion.org.



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A Christmas Word

By Ken and Jan Merop
Avery County



Imagine the incredible power of the spoken word that flung the stars into space and called them by name. Just think of majestic mountains pushing up into enormous splendor by the word spoken in creation.

The oceans, streams, rivers, waterfalls...all came into being by the word of His mouth.

When considering the heavens and all the rest of creation, take it a step further and contemplate the One who gave it being – the Word.

The Bible clearly states it this way in John 1: 1-5, NIV, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.*”

The Christmas story is one of wonder, love, grace, and mercy. It is God reaching out to the man to pull him out of the darkness into His glorious light.

Wonder. It surrounds the story of Christ’s birth – angels, stars, Magi, shepherds, a stable, a virgin, a newborn baby – yet divine and eternal. The prophecy about Him said that He would be called Wonderful. That is, full of wonder.

Love. Why would God the Father allow God the Son to lay aside His glory and be born a tiny baby – helpless, powerless? Why would Jesus choose to come knowing His purpose was to die a horrible death on the cross for the sins of each and every one of us individually? What held Him there? The nails? No. Love. “For God so loved...that He gave...”

Grace. Grace is God giving us what we don’t deserve. The sin nature that Adam incurred in his disobedience and that we inherited could only be dealt a death blow by One who was sinless. That One is Jesus. Sin’s penalty is death. But through Jesus’ sacrifice, grace was extended and we get a life when we believe and receive His free gift. Giving us one way is a gracious gift.

Mercy. Mercy is God withholding what we do deserve. He looked upon the sinful condition that separated us from having a relationship with Him and made a way for us to come to the Father.

Many words describe this beautiful season of the year. But it is only because the Word, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, is truly the reason for the season.

He is the Christmas Word. Selah

Frosty Covering

The quiet expectation alive within the snowy atmosphere was an invitation for us to walk slowly under its canopy. As we inhaled the clean mountain air and observed the delicate etchings of the snow’s designs, we luxuriated in the artistry of our Creator’s hand. “All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.”
Colossians 1: 16 & 17



Ken and Jan love residing in the mountains of Avery County. Visit Jan’s new blog @pauseandconsider.net, Journeying with Jan. Ken’s photos can be seen at kenmeropphotography.com.



Pleasant Hill Baptist Church

Once Again

By Caron Cline
Burke County



Time. God created the heavens and the earth and immediately started His cosmic clock, setting boundaries called days, weeks, months, and years. Although He set eternity in our hearts, our finite minds cannot comprehend such an infinite concept. We need borders which we call beginnings and endings. Our Father understands our limitations all too well therefore He orchestrates circumstances within those boundaries of time. So, in the fullness of time, God sent His Son to dwell among us as the visible representation of Himself; One Who would be a perfect reflection of grace, love, and mercy. This concept known as time delivers us each year to the season of remembering the visitation of the Promised Messiah. Though this story has been celebrated time and again, we never tire of hearing it.

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger’. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!’ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us’.” Luke 2:1-15.

The shepherds were frightened, then humbled, and lastly, filled with an overwhelming sense of joy and purpose. Angels had visited them, spoken to them, and actually announced the birth of the long-awaited Savior of the world to them, mere shepherds. But something more incredible had also been revealed; this Christ child was nearby and the angel invited them to personally visit the newborn babe. The trip was made in haste; the sheep were temporarily forgotten; and the Savior was found lying in a manger, just as the angel promised. The arrival of unexpected guests must have astounded Mary and Joseph. When they heard their testimony of a choir of angels announcing the birth of the long-awaited Messiah in Bethlehem, peace surely flooded their minds. Their God had not forgotten them! This stable was no mistake! It was the perfect place for welcoming shepherds to this divine appointment. But how much did these shepherds understand about the Promised Messiah? Did they realize that His arrival changed the course of history forever? Did they understand the horrors of sin and the necessary sacrifice of this child for those sins? Did they comprehend that He would be a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to the people of Israel? Probably not! But they understood that this revelation was from God and that their lives would never be the same again. This encounter with the Christ child brought forth testimony from their lips to all who would listen along with praises and adoration to the One who graced them with this moment. The shepherds departed, leaving Mary to treasure their amazing words of sweet affirmation within her heart. This unexpected visit quieted many of the doubts that invaded Mary and Joseph’s minds. After all, who could have imagined that God would allow His own Son to be born in a stable? Yet this was only a precursor of future rejection, misunderstanding, humiliation, and horror that would mark His short life on this planet. For now, His destiny was hidden from His earthly mother but in a few short days, a sobering prophecy would be spoken that would forever ring in her ears.

Simeon, the man of God, would speak these words specifically to Mary: *“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”* Luke 2: 34-35. Wrapped in those swaddling clothes, Jesus rested in the arms of Mary, just as any other baby would rest in its mother’s arms. Yet this child was the fulfillment of God’s promise to Adam and Eve; His promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; His promise to David, and now His promise to Mary and Joseph. She must have reflected on the words spoken by the angel: *“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of His kingdom there will be no end”.* Luke 1:31 The grace of God protected Mary from the complete revelation of her Son’s mission to earth. For now, she was allowed the joy of simply falling in love with her child. The next months remained relatively normal, but within the first two years of Jesus’ life, more visitors would arrive. Magi from the East, who had seen His star and traveled many miles, came to worship the new King. Their inquiries into His whereabouts launched a chain reaction of events that sent Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt for their child’s life and the killing of multiple boys under the age of two. The enemy was already seeking to thwart the plans and purposes of God. Jesus was sent to save His people from their sins and nothing would be able to hinder His mission. Do we tire of this timeless story? The danger is real; the flesh is weak. The Spirit living within every true believer always ignites a passion within our hearts to celebrate and worship the One Who

came to rescue us from our sins. The Spirit’s mission is to glorify Jesus; to lift Him up; to remind us of everything that He said and did, and to drop us to our knees in adoration of the One who loved us enough to die for us. He actually emptied Himself, took the form of a servant in a body of flesh and blood, and then humbled Himself and willingly died on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. O come, let us adore Him!!!!

Caron Cline is a follower of Jesus Christ who loves to teach the word of God. Her desire is to see every believer growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord.

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The Orchard at Altapass

The Orchard At Altapass Closes For The Season

By Kate Groff
Mitchell County

On November 1, the Orchard at Altapass closed for the season. It's been a strange year, but we count ourselves as lucky in that we live and work in the Blue Ridge Mountains with its fresh air, less traffic, and seemingly, endless possibilities. Next season the bees will be shaking and flying after having eaten all their winter honey, the silk from the exploding milkweed will root in the thawing moist spring ground, blueberries will prepare their first fruits, apple buds will peek out from branches of older trees, and lime green leaves unfold on the one-year-old saplings in the nursery. The field will continue to grow throughout the winter months, but it's what happens outside the Orchard, in the cities, towns, neighborhoods, shops, and restaurants, that will determine the path of the Orchard in the coming year.

Changes made in June were done in a quick response to a pandemic. Changes for 2021 will be made through six months of deliberation, determination, and dedication to preserving the Orchard and continuing its mission. Penciled-in plans for the new season include bringing the music back and "hayrides," both prohibited this year, both sorely missed; the completion of the Clinchfield Railroad model display; a comprehensive monarch butterfly habitat; more activities for the kids, and a couple of surprises. We'll even find a place for the stacks of chairs now taking up space in the barn. If the apples don't stop growing, the Orchard won't stop inviting people to visit and share the magic of its rolling hills. And if masks become as "must wear shoes and shirts," then masks it will be. There will be smiles beneath.

