



Tim’s Treasures

A Season of Hope
By Tim Tron
Burke County

“For God hath not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, ...” – 2 Timothy 1:7

Kevin was early for his shift at the big box store Thursday morning. His wife, Janelle, of just five years, had made him a surprise breakfast in bed. It wasn’t his birthday, nor any other reason to celebrate other than that she was like that – always finding ways to make his seemingly mundane life joyful. She planted a kiss on him before he walked out the door, handing him his lunch bag and pressing a little trinket into his hand. After walking back to the loading dock where the semi-trucks were waiting to be relieved of their cargo, he took out the little gold chain that contained a heart-shaped locket. As he started to open the golden keepsake, a forklift operator and four other men walked past him into the rear of the nearest trailer and began to unload pallets of groceries. Kevin began walking and joined them, taking his place deep inside the dimly lit cavern of the cargo container.

He started to put the surprise back in his pocket when the sound of rushing wind came from above. Before he could look up, the weight of an entire pallet of flour and oil, nearly a ton, came crashing down upon his body. There was nothing left, no time to react. There was no time to fear death, only an instinctual bracing against an onslaught that no human should survive.

“That thing that is unknown yet known to be, will always be more or less formidable.”

Crushed beneath the massive weight, unable to breathe, the youthful life began to slowly ebb from his being. As the soul clung to the last vestiges of existence, the light within, that lifeform known as the spirit, no longer found reason to remain. As one preparing for a journey to a new home, the floors were septic, the bed was made, and the last details finalized as the door began to be closed one last time. But, in a reprieve of his terrestrial life, the door did not shut. Minutes later, the oppressive mass was slowly lifted. Breath, once obliterated by that immense weight, began releasing its deadly grip. While the spirit returned to his soul, the shelves made barren would take time to restock. A clean slate had been granted. It was now up to him to cast out all life’s burdens and anxieties – to accept his fate and testimony as unique as his name. The name that is only known by him and God. “And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone, a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it.”

The chopper landed in the parking lot of the store. Crowds of onlookers gathered, hoping to catch a glimpse of the reason for the unusual sight. The Flight EMTs raced from beneath the spinning blades, stretcher between them, as they



rushed to the victim. Loading him, they returned almost as quickly as they had left, and once in the transport, it lifted off, headed for Charlotte. Gordon, the lead technician, began checking vitals with his teammate, Jackson, a routine they knew by heart. They were seasoned paramedics, having seen almost anything and everything in their long careers. The patient was intubated, an IV was inserted, pain meds were administered, and the neck brace was secured. Once stabilized, they had a few minutes to reflect as the chopper flew at breakneck speed for the best trauma unit in North Carolina.

“This one didn’t look good,” Gordon thought to himself. He’d seen all sorts of accidents where victims had been crushed in automobile accidents and construction sites, but this was a first. The patient didn’t have any contact information when they picked him up, so for now, they had nicknamed him, Asheville. Gordon knew from the vitals when a patient probably would or would not make it - he had somber doubts about the future for this one. If Asheville made it, he definitely would be a vegetable for life. The pressure on the young man’s body had been so extreme his eyes had been nearly pushed out of his skull, and blood had been pushed through his sweat glands. Gordon shook his head no as he looked over the body of Asheville at Jackson, who was seated opposite him. They tried not to get their hopes up. Early on, they had learned this mistake the hard way.

As the chopper flew intensely toward the big city, Gordon happened to look down at the side of the patient. Though they had secured him tightly to the stretcher, he had noticed that the young man cradled something in his still-clutched hand. Leaning in to get a better look, the aircraft hit a small air pocket, and the cabin frame bounced. Asheville’s hand opened slightly as Gordon saw a small golden chain begin to slip from the grasp. Not wanting to lose a patient’s belongings, Gordon gently pulled the locket from his unconscious fingers. He held it up, showing Jackson, then gently opened the locket. Inside was a tiny picture of a beautiful young woman on one side and a cross on the opposite. Underneath the cross was a tiny engraving that read, “Love is the Greatest Commandment, Love, Janelle.” Although he always tried to maintain a breadth of separation between him and their patients, this one suddenly found a tight spot in his throat. He looked over at Jackson who by now realized something was up with his buddy. Jackson shrugged his shoulders, saying in the headset, “What’s up?” Gordon gently lifted the chain and locket over to Jackson, who did the same, opening the tiny gift and revealing the message and image inside. He then gently handed it back to Gordon. Both seasoned First Responders sat in silence, each looking but not looking at one another.

“Damn it,” Gordon spoke under his breath, looking down at his flight boots, trying to regain his composure. When he could finally look up, he noticed Jackson doing the same. They sat in silence, periodically checking Asheville’s vitals as they prepared for their approach to Atrium Hospital, neither wanting to talk about

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What We Believe

Here are some of the essential elements of our faith at the Blue Ridge Christian News:

God

God is the Creator and Ruler of the universe. He has existed eternally in three persons and chooses to manifest Himself in these three ways: as God the Father, as God the Son, and as God the Holy Spirit. These three are co-equal and are one God. (Genesis 1:1, 26-27; 3:22; Psalm 90:2; Matthew 28:19; 1 Peter 1:2; and 2 Corinthians 13:14)

Jesus

Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, who is fully God and fully human in His incarnation. He lived a sinless human life and offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of all humanity by dying on a cross. He arose from the dead after three days to demonstrate His power over sin and death. He ascended to heaven and will return again to reign as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. (Matthew 1:22-23; Isaiah 9:6; John 1:1-5; 14:10-30; Hebrews 4:14-15; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Romans 1:3-4; Acts 1:9-11; 1 Timothy 6:14-15; Titus 2:13)

The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the very Spirit of God, fully divine, manifested in the life of every believer from the moment of salvation. He is equal with the Father and the Son as God. He is present in the world to make men aware of their need for Jesus Christ. He provides the Christian with power for living, understanding of spiritual truth, and guidance in doing what is right. The Christian seeks to live under His daily control. (2 Corinthians 3:17; John 16:7-13; 14:16-17; Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 2:12; 3:16; Ephesians 1:13; Galatians 5:25; Ephesians 5:18)

The Bible

The Bible is the divinely inspired, authoritative, infallible, living and active Word of God to all men. It was written by human authors under the supernatural guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the ultimate source of truth for Christian beliefs and living. In it we find a guideline for right relationship with God and God's creation, and a blueprint for personal, emotional, and spiritual growth. (2 Timothy 1:13; 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:2-21; Psalm 119:105, 160; 12:6; Proverbs 30:5)

Humanity

Humanity is designed and made by God in His image. We have been created as cognitive, moral, ethical, and physical beings and have been equipped by God for both relationship with Him and with one another. Both male and female are gifted by the Creator with characteristics which equip them for the purpose for which they have been created: relationship, dominion, and responsibility. Although God designed us to have fellowship with Him, we became alienated from God through disobedience. As a result, all human beings are born with a sinful nature and choose to sin against God. We are incapable of regaining a right relationship with God through our own efforts. (Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8:3-6; Isaiah 53:6; 59:1-2; Romans 3:23; 5:22; Colossians 1:21; 2 Corinthians 5:17)

Eternity & Eternal Security

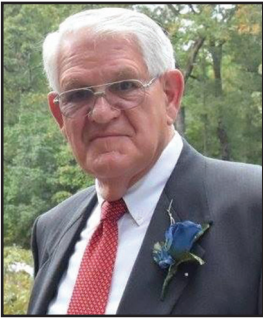
Our soul, the essence of our being, was created by God to exist forever. That forever is spent in one of two places: eternally present and in union with God because of His forgiveness and salvation or eternally separated from God because of sin and unbelief. At the moment that our physical body dies, those who are saved are immediately taken to heaven. Those who have rejected God's gift of salvation will spend eternity separated from God in hell. Because God gives man eternal life through Jesus Christ, the believer is secure in that salvation for eternity. Salvation is maintained by the grace and power of God, not by the self-effort of the Christian. It is the grace and eternal power of God that gives this security. (John 3:16; 5:11-13, 10:29; 1 John 2:25; Romans 6:23; Revelation 20:15; 2 Timothy 1:12; Hebrews 7:25; 10:10-14; 1 Peter 1:3-5)

Salvation

Salvation is God's gift of redemption and reconciliation to Himself and is offered freely to all who accept, by faith alone, Jesus Christ as God's only son and receive Him as Lord and Savior. We can never make up for our sin with self-improvement or good works. It is only by trusting in Jesus Christ as God's offer of forgiveness that you can be saved from sin's penalty. Eternal life begins the moment you receive Jesus Christ into your life by faith. (Romans 5:1; 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-9; John 1:12; 14:6; Titus 3:5; Galatians 3:26)

Life Lessons

By Doug Harrell
Mitchell County



As I sit down to write this January 2024 Life Lessons it is a few days before Christmas and I am thinking about the importance of the birth of Christ in our lives. His birth, death on the cross, and resurrection from the grave gave us the ability to face a new life like a new year gives us the ability to face a new year. The only difference is that He gives us a clean slate to start anew, where here on earth we must carry the burdens of the past year with us into the New Year. If we truly have Him at our side we can start anew anytime but the beginning of a new year can allow us to press restart. The foremost goal for most of us is to achieve a greater sense of happiness and peace in our lives each year. I recently wrote a daily devotion that I would like to plug in here for each of us to think about as we approach January 1, 2024.

“When you stop and really think about what you want in life I would guess that the underlying desire is to be happy. We desire joy to be the dominant theme in our lives. So many times we search for this happiness and joy in things of this world. The earthly pleasures that can be found around us, the problem is that these things rarely, if ever, bring us lasting joy.

The only true joy we ever find is between the covers of the world's most popular book, the Bible! We tend to think of the Bible as a book of rules and regulations, things that cause us to fear and worry, not necessarily bring us joy. The amazing thing is that though the Bible does contain laws and rules by which we are to live our lives, the most frequent command in the Bible is to be happy! That may surprise some of you but when you study what God is telling us it is that He wants us to have happiness here on this earth!

Think about the word “rejoice”, think about the meaning of that word! The word rejoice is found 282 times in the Bible. When you add the fear nots and the be not afraid’s the number is amazing!

“Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice.” Philippians 4:4 KJV
“Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 KJV

True happiness comes when we truly learn to give thanks in all situations. To understand that even though we might be struggling with events around us, through Jesus we can still find joy eternal.

“Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.” Philippians 4:11-13 KJV

Even in the depths of despair, we can find comfort if we are truly a child of the most high God, our Abba Father. Learning to hold on to this love in the storms of life makes all the difference in our lives now and forever.

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28 KJV

Today understand that we obey and honor the words of our Father because He loves us and wants us to be happy. We obey because we love, not fear Him. Take these words to heart as you move forward today. Make a conscious decision to be happy, not downtrodden.

As we move into the new year, understand that the directions God lays out for each of us are there to enable us to have the joy and peace that only He can provide. My prayer for each of us is that we claim a new start with the start of a new year. Wishing each of you a blessed and Happy New Year.

Doug Harrell is a life-long resident of Mitchell County, Owner of Harrell Hill Farms, Inc, a member of Bear Creek Baptist Church.

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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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GCBC Kids 5:30 PM
Wednesday Service 7:00 PM
Youth 7:00 PM
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828-584-8212

Pastor Steve Bietz

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

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828-765-0660
altapassbaptistchurch@ccvn.com
www.altapassbaptistchurch.org

Dr. Marcus R. Benfield
Rev. Tony Lominac - Associate Pastor

Sunday School - 10:00am
Worship - 11:00am
Sunday Evening - 6:00pm
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

Plumtree 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 10:30 am
Life Groups Tuesday-Thursday evenings, 7:00 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 6:00 pm
"Love All, Reach All, Teach All, Send All"

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

Pastor - Phillip Greene

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828-437-2357
www.burkemontbaptist.org

Sr. Pastor - Dr. Luke Lane

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8:30a - Early Worship
9:45a - Sunday School
11:00a - Worship
Wednesday Services
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828-765-9411
www.sprucepinefbc.com
www.spfbc.blogspot.com

Dr. Rocky Branch
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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!

Pine Branch Baptist Church
48 Church Road
Spruce Pine, NC 28777
Phone: (828) 765-9101
www.pinebranchbaptist.org
Email: info@pinebranchbaptist.org

Rev. Bruce Cannon, Interim Pastor

Sunday School • 9:45-10:45am
Worship Service • 11:00am
Sunday Evening • 6:30pm
Wednesday Evening • 6:30pm
Growing Together in Christ

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
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Wednesday Evening Service 7:00 PM
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Spruce Pine United Methodist Church
11090 Hwy. 226 South
Spruce Pine, NC 28777
sprucepineumc@gmail.com
828-765-7446

Pastor Richard Schilling

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

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

Interim Pastor Blake Glenn

Sunday School 9:00 AM
Worship Service 10:00 AM
Discipleship 6:00 PM
Evening Worship 6:00 PM
Wednesday Worship 6:30 PM
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Landis Orthodox Presbyterian Church
4975 US 221
Marion NC 28972
(828)-756-7470
www.landischurch.org

Elder Mike Cloy
opcmickecloy@gmail.com

Sunday School 10:00 AM
Worship Service 11:00 AM
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the young man that lay before them. A young man who would never be the same if he lived at all.