We'll be on the lookout for more volunteers. So, if you would like to help for a day or a few hours, please let us know. Email Beth Hilton at execdirector@altapassorchard.org for information about where, when, and how you can fit in. We don't know if the opening day will change from years past, hours, or days open, but will keep everyone informed as we continue to "save the good stuff." And we thank everyone who took those few hours out of their tense days to spend them at the Orchard.

The Orchard is located at 1025 Orchard Road near Spruce Pine at mm 328.3 on the Blue Ridge Parkway and is a not-for-profit, 501(c)(3), working orchard, heritage, and educational venue. Family- and pet-friendly. Wheel-chair accessible. For information, please visit altapassorchard.org, our Facebook page, or call 828-765-9531.

Kate Groff is the Programs Coordinator for the Toe River Arts Council.



Foundation Forward

Founding Fathers and How They Served Our Country—John Morton

By David Streater, PhD
Burke County



John Morton was born in 1725 in Delaware County, Pennsylvania. John's father died before he was born. His stepfather homeschooled him in many areas including ethics and mores. These philosophical disciplines would serve him well in years to come.

During his lifetime, Morton had various careers: a magistrate, Stamp Act agent, sheriff, and others. In 1744, he became a Pennsylvania Supreme Court justice. He also served as a delegate to the First and Second Continental Congresses. During this time, John had to face a crucial and critical decision.

Many of Morton's constituents were British Loyalists who desired to remain under the King's control. John favored independence. Morton's ethical dilemma was to appease his constituents or leave them and support independence. There were seven delegates from Pennsylvania. Three were for independence, and three were not. Pennsylvania's decision rested with John Morton. Following his conscience, delegate Morton ultimately voted for independence. For his patriotic act, many of John's colleagues and friends shunned and rejected him.

On April 1, 1777, John Morton was the first of the Declaration of Independence signers to die. On his deathbed, John stated that his voting decision for independence was "the most glorious service I ever rendered my country". His dauntless decision was insightfully patriotic; it clearly changed history and the world!

Please visit your Charters of Freedom setting in most western North Carolina counties. A Charters of Freedom setting consists of the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. They are on permanent display analogous the Charters of Freedom in the National Archives, Washington, DC. Please visit our website (ChartersofFreedom.com) to learn more about our existing settings.

Teachers are encouraged to contact Dr. Streater for information and complementary student education materials to enhance experiential field trips to a Charter of Freedom settings. Everyone is welcome and urged to obtain a personalized engraved legacy paver for placement at their Charters of Freedom setting. Please contact Dr. Streater (david.streater@gmail.com) for an engraved legacy paver and free educational materials.

Dr. David Streater is the director of education for Foundation Forward. He is a retired college instructor and administrator, and a retired probation and parole officer/administrator. David is a criminologist who has an acute history interest, served in the Navy, and is a resident of Burke County, NC.

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Berry Chapel Baptist Church

Never Forget the Best

By Steve Williams
Mitchell County



Merry Christmas

I pray that we never forget the best thing about Christmas. I remember a story of a shepherd-boy in the Alps while tending his sheep. He saw an odd flower at his feet. He plucked the flower, and as he did so a door opened into the mountain. He went in and soon came to a great pile of gems. A voice said: "Take what you wish, but do not forget the best."

Eagerly he grasped all the gems he could carry. As he did so, he dropped, unnoticed, the odd little flower which had unlocked the mountain for him. Hurrying to carry his jewels home, he again heard the voice saying. "Don't forget the best." He paid no attention and soon was outside the mountain cave. He missed the odd flower which had served as a key to let him in the mountain was gone. The jewels he had eagerly gathered turned into dust before his eyes. He had forgotten to take the best.

Many are the good things of this world we have a right to enjoy so long as we do so lawfully and rightly. The Voice comes to us also saying: Take what you want and can of earth's treasures, but don't forget the best." And the best is Christ. Christmas today has become such a hassle because we have managed to leave the best out of it which is Christ Jesus. Gift's, parties, and get-togethers are wonderful and good in themselves. But in the midst of so much that is good, may we never forget the best, the Christ of Christmas.

So let us not lose the best which is Christ this Christmas. May we honor Him and remember that He is the Reason For The Blessed Season. See Christmas is not a time or a season, but a state of mind. May we keep our minds focused on Christ this season and reflect on the greatest gift ever given. My Prayer to you is that Christmas will be a Blessing and not a Hassle.

Beverly, my wife, and I would like to wish all a very Merry Christmas and a very prosperous New Year. May we never get out of heart or give up or give in to a world that has gone crazy. Please pray for our nation and President Trump as never before.

Words of Wisdom:

- Christmas is a season not only for rejoicing but also reflection. Winston Churchill
- We are never more like Jesus Christ than when we are giving. So this Christmas let's be sure to share Jesus with someone. It the best Gift they will ever receive. Steve Williams
- Christmas, my child, is love in action. Every time we love, every time we give, it's Christmas. Dale Evans
- For it is in giving that we receive. N/A
- God can't be Defeated. Nor can they who trust in Him. N/A
- The loneliest place in the world is the heart where the Lord Jesus is absent. N/A
- I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Jesus

Christmas Gift Suggestions

To your enemy, Forgiveness
To your opponent, Tolerance
To your friend, your Heart
To a customer, Service
To all, Charity
To every child, a Good Example
To the lost, Share Jesus
To yourself, Respect
By Oren Arnold

A Little Humor for Christmas:

• An atheist complained to a Christian friend, "You Christians have your special holidays, such as Christmas and Easter. Jews celebrate their national holidays, such as Passover and Yom Kippur. But we atheists have no recognized national holidays. It's unfair discrimination." His friend replied, "Why don't you celebrate April the first?" and call it April Fools Day.

Steve Williams is the Pastor of Berry Chapel Baptist Church in Spruce Pine.



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Your Government Page

NC Senate District 47



Sen. Ralph Hise
Ralph.Hise@ncleg.net
919-733-3460

Much has been written over the past ten years about gerrymandering. At this point, it's quite literally been litigated to death. But not enough attention has been paid to the districts drawn for the most recent 2020 election.

To put it bluntly, Republicans won under a district drawn by the Democratic Party's high-priced mapmaking expert, who is a professor out of the University of Michigan.

But even the Democratic Party expert's districts weren't good enough for the Democrats in the North Carolina Senate. They went in and amended his districts four times during the drawing process to give themselves even more of an edge.

The only people to touch the North Carolina Senate maps, then, were Democratic legislators and the Democratic Party's mapmaker. Republicans had zero say in the composition of the 2020 districts.

But I and other Republicans still won.

Why? Because the Republican Party's platform of low taxes, reasonable regulations, school choice, and teacher pay raises is popular. The Democratic Party's platform of defunding the police, raising taxes, and denying lower-income families the privilege of school choice is unpopular.

It's as simple as that.

Republicans have now won six elections in a row on four different sets of maps, including two drawn by Democrats. At some point, Democrats must know that their problems come from their policies, not their districts.

Over the coming months, you'll probably hear more and more Democrats blame their losses on "gerrymandering," ignoring the reality that people just don't like their high-tax, high-spending proposals.