Once the tracks of the Life Flight landed on the roof of the hospital, Gordon and Jackson had the still-unconscious Asheville unloaded and rolling to the ER. There, they were met with a trauma team already prepped and ready to perform surgery as needed. Gordon lingered as Jackson filled out the usual paperwork before leaving. The ER team confirmed Gordon’s fears, brain trauma likely with definite signs of brain bleed. “This one will be lucky to survive the night. If he did,” the doctor leading the team said, “He’ll be comatose the rest of his life.” They immediately began performing the scans needed to determine how to start the operations to save Asheville’s life if it were to be.

“Doctor,” a nurse called, “the family is here.”

“Bring them in.”

From all his time in the paramedic corps, Gordon had seen all kinds of despondent family members wailing and weeping at the sight of their loved ones. But this one hit him harder than usual. The beautiful blonde, the one in the image of the locket, came around the corner screaming, barely able to stand, being supported by two older women. Her attractive form was now marred with uncontrollable crying, the mascara stains running down her flushed cheeks. He knew this had to be Janelle. He turned to leave but watched out of the corner of his eye as the doctor and his team tried to comfort the distraught woman. “Ma’am,” the ER doctor spoke calmly and assuredly to the young wife, “I’m not going to give you any false hopes. He will likely be a vegetable for the rest of his life. I can tell you right now he’s got all the signs of a brain bleed. If he lives, he will never be the same.” The young woman collapsed on the floor as the medical team began to try to revive her ailing, slender frame.

“This will be another one that’ll be hard to forget,” he told Jackson as they headed out on another call. Jackson nodded, looking away as they ran toward the waiting bird. The chopper lifted off, gaining altitude as Gordon looked out the side window as the roof of Atrium disappeared from view, and beneath it, that family mourning the pain of their beloved. “Did he even have time to fear the death that awaited him,” Gordon thought to himself, “Or did he realize it and know that this was the end? Was he prepared?” Gordon watched the city pass below as they raced to the next accident, and one last thought came to mind. “Am I ready, and will I fear it when death comes?”

Two days later, Gordon and Jackson were working the day shift when they were called for a Life Flight back to Atrium. “Hey, you wanna check and see if Asheville made it,” he called to Jackson as they loaded the next patient into the chopper. “Sure, I’m curious, but dude, don’t get your hopes up,” Jackson responded. Gordon nodded in agreement.

Gordon found it hard to sleep the night after they had dropped off Asheville. In the scene of the young woman falling to the floor, all hope seemed to have left her body. The opposite of what the doctor had been trying to convey. But then again, what was hope? He had pulled his old college Bible off the shelf, turning to Romans 8:28, and read, “*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.*” Then he found a bookmarked page and turned to it, reading, “*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment.*” It was then Gordon realized how much he had forgotten to lean on God. There was a continual sense that the aircraft they flew in each day had a short life expectancy for its occupants, crew, and pilot. Then, the danger of entering disaster scenes. All of which required him to push away the thought of fear, but not in a healthy way. They were nothing more than self-imposed avoidance of the truth. After all these countless hours of rescuing others, he had almost lost what was most important: his relationship with God. That night, he prayed before slipping into bed, thanking God for his life and reminding him what it meant to cast out all fear with that perfect love.

After checking their patient into the ER, they checked the hospital patient registry. Sure enough, Asheville was listed in room 3153. “Hey, he’s still with us,” Gordon called across the room to Jackson.

“Who’s that?”

“Asheville, the man with the crush,” he mused at his teammate. It was a kind of trench humor that one had to adopt in their line of work. “

“Let’s go see him. We’ve got a break until 1500 hours.

“Cool, let’s go.”

Before entering the room, each man tried to mentally prepare himself for what they would see. They had already been pleasantly surprised to find the young man they thought would surely be dead to still be alive. This was just a bonus. No matter what state he was in, they would at least be able to see the family, if there was any, and give them their encouragement about him making it this far after what they had seen. Each man knew for sure that they would see either a comatose patient or, at best, a mentally impaired shell of a man.

Yet, Gordon and Jackson were unprepared for what awaited them in room 3153. As they entered, the talk in the room abated, leaving the door open for Gordon and Jackson to introduce themselves. As they did, Gordon’s eye caught the patient update board. Asheville’s real name was Kevin. He nodded at the update to Jackson, who likewise realized Asheville had a name. Feeling a little overwhelmed with the attention, Gordon shoved his hands into his pant pockets, a habit in times of stress. The moment he did, he felt the coolness of the chain against his right hand. Terror struck his heart. He realized he had never returned the precious keepsake to Asheville, who he now knew as Kevin. Not wanting to forget it, he quickly drew it out, keeping it in his closed fist until the time was right. But for the moment, his attention was drawn to what was before him.

There, sitting upright, alert, and talking to those family members gathered around him, was Kevin, their Asheville. Physically, he looked like he had been hit

by a Mack truck. His face told the story. The blood that had been pushed through the sweat glands had coagulated, making a freckled pattern around the black-and-blue eyes, still slightly swollen and bloodshot, with vast swaths of blood replacing the whites of his eyes from the intense pressure they had experienced. But what was even more amazing was that Kevin was conscious and aware of his surroundings.

“This kid should be dead,” Gordon thought inwardly. He had no more thought of the words when Kevin looked directly at him.

“Don’t I know you?”

“I doubt it,” Gordon replied, somewhat taken aback, “You weren’t in any condition to recognize me when we met a couple of days ago.” The others, including Kevin, chuckled at this.

About that time, a young woman walked into the room, followed by an older gentleman, “Probably her father,” Gordon contemplated. Gordon then realized she was the image in the trinket he still clutched in his hand. She was Janelle.

Gordon could feel the lump rising in his throat again as he fought it back down. “We came to see how Asheville, I mean Kevin, was doing. We were the first responders who airlifted him here last Thursday. He didn’t look too good back then.” Gordon looked at Jackson, who then continued, “We can honestly say we didn’t expect to find you looking quite,” he paused, “well, this good.” An older woman chimed in, “Praise God!”

Gordon then lifted the locket, “You almost lost this, which we meant to put in your personal belongings, but with all the chaos, we forgot.” He gently slipped it into the bandaged hand of the bedridden, bruised Kevin.

“What’s this,” he asked, looking back at Gordon.

“It was something you had in your hand at the time of the accident.”

Kevin looked at it with a question across his brow. “I don’t remember having this,” he said, then turned toward Janelle, who now stood at his bedside. She then softly picked it up from his open palm and, with tears in her eyes, opened it and showed him the image and engraved words inside, “Love is the Greatest Commandment, Love, Janelle,” and gently placed it around his neck.

“It was the last thing I gave to you on your way to work last Thursday,” and this, as she leaned in to kiss him on the cheek, as she whispered the words, “I love you more than you can ever know and ever forget.” Kevin wrapped his bandaged hands around the love of his life and held her tight.

There wasn’t a dry eye in the room. Gordon could feel the moisture on his cheeks as he looked toward Jackson, who was also fighting back his emotions. After they had shared their experience and thanked the family for allowing them to visit, the two men left the room. They walked in silence as they headed back to the helideck to catch the next flight. Each man thinking inwardly of what they had just seen and witnessed. There had been no brain bleed, no fractured skull, not one broken bone. It was Jackson who spoke first, “A damn miracle, that’s all I can say,” he paused, looking up from his boots into the eyes of Gordon. “You know what I mean.”


Gordon nodded. Words had not yet formed to match what his heart was saying. All Gordon could think was that there before them, lying in that hospital bed, was proof of something beyond this world, beyond the understanding of the most talented, intelligent doctors he knew. God was the only answer to what they had witnessed. He was real. He was there. It was the proof he didn’t need, but he welcomed it. He would never take for granted again those moments when he needed that support, that shoulder to lean on in times of trouble – for he was there with them, even now. Gordon didn’t say it, but he was certain that God was working in his life at that moment more than ever before.

“Endless must be our terror, until we come heart to heart with the fire –core of the universe, the first and last and the living one!”

Two men climbed into the waiting chopper to fly to another disaster, another life in the balance, but with something different in each of them – a hope for tomorrow, an awareness that they were not alone, that God was with them. They were forever changed.

Thanks be to God.

Timothy W. Tron lives in Collettsville, NC. with his family. He is currently the Systems Administrator for the Computer Science Department at App. State. Timothy is the former Director of the Trail of Faith in Valdese, where he still volunteers and helps with tours. He is the author of a new Christian series, “Children of the Light”, with the first book being, “Bruecke to Heaven”, revised as “Bridge to Heaven”, and his recent book, being the second, “The Light in the Darkness”. He is an active blogger, artist, and musician. Timothy also has a BSEE from UF, and is a Lay Speaker. He is currently acting as the Faculty/Staff Liaison for the Ratio Christi campus ministry at App. State. He can be reached at trontw@appstate.edu You can visit his website at <http://www.timothywtron.com/> or see more of his writings [HERE](#).



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By Terry Cheek Th.D.
McDowell County



By the Lord’s amazing Grace, we find ourselves at the beginning of another New Year! 2024 is in front of us and once again we are asking the question; what will I do with it? By the way, it’s a healthy question to ask. There is a lot to be said about making plans, commitments, promises, and even popular resolutions for the coming year. There is even more to say about keeping them. Keeping any plan, commitment, promise or resolution requires that we embrace with our heart what is necessary to fulfill the expectations placed upon our life. Let’s talk about that for a little while.

Every year we make promises with the fullest intention of keeping them. Maybe we’re going to drop a few pounds, or quit smoking, or get away from immorality, maybe we’re going to get back in church or quit drinking or doing drugs. Too often you keep falling short, year in and year out. With it comes the feeling of being a failure. You let yourself down, maybe even your family, friends, or spouse. Why? Why do you fail? I have the answer, I also have some words of encouragement for you, please keep reading!

First, understand that you do not have what it takes to overcome the pitfalls of life. The pitfalls of life come from sin and within each one of us is a sinful nature. Maybe you have never heard of that. Simply put we are born separated from God because of the sin of Adam and Eve. We are told in Romans 3:10 *“As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one.”* and again in Romans 3:23 *“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;”* we cannot within ourselves overcome the sin nature within us.


Second, there is a consequence or penalty that comes with sin. Every one of us is headed for this penalty. Notice with me Romans 6:23 *“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”* Sin has a death penalty. This death penalty is an eternal death, a death beyond our heartbeat. That isn’t very good news to begin a New Year with, is it? If we stopped right there we could find no hope and have no confidence moving into 2024, but the Bible continues so let’s continue in it! God has a gift. A payment for the penalty (consequence) of sin, a payment that doesn’t mean an eternal death. God offers eternal life as a substitute for eternal death.

Third, the eternal life that God offers was provided by Jesus Christ! Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. Romans 5:8 *“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* Commendeth is an old English word that simply means God shows or displays, in this case, His love. Even while we are living with a sinful nature embedded in our lives and having no hope, Jesus died for us! He did this to prevent you from dying an eternal death. All the pleasures you may find in sin; for example, indulging in drinking, drugs, immorality, greed, lying, and cheating. They are short-lived pleasure, short-lived because the end is death. It’s important to understand, that we are not sinners because we sin, we sin because we are sinners! Jesus is the salvation of sinners.


Fourth, how does Jesus remedy our sinful nature? I’m glad you asked! Your Bible tells you in Romans 10:9-10 *“That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. (10) For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”* Simply put, confess and believe! Confess that Jesus and only Jesus can save you. There is no other person who can take the place of Jesus Christ as your savior. You must be willing to confess that. To confess Jesus as your savior you must believe that God did raise Jesus from the dead. That’s right, it’s no fairy tale. Jesus’ resurrection is a reality you must accept by faith, then by that same faith confess Jesus as the only forgiveness of sin, your sin!


This miracle is called being born again! Having this new life in Jesus Christ gives you His presence daily. That’s right, Christ lives within you. That fact is the strength you need to fulfill your New Year’s resolutions. Whatever they may be with Jesus in your life they will be the right decisions made with the presence of godly strength and you will have the faith to let God lead you to success His way in 2024! Until we meet again in person or in print, may God bless you is my prayer.

Terry Cheek is the founder and broadcaster of The Inspiring Word media ministry. He and Lori are members of Blue Ridge Church of Marion N.C. You can contact Terry by email at theinspiringword@gmail.com.



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Perpetual Eternity – Heaven or Hell???

By Carol Wallace
Kingsport, Tennessee

The year 2024 sounded so futuristic when growing up in the 1960s! My husband, Larry, and I were joking about being born mid-century! We used to study history and refer to the mid-nineteenth century and now we refer to our history as children in the mid-twentieth century!

While turning the page on the perpetual desk calendar to begin a new year, it reminds me of the need to change Grandmother’s wooden perpetual calendar on the wall in her kitchen. Granddaddy made perpetual calendars in his woodshop, carefully cutting each square, and lettering each day of the month; adding changeable plaques for January through December; a beautiful piece of handwork! Changing the month, and moving numbers to correspond to the days of the month, makes one more acutely aware of how quickly time is passing. Another month, another season, another year. Time, precious time is passing. What am I doing with my time to glorify Jesus, to benefit others? My small perpetual desk calendar has scripture and/or an encouraging word or thought for the day. Turning these pages takes my mind in a more positive direction and less focus is given to the passage of time and a moment is taken to reflect on scripture and encouraging words.

Have you given thought to the word perpetual about where you will spend “perpetual eternity”? Perpetual – never ending or changing; endless, uninterrupted; irredeemable; eternal! Where will you spend perpetual eternity?

“For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Matthew 16:26)? Your soul is valuable, and Jesus desires that you be in perpetual eternity with Him. He has gone to prepare the place.

Most of us will not be accomplished enough to be written about in history. If we live seventy-plus years, and have children, grandchildren, and extended family, in one hundred years, our names will, most likely, never be mentioned. We will be living perpetually in heaven or hell and things on earth will be of no more consequence. Our material treasures will be of no significance. Do these thoughts sadden your heart? If you know Jesus, let us hope not!

The Bible tells us in Matthew 6:19-21 *“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through to steal; for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”*

If we want to obtain heavenly treasures, we must be about our Father’s business. Priority business is to accept His Son, Jesus, as Savior and Lord of our lives!

Jesus said to follow Him! If we dedicate our lives to following in Jesus’ footsteps, we can obtain heavenly treasures that no one can take away. *“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another; and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name.”* Malachi 3:16. God’s Word tells us there is a book of remembrance of those who respond to HIM; God’s record of our faith.

Doing excellent work and honorable deeds is not the way to heaven! Only faith in Jesus Christ saves our souls...by faith are you saved through grace...God’s grace! When we trust in Jesus, our heart desires to please Him in our daily walk, therefore, our heart treasures are heavenly-focused instead of earthly-bound. We may not be remembered on earth for long after we leave, but we will be known in heaven eternally. Our Savior has our name in the palm of His hand.

Hell is also perpetual! An eternal place of torment separated from God; perpetual darkness; ceaseless; constant. Think about what is in your future, is it perpetual heaven or perpetual hell? Today is the day of salvation; please do not delay. Put your faith in Jesus and accept his gift of grace through faith.

“While we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are TEMPORARY, but the things which are not seen are ETERNAL!” II Corinthians 4:18

Perpetual blessings to you!

My husband, Larry and I reside in Kingsport, TN and are members of Buffalo Ridge Baptist Church in Gray, TN. We grew up in Fall Branch, TN and were both saved at a young age. We have two children, Jonathan (Tammy), and Kala and one grandson, Gaike. I am a retired Administrative Assistant and have enjoyed serving in various Children and Ladies Ministries through the years.



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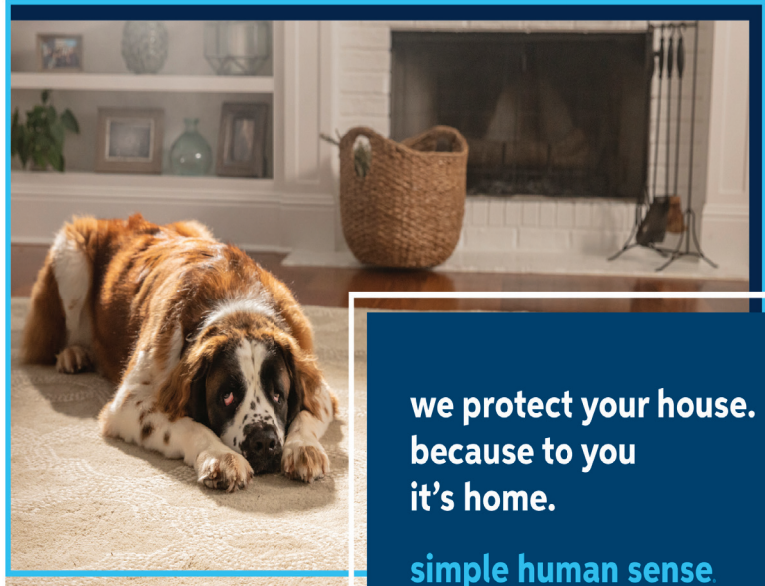
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Marlene’s Meditations

Understanding the Significance of Life

By Marlene Houk
Burke County



“Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the LORD, and that he had spoken these things unto her.”
John 20:18

The purpose of each person who crosses my path in life, each disappointment and wild joy, each goading and angry jab thrust at me – is to call me to the Lord. Sometimes I run to Him, tears streaming from the jagged wound in my soul. Often, I stomp around in circles, fuming and ranting, slinging bullets of truth to the nearby stones and trees and wishing my enemies stood in their places. But, my spirit belongs to my Savior, and He calls me gently to remember our relationship. Eventually, I tuck myself under His wings and rest in His Word.

Mary Magdalene, whose story of cleansing from devil possession and discipleship to Jesus, appears in all four gospels in the New Testament. She met many people on the road of her life. But the One who transcended all others was Jesus. He delivered her from a prison of torment and led her into the light of His presence. As I follow her trail 2,000 years later by reading her story over and over, her significance unfolds in a breathtaking panorama of truth. As I age, both physically and spiritually, my heart soars within my despair as truths from her life transform my thinking.

Mary Magdalene herself was significantly prominent in the Gospels. Writers of the first four books of the New Testament, inspired by the Holy Spirit, recorded her actions and words in 1,544 words.

Beyond her story, the frequent reader may gradually gather a list of Mary Magdalene’s significance in being first from several perspectives.

- 1) first in the list of the women who beheld Jesus on the cross afar off
Matthew 27:55-56
- 2) first listed at the tomb after the stone was rolled into place
Matthew 27:60-61
- 3) first at the tomb on resurrection morning, Mark 16:1
- 4) first person Jesus appeared to after His resurrection, Mark 16:9
- 5) first person to tell the news of Jesus’ resurrection, Luke 24:10

I love Mary Magdalene’s divinely appointed place of firsts in the Gospels because she illuminates Jesus. The reflection of His glory in her helps me to know Jesus better. Her reactions to Jesus’ healing and her devotion to Him shed light on how He treats women, and, by inference, how he treats me. He granted her the honor of being the first to tell the disciples of His resurrection. She, who had walked with Him and the other disciples through life shows me today how Jesus honors those who walk with Him.

But her walk often led through the valley of the shadow of death as King David describes in Psalm 23. The Gospels mention sepulcher 30 times, and one of those times describes Mary Magdalene crying at the tomb. She had misunderstood the significance of the empty tomb and was crying over her lost expectations, over her idea of a better life, and over her dreams. We do that too. What is Mary telling us about changing our mindset when reality does not meet our expectations? Understanding the significance of Mary Magdalene’s messages to us includes her directive to change our definition of success, fulfillment, joy, and reality. We follow her as she walks through the new definition by realizing three things.

First, God is in charge of our successes, failures, fulfillment, joy, and reality. How ironic that the entire Roman government, who ruled the known world at that time, fell helpless at the mighty power of God to resurrect Jesus. Reality became subject to God. Women walked into the empty tomb while hefty soldiers lay immobile. The Holy Spirit blew the wind of understanding the significance of the empty tomb, and the rush of truth dried her tears. When we understand Who reigns, no matter the iron grip of enemies, our soul calms and truth dries our tears. We may feel as Herbert Lockyer described Mary Magdalene after the miracle of her devil cleansing, “Her deranged and nerve-racked mind became as tranquil as the troubled lake Jesus calmed.”

Second, Jesus redeems our disappointments. He turned Mary Magdalene’s waiting into worship and her confusion into commitment. She sat, utterly hopeless and defeated by the empty tomb, believing the distorters of truth—the Roman government—had stolen His body. But, when Jesus appeared, the truth dawned in her soul, and she ran to tell the disciples the amazing news of His resurrection. Her disappointment turned to delight, and she learned a tremendous spiritual lesson to look beyond life and understand the significance of her experience at the empty tomb. When life tumbles us into the pit of despair, look up toward the light of His truth to be delivered from misunderstanding current events.

Third, no matter how significantly earthly storms dominate our lives and seem to be immutable and unsolvable, eternity brings closure. Mary Magdalene saw the empty tomb and collapsed in helplessness. But, just beyond her thinking the brilliant light of Jesus’ resurrection catapulted her into a glimpse of glory as she realized she would be with Jesus for all eternity. How her heart must have leaped in joy as the truth of 2 Corinthians 4:17 radiated throughout her soul, “*For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.*”

Prayer: Dear Jesus, in this new year, please help me to understand that the significance of my life events—whether sad or happy—point to you. Amen.

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

Putting God First

By Shawn Thomas
Angleton, Texas



In Matthew 6:33 Jesus said we are to “seek *FIRST* the kingdom of God.” The single greatest problem in many of our lives as Christians is that we don’t really give God first place. We give Him “a” place, but not always FIRST place. So as we begin this new year let’s look at some ways we can give Him “FIRST” place this year:

1. Give Him the first part of every day
Psalm 5:3 says: “*In the morning, O Lord, You will hear My voice; in the morning I will order my prayer to Thee, and eagerly watch.*” Here David says, my first act of the day will be to seek my God. He gave God the first part of his day in prayer.
We see that commitment in the life of Jesus too: Mark 1:35 is the best example: “*And in the early morning, while it was still dark, He arose and went out and departed to a lonely place, and was praying there.*” The Father definitely had first place in Jesus’ life — and He SHOWED it by giving Him the first part of His day in prayer.
What has first place in your life in the morning? What’s that thing you just can’t leave home in the morning without doing? For some people it is exercise. For others, it is putting their makeup on — NO WAY they’d leave home without it (and perhaps some of us shouldn’t!). All of us probably have something we just HAVE to have or do before we get out for the day. God says I want to be that one thing: more important than your exercise; more important than your coffee; more important than whether your pants are ironed — more important than any other thing.
When I pastored in Tulsa there was a woman in our church who enjoyed reading the newspaper, and she wouldn’t leave home without reading it. But she realized she was putting her newspaper ahead of spending time with God in His word & prayer. So she made a new commitment: “No Bible; no newspaper.” She would not read her paper until she’d been with the Lord first. Some of us need to make a similar commitment as we start this new year, that NOTHING else will take priority over our time with God in the morning. Make a commitment like David to say: “In the morning O Lord, You WILL hear my voice” — and give God the first part of your day.
2. Give Him worship on the first day of each week
Our commitment to worship on the Lord’s Day is one tangible way of showing whether we are really putting God first in our lives.
We show by our schedules what our priorities are. When I pastored in North Carolina, I soon discovered that they thought NOTHING about scheduling church activities, sporting events, and all kinds of get-togethers during times when the University of Oklahoma was playing football! That was just unheard of where we came from! The first thing you do before you plan anything is check the OU football schedule — weddings, funerals, it doesn’t matter! But for some reason, they just didn’t do that in North Carolina!
All kidding aside, what we prioritize in our schedule says a lot about what’s really first in our lives. One of the best ways to put God first in your life this new year is to give Him the first day of the week and make worship THE priority item on your schedule. Let your family know: we ARE going to worship this Sunday, and every Sunday this year. Don’t ask me IF we are going to church Sunday — we ARE going! Plan now to give God the worship He deserves on the first day of the week.
3. Give Him the first tenth of your income
The principle of giving to God first is found in the Bible:
— Prov. 3:9 “*Honor the Lord from your wealth, and from the FIRST of all your produce*”.
— Ex. 23:19 “*You shall bring the choice first fruits of your soil into the house of the Lord your God*”
— Ex. 34:20 “*The first offspring ... belongs to Me, and all your male livestock, the first offspring from cattle and sheep ...*”.
Israel was commanded to give God the first of everything: the first of their fruit, the first of their vegetables, the first of their cattle, the first of their dough – the bottom line is that they were to give the Lord the FIRST of everything that He gave them.
The reason such giving is important is because it shows our heart. When my father passed away a few years ago, my sisters and I shared some stories we remembered about him. One of my sister Erin’s favorite memories of Dad was one time she asked if he had \$5 so she could eat pizza with the youth group after church. Dad reached into his wallet and gave her \$5. She didn’t know until later, when my mom told her, that we were on a pretty tight budget just then, and Dad had set aside that \$5 to eat out one day that week, something he really enjoyed. But he gave that up for her. Erin never forgot that, and she never will. It wasn’t just the money; Dad showed by that sacrificial gift how important my sister was to him.
It’s the same when we give to the Lord. It’s not just about the money. The way you spend your money reveals your heart. When we give God back the first 10% of what He gave us, it shows in a real, practical way the place that He has in our hearts. Conversely, when we do NOT give that 10%, it is a very practical giveaway sign that something else has displaced God in your life: that you wanted a house or car or boat or something else more you wanted to honor Him. Our lack of giving shows that God does not have first place in our hearts.
A lack of giving is like a “warning light” for your spiritual life. When a warning light comes on in your car, you know that something is wrong, that needs attention. In the same way, when you aren’t giving to God, you need to see that “the lights are flashing” — there’s something wrong in your heart before God. It’s NOT just a financial problem; it is a heart problem: you’re putting something ahead of God. Your

lack of tithing is just the “warning light”, of what’s going on in your heart!

Many of us evaluate our budgets as we begin a new year. Plan to put your money where your heart is — or where it needs to be — by giving God the first 10% of everything He gives you this new year.