Just remember: If there was a pro-Republican gerrymander in this year's state senate races, then it was executed by Democrats, as they're the only ones who drew the districts.

As always, please share your thoughts with me on these or other issues related to the state government by emailing me at ralph.hise@ncleg.net or calling me at 919-733-3460.

NC Senate District 46



Sen. Warren Daniel
Warren.Daniel@ncleg.net
919-715-7823

Now that the excitement and suspense of the 2020 election have passed, I wanted to provide you with a brief update on the results related to the General Assembly.

As you know, the voters of North Carolina again returned strong Republican majorities to both the NC House (69) and NC Senate (28). Rewarding a job well done, NC voters made a clear choice for a sixth consecutive election in support of the Republican platform of lower taxes, reduced regulation, pro-life policies, expanded school choice, and making large investments in both public education and teacher pay raises.

The Senate Republican majority will continue to deliver on these promises and more. I am thankful to the voters of Avery, Burke, and Caldwell counties for again allowing me the opportunity to represent you in Raleigh. It has been a privilege to have been involved in each of the past six elections for NC Senate District 46 and to have seen many of our conservative campaign promises fulfilled. Over the next two years I am looking forward to working with my fellow legislators, both new and seasoned, our highly qualified Council of State members, a new Lt. Governor, as well as Governor Cooper.

As we near the end of what has been a trying, stressful, and tumultuous year, above all I hope you will remember to celebrate that *"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the father, full of grace and truth."* – John 1:14

Lydia and I wish each of you and your families a very Merry Christmas. We hope that your holidays are filled with much joy and fellowship and that 2021 will bring renewed hope and blessings to you and yours.

If I can be of service to you in the coming year, please reach out to my Raleigh office for assistance

NC House District 86



Rep. Hugh Blackwell
919-733-5805
Hugh.Blackwell@ncleg.net

Now that the election is mostly over, I want to say how grateful I am to the people of Burke County for allowing me to continue representing them in the NC House of Representatives in Raleigh. Based on election results as of now, Republicans gained four seats in the NC House and will have 69 seats in the new legislature that begins in January. That compares to the 65 seats they won in 2018. The NC Senate remained virtually unchanged, losing one seat. It now will have 28 Republican senators instead of the 29 after the 2018 election. As a result, North Carolina will continue to face divided government with Governor Cooper, a Democrat, being reelected to head the executive branch of state government. The new year will tell whether we again have the multiple Cooper vetoes of legislation, including his veto of the two-year state budget that had multiple negative impacts across state government. Not the least of those negative effects were the denial of raises to educators and needed reforms in health care delivery. The General Assembly's financial and budgeting policies, maintained despite the Cooper vetoes and opposition, have allowed North Carolina to both maintain its AAA bond rating with all three independent rating agencies and to be among the few states best weathering the current economic hardships caused by a continued shutdown of significant segments of our state's economy.

In the new 2021 legislative session, I expect education and healthcare issues to again be at the top of the agenda. Only time will tell if Governor Cooper will relent in his demands to move us towards government-controlled healthcare that I believe would be a disaster. Hopefully, we will allow individuals to keep and choose their own private insurance and physicians. Hopefully, we will seek solutions that lower costs by offering innovative choices to citizens needing coverage, whether through an employer or in the open market. We will, of course, continue to make provision, hopefully, enhanced, for needy children, those with special needs, and those unable to work and provide for themselves and their families.

The education of our children is as essential as anything government does. Unfortunately, the Cooper administration has wasted the last nine months by failing to develop effective policies to allow parents the option of putting their children back in schools and colleges. Such policies should focus on the best possible health protections consistent with also allowing education to take place in person (not primarily or substantially by remote means). The Cooper administration has put our children's academic progress and mental health at risk by keeping schools closed. Our children are experiencing academic setbacks from which they may not ever recover. Attendance in the classroom is essential for both their academic success and mental health. The legislature needs to focus on making school participation safe for all while at the same time having learning and student life continue



God Bless America

Bethel Women’s Colony: A Journey into Truth

By Marion Stephan
Burke County

“Where can I go from Your Spirit?/Or where can I flee from Your presence?/ If I ascend into heaven, You are there;/If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there./ If I take the wings of the morning./And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea/ Even there Your hand shall lead me./And Your right hand shall hold me.” (Psalm 139:7-10)

For Donna McCall, women’s campus director at Bethel Colony of Mercy in Lenoir, North Carolina the journey into ministry was erratic. In an interview during Hickory Aglow’s November 19 Zoom meeting, McCall described her odyssey through a broken childhood home, an early abusive marriage, a descent into drugs and drinking, and an on-again, off-again relationship with Christ.

McCall is now married to “a decent man,” and has served at Bethel since 2018. Bethel Colony of Mercy is a Christ-centered residential program serving persons addicted to drugs or alcohol.

McCall recalled that at age 16, after entering a marriage that “wasn’t working out,” she adopted a lifestyle of partying and drinking. Then, one day, she was riding in the passenger seat of a car, on a return trip from a bar with several others. Suddenly, “a tree was in my face and the door flew open . . . , and I woke up and I was in a ravine.”

She spent three months in a hospital with a broken leg. Her only visitor was a preacher who prayed with her but “didn’t share the plan of salvation.” At one point, she cried out to God, “If you're there if you're really real, I just need you,” and He “came into my heart.”

After her release from the hospital, she went into a church, “walked to the altar” on crutches, and received Christ. She returned to her husband, hoping to make the marriage work. However, “it wound up a very dangerous situation and I had to get out of that situation.” By then, the marriage had produced four children.

She became angry at God and “walked away from the church where I started.” Eventually, finding herself “just miserable,” she “went back to the church in about 1996 and I rededicated my life.”

In 2001, she began a career as a realtor. Fifteen years later, she was approached by a member of the Bethel Colony Board of Directors. He was seeking her help in finding land on which to build a campus for women, to supplement the existing men’s colony.

Eventually, the women’s program was underway, and she was offered the position of director. “Needless to say, I was shocked.” Although she had long had a heart for women’s ministry, she considered herself too old to take on such a mission. However, she says, God assured her otherwise.

McCall says that the most important emphasis of Bethel’s treatment program is truth. “Most of the time people want to blame other people for their addictions.” However, McCall asserts, residents are treated under the assumption that “*‘The truth shall make you free’*” (John 8:32).

The 65-day program at Bethel, according to McCall, includes intensive Bible study and counseling. The women are taught that Christ offers new life; He is “the lifter of their heads.” Among participants in the program, she says, “there have only been about three women that have left without praying the sinner’s prayer.”

Hickory Aglow Zoom meetings occur at 7 p.m. on the third Thursday of each month. The next meeting, on December 17, will focus on how Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, illuminates the birth of the one who “*became flesh and dwelt among us*” (John 1:14).

Marian Boyd, the scheduled speaker for the evening, explains that Hanukkah is “a very joyous celebration” of the time God supplied enough holy oil to rededicate the second Jewish temple. Persecution and Jewish civil war had diminished temple resources so that only enough holy oil existed to light the menorah for one day. However, “God supernaturally supplied the oil” for all eight days of the rededication. In the same way, the Holy Spirit provides the power we need to rededicate our lives daily to Jesus, the light of the world.