4. Give Him the first consideration in all your decisions
Matthew 6:33 says: “*Seek first the Kingdom of God ...*”.

Each of us considers certain things when we make decisions:
— How will this affect me financially?
— How will this affect my family?
— What will people think about me if I do this?
And so on.

You will undoubtedly have many decisions to make this coming year — what factors will you take into consideration as you do?

If you’re a Christian, the #1 factor for every decision you make this year should be: What pleases God? What advances His kingdom? What does His word say?

One of the biggest mistakes you can make this year is to do something without seeking God first. In Joshua 9, the Gibeonites tricked Israel into making a covenant with them, something God had forbidden. The key phrase is found in:14, where it says they “*did not ask for the counsel of the LORD.*” They didn’t check with God first — and they made a bad agreement with the Gibeonites, which became an albatross around their neck and cost them for years to come.

Christian people do this all the time today: they make decisions without checking with God first, and it costs them:
— They go out and buy a car on a whim, without really seeking God, and end up with monthly payments that strangle them for years to come.
— They get entangled in a relationship with a guy or gal, without really asking if this is who GOD has for them, and it ends up dragging them down spiritually and emotionally and causing much pain.
— They just do something because it “seems like the right thing to do”, or because it’s what they did last year — but they miss something better which God had planned for them.

Don’t do that this year. Don’t decide without seeking God first: in His word, in prayer, and by getting wise counsel from the most godly people you know. “Seek FIRST the kingdom of God” — give HIM the first consideration in every one of your decisions this year.

These are four specific areas in which you could put God first in your life as we begin this new year. But maybe it’s something else in your particular case. Spend a moment and ask the Lord: “What do I need to do, to really put You FIRST in my life this year?”

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.



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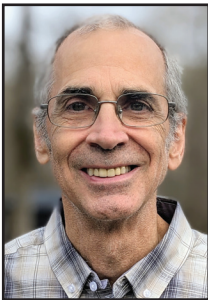
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Why are 1 & 2 Samuel and 1 & 2 Kings Categorized as part of the “Prophets”?

By Thomas Thorne
McDowell County



Two months ago we looked at the categorization of the Old Testament as divided by Christian and Jewish scholars. We saw how Christians divide the O.T. into five categories – The Pentateuch, Historical books, Poetic books, the Major Prophets, and the Minor Prophets while Jewish scholars divide the O.T. into three categories – The Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. We also saw that the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings are included in the “Prophets” category by Jewish sages. Then in last month’s article, we examined the word “prophet” and saw that the meaning of this noun is to be a spokesperson for someone else and therefore, a prophet of God is a spokesperson for God. One who relays God’s word accurately and with enthusiasm.

So the question remains, why are Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings included as a part of the “Prophets” instead of the “Writings?” These books are all stories of the successes and failures of ancient Israel, aren’t they? Our goal today is to gain an understanding of why these “historical” books are placed in the group known as the “Prophets.”

Let’s look at it from a slightly different perspective. After Judah realized their final defeat by Nebuchadnezzar in approximately 586 B.C., the nation was left in ruins and her population was decimated. Many of her people were in exile, whether per force in Babylonia or voluntarily in Egypt and elsewhere, and many others must have died amid the horrors of warfare. Large parts of the country were depopulated, so much so that the Edomites had no difficulty in over-running much of Southern Judah.

The temple was destroyed, and its longstanding traditions and rituals were brought to an end. Above all, the throne had perished. David's family, who had held that throne through all the upheavals and changes that were often unwelcome and unpleasant over more than 400 years, were now deprived of royal status. The story of Judah did not of course terminate at this point. The exiled would return, Jerusalem and the temple would rise again, the Jewish faith would revive, and in the future, another sign of David's line would be born, the king of a realm “not of this world”.

Yet, the ancient biblical authors of these books (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings) did write the stories. We cannot imagine that it gave the writers any pleasure to recount the grim details of their country's downfall. What was the purpose of these writings then? A careful study of these books reveals that these books constitute an examination of the causes of the decline and fall of God’s ancient people.

In my years working for a large Fortune 500 company, one of the key activities involved when things went wrong was called “Root Cause Analysis.” Evaluating past processes and activities to see what caused the problem and to make changes when improvement dictated them. If the future were to mean anything, the survivors of 586 B. C. must be able to ascertain and analyze those causes, for the lasting benefit of future generations. And this is the lesson for 21st century followers of Jesus as well.

Thus, while we are familiar with the term “Kings” as a title for two Old Testament books, we should not overlook the truer perspective of those ancient Jewish sages who recognized that the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel (1 & 2) and Kings (1 & 2) belong collectively in the category “the Prophets.” These books are speaking to us from God. Telling us not to forsake Him, and the extreme importance of not seeking after or following idols, of any kind. After all, if we don’t heed the warnings of the prophets to ancient Israel, we are likewise destined to fall into the same traps and eventually to destruction.

In next month’s article, we will look into why Daniel is considered by Jewish sages to be part of the “Writings” instead of the “Prophets.”

Baruch Ha Shem – Praise the LORD
Shalom Shalom

Tom Thorne and his wife Amy are fellowship coordinators for Avdai El Elyon/ Servants of the Most High God ministries. Tom can be reached at servantsot-mhg@gmail.com

“Mountains of Blue”

By Tammy Hopson
Mitchell County



There is no doubt in my mind that God created the Earth and I have no doubt that He created it for us to enjoy. I also believe we are very blessed to live in and around the Blue Ridge Mountains. Every season they are breathtaking to behold. But something about the Winter season makes them especially blue and spectacular to me. The vision of them, as they stand tall in the distance and in the cold, prompted me to write

“MOUNTAINS OF BLUE”
Majestic surround,
Glistening ground.
Skies of azure,
Call and allure.
"Come see!"
And "Come view!"
These mountains of blue!

Sunbeams display,
With golden array.
Indigo lines,
Of poplar and pines.
Layered amidst,
The soft smoky mist.
Of mountains of blue!

In silence they stand,
Made without hand.
Ever remaining,
Their beauty proclaiming.
No happen of chance
created this stance.
These mountains of blue!

As I look and behold,
Your escarpment of old.
My spirit cries out
"No question! No doubt!"
"Splendor, evidence of
His magnificent love!"
"Oh, mountains of blue!"

If men fail to raise,
Their voice in due praise.
Your cliffs and your hill,
Will sing to God still!
Your valleys and banks
Resounding in thanks!
For mountains of blue!

I have decided that my voice shall join the chorus of praise the mountains seem to sing in their beauty. I am incredibly thankful for what God has created and I know you are too. May the New Year find us all singing the same song of praise as we also look toward another land, heaven created just for us but much more beautiful than this.

Happy 2024 to all of you!

Tammy Hopson has been a Mitchell County resident since 1992 and lives in Red Hill with her family. She is a mother of six children and grandmother of 14. She has been a member of Hoyle Memorial Christian Fellowship in Lawndale, NC since 1992 and helps lead The HMCF Youth Group. tammylynnhopson@gmail.com

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The Secret to Your Best Life
By Joyce Meyer

One of the greatest lessons I've learned is that you can't be both selfish and happy. I know this is true through my own personal experience, but more importantly, the Bible has some things to say about the attitude we should have about "self."



For example, love is not selfish. In the Amplified Bible, 1 Corinthians 13:5 says love *"is not self-seeking."* In 1 Corinthians 15:31, the apostle Paul said, *"...I die daily [I face death and die to self]"* (AMP), which basically means he was not self-seeking but instead focused on doing what God called him to do with his life.

Some scriptures teach us the importance of having self-control. Galatians 5:23 lists self-control as a fruit of the Spirit, and 2 Timothy 1:7 says that in Christ, we have a spirit *"of power and of love and...personal discipline [abilities that result in a calm, well-balanced mind, and self-control]"* (AMP).

If you've lived very long, you realize that not being selfish requires self-control, because we're all born with a selfish human nature. Think about how babies act: they are only concerned with what they need and usually cry when they don't get their way.

Thankfully, when we experience new life in Christ, we die to sin (Romans 6:11). But even though we die to sin, sin does not die. That's why we have to continually make the decision over and over again to choose to do the right thing on purpose. And we have what it takes, in Christ, to do what's right—whether we feel like it or not.

As Christians, we're destined to be molded into the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29). Jesus is the greatest example of what it means to love others and not live a selfish life. First John 3:16 (NIV) says, *"This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters."*

This scripture shows us that Jesus gave everything when He demonstrated His love for us. And we are to follow His example.

The truth is, loving others is not always easy, and it always costs us something: time, money, convenience, etc. But through our relationship with Christ, we can find the strength and ability to love others, even when it seems to cost more than we think we can give.

God is faithful to give us His love, grace, and wisdom to reach out and be a blessing to others. And when we do, we end up receiving more joy and peace than we had before.

It's important to understand that God doesn't expect you to take this to such an extreme that you don't take care of yourself. We need to use wisdom so we can be healthy emotionally, mentally, and physically while we're helping others. In following Jesus' example, remember to make your relationship with God your number one priority and do what He puts in your heart to do.

The world is full of lonely, hurting people who are hungry for the love of God and the hope that is only found in Jesus. I want to encourage you to get rid of a "What about me?" mindset and instead pray, "God, show me someone who needs a blessing. Show me someone I can help."

We all have room to grow in our relationship with God, and learning how to reach out to others is a big part of that process. I used to be self-centered and focused on getting my way all the time. And I was miserable! But now I am happier than I've ever been because I don't spend all my time thinking about what I want, what I think, and how I feel. The truth is, you can't be happy if the center of your life is you!

Imagine how different the world would be if everyone would just do one nice

thing to help someone else every day. It can be so simple to put a smile on someone's face. Give a compliment, give something away, take the time to listen, open a door for someone, let someone go before you in line at the store...the list could go on and on.

Make it your business to regularly reach out to people around you, encouraging them and meeting their needs as you can do it. Be determined each day to do at least one thing for someone else that makes their life better. Trust me: You'll discover that serving God by loving others is the most wonderful, exciting thing you can do!

Joyce Meyer is a New York Times bestselling author and founder of Joyce Meyer Ministries, Inc. She hosts the Enjoying Everyday Life radio and TV programs, which air on hundreds of stations worldwide. For more information, visit www.joycemeyer.org.

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By Andrew Goins
Watauga County

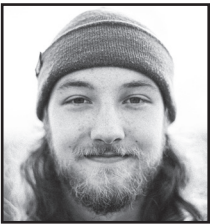
December dies a quick death, filled with laughter, joy and celebration, and most lethal of all, hope. There is no “killing time” in December. There is only giving “life to time” by singing Christmas carols, furnishing evergreens with lights, popcorn, and swarming memories re-presented on swinging bibelots. December is brimming with children because at Christmas we all become children. Perhaps it is because Christmas is the season when we remember our childhood the most; we remember that one snowstorm where the power went out and we stayed up all night playing Monopoly and Isaac, the youngest, actually won and we all went crazy; we remember sitting in a chair by the fire drinking hot chocolate while momma read us a story about a man named Scrooge and transformation that overflows into a eucharistic life—a shared life; we remember the year dad lost his job and so we decided to participate in the economy of creativity and frustration and make our own gifts; we remember that one year when grandpa died and momma was depressed and we all tried our very best to make her happy. December is filled with a great and holy remembrance. Remembrance is the avenue to growing young. “*Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*” We need to become small again. We need to run again, not because it is healthy or trendy but because we experience a rapture—a thrill of emotion. We need to laugh again, not because it is polite but because of the overabundance of joy that dashes from our lungs to our tongues in joyful laughter. We need to learn to clap and cry and tell the perpetrator that they hurt our feelings. We need to learn how to grow young.

But December has died and it’s January now. The Christmas tree wilted, the stockings packed and the Christmas presents giddily unpacked. If I am honest with myself, Christmas sickens me. I pick up germs like a first grader eating gum from under his desk. We Christians are the most unsanitary of all. We never wash our hands while singing the ABCs or take our immune support vitamins. We skip our flu shots and touch our faces and spread all of our germs almost as though we are trying to sicken in the world. But we’re not. We just have the ruthless germ of hope. Just as Christmas haunts us with flickering childhood memories, it also haunts us with the memory of the Spirit hovering over the womb of Mary to create something out of nothing—ex nihilo, where God knits together sinew and ligament, lung and scapula. This knitted creation was born out of a virgin teenager with DNA, 46 chromosomes, eyelashes, and Jewish blood. We remember the Christ who came out screaming bloody murder like the rest of us while the angels swooned the shepherds singing “*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.*” It is a coruscant phantasmagoria charged with hope because God entered into what Karl Barth called a “holy mutability” by assuming flesh.

Athenasius, a fourth-century theologian who defended trinitarian orthodoxy and helped form the Nicean creed, brilliantly wrote: “The Word of God came in His own person, that, as He was the image of the Father, He might be able to create humankind afresh after the image.” God the Son recreates humanity by being the true image of God void of evil, so that our evil might be transformed into good. Jesus becomes the perfect image and makes us into the perfect image. Our spirit and soul, body and blood, and all made new. Jesus assumes flesh, defeats death, and promises that what happened to his body will one day happen to our body! The body that could walk through walls, conceal and reveal, disappear, and delight in creation by eating broiled fish will become our body. What hope!