When Jesus attended the Feast of Dedication in John 10:22, according to Boyd, He was celebrating Hanukkah. The word “Hanukkah” means “dedication.” It was on this occasion that “He chose to tell them [the Jews] that He was Messiah.”

Boyd developed an interest in the Hebrew roots of Christianity during a Christian Believers United conference on the subject, in Black Mountain, North Carolina. “As I listened to these Hebrew scholars teach about our Hebrew roots, the Holy Spirit sparked a flame in my heart to learn and study about the spiritual roots of our faith. The Jewish roots existed in the early church, but were severed centuries ago by the religious systems of man.”

She began to explore these roots through studying “the everlasting covenant God made with Abraham.” This exploration led her to realize that “Jew and Gentile alike partake of that covenant through our faith in the Jew’s Messiah, Yeshua (Jesus), our Savior, Deliverer, Lord, and King. It has become my heart's desire and calling to help restore, once again, the Hebrew Roots of our faith back to the Ecclesia of God.”

Boyd currently teaches on the Hebrew roots of Christianity at various small groups, churches, and conferences. She and her husband, Paul Boyd, serve as co-pastors and praise and worship leaders at His Place Worship Center in Marion, North Carolina. Paul Boyd will be leading the praise and worship portion of the December Aglow meeting.

Additional information on Bethel Colony of Mercy and Hickory Aglow is available at <http://bethelcolony.org/> or www.aglownet.org/hickorync, respectively.

Marion Stephan is retired and is active in His Place Worship Center, Marion, North Carolina.



By David Burleson
Burke County



It is difficult to believe that almost half the school year is already completed, and the Christmas holidays will be here soon. The New Dimensions students have achieved a great deal of success thus far and we anticipate even more achievements during the remainder of the school year. Our students have improved academically, competed well athletically, and participated proudly in a variety of other activities. Most importantly, we are proud that our children have progressed in their character development and citizenship skills.

It was the renowned author, Charles Dickens, who once said: “There seems a magic in the very name of Christmas.” I know that each of us shares Dickens’s sentiments, even more, when we think of the meaning of the holiday season and the anticipation of being with family members and friends. The festivities of this wonderful time of year offer us many opportunities to be with those who make our lives special and to reflect upon our numerous blessings, even in this time of COVID.

During this magical season, I am most thankful for the privilege of serving as the director of New Dimensions. I am grateful to the staff members who share their many gifts of encouragement, love, knowledge, and patience with every student each day. Each staff member makes daily contributions to academic and personal success for every child at our school.

With continued community support and the dedicated staff of New Dimensions, we will exceed the level of past accomplishments and experience even greater growth in 2021. Quality schools are vital to the economic development of our county. Therefore, our school is dedicated to preparing our children for a successful, productive citizenry.

I want to thank each individual in our school that works so diligently each day to provide the best possible education to our students. My gratitude is extended to each parent who has provided support to his/her child and the school, especially during this unique time in history. We are very blessed to live in a community that conscientiously assumes its responsibility to educate children and to provide the necessary resources for their success.

During the entire month of December, New Dimensions is providing numerous opportunities for our school family to give back to community organizations that assist those in need. From food drives to providing Christmas presents, our school is very involved in helping others.

Our school has some activities planned to help our families celebrate the holidays. These activities include the following:

- Monday, December 7 – NDS Gives Back – Toys for Tots
- Tuesday, December 8 - NDS Gives Back for BUCM Canned Drive
- Wednesday, December 9 - NDS Gives Back for Blue Elves
- Thursday, December 10 for BUCM
- Thursday, December 10 – ICEE Day
- Thursday, December 10 – NCSSM Presentation for Select Seventh and Eighth Graders – Middle School Auditorium – 2 p.m.
- Saturday, December 12 – NDS Board Retreat – Wilkerson Auditorium – 9 a.m.
- Monday, December 14 to Thursday, December 17 – NDS PTO Penguin Patch
- Monday, December 14 – Ugly Sweater Day
- Wednesday, December 16 - NDS Finance Committee Meeting – Conference Room – 4 p.m.
- Thursday, December 17 – Pajama Day
- Thursday, December 17 – NDS Board Meeting – Wilkerson Auditorium – 4 p.m.
- Friday, December 18 – Remote Learning Day
- Monday, December 21 to Friday, January 1 – Christmas Holidays

As 2021 approaches, we anticipate the year with excitement; yet, we know much work is yet to be done. We must continue to work together as a community to continue to emphasize the importance of education and supporting each other. It is also of great importance to meet the needs of each student that is in our school.

As our school continues to work with parents and the community to fulfill the challenge of educating our children, please share your ideas and suggestions. Your input is greatly appreciated and needed. Together, we can accomplish so much for the young people of our school.

Best wishes to you and your family for the most blessed of Christmases and the best of new years. With your continued support, the New Dimensions Charter School can and will help each child achieve all the success and happiness he/she so richly deserves. Together, we can make sure that each child in our school achieves success.

David Burleson is the Director of the New Dimensions Charter School in Burke County.



God’s Kingdom of Love

By Alan Griffin

There is a place where love abounds, where trust and faith go hand in hand. Where righteousness and justice are the foundations of a relationship that can last forever. It is not a fairy tale or dream. It is a place inside of us where only we can enter, but it is available for us to share with everyone we meet. A place where we are led by still waters and where we can rest on green pastures. A place where peace can be found in a busy world. A place where joy and harmony reside together. A place where the purest form of love can be found. A place where we are one together with our Creator. The kingdom of God is a place inside of our mind where the communion of love is at its greatest potential. *“But seek first the kingdom of God is righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”* Matthew 6:33 The world of Agape, or the world of God’s love. *“No greater love is there than the love our Heavenly Father has for us. For the kingdom of God in word but in power.”* 1 Corinthians 4:20



Obtaining this love is the number one priority of every human on earth. Without it, we are lost, miserable, and lonely. This loneliness causes us to make bad decisions. To be able to develop a long-term relationship with our life partner we have to take the steps necessary to enter the kingdom. Far too many of us proceed with a partner before understanding the concept of love. Forget what you see in the media because their method will only lead to relationship failure. The technical term is controlled obsolescent, or a relationship with programmed flaws of defeat. Your success is a detriment to their lifestyle of no rule’s relationships. Today we are intermingled with those who use the word of love to their own selfish advantage. They lie and prey upon people’s feelings for their own gain. Through this 3-step process, you will learn how to develop lasting relationships and you will learn how to detect people who are befriending you for their own personal gain.

Step 1) Daily Bible study and prayer - First we seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness. We do this by surrendering our life to God so that the Holy Spirit may enter us and have a work inside of us. We spend time every day growing with God through daily Bible study and prayer. *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.”* Mark 1:15 NKJV To repent is to turn away from what you know in your heart is wrong and turn toward God. If you understand these things the right has been given to you to know the mystery of the kingdom of God. Most people enter adulthood by the way of the world. To these people, the Kingdom is a mystery they do not understand because they are blinded to spiritual matters. To others, they receive the Word and seemingly accepted Christ as their Savior, but there is no foundation of Bible study and prayer, so they soon wither away. The third hearer receives the Word, but the message is choked out by the cares, riches, and pleasures of this world. They believe but they never surrender their life to Christ. The fourth group hears the word of God, surrenders their will, and serves God in some manner to produce fruit. They have a ministry where they are sharing the Gospel with others.