But it is January now and I don’t feel so good. The hope of Christ returning and the New Creation feels abstract and aloof. We go back to work. We take out the trash. We smother the wick of celebration with a lick of the fingers and a quick pinch. Can the joy-charged hope of God lying in a meager manger transfigure this rugged monotony? With discipline, yes. Some people are optimists and some people are pessimists, but no one is instinctually hopeful. The conditions for the hope of New Creation germinating and growing are less than ideal in this world. There are wars and rumors of wars. There is cancer, skinned knees, earthquakes, and bee stings. Hope is a native of heaven and is a transplant to us here. It is used the “higher elevations”. For hope to grow in the harsh climate of evil and brokenness, we must fertilize it with faith that knows Jesus is coming again to make all things new (whether I believe it or not). We must water it with the Word of God. It is in this sense that hope is a discipline. Hope is something we decisively march towards rather than fall into. So, when the temperature is cold and the day dreary, hope. When apathy creeps in, hope. When you return home from visiting loved ones and feel alone, hope. When Hope is a discipline; it is something that must be decisively intended before it becomes an impulse. Against all of the harshness and hurt, monotony and mundane, I dare you to hope.

Andrew Goins is on staff for a campus ministry at Appalachian State University called Ratio Christi. He also works as a youth leader and worship leader at Arbor Dale Presbyterian Church in Banner Elk. Andrew is committed to simply and thoroughly loving his wife Bethany, growing in his bible nerdiness, delighting in good books (theology, poetry, and select fiction), music, photography, creation, and in gathering people together for bible studies, a shared meal, or making music



Avoiding Satan’s Snares

By Steve Williams
Mitchell County

Let me welcome you into 2024, it’s here ready or not. This coming year will hold one of the same things that we all faced last year and that is Satan’s Snares. He is always out there looking to trip us up, year after year, month after month, week after week, and day after day. He is always looking for a time to attack God’s people. The Bible tells us in 1 Peter 5:8: “*Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: or Be sober [Not intoxicated sound minded] [well balanced and self-disciplined], be alert and cautious at all times.*” That enemy of yours, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion [fiercely hungry] seeking someone to devour.

We live in a day where it seems that Christians are falling like flies. There is little to no difference in the Christians' Rate of Divorce, Problem Children, Financial Trouble, and the list could go on. What is the problem you say? It’s simple, Christians need to learn to be Persistent in their Christian Walk with God. As Christians, we need to understand that when we make a mistake it is not over. We’re not to give up, let up, or back up, but look up to our Lord and Savior and Press On. When you and I mess up, we do not automatically become failures in the eyes of God. We as Christians need to learn the difference between being a failure and experiencing failure in life. Once we trust in Christ as our Savior, we are new creations, and our past failings are just that—in the past.

In Luke 22:31-32 “*And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not:*” And we know that Peter denied Jesus 3 times. What if Peter had allowed his past to follow him he would have never accomplished anything for the Lord. The Bible shows us this great truth in Acts 2:14-36 when the spirit of God entered into the upper room on the Day of Pentecost Peter preached and 3000 people were saved. Any future mistakes in our lives are to be regarded as temporary defeats; learning processes along life’s way do not define who we are.

Peter learned this lesson well. No matter how many times he was reviled, chased out of town, or put in prison, he did not consider himself a failure. Rather, he looked to His Lord to determine the truth about who he was—a forgiven sinner.

Christians, we need to understand this important fact: It isn’t the load that weights us down- it’s the way we carry that load. God's Word promises us that He will make our burdens light.

Christians also need to learn something else. Encountering difficulties and tests does not automatically mean to change direction. They may delay us in reaching our goals, but they are not necessarily a dead end. Look at trials not as reasons to quit, but as opportunities that can assist us in reaching goals. During moments of defeat, God wants to teach us something that will help us succeed later on. Satan places snares all through our lives and we need to try to avoid these snares in life. There’s not a person reading this, that has not gotten entangled in the snares of Satan at one time or another.

Let’s listen to these words again. Could Read like this: Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

Don’t allow yourself to become Satan's next Victim, but allow God to help you have victory over Satan's Snares. Lions attack sick, young, straggling animals. They choose victims who are not alert. Peter is warning us to be alert for Satan when we are suffering or experiencing difficulties.

Words of Wisdom:

- Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races one after the other. Walter Elliot
- By perseverance, the snail reached the ark. Charles Spurgeon
- Patience and perseverance have a magical effect before which difficulties disappear and obstacles vanish. John Quincy Adams
- Football is like life - it requires perseverance, self-denial, hard work, sacrifice, dedication and respect for authority. Vince Lombardi
- Just remember, you can do anything you set your mind to, but it takes action, perseverance, and facing your fears. N/A

Smile when you Get it:

I started out feeling Bold

Then I

Lost My “B”



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

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“The Bread of Life”

By Art Dmytriyeu
Yancey County



As we begin the brand-new year 2024, let us turn our attention to the most important things. What things, you may ask? According to the inspired writings of the wisest king Solomon, we should *“Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”* (Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 KJV). For us to do it we should study the word of God carefully and live according to His Word. Jesus responded to Satan in the wilderness with the words from the book of Deuteronomy: *“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.”* (Matthew 4:4 KJV; Deuteronomy 8:3 KJV).

Let us consider these words more deeply. Man does not live by physical bread in itself, but by the life-giving Word of God, by which bread was created and which is contained in the bread and does not deny man’s need for his daily bread. The context of these words, taken from the book of Deuteronomy, refers to the manna that God fed the people of Israel during their journey through the wilderness. So, the Lord met the physical needs of people. Jesus, quoting this expression during the temptation of hunger, showed his attitude towards the physical needs of man. In the pages of Holy Scripture, one can clearly see the compassion with which God treats the poor and hungry. He condemns those who have much *“not to deal thy bread to the hungry”* (Isaiah 58:7). Man, like any other living creature, constantly needs food. Moreover, this food is much more extensive and multifaceted than we usually think. It comes to us through several channels at once, which makes it possible to maintain the necessary healthy balance of power. Today, we will understand the importance of complete, balanced, and high-quality physical nutrition, which is the key to our healthy existence. In addition, we know that the health of our body does not depend only on what we ingest. We still need air, water, sun, and much more. The question is: do our needs end at this level? The Scripture answers: no!

The words spoken by Christ in the wilderness are clearly addressed to the crown of Creation — humanity. We know that not a single creature on earth, except humans, experiences a spiritual form of hunger. The reason for this is that man was created *“in the image and likeness of God.”* (Gen.1:26.) Man, first of all, has a Spiritual Origin, he is a spiritual being! In addition to physical strength, we were also endowed with spiritual and moral potential. Just as we need constant restoration of our physical strength, we also need restoration of our spiritual strength. Our physical health depends on the variety and quality of food we eat. The state of our spiritual and moral principles also depends on what we feed our souls.

The uncontrollable growth of mental and emotional disorders in our society is, first of all, the result of spiritual hunger, although people often do not realize this. Weakening of morality, ethical and moral standards, selfishness and pride, intolerance, and bitterness - these all link to one long series of spiritual problems. Today, humanity is gripped by hitherto unprecedented crises: economic, social, political, environmental, moral, and religious. A hungry, tormented, tired of the struggle of life, completely bankrupt soul can be satisfied only with the Bread that came down from heaven - the Word of God. The Lord says: *“I am the bread of life.”* (John 6:35). Through His Word, God not only restores His image in us but also reveals Himself and His will to people.” *His inspired Words are: “... be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”* (Romans 12:2 KJV).

Dear Reader, may the Lord feed you and heal you physically, emotionally, and spiritually as you come to Him in prayer for the Bread of Life! God Bless You!

Pr. Art Dmytriyeu is originally from Siberia. He has traveled the world in Evangelism and pastoral ministry. He serves as a pastor in North Carolina, holds a Master of Divinity degree, and is currently a Doctor of Ministry candidate. More information at: <https://burnsvillenc.adventistchurch.org/pastors-blog>



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Wellness Tips for a New You in the New Year

If your list of New Year’s resolutions is a mile long, you may be feeling overwhelmed and unsure where to start. Let these three essential wellness tips set you up for a successful year and give you the power, energy, and determination you need to reach all your other goals.

Make Time For Breakfast

Many people make the mistake of skipping breakfast, particularly if they are trying to lose weight. But breakfast is an essential part of your overall health and well-being, giving you the fuel and energy you need to power the day until lunch. This is important to help kickstart your metabolism and regulate your hunger. Think you don’t have time to prepare a healthy breakfast? You’re not alone. However, many are open to implementing this habit with quicker breakfast options that cut prep time in half. In fact, 51% of consumers agree that frozen breakfast foods are the most convenient option and 37% said they would eat frozen breakfast foods more often if they were healthier, according to market research from Mintel. Thanks to quick and tasty options like Eggland’s Best Frozen Breakfast Bowls, made with hearty ingredients and ready to eat in minutes, there are efficient ways to enjoy a nutritious breakfast. Not only do the bowls taste great, but they are made with nutritionally superior Eggland’s Best eggs, which contain six times more vitamin D, more than double the Omega-3s, and 10 times more vitamin E compared to ordinary eggs, so you can feel confident that you’re getting optimal nutrition before taking on the busy day ahead. The bowls are available in three great-tasting flavors, Sausage and cheese, Salsa, Bacon and cheese, and Loaded Potato Scramble, meaning you certainly won’t get bored putting your new breakfast plan into action.

Practice Self-Care


Between work, family life, and other commitments, it can seem challenging to carve out time for yourself. But a little self-care goes a long way toward helping you recharge and better manage all your responsibilities and stressors. Whether it’s going for a run, taking a yoga class, doing arts and crafts, or reading a book, be sure to spend some time each week doing something that you love that makes you feel your best.

Prioritize Sleep


Prioritizing sleep will improve every aspect of your physical and mental wellness and help you achieve all your other goals. Unfortunately, streaming devices, social media, and other distractions make it all too easy to stay up later than you intend. Setting an alarm in the evening can serve as a gentle reminder that it’s time to put down devices and start your bedtime routine, helping you create a more consistent sleep schedule. This will also eliminate exposure to blue light late in the evening, an environmental factor that has been proven to make it harder to fall asleep.

Achieving your goals starts with feeling your best. Make that happen in the New Year by prioritizing the most essential building blocks of health and wellness, from sunrise to sundown.





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Sudoku Solution

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

Crossword Solution

S	I	T	S		O	W	N	E	R		A	H	A	B
A	B	R	A	M		H	E	R	E		P	A	L	E
W	E	A	V	E		O	W	E	D		A	V	E	N
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M	E	N	E		P	R	O	V			P	L	A	N
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Kids' Corner

The Giggler

By Christy Lowman
Burke County



I think it's great that God made an animal that laughs. After all, laughter is the best medicine, right? All of us need more laughter in our lives. This animal not only giggles but laughs out loud. Do you know what it is?

A spotted hyena is the only hyena out of the four different types that laugh. It is often called a "laughing hyena." The spotted hyena's vocal repertoire is unique. This repertoire allows it to make laughing and giggling sounds. However, it only makes these sounds when it is nervous or uncertain about something. Not because it finds something funny. The spotted hyena is also able to make a whooping call at night that sounds like a wolf's howl. Some scientists think that this hyena can make up to 28 different vocalizations.

Spotted hyenas are the largest hyenas. They are brown with black spots. The females are larger than the males and therefore dominate the clan. They are also more aggressive and stronger than the spotted males. Their leader is the most dominant female in the clan. The clan is made of as many as 130 members, mostly females. They live in a "fusion=fission" society. This means the entire clan is hardly ever all together. Most of the time each hyena is on its own or stays in small groups but every so often the whole clan will meet. These hyenas also only mate with other clan members to protect their gene pool since each clan is usually made up of their kin.

Although spotted hyenas look like large dogs they are not. They are not related to dogs at all. These carnivores can kill much larger animals than themselves, including giraffes and cape buffalos. They are very successful hunters and can chase their prey up for several miles and up to or until the other animal wears out. Their power bite is 1100 psi. The average psi of a person is 150-200 psi. Their jaws can break 2 ½ inch bones so they can eat bone marrow which is found only inside bones.



Their pups are born with completely black fur. They are born "precocial" which means they are born more advanced. They already have open eyes, teeth, and muscles when they are born.

These carnivores are very intelligent. They can count how many members opposing clans have. Young males will always join the clan that has the least number of other males in it.

Even though laughing is good for the soul there are times when laughing is not nice. Can you think of some examples?

As we speed closer to end times. There are and will be more people who will laugh at you for being a Christian. Yes, that is right, people will make fun of you for believing in God and Jesus. They will laugh, and call you names. Unfortunately, I'm seeing this already. Jesus warns us in the scriptures that this will happen if we are a believer and stand up for Him. Are you ready to stand up for Jesus and your faith?

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. 12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Matthew 5:11-12 NIV

Dear Lord, as we continue our journey You have set before us here on earth help us be strong and courageous and stand up for You and our faith. Help us not be fearful when we are made fun of or laughed at. In Jesus's name, we pray, Amen.