Step 2) A pure mind and body – *“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”* Romans 12 12:1-2 Do not be deceived. Wicked people will not inherit the kingdom of God. People who lie, cheat, and steal; those who have sex out of wedlock; people who worship money, fame, and materialism; people who have sex with others while married; and homosexuals will not enter the kingdom of God. We are to abstain from immoral behavior. We are to set ourselves apart from this wicked generation. We are to cleanse our thoughts from evil. It is our mind that is the temple of God. It is a place of purity and sanctity where God resides.

Step 3) Love - Love is the greatest gift mankind has ever been given. For God so loved the world. Love one another as we love ourselves. Do unto others as we would have others do unto us. Love our enemies. We do this in a caring Godly manner. *“Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God little child will by no means enter it.”* Luke 18:17 The love of a child is trusting and faithful, and true. We depend on our parents, the Heavenly Father, and we abide by His word. For the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. We have comfort in knowing the Holy Spirit resides inside of our mind to counsel and guide us through this treacherous world. We are never alone. God is always with us.

These three steps will embark you on a journey of lasting relationships. I have included below all scripture that refers to the kingdom of God. Please study it very carefully.

Alan Griffin started the kidsnchrist ministries in November 1997. He has worked with inner city kids for 21 years. He found a need for specialized Biblical literature that would reach people of all ages and has been writing since 2005. The ministry has expanded their websites to reach around the world. Kidsnchrist.com, millennialchristian.com, teensnchrist.com, seniorsnchrist.com, picture-verse.com, and soulworks-smallgroups.com. We had an outreach of over 13,000,000 people last year with 36,000,000 impressions. If you have any questions for Alan you can reach him at alan@kidsnchrist.com

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Watts Named Dean of Student Success

The Board of Trustees of McDowell Technical Community College, on the recommendation of Interim President Ryan T. Garrison and Dr. Penny Cross, Vice-President for Learning and Student Services, has named Dr. Beverly Watts as McDowell Tech’s first Dean of Student Success.

Watts was most recently the college’s Director of Developmental Studies and Quality Enhancement, a position she has held since 2011. Before that time, she was Department Chair for Developmental Studies from 2003-2011. She began her career at McDowell Tech as a Mathematics Instructor in College Transfer/General Education in 1998, a position she has continued to hold along with her other positions.

Watts will assume her new position immediately. In her new role, Watts will direct all Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) initiatives to ensure completion of all required activities and reports, both internally and externally, and provide leadership and organization for current and future Quality Enhancement Plans.

Also, she will supervise McDowell Tech’s liaisons for secondary partnerships and NC Career Coaches. Finally, she will oversee the scheduling and evaluation of courses within the Developmental Studies area.

“We are pleased to have Dr. Watts take on this new role,” said Cross. “While she will retain some of her previous duties as Director of Quality Enhancement, her new position adds several additional responsibilities, as well as supervisory activities for our high school partnerships and career coaches.

“Watts had a key role in developing the current QEP, which received high praise from our SACS Visiting Team. It is an ambitious plan, as the Team noted, but Dr. Watts is up to the challenge of now implementing that plan,” she stated.

SACS is the abbreviation for Southern Association for Colleges and Schools, the body through which the college is accredited, specifically in the Association's Commission on Colleges.

The QEP is a multi-year plan designated by the acronym “ROARR,” which stands for Recruitment, Orientation, Advising, Retention, and Referral, the five elements of the plan. In simplified terms, the QEP seeks to enhance the college’s efforts to bring students to the college, help them stay in school and be successful, and help refer them for appropriate placement when they have completed their individual programs.

The college’s liaisons at each of the high school and early college programs, as well as the NC Career Coaches, will each play roles in implementing smaller parts of the plan, as well a variety of other individuals.

“Ultimately, the strategies in this plan will be the focus for all of our faculty and staff for the next few years,” Cross continued. “We are confident that we will see growth in student success that we will build on from year-to-year.”

Watts is a graduate of North Carolina State University with a double major in Mathematics and Mathematics Education and earned her Master’s degree in Middle Grades Education with a concentration in Mathematics from Appalachian State University. Later, Watts also earned a Doctorate (Ph.D.) in Education from Capella University, with a concentration in Post-Secondary and Adult Education. In addition to her administrative duties, Watts has been a highly respected member of our instructional faculty and has twice received the college’s Excellence in Teaching Award (2004 and 2018).

In 2005, Watts was also named a Semi-Finalist for the NC Community College System’s Excellence in Teaching Award.

Outside the classroom, Watts also received the Distinguished Chapter Advisor for Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society (2003-2007), the Silver Beaver Award from the Piedmont Council of the Boy Scouts of America, the District Award of Merit from the Swamp Fox District of Boy Scouts of America, and was the City of Marion’s Citizen of the Month in October 2011.

Dr. Watts has served in numerous teaching and leadership positions in her church and has been an active civic leader as well. For many years she has served on the Mountain Glory Festival Committee, the City of Marion’s Tree Committee, and she has held several roles as a board member of the McDowell County Health Coalition.

Recently, Watts also Co-Chaired the Data Initiative Student Support Team for the North Carolina Community College System Office.

A few years ago, Watts helped to write a grant for what would become “Camp Opportunity,” a very popular summer camp program for middle school students, and successfully directed the camp for several years.

“Clearly, Dr. Watts is a talented and successful leader,” Cross concluded, “...and we are lucky to have her step into this role to assist our students with their own success.”



Dr. Beverly Watts

Valentino Is New Director of Small Business Center

Stacy Buff, Dean of Career and Technical Education, recently announced that Terry Valentino has been named Director of the MTCC Small Business Center effective December 1, 2020.

Valentino is a long-term employee of the college with over 20 years of professional and administrative experience, most recently serving as Director of College and Career Readiness and Human Resources Development.

She will succeed Frank Silver, current director of the center, who is retiring. “Terry has done a fantastic job leading College and Career Readiness and HRD, and I have every bit of confidence that she will do the same in her new role,” said Buff.

Valentino earned her Bachelor’s degree in Literature from the University of North Carolina at Asheville and a Master’s degree in Higher Education Administration from Western Carolina University.

Valentino has one son, Chuck Eline, and is married to Jorge Valentino, a Graphic Designer who also works at McDowell Tech.

Rapid Response Team Ministering
to Hurricane-Ravaged Communities

By Lizzy Long

While Hurricane Zeta brought additional damage to storm-battered states in the South, the Billy Graham Rapid Response Team (RRT) has offered emotional and spiritual care to devastated regions along the Gulf Coast for months.

Billy Graham chaplains are serving in Louisiana and Alabama amid the Atlantic's most active hurricane season since 2005.

On Wednesday, Zeta made landfall in southern Louisiana as a Category 2 storm with 110 mph winds—just one mile shy of a Category 3—and showed no mercy on residents already reeling from a hectic hurricane season. Rushing inland, the system weakened to a tropical storm while causing millions to lose power on its flight to the mid-Atlantic.

At least six people died due to Zeta, which brought strong winds, tornadoes, and heavy rain across the South. Houses and businesses received structural damage and blown-out windows, and trees fell on top of homes and cars.

“Not only is [Louisiana] water-logged, but there have been untold millions of dollars in damage to people’s homes and businesses,” Franklin Graham posted on Facebook. “Pray for Louisiana’s Governor John Bel Edwards, first responders, emergency management, and the people of this hurting state and surrounding areas.”

According to the governor, nearly 3,600 evacuees remain displaced after hurricanes Laura and Delta, which hit earlier this year. The Rapid Response Team is ministering in four locations across Louisiana: Lake Charles, DeQuincy, DeRidder, and Jennings. After Hurricane Sally, the team was also deployed in Foley, Alabama, another state where Zeta wreaked havoc.

Partnering with Samaritan’s Purse, a ministry that helps with the cleanup process, the Rapid Response Team is checking on residents and offering a listening ear. During the hurricane season, they’ve seen many place their faith in Someone beyond what this world has to offer—Christ.

As communities rebuild in the days ahead, they’ll continue to serve those recovering from this year’s hurricanes.

Please be in prayer for everyone affected by these storms.



By Monica Kirtz
Mitchell County

2020 has certainly been a different and challenging year, but that is not the reason for this article. Over the past several years, my heart has been heavy over our celebration of CHRISTmas. As we all know, it has become about anything and everything other than JESUS and His birthday. Personally, I have struggled with what it would “look like” to focus more on Him during this season. This is not a condemnation of family traditions or gifts or activities...but a call to truly celebrate CHRIST. As I have been praying about this and asking GOD what He wants me to do and how to do it, I heard a recent episode of Focus on the Family. The speaker mentioned how birthdays celebrate people...so CHRISTmas should celebrate JESUS. That spoke directly to my heart and gave me the answer I was looking for...this is a real need, and The LORD had spoken to this woman as well. She said her family still has gifts and fun and also, they have a birthday party for JESUS. Many of you may already do this, but if you don’t, let me encourage you to try it!

As I was pondering all of this, one of my piano students, who is only 7 years old, said something remarkable! We were talking about CHRISTmas being a celebration of the birth of JESUS. She said we should get a balloon and release it into the sky...and even had the idea of tying a note to it!

Here are several suggestions to celebrate the true meaning of CHRISTmas:

- Plan a birthday celebration for JESUS. Be creative. Ask The LORD to guide you and give you ideas. Great memories will be created and passed down to children. They will never forget it!

- Make your own CHRISTmas gift tags that say, “Please accept this gift in honor of JESUS’ birthday.”

- Give money to the Gideons in honor of JESUS’ birthday. They have a “Happy Birthday, JESUS” celebration every year and place Bibles in many locations. This is a wonderful way to spread The Gospel! Start collecting change in a jar all through the year and use the money to purchase Bibles. The Bibles only cost \$5 each. A jar full of change can purchase a lot of Bibles for the glory of The LORD!

- Tie notes to balloons and release them on CHRISTmas day or during the week of CHRISTmas.

- Make cards for residents in nursing homes or rest homes or for prison inmates.

- Give a gift to someone who cannot give you one in return.

- Find a needy family and do something special for them. For example, give them a gift card, take groceries to them, or meet a need. JESUS said in Matthew 25 that when we are kind to others, it is as if we are doing it to Him!

Let’s make CHRISTmas 2020 a true celebration of the birth of CHRIST. Put Him first in your home and your heart. Enjoy time with family and friends. May this be an extra special CHRISTmas!

Mrs. Monica Henley-Kritz is County Coordinator for the National Day of Prayer Associational Prayer Coordinator Monica is a member of Crabtree Chapel Baptist Church, where Jason is the pastor.



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The Wonder of Christmas

By Dan Qurollo
Burke County



Without a doubt, 2020 has been a whirlwind of a year we will most likely not soon forget. Amid all the fear and uncertainty, it is easy to lose our focus on Christ and place it on that which has no eternal value. Added to the craziness of the year, this time of year is often filled with incredible pressure, much of which is self-inflicted. Although many view this time of year with frustration and panic over all that is expected of them, believers are to be governed by a much different perspective.

That perspective centers on a baby born to a young, unexpected Jewish girl who was betrothed to a man who loved her dearly. When Mary first received the news, she was puzzled as to how this was going to be fulfilled. The angel explained to her, *"The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God"* (Luke 1:35) and was reminded, *"For with God nothing shall be impossible"* (Luke 1:37). She was filled with excitement and wonder as she ran to tell her cousin Elisabeth what was about to transpire. Her song of praise recorded in Luke 1:46-55 is worthy of careful study.

Though we often think about how unexpected our year has been, the events surrounding the birth of Jesus were most likely not what neither Mary nor Joseph anticipated. She and Joseph were forced to travel to Bethlehem to pay a tax. When they arrived, they were unable to find a room in the inn and were forced instead to lie with the animals. It was that night in those conditions that the very Son of God entered into this world. What a truth to ponder!

After the shepherds came and witnessed that which they had been told, they immediately began telling all who would listen to that which they had seen. I have always been intrigued by the statement that is contained in Luke 2:19 which states, *"But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart."* I have often wondered what she thought.

Find some time this Christmas season to get away from the busyness of life and ponder the events we are celebrating at Christmas. It is truly an amazing reality to consider that God took on human flesh to pay the price for my sins. Clearly, it is worth pondering, and it demands our focus.

Pastor Dan Qurollo is pastor Morganton Baptist Church. Check us out on our website www.morgantonbaptist.net or find us on Facebook and YouTube.

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Read Romans 10-5-11

By John McCoury
Roan Mountain, Tennessee

That is the clearest statement in the Word of God on how to be saved. Paul makes it very simple. He says that it begins with the confession of the mouth: Jesus is Lord. Don't twist those words to mean that you have to stand up in public somewhere and announce that you believe Jesus is Lord before you are saved. Paul does not mean it that way, although it does not exclude that. He means that the mouth is the symbol of the conscious acknowledgment to ourselves of what we believe. It means that we have come to the place where we recognize that Jesus has the right to lordship in our lives. Before this point, we have been the lord of our lives, and we have run our own affairs. We have decided we have the right to make our own decisions according to what we want. But there comes a time, as God's Spirit works in us, that we see the reality of life as God has made it to be, and we realize Jesus is Lord.

He is Lord of our past, to forgive us of our sins; He is Lord of our present, to dwell within us, and to guide and direct and control every area of our life; He is Lord of our future, to lead us into glory at last; He is Lord of life, Lord of death, He is Lord over all things. He is in control of history. He is running all human events. He stands at the end of every path on which men go, and He is the ultimate one we all must reckon with. That is why Peter says in Acts 4:12: "Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

You cannot read the book of Acts without recognizing that the basic creed of the early Christians was: Jesus is Lord. These are days when you hear a lot about mantras, words that you are supposed to repeat when you meditate. I suggest you adopt this as a mantra: Jesus is Lord. Say it repeatedly, wherever you are, to remind yourself of this great truth. When Peter stood up to speak on the day of Pentecost, this was his theme, Jesus is Lord.

Paul tells us here that Jesus is Lord, and when God has led you to the place where you are ready to say to yourself, Jesus is my Lord, He then acts conclusively. Through that confession God does something. No man can do it, but God can. He immediately brings about all that is wrapped up in this word, saved. Your sins are forgiven. God imparts to you a standing of righteous worth in His sight. He gives you the Holy Spirit to live within you. He makes you a child in his family. He gives you inheritance for eternity. You are joined to the body of Christ as members of the family of God. You are given Jesus himself to live within you, and you will live a life entirely different than you lived before. That is what happens when you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead. Father, I am grateful for these clear words from Paul. Today I reaffirm my confession that Jesus is Lord.