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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. 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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Christian Action League

Ben & Jerry's Israel Boycott Sparks Divestment Measures in North Carolina

By L.A. Williams

Boycotting Israel? Then don't look to do business with the state of North Carolina. That's the message sent to Ben & Jerry's Homemade Inc. by N.C. Treasurer Dale R. Folwell this week. His office issued a press release Thursday announcing the addition of the popular ice cream brand to the list of companies subject to divestment and contract restrictions as a result of their boycott of Israel. The action includes Ben & Jerry's parent company, Unilever PLC, and Unilever subsidiaries, according to the release.

"We have policies in place per state law that dictate how we should proceed on any holdings in the retirement system of companies that boycott Israel and their affiliates. We will follow our policies and the law," said Folwell. He has ordered the divestment of \$40 million in Unilever assets and has dispatched notices to local governments and state agencies prohibiting them from contracting with either company. He said the action was particularly important in light of recent atrocities perpetrated against the Israeli people.

"There is no place for antisemitism in this state or this country," Folwell said. The state's retirement system provides benefits and savings for more than a million members, including teachers, firefighters, police officers, and other government employees. Folwell's office manages the pension plans' investments which total \$117.9 billion.

The Rev. Mark Creech, executive director of the Christian Action League, said league supporters rejoice in Folwell's action.

"We thank God that our great state has a good statute on the books such as this one," he said about the North Carolina Divestment From Companies Boycotting Israel Act of 2017 (Gen. Stat. § 147-86.81).

Creech outlined the spiritual connection that Christians share with the Jewish people and their land.

"As a conservative evangelical Christian, I firmly believe in the biblical covenant that God established with Abraham and his descendants, which promises them land and blessings as an unconditional and eternal covenant. Israel holds a central place in God's economy, being chosen as His special people to demonstrate His faithfulness and fulfill His purposes. This divine choice is not based on any merit or superiority on Israel's part but is part of God's sovereign plan," he said, pointing out that Israel's significance is deeply rooted in messianic prophecy.

"The Hebrew Bible contains prophecies that find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and we anticipate His return, which will involve the restoration and blessing of Israel. The authority of the Bible is paramount in our faith, and we interpret it literally, including prophecies concerning Israel. We view the words of the prophets and the apostles as divinely inspired and relevant today, shaping our understanding of Israel's unique place," Creech added.

He said Christians look to the future in anticipation of the fulfillment of eschatological purposes when Christ establishes His Kingdom on Earth.

"In this scenario, Israel plays a pivotal role, with Jerusalem as the capital of Christ's Kingdom, and Israel fully restored and blessed," Creech said. "Our faith in these promises guides our unwavering support for Israel and her people."

North Carolina is far from alone in standing up for the Jewish people. At least 35 states have passed bills and executive orders designed to discourage boycotts of Israel. New Jersey, Arizona, and Illinois are among those states that have divested from Unilever. Florida stopped buying shares of Unilever in October of 2021.

Ben & Jerry's is one of 10 companies on North Carolina's recently updated "Divest and Do Not Contract" list. The company, which prides itself on social activism, announced in 1998 that it would not purchase water from an Israeli company in the Golan Heights. In 2009, it changed its "Chubby Hubby" flavor to "Hubby Hubby," as an endorsement of same-sex marriage. Its decision to halt sales in the West Bank made headlines in 2021, and it sued Unilever shortly thereafter when the parent company contracted with Israeli sellers against its wishes under the brand name Blue & White Ice Cream Ltd. The case was settled out of court late last year.



Hey y'all, we are Steven and Jennifer Painter. We started out as some of those folks who saw a sad story on the news about a child who had been neglected or abused and said, "why did this have to happen? We would have gladly taken that child and loved him/her!" Yet we didn't make a move to actually BECOME that family because "it was never the right time" or "we don't know where to start". But really, when IS it the right time? Answer: now. How do we get started? Answer: just make the call! There are children NOW who need someone to bridge that gap. Contact McDowell DSS to learn more. 828-652-3355.

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New Shoes

By Caron Cline
Burke County

The Advent season with its hustle and bustle, parties and presents has passed. Hopefully, it has been a time of renewed devotion to the Christ child Who entered time and space for the express purpose of offering Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. He came to seek and to save the lost and His mission will continue, through His people, until time, as we know it, is no more. As we enter a new year, our Savior, our Bridegroom, once again renews our call to walk in faith and victory despite the violent turbulence that threatens to overwhelm and paralyze our lives through fear, manipulation, and intimidation. We are commanded to stand firm in the power of our Father’s might and to walk in a manner worthy of this awesome calling. Many have been steered off the ancient paths of God’s principles by false teachings and deceptive philosophies. The paths of this present world system are littered with broken dreams, mental anguish, and bitterness of heart. Walking these paths will produce an overall spirit of oppression and rejection. Even those who call themselves Christians sometimes find themselves on these dead-end paths. Their garments are tattered, and the soles of their shoes are worn thin. It is time to stop, recalculate, put on the new shoes of the gospel, and return to the highway of holiness. God gifts each of His children with specific callings according to their measure of faith. However, every follower of Christ has been endowed with the divine nature from the moment of salvation and is responsible for exhibiting His characteristics in a dark and lonely world. Three of those traits are of the utmost importance, wisdom, grace, and love. We have in our possession the living, breathing word of God. We have in our spirit, the living, breathing word of God (Christ, in the form of the Holy Spirit).

Colossians 2:2b,3 “...a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”.

We know things that can break chains of addiction, bitterness, fear, etc. We know things that can break generational strongholds. We know things that can change eternal destinies. We invest in the lives of others by walking out the truths of God’s Word and sharing His wisdom with them concerning their issues. Secondly, we invest in the lives of others by walking in grace toward the problems and issues in their lives. We abandon the self-righteous judgmental thoughts and words that are part of human nature and allow the grace of God to overflow, offering undeserved favor and encouragement. We also invest by testifying to the power of God’s grace which brought deliverance from our own struggles and weaknesses. Lastly, we invest in the lives of others by walking in divine love toward one another even amid our own issues as brothers and sisters in Christ. Only our Lord could perform such a miracle between such a wide variety of people with such different backgrounds and with such different opinions. Our testimony of unity and love is proof positive that God’s love can perform the same miracle in others.

As we lace up our new shoes and begin walking in divine wisdom, grace, and love, others will join this journey for the furtherance of the Kingdom of God and the destruction of the kingdom of darkness. Rise up and walk!

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.



Sanctity of Human Life

By Chastity Ogburn
Avery County

Deuteronomy 30:19 “I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live:”

January is Sanctity of Human Life Month and many churches will observe January 21, 2024, as Sanctity of Human Life Sunday. This is a day we set aside every year to focus on the value of every human life since President Ronald Reagan proclaimed it in 1984. This year will commemorate the 40th year our nation has observed the sanctity of human life. This day is an opportunity for churches and pastors to focus on the value of all human life and that life is a sacred precious gift from God. Every unborn child is precious to God and created for a purpose, in the Bible Psalm 139 tells us this so beautifully. I love Psalm 139:16 where David writes that our days ordained for us are written before any of them came to be. God had a purpose and plan for our lives before we were ever born. God thought of you and me before we were ever conceived. How exciting is that!!

This will be our nation's second year celebrating the overturning of Roe v. Wade. Over 63 million lives have been lost to abortion since 1973. It is the leading cause of death. Our society refuses to recognize it. After 50 years since abortion was made legal in the United States, many lives have been saved since the overturn in June of 2022, however, we still need to pray for the ending of abortion. Pray that hearts and lives are changed to choose life. North Carolina continues to make abortion legal and in the first six months of 2023, North Carolina recorded 55 percent more abortions than it did in the same time frame of last year, according to the Guttmacher Institute. Praise God with North Carolina’s 12-week abortion ban that was enforced this past summer abortions dropped by 31 percent this past July according to the Guttmacher Institute. The new pro-life law passed in May and was enacted in July. North Carolina is protecting babies after the 12-week limit. Lives are being saved! We still need to pray for our state to take a stand against abortion protecting babies from the moment of conception. Chemical abortion is on the rise across our country and continues even in states where abortion is illegal. We need to pray that our nation will see the sacredness and value of all human life from the womb to the tomb. God creates all life. He is the only giver and taker of life. There are many ways for individuals and churches to get involved. Celebrating Sanctity of Human Life Sunday is one way to be a voice for unborn lives. It is a day to bring awareness by sharing the truth about abortion and its devastating effects. Many lives and families have been affected by abortion. Statistics show that 1 in 4 women by the age of 45 will have had at least one abortion. Many women and men are hurting from a past abortion. Sanctity of Human Life Sunday is a perfect opportunity to extend grace and forgiveness to those who are suffering from the guilt and shame of a past abortion. God forgives those who have had an abortion. Post Abortive women and men are in our churches and need to hear the message of God’s grace. The enemy uses abortion to keep many bound and Christ came to free the sinner as it is written in the verses of Isaiah 61:1-3. What can you do? Pray for the ending of abortion in our state, and nation. Pray for mothers to choose life for their babies and know that there is hope for both them and their babies. Pray that they will be guided to the help and support that is available to them. Support your local pregnancy centers and ministries. Pro-life ministries are at the frontlines and they need prayers, financial support, donations, and volunteers to help them continue the work that God has called them to do. It is my prayer that we will walk into the new year with a thankful heart for life and take every opportunity to stand, support, and defend all life.

May God bless you and your families in the New Year!

Chastity Anne Ogburn is a follower of Jesus Christ. She is the founder and director of Anne Ministries offering pregnancy support and recovery services in Avery County. She is the author of “His Grace Covers All”, a memoir inspired by God. Chastity and her husband Jay attend Emmanuel Baptist Church in Newland. They have six children and two grandsons. For more information or to contact Chastity visit anneministries.com or email anneministries@gmail.com





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Family of God

Ain't Nothing Better Than a P&J Sandwich

By Dr. James L. Snyder
Ocala, Florida



I'm not sure what happened to my closely guarded diet during these recent holidays, but I won't ask. The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage has been so busy cooking and preparing food that she didn't have time to oversee my diet.

I love it when a plan comes together.

As usual, I used this time for my benefit and delighted myself with all the food. And believe me, the food was delicious.

One thing I like about holiday eating is that you can always go for seconds and if careful, thirds.

As the family is around the table and the chatter continues, I can sneak another portion of that delicious turkey. There is no way I can have too much turkey. From one turkey to another, I can only say, "Gobble, gobble, gobble."

Another benefit of these holiday meals is the leftovers. Sometimes, it has been my experience that leftovers are more delicious than the original. I'm unsure if it's The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage's culinary skill or just the quality of the food. The second time around is a winner. The third time around is not too bad, either.

In our house, the planning of the holiday meals begins in late summer. Our shelves are stocked with all kinds of food for the holidays. We have a special refrigerator in the garage stuffed with all sorts of things for the holiday.

If I had to choose which food I enjoyed the most during these holidays, I would be in trouble. Or maybe I could say, like my uncle used to say, "It's what I'm eating at the time."

I must say that the pie selection is right up at the top of the best part of the meal. There were all kinds of pies: pumpkin pie, apple pie, lemon meringue pie, and those were just the pies I saw and ate. My plan is, that if I eat only one slice at a time, I may not be caught.

I ended the holiday season well stuffed with some delicious food. No complaints from this side of the Parsonage.

The week following our Thanksgiving dinner, The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage and I sat in the living room relaxing. I looked at her and said, "When is our next Thanksgiving dinner?"

Looking at me with one of her looks, she said, "When I find the next turkey." And then she stared at me until I was just slightly uncomfortable.

About a week after our Thanksgiving dinner, The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage planned to spend the day shopping for Christmas presents. I was instructed to get my lunch for that day.

I don't mind getting my lunch as long as she doesn't know the ingredients of my lunch. But how can you compete with all that food in our refrigerator this time of the year?

When lunchtime came, I opened the refrigerator and looked at all the delicious food. I was trying to figure out which I would pick first. No matter which one I choose, it would definitely be delicious.

Then I had one of those "Whaaaat" moments. I saw something in the refrigerator I had not thought about for a long time. I had all the Thanksgiving food in the refrigerator, and in the corner was a jar of grape jelly. I haven't seen that jar in a long time, and I'm not quite sure why I happened to see it now.

I knew the cupboard beside the refrigerator had several jars of peanut butter. What came to me at that moment was a P&J Sandwich. For those under 50, that is a Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich.

Suddenly, my tongue began wagging in culinary anticipation. There ain't nothing better in this whole wide world than a P&J sandwich. As a kid, that was my favorite lunch I took to school every day. And it doesn't matter what the jelly is, grape, strawberry, blueberry, it's all rather delicious.

Looking behind me to ensure the way was clear and that The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage had not come home early, I set out to fix my favorite sandwich. Don't get me wrong here; turkey is a wonderful sandwich. But it doesn't compete with this P&J sandwich I was about to indulge in.

I don't know who invented peanut butter, but they have greatly served humanity. Then, adding jelly to peanut butter sandwiches is another brilliant accomplishment.

Quickly, I put together my P&J sandwich, got a fresh cup of coffee, and then went to the kitchen table to celebrate my lunch. After finishing that sandwich, I was very much tempted to go for sandwich number two. What would be wrong with that?

If The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage knows what I had for lunch, how would I explain it to her? Keeping it a secret is my number one agenda.

Munching on my P&J sandwich, I remembered what David said. "*Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart*" (Psalm 37:4).

I love food, but my greatest joy is in the Lord. As I focus on Him in my daily activities, I begin to understand the important desires of my heart. It's amazing how God surprised me with something that really made my life happy. The finer things in life aren't everything. Sometimes it's the simple things that make me truly happy.

Dr. James L. Snyder is pastor of the Family of God Fellowship, 1471 Pine Road, Ocala, FL 34472. He lives with his wife in Silver Springs Shores. Call him at 352-687-4240 or e-mail jamesnsnyder2@att.net. The church web site is www.whatafel-lowship.com

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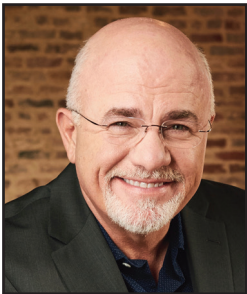
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Dave Says
By Dave Ramsey

I think my mother-in-law has a serious credit card problem. Do you have any advice?

Dear Dave,
I think my mother-in-law has a serious credit card problem. She can't afford stuff, but she shops anyway, chalks up more and more debt, acquires more credit cards, and thinks she'll pay for it all later somehow. Her ex-husband has bailed her out a few times, but he's unwilling to help anymore. My wife and I, and my wife's sister, want to address this issue, but we're all worried about her reaction, and we don't know where to start. Do you have any advice?
Randall

Dear Randall,
First, everyone involved should understand they're likely to receive an angry response from this lady if she's confronted over her actions. Sometimes people get ticked off when they hear the truth, especially when it's connected to their own misbehavior. It may even be a good idea for your wife and her sister to get some advice from a family counselor beforehand. Really, what we're talking about here is an intervention.
Also, you need to stay out of the discussion. This is something for her daughters to handle. Support your wife and her sister through it all, but if you're in there asking questions and probing around, you're liable to come off as the evil son-in-law. And you folks don't need to add any more problems to the mix.
They need to sit down with her in a quiet setting, one where there are no interruptions, no television, and no one else. Start with the fact that they love her and



care about her deeply. That's very important in a situation like this. But they also have to walk through what's really going on and let her know they're tired of watching her destroy herself, and her finances, with her irresponsible behavior. If she had a drinking problem, you'd want to try to make her see how alcohol was hurting her and the relationships she has with her family. In this case, she basically has a credit card addiction. And it's wreaking havoc on her financial well-being and the people who care about her.
So, show as much love and understanding as possible. But someone needs to say something soon. —Dave

My husband won't cut up our credit cards but wants to keep them locked away in case of emergency. What should I do?

Dear Dave,
We're following your Baby Steps plan, and we've paid off all our credit cards. But when I talked to my husband the other day about cutting up the cards and closing the accounts, he said he would rather keep the accounts open, and the cards locked away in a drawer for use as an emergency fund. He says this will help us have an emergency fund in place quicker than saving for one. I think there's more behind his reasoning, though. He grew up in a very poor family, and I wonder if he's not afraid of somehow ending up in that kind of situation again. What can I do to convince him to follow your advice?
Ramona

Dear Ramona,
I think you're a very perceptive lady. You said your husband grew up in poverty, right? So, what I'm hearing is the cards represent almost a security blanket for him—a financial security blanket. I get that, but here's the thing. If you had a fully funded emergency fund of three to six months of expenses sitting in the bank, I'm talking about hard cold cash, you'd have the security of knowing that the expense

of a new air conditioning unit or transmission for the car would only be a minor inconvenience. And, you'd be able to cover it easily without going back into debt.
Instead of actively trying to convince him of something, a better route might be to sit down together and talk through the whole thing. Explain to him you think you know why he feels the way he does, and that it's understandable. Then, ask him if there's a reasonable amount you two could have in the bank that would help him stop worrying. Discuss it, agree on an amount, and then agree to cut the cards up and close the accounts when you reach that figure. Remind him, too, that you'd still have your debit cards in hand in the event of an emergency.
Above all, Ramona, make sure you work together. Be patient and understanding. If he has recognized the wisdom of getting rid of debt and taking control of your finances, he's moving in the right direction! — Dave

Dave Ramsey is CEO of Ramsey Solutions. He has authored seven best-selling books, including *The Total Money Makeover*. *The Dave Ramsey Show* is heard by more than 14 million listeners each week on 600 radio stations and multiple digital platforms. Follow Dave on the web at daveramsey.com and on Twitter at [@DaveRamsey](https://twitter.com/DaveRamsey).

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Lessons I’ve Learned From “The Man With Half A Brain.”

By Steve Henry
Burke County

Lesson #1; Witnessing is simple

My younger brother was born in 1954, had a normal childhood, popular in school, and seemed to have everything going for him. Then at age seventeen Doug was stricken with encephalitis. After two brain operations in thirty days and a large part of his right brain removed he was reduced to something like a wild beast. He was left with very limited short-term memory and significant paralysis on his left side. We are grateful for all the people that God has brought into his life to help him along the way but in the initial days after bringing him home from the hospital we thank God and a loving mother for helping him progress into the gentle and loving person we know today.

He went home to be with the Lord on July 18th, 2019 at age 65. About 7 years before his passing a brain scan was performed on Doug and the doctors discovered he had about sixty percent function in his left brain, so we are talking about a man that was literally operating with about half a brain. The following stories will fill the span from 17 to 65 but the thing that amazes me to this day is the fact that God continually used this man with half a brain to remind me of things that I should not need to be reminded of and even taught me truths from God’s Word that have helped me in my personal walk with the Lord. I hope that as you read these stories you will be reminded that the mind of Christ is alive and well whether we have a fully functioning brain or not.

The first lesson, witnessing is simple.

As I have shared with you in previous stories I grew up struggling with a total sense of worthlessness. My life was permeated with fear, anger, and hatred for any kind of authority. During my teenage years, I developed the attitude that nobody was going to tell me how to run my life, not my parents, not my teachers, and especially not God. I didn’t need Him or anyone else, I had all the answers. As I entered young adulthood I considered myself “my own man,” had the world by the tail, and continued living the facade of not needing anybody. I lived the “tough guy” routine, doing anything to show others how “bad” I was, not realizing I was just a scared little kid who just needed to be loved and accepted.

God allowed me to live this way until He decided to get my attention in January 1975 when my father died of a massive heart attack. I was almost twenty-three at the time. Though we weren’t close at all, when someone in your family dies at the age of forty-six it tends to get your attention. Some things were said at his funeral that made me think about the brevity and uncertainty of life and how important it is to know we have a personal relationship with God.

It wasn’t long after the funeral that I got involved in my self-centered existence again and forgot most of what was said. But God had other plans. I had no plans of going to church or having anything to do with God’s people so He started sending them to me. In the year following my daddy’s death, there were five or six different times that someone from the church would drop by to “witness” to me. Some shared God’s Word with compassion, some were like a bull in a china shop, and one told me I was a snake in the grass (never figured that witnessing technique out), but they all had the same message, “You’re a sinner in need of a Savior.”

Then it happened, I met the greatest soul-winner I have ever known (actually I had known him all my life but never in the capacity that God was about to use). There is one characteristic about Doug that makes what he did in my life so interesting i.e., most of the time he won’t initiate a conversation with anyone. If you talk to him he will answer but very seldom will he initiate the conversation.

We were at our aunts’ house in Hickory for a family gathering the Christmas before my conversion in February. For some reason, I volunteered to take Doug back home. Looking back on that I realize how unusual it was for me to volunteer to do anything for anyone but when God sets His sights on you there is nothing you can do to control the circumstances He engineers. We had been riding in silence for about thirty minutes, I was probably listening to the radio, you know, in my own little world, when “out of the blue” (or ‘from beyond the blue’) thirteen words were uttered that would impact my life for all eternity. Doug said, “I cussed Mama the other day but I asked Jesus to forgive me”. Thirteen words, then silence.

In the ensuing days until my conversion a couple of months later, there was nothing but silence in my heart and mind. At some point, during this time I remember thinking “Here I am, acting like I have the world by the tail, have all the answers, but this guy, with part of his brain gone, has more sense than I do, i.e. he knows where forgiveness comes from”. I am grateful for all the times people came and shared God’s plan of salvation with me. I don’t remember the details of what they shared but I do remember the thing that stands out in my mind about what they told me was I was a sinner in need of a Savior. The thing that God said so emphatically to me through Doug was “I want to forgive you of all your sins”. This simple thirteen-word sermon, delivered in about ten seconds, did more to get my attention than all the other things that were said to me in the months leading up to my life-changing encounter with God.

Witnessing is simple; if your sins have been forgiven just tell them where forgiveness comes from.

I look forward to sharing other lessons I’ve learned from him in the ensuing months.

Steve Henry has been a lifelong resident of Burke County. God blessed me with an incredible lady that I have been married to for 43 years. He has blessed me with two wonderful children and two beautiful granddaughters.



Lakeview Missionary Church

Suffering For Others

By Christopher L. Scott
Moses Lake, Wash.



An 80-year-old man still talks about a miscarriage he and his wife had when they were in their twenties. It was painful and hurtful. It was devastating to them. But to this day, more than 50 years later, he knows that experience has helped him comfort others. In his words, “I would never be able to comfort others experiencing the grief of a miscarriage if I had not myself been through the pain of a miscarriage.” But that man’s sentiment is not new. Paul wrote something similar to the believers living in the city of Corinth.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4, NASB).

Let me, if I may, point out a few important things in these two verses. Notice Paul tells us that God comforts us in “all” of our afflictions. Every emotional thought and every painful tear involves God’s comfort. A boyfriend cheating on us, a job taken away from us, a marriage that slips away from us, or a time of good health that alludes us. He is with us through each and every painful experience we endure.

Let’s also notice that there’s a purpose Paul describes in the comforting that occurs in affliction. Paul writes that God comforts us in our affliction “so that” we may be able to comfort others in their affliction. I know that it might sound cliché that we are in affliction and comforted in that affliction so that we can comfort others. While suffering and difficult experiences cause us severe pain, we must remember that those experiences often serve a purpose later to comfort others.

Pastor Tony Evans writes about these verses, “If anyone assures you that you can avoid suffering like health problems, mental anguish, relationship difficulties, or financial straits—provided that you have enough faith—they’re not telling you the truth. Paul was a visible and verbal follower of Christ who stood head and shoulders above other Christians in terms of faithfulness. And he suffered greatly—not despite his faith but because of his faith in and obedience to Christ. Paul’s suffering and ours is directly related to God’s purpose of using us to minister to others.”

I know most of us reading these words right now are going through tough times of suffering. But God’s message to us in 1 Corinthians is that God will comfort us at this time during our affliction, and He will give us plenty of opportunities in the future to comfort others as they experience similar afflictions that we’ve already endured.

Christopher L. Scott, a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, is a pastor and freelance writer. Learn more about his writing ministry at ChristopherLynnScott.com.



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IDF Soldiers Lighting Hanukkah Candles in Gaza:
A reflection on the Path to Transforming Peace

By Jim Denison

President Biden hosted the annual White House Hanukkah Party last night; invitees included Holocaust survivors and leaders from across Jewish religious denominations. However, I’m thinking today of different ceremonies held recently in dark places: some eight hundred menorahs from Israeli children who were evacuated from the area around Gaza were delivered to IDF soldiers fighting in the Gaza Strip. As they lit these candles on the front lines, families of Israeli hostages held by Hamas held their own Hanukkah observance in Tel Aviv.

Meanwhile, in another moving act of solidarity, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz lit the first candle on a huge menorah in front of Berlin’s iconic Brandenburg Gate. “I wish that the candle of Hanukkah will shine far beyond this square and much longer than just for the eight days of Hanukkah,” he said while wearing a black velvet skullcap.

As Jews around the world grieve the atrocities of Hamas’s October 7 invasion, global solidarity with them both as a people and as a nation is vitally significant. However, there’s a problem with conflating the two, one we urgently need to understand in our conflicted day.

When one day of oil lasted eight days

Hanukkah originated in the second century BC when Greco-Syrian rulers took over the Jewish temple and outlawed Judaism. Judah the Maccabee led his fellow Jews to defeat one of the mightiest armies on the earth, drive them from the land, and reclaim the temple. However, when they sought to light its menorah (the seven-branched candelabrum), they could find only a single cruse of olive oil that had escaped contamination by the Greeks.

Miraculously, when they lit the menorah, the one-day supply of oil lasted for eight days until new oil could be prepared under conditions of ritual purity. To commemorate and publicize this miracle, Jewish leaders instituted the festival of Hanukkah (meaning “dedication” and pointing to the rededication of the temple). Jews around the world are observing that miracle this week. Some are deeply devout, living daily by the 613 laws of Judaism. Others are less so. Still others are secular, identifying with Judaism as their race rather than their religion. But all are united in their commitment to their people and to the tiny nation that was founded to ensure their survival.

This conflation of race and religion is typical for other religions as well. Most Muslims were born into Islam. The same holds true for Buddhists and Hindus. Their religion is a component of their family origin and, likely, their racial demographic.

Unfortunately, many think the same is true for Christianity—including many Christians.

What people don’t understand about Christianity

Do you ever wonder why so many wars are fought in the name of religion? The present conflict in the Middle East is one example: Hamas is convinced that Allah intends them to have the same land Jews are convinced Yahweh promised to them. Skeptics often point to religious wars waged across human history as evidence that religion does more harm than good.