Is our verbal confession congruent with our acceptance of Jesus as Lord? Do we need to review the radical implications of our inheritance as Christ's disciples? Is Jesus in reality Lord of our body, soul, and spirit?

John McCoury is pastor of Evergreen church in Roan Mountain, Tennessee and also chaplain at Roan Highlands Nursing Center.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Matthew 2:1-12



Bcps Four-Year Cohort Graduation Rate Hits 91.7 Percent

By Cheryl Shuffler
Burke County



Burke County Public Schools in 2020 had its highest graduation rate in 10 years. The district's four-year cohort graduation rate for the class of 2020 is 91.7%, up 2 percentage points from 2019, and up 6.8 percentage points from a district low in 2012. The average graduation rate for the state is 87.6 in 2020. All four traditional Burke County Public Schools high schools had graduation rates above the state level, and Burke Middle College once again had a 100% graduation rate. The Burke high school rates are as follows:

- 100% Burke Middle College
- 96.1% East Burke High School
- 94.1% Draughn High School
- 92% Patton High School
- 90.4% Freedom High School
- 76.8% Hallyburton Academy

Burke County Public School Superintendent Dr. Larry Putnam attributes several factors to the district's steady rise in graduation rates over the past four years. He said, "We know that student attendance, student engagement, family engagement, and economics are all factors in a student's success in school and achieving the ultimate goal of graduation and receiving that all-important high school diploma. Student-teacher relationships and school administrators also play an important role in student success. In Burke County Public Schools we have taken targeted steps over the past few years to do more to keep students in school. This includes adding Student Services Director Dr. Mike Swan to focus on student needs. Our counselors and principals are actively involved in intervention measures. We also have added various programs over the years so students can find courses they are interested in to keep them engaged. Another success has been our GEAR UP grant program for middle and high schoolers to see that not only is high school graduation attainable, but so is college. While schools do their part to help get students graduated, parents can help, too. Studies show that simple activities such as reading together at home and having meals together at the supper table factor into a student staying in school and ultimately graduating. While we recognize there is still work to do, I am very proud of our hard-working students and staff for making graduation a priority and getting our graduation rate over 90 percent."



Cheryl Shuffler is the Public Relations Officer for the Burke County Public School System.



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Crossword

Crossword 261 and Solution
ACROSS

1 Israel, who pursued ____ of righteousness (1,3) (Rom 9:31)
5 Therefore, get rid of all ____ filth and the evil (James 1:21)
9 God is ____ to make all grace abound to you (2 Cor 9:8)
13 A deceptive manoeuvre (especially to avoid capture) (Josh 9:3-4)
14 you must cancel any debt your brother ____ you (Deut 15:3)
15 this message will bring ____ terror (Isa 28:19)
16 he entered the temple ____ and began driving out those who were (Luke 19:45)
17 The body is a ____, though it is made up of many parts (1 Cor 12:12)
18 Sarah's Egyptian handmaid (Gen 25:12)
19 Three times I was ____ with rods (2 Cor 11:25)
21 Bel bows down, ____ stoops low; their idols (Isa 46:1)
23 member of the first family of the Bible
24 And he ____ in his right hand seven stars (Rev 1:16)
25 After them, seven other heads of grain ____ thin and scorched (Gen 41:6)
27 No one can deliver out of my hand when I act, who can ____ it? (Isa 43:13)
31 That which groweth of ____ own accord of thy harvest (Lev 25:5) KJV
32 also, that women ____ themselves in modest apparel (1 Tim 2:9)
33 will men take ____ of it to hang any vessel thereon? (1,3) (Ezek 15:3) KJV
36 ____ put forth his left hand, and took the dagger (Judg 3:21) KJV
40 and drew the ____ to land full of great fishes (John 21:11)
41 praise him with the ____ and flute (Ps 150:4)
44 Iron is taken from the earth, and copper is smelted from ____ (Job 28:2)
45 If you really ____ me, you would know my Father as well (John 14:7)
47 Jesus was led by the Spirit ____ the desert to be tempted (Matt 4:1-2)
48 The king got up in ____ (1,4) (Est 7:7)
50 son of Noah (Gen 6:10)
52 for out of that well they ____ the flocks (Gen 29:2)
54 He will deliver us from the ____ when he invades our land (Mic 5:6)
59 a quarter of a ____ of seed pods for five shekels (2 Kings 6:25)
60 to see if there are any ____ understand, any who seek God (Ps 14:2)

61 keep away from every brother who is ____ (2 Thess 3:6)
62 and singers joined in ____, as with one voice (2 Chron 5:13)
66 a third of a shekel for sharpening ____ and axes (1 Sam 13:21)
68 I will make thee ruler ____ many things (Matt 25:23) KJV
70 testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in ____ (Acts 23:11)
71 loose the chains of injustice and ____ the cords (Isa 58:6)
72 so is good ____ from a far country (Prov 25:25)
73 To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the ____ of life (Rev 2:7)
74 ____ there be debates, envyings (2 Cor 12:20) KJV
75 But neither so did their witness ____ together (Mark 14:59)
76 A large ____ of pigs was feeding on the nearby (Mark 5:11-12)

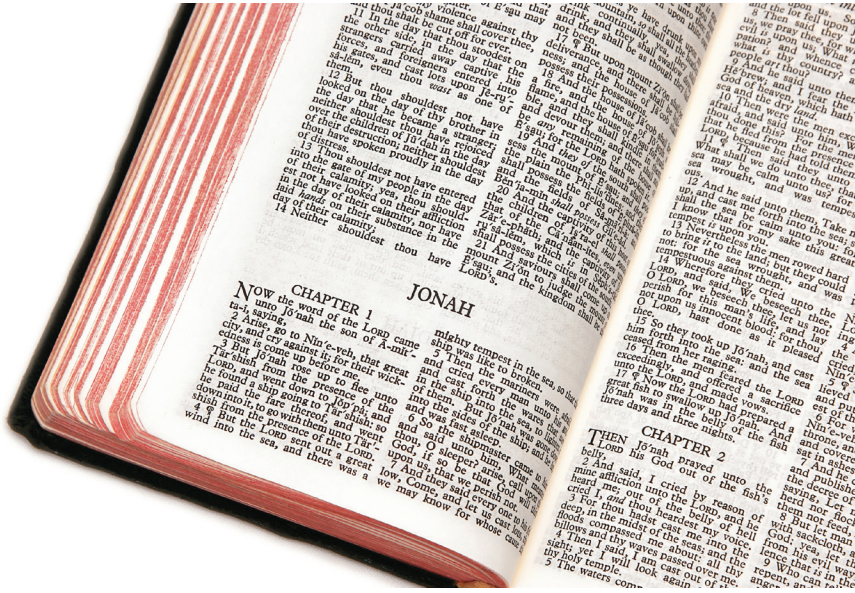
DOWN
1 ____ and Dumah, and Eshean (Joshua 15:52)
2 See if you can ____ him into showing you the secret (Judg 16:5)
3 the throne there was what looked like ____ of glass (1,3) (Rev 4:6)
4 you say, 'It will be fair ____, for the sky is red (Matt 16:2)
5 they will tear down your ____ and destroy your lofty shrines (Ezek 16:39)
6 and begat a son in his ____ likeness, after his image (Gen 5:3)
7 Examine me, O LORD, and prove me; try my ____ and my heart (Ps 26:2) KJV
8 there is only ____ between me and death (1,4) (1 Sam 20:3)
9 he warmeth himself, and saith, ____, I am warm (Isaiah 44:16) KJV
10 Take ye wives, and ____ sons and daughters (Jer 29:6) KJV
11 Let love and faithfulness never ____ you; bind them around your (Prov 3:3)
12 Surely I have acted like a fool and have ____ greatly (1 Sam 26:21)
15 But God will ____ them with arrows (Ps 64:7)
20 The wicked man ____ deceptive wages (Prov 11:18)
22 He will ____ those wretches to a wretched end (Matt 21:41)
26 Of what ____ is money in the hand of a fool (Prov 17:16)
27 Mordecai the Jew was second in ____ to King Xerxes (Est 10:3)
28 garden (Gen 2:15)
29 I cast my ____ against them (Acts 26:10)
30 to settle down and ____ the bread they eat (II Th 3:12)
34 digs a hole and scoops it out falls into the ____ he has made (Ps 7:15-16)



35 Am ____ trying to win the approval of men, or of God? (1,3) (Gal 1:10)
37 as small as the ____ frost on the ground (Ex 16:14) KJV
38 I particularly ____ you to pray so that I may be restored to you (Heb 13:19)
39 He was a prophet, powerful in word and ____ before God (Luke 24:19)
42 encourage the ____, help the weak, be patient with everyone (1 Thess 5:14)
43 that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or ____ (Rev 20:2)
46 Awake, O Lord ____ do you sleep? (Ps 44:23)
49 He saved us through the washing of ____ and renewal (Titus 3:5)
51 angels hastened Lot, saying, ____, take thy wife (Gen 19:15) (KJV)
53 ____ on him who is lax in doing the LORD's work (1,5) (Jer 48:10)
54 What about this ____ crime that was committed (Judg 20:12)
55 His face ____ like the sun, and

his clothes became as white (Matt 17:2)
56 appointed priests from all ____ of people (1 Kings 12:31)
57 her maidens walked ____ by the river's side (Exodus 2:5)
58 Moses replied, "I will ____ appear before you again" (Ex 10:29)
63 the ____ has faded and has not spread in the skin (Lev 13:6)
64 Moses said to Aaron, "Take a jar and put an ____ of manna in it (Ex 16:33)
65 I have ____ to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? (Matt 3:14) KJV
67 a man clothed in linen who had a writing ____ at his side (Ezek 9:2)
69 bring two male lambs and one ____ lamb a year old (Lev 14:10)

Solution on page 14



One of the Biggest Mistakes Many Christians Will Make This Christmas Season

By Shawn Thomas
Angleton, Texas

I Peter 4:17 says “*For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God.*” Scripture says we need to live — even in this Christmas season — like people who know they are accountable to God. The “judgment” that we will face as believers is not a judgment of condemnation — Romans 8:1 says “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*” If you really know the Lord, you are saved and secure. Nothing can change that. But Peter says here that God will allow judgments to come here on earth to purify His people and help us to get serious about Him.

Peter knew His Old Testament, and he knew that in Ezekiel 9, God commanded a judgment to come upon the land — but He commanded for it to begin in HIS Temple, with HIS people — Judgment would begin with HIS PEOPLE FIRST! Peter also knew that the Old Testament closes with the Book of Malachi, which prophesies the coming of the Lord. People may have thought, “Oh, the Lord is coming; that’s good!” But Malachi says in 3:2 “*But who may abide the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire.*” (That verse put to music in Handel’s “Messiah” is powerful!) You might think that if a “Day of the Lord” was coming that it would be good; but Malachi says He is coming to judge and to purify His people.

So Peter says Judgment will begin with the household of God; with HIS people — and today that means US! We need to realize that we are accountable to God and live in the light of that reality.

Years ago, the United States House of Representatives used to meet in Statuary Hall. In that Hall, there was a sculpture which Carlo Franzoni crafted in 1810, depicting Clio, the Muse of History, riding the winged Car of History, keeping notes in her book. Historian David McCullough writes that Clio was there to remind our representatives “that their words and actions would face the judgment of history ...”. (Brave Companions, McCullough, p. 232)

We know that there is no Clio, “goddess of history,” but we do know that there IS a real God, who is indeed watching over us, and who is indeed recording everything that we think, say, and do and that we are accountable to Him. And He is not content for us to remain as we are. Yes, Jesus takes us as we are — but He does not LEAVE us as we are. His purpose is to purify us as His people, to cleanse sinful habits out of our lives; to make us more like Him, and to prepare us to be with Him in heaven forever.

One of the biggest mistakes we can make as Christians this Christmas season is to ignore this, and think that we are here just to “eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die” like the rest of the world does. That’s not God’s purpose for us. He will allow, and even cause, trials and judgments to come into our lives to cleanse and purify us as His people. And we are foolish if we just keep living our lives as if we are not accountable to Him.

Now I do believe that we can and should celebrate Christmas, and other holidays. There are numerous examples in scripture of God’s people celebrating with great feasts and presents before the Lord. That is a good thing! But just as I Thesalonians says of God’s people that “we do not GRIEVE like those who have no hope,” neither we CELEBRATE like those who have no hope either.

— Every day we enjoy in December, let’s remember that we are one day closer to enjoying the day of eternity with God in glory.

— At every party and get together, we should think of those around us who are lost, and who need our witness.

— With every dollar we spend — and it’s great to spend money on gifts and celebrations— but let’s also balance that, by giving MORE to kingdom causes which will last for eternity than we do on things that will perish with the season.

Our accountability to God should affect the way we spend our money this Christmas season. God will hold us accountable for how we have used the money He has entrusted to us to advance His kingdom. That ought to really sober some of us. God has blessed us so much — but what are we giving back? Are we even returning to Him the 10% minimum He asks as a tithe? And with all, He has blessed us with, as the richest people on earth, are we giving above and beyond that 10% to support His Kingdom work where we live, as well as to the poor, and our worldwide mission work?

Some of us might tend to look at a mission offering and say, “Man I just don’t know if I can give \$77 to support a missionary for half a day!” But at the same time, many of us will think nothing about turning around and spending \$77 on a Christmas tree that in 3 weeks will burn up in a flash and be gone forever!

And that’s just an example. We need to live our whole lives this Christmas season, in the light of God’s judgment; in the light of eternity. It should affect the way we spend, the way we give, the way we talk, the way we pray, the way we party, the way we spend our time, the way we treat people — the way we do everything we do. The true God is history is watching over us, and He is recording everything we do. And we are accountable to Him for it.

One of the worst things a Christian can do this Christmas season is to just run through this season without giving thought to God and eternity. His word says “For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God.” This reminds us that even during this Christmas season — and truly, ESPECIALLY in this Christmas season — you are always accountable to Him!

Shawn Thomas is a Southern Baptist pastor for almost 35 years, I currently serve as Senior Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Angleton, Texas.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. Luke 2:8



ciples. Like those followers of Jesus who had walked and talked with Christ after his resurrection, they too had a story to share. One that was so inexplicable, so earth-shattering that they would live the rest of their lives pursuing the mission to share it with all that would hear, even unto the point of death. It was who they were. As we go forward in this holiday season, let us come together as a family, and may the hope of Christ, and Christmas be with you, until the end of time. May it someday become who you are as well. Thanks be to God.

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