Here’s what they’re missing: true Christianity is not a religion about God but a deeply personal, transformational relationship with him.

Jesus was adamant: “Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). When a person places their personal faith in him as their personal Redeemer, they become a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Peter said of



this experience: “According to [God’s] great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope” (1 Peter 1:3). When we ask Christ to forgive our sin and become our Lord, he makes us into the “children of God” (John 1:12).

Now, when we submit our lives to his indwelling Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 5:18), the Spirit makes us more like Christ (Romans 8:29) by manifesting his character in and through our lives (cf. Galatians 5:22–23). As we worship, pray, study Scripture, and live biblically, we grow in grace as the new people of God (2 Peter 3:18).

Such people love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (Matthew 5:44). If they are walking in the Spirit, they do not initiate conflict but seek to advance justice and peace (Micah 6:8; Matthew 5:6, 9).

What “hinders our spiritual life more than anything else”?

You knew these theological truths before I recounted them. However, we must beware of the same temptation that adherents of religion face.

I define religion as the human attempt to please and secure the blessing of God (or the gods). We choose to attend services at a church, synagogue, temple, mosque, or shrine and to invest money and time in religious activities. All of this is on our terms, done as we wish. All the while, we hope that God (or the gods) will reward our religiosity with benefits that outweigh its costs.

Since 85 percent of the planet’s population identifies as “religious,” I just described nearly seven billion people. How is transactional religion working for the world?

Oswald Chambers observed, “The characteristics of individuality are independence and self-assertiveness. It is the continual assertion of individuality that hinders our spiritual life more than anything else.” This is why, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer noted in The Cost of Discipleship, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

During this Advent week of peace, if you would know true peace, trade a transactional religion about Jesus for a transforming relationship with him. Submit all that you have and are to him as a “living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). Ask him to take away anything that is not his best for you and add anything that is. Ask His Spirit to make you more like Jesus than you have ever been before. And know that he delights to answer your prayer, to the glory of God.

Watchman Nee said, “A born-again person ought to possess unspeakable peace in the spirit.”

Do you?

If not, why not?

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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Snow Hill Baptist Church

Violence In Schools And What Parents Can Do To Help. No Regrets Family

By Dean Honeycutt
Mitchell County

As I think about the new year it would be easy to write one of those feel-good articles about change and being the better you. We all like those warm fuzzy feel-good articles. And to be honest with you, they are much easier to write. We tend to have a problem tackling the more difficult subjects like sin and repentance. The Bible warns us about those who have itching ears. 2 Timothy 4:3–4 *“3 For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; 4 And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables.”*

“Itching ears” in this context refers to those who want to tell people what they want to hear as opposed to preachers or teachers confronting sin and depravity. It is by no means a joy of mine to address these issues of moral decay but that is where the Spirit of God moves me. It is not that I like to bring the subject up, but I cannot but speak the truth in love.

In October I wrote on the subject “Are we abounding in sin?” illustrating an obvious decline in respect for human life. Citing a recent hit and run by two teens in a car laughing about striking a retired police officer riding a bicycle resulting in his death. The two teens had zero compassion for the man they hit. They were not sorry for what they had done, only sorry they had gotten caught.

We can reference many disturbing and almost unbelievable news articles about the sinfulness of man. However, journalists and reporters will not use the word sin or depravity. The New York Post December 16, 2023, opinion article written by Naomi Riley writes It is time for a ‘broken windows’ policy for schools referring to a 1990s policing strategy in New York where low-level crimes were prosecuted with high penalties. The policy deterred crime by showing would-be criminals that law enforcement was serious about crime and people would think twice about committing a crime.

Riley draws our attention to the unprecedented rise in violence in our public schools. In North Carolina crime and violence spiked twenty-four percent as, new data was presented on March 1, 2023, to the N.C. State Board of Education. (Carolina Journal; Crime and violence spike 24% in NC public high schools, March 3, 2023, by David Bass) Sadly, we are losing good teachers in our schools because of a lack of discipline. Whatever happened to a good butt-busting? Riley shares recent acts of violence in our public schools. The most horrific and disturbing is 16-year-old Jonathan Garcia. Garcia attacked his teacher in her classroom at Eldorado High School. The brutal attack lasted for an hour and a half and details of this act of violence are so disturbing I will not write about them here. Garcia was sentenced to 16 to 40 years in prison.

We have replaced stern disciplinary actions with counseling sessions and hugs. When I was a child, and I did something wrong I did not get a counseling session, I got a spanking. Many educators blame COVID restrictions as the reason for the uptick in violence in schools. Society always finds a way to avoid and blame our sinful actions without going to the root of the problem. We know the root of the problem is sin. Sin is the reason for the breakdown of the family and the root cause of violence in our nation. Until we get to the root cause of the problem, we will not see the necessary change.

True change starts with repentance from sin. We are never told to reform, but we are told to “*be transformed by the renewing of our mind that we may prove, what is that good and acceptable, and perfect will of God.*” Most people approach problems in our society by trying to reform. But we cannot reform sin. Sin must be crucified and die in ourselves. Romans 6:1–2 “*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? 2 God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? A person who is dead to sin will want to live for the Lord.*”

As a Christian parent, what can we do to help? We can pray and repent asking God to bring revival to our sinful nation. We can be proactive in our children's school and be supportive of teachers. Show up to school activities and introduce yourself to your child's teacher. Elect Christian school board representatives. Reach out to families who are struggling with the good news of Jesus Christ. Be inclusive of those families who do not seem to fit in. Invite them to church and include them in community events. Showing the love of Christ will go a long way in preventing problems. Vacation Bible schools and Christian youth groups are a wonderful way to introduce a child and his family to Jesus Christ.

We know that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation, and salvation is the only true deterrent to sinful actions. So where do we start? Start with your friends and family. A heart that loves the Lord wants to please the Lord.

Happy New Year

Addendum: As I close this article, 5 teens in Florida are charged with the brutal beating of a student. A video that is so disturbing it must be edited to be viewed by news outlets.

Pastor Dean Honeycutt shepherds Snow Hill Baptist Church in Bakersville, NC. He may be reached at 828-385-0213, snowhillbaptist@gmail.com , or visit their website at www.snowhillbaptist.com.

Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. John 15:13



Freedom Life Ministries

Freedom Life Holds Inspiring Fireside Event, Igniting Holiday Hope with Year-End Giving Goal of \$ 15,000

By Jim Smith
McDowell County

Marion, NC – November 2023 – this past month, amidst the crisp mountain air and twinkling holiday lights, Freedom Life Holding hosted its annual Fireside event, bringing together community members, supporters, and reentry clients for an evening of heartwarming stories, inspiring testimonies, and unwavering hope. Held at the warm and inviting Grace Community in Marion, North Carolina, the event served as a powerful reminder of the transformative impact Freedom Life has on individuals returning from incarceration and their families.

The evening unfolded with poignant testimonials from Freedom Life reentry clients who shared their journeys of overcoming challenges, rebuilding lives, and finding purpose. Their raw honesty and heartfelt stories resonated deeply with attendees, painting a vivid picture of the crucial support network Freedom Life provides.

State Representative Dudley Greene graced the event with his presence, delivering a stirring keynote address that emphasized the importance of second chances and the vital role organizations like Freedom Life play in fostering successful reintegration into society. His words underscored the urgency of Freedom Life's year-end giving campaign, which aims to raise \$15,000 to continue its invaluable programs and services.

Adding a touch of emotional resonance to the evening, the talented vocal group Heart Cry filled the air with their soulful melodies, their music weaving a tapestry of hope and resilience. As guests were serenaded, they savored the aromas of freshly baked cinnamon rolls, courtesy of Gogos Bakery, and enjoyed warm cups of coffee donated by the local Ingenious Comfort and community

"Fireside was a truly humbling and inspiring experience," shared Danny Hampton, Executive Director of Freedom Life Holding. "Hearing the stories of our clients, witnessing the support of our community, and feeling the collective spirit of hope ignite within the room – it's these moments that fuel our passion and remind us of the profound impact we can make together."

With the holiday season upon us, Freedom Life urges the community to embrace the spirit of giving and consider supporting their year-end campaign. Every contribution, big or small, will help bridge the gap for individuals navigating the often-treacherous path of reentry, equipping them with the tools and resources they need to build brighter futures for themselves and their families.

To donate to Freedom Life Holding's year-end campaign and help reach their \$15,000 goal, please visit www.freedomlifeministries.org or contact Jim Smith at 559-2224 for more information. Together, we can illuminate the path forward for those seeking to reclaim their lives and ignite the embers of hope this holiday season.

Jim Smith is an area Worship Arts Director, He is the Development Director at Freedom Life Ministries, and run a production company wjscreativegroup.com



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Fulfill Your Calling

By Chris Rathbone
Mitchell County



Fulfill Your Calling! As many of you may know, at the end of August last year, my ministry as pastor at Mine Creek Baptist Church came to a close. For approximately 8 years, God gave me the privilege of pastoring this wonderful church family. They certainly took my family in and loved us like we had always been there. I hope that God used my preaching and ministering to be a blessing to Mine Creek. God told me to go there and simply help and He had shown me that I fulfilled what He wanted me to do there. We certainly grew to love that church family dearly and miss being with them. God had richly blessed over those years and leaving was hard, especially when the ministry of the church was going so well. However, something I have learned over the years is when God speaks to your heart about something, you better listen. He is leading us for a reason, even if we don’t necessarily see what that reason is at the time.

While it is hard to not have our own church family to worship with, the last few months have been a blessing. There’s only been a couple of weeks where God has not allowed me the privilege to preach somewhere. We’ve traveled to several counties filling in for pastors who were away from their churches and also for churches without a pastor at this time. My prayer since August has been for the Lord to show me where He wants us to be next. While He doesn’t always show us right away where He is leading, I know we can trust Him that when we get there, He WILL reveal it to us.

That being said, there has been something burning in my heart over the last couple of months that I want to share. Several of the churches I have preached at are without a pastor/preacher, some for over a year. One of the recurring statements that I have heard is this, “Preacher, we’ve asked several men who have been called to preach to just come fill in for us awhile and none seemed to be interested.” This statement has me somewhat puzzled and troubled.

First, let me get something out of the way. Every man who feels called to preach by the Lord must pray and seek God’s will on where the Lord may lead and in what capacity he feels led to serve. These are things that each man must search out personally. If a man is genuinely called by God to preach/pastor, God will certainly show him when and where. One thing I have noticed is that many young men I know who have surrendered to preach, often never go too far beyond their home church. They may preach here and there on occasion, but for one reason or another, seem reluctant to commit to serving a church. I’ve had several churches tell me that they have asked a few young men who have answered the call to preach but have declined to just fill the pulpit every week. Again, I realize every man must pray and seek where God may lead. However, when this becomes a recurring theme, it personally causes me concern.

There are quite a few churches in our region that are without pastors/preachers. Some are small churches, some bigger churches. Some churches have been through struggles and are having a hard time. In some cases, a pastor has gone on to be with Lord and a church needs a preacher. Churches are struggling to find someone just to bring God’s Word to them while they search out God’s direction for the future. The point is, there is a great need in our churches!

If you are a young man whom God has called to preach, this message is for you! Fulfill the call of God! Stop allowing fear and doubt to hinder you. Every seasoned preacher started somewhere. Every preacher had a first interim, first pastorate, first baptism, first revival, first everything. If you are called, you need to fulfill what you promised God you would do. There are churches out there that will give you an opportunity. They are hungry for the Word and just need a man of God who is willing to love them and preach to them. When God has a church for me and my family, He will show it to us. But I have to be willing to step out on faith and follow His lead. You must do the same. You must fulfill the promise you made when you surrendered to His call. You must fulfill your calling!

Preacher Chris Rathbone is former Pastor of Mine Creek Baptist Church.

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Pearls of Faith

By Regina McIntosh
Yancey County



Day Fifteen: Galatians 5:22 “*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith,*”

We recently celebrated Thanksgiving and my granddaughter told me I was always offering them ‘stuff’ - just little things that I hoped would make them happy. Nothing really, but little things like little girls’ love, makeup or lotion, etc. Anyway, strangely enough, they’d come to stop accepting my kindness’ and I wondered why. I told them to please accept my kind gestures because they were gifts of the spirit – gifts from my heart, small tokens of my affection for their beautiful gift to me.

My little granddaughter asked me, finally, “What do we give you?” and something that I remembered about us cherishing Jesus’ presence instead of the presents at Christmas made me say, “Your presence!” That is what they gave me and what it is that makes my life worthwhile – a smile, a light that passes over the eyes, a gentle word, a kindness that often goes unheard. With their “presence,” they provide me with the most beautiful gift of all gifts...

Love, that greatest gift of the spirit. Love that knows no reason or no season. It is always available and always giftable. It is love that makes life worthwhile and it is my little granddaughter’s love that makes me smile when she comes to visit and offers me her “presence”. Without this love, what in life would hold any meaning? It is love, that wonderful gift of the spirit, that accomplishes more in one moment than I can accomplish (with all my gifts) in a lifetime. The little things I give to her are just things. They don’t mean a thing. They are only things. What means something is the feeling behind the gift... my presence is meant to share with her a love that she has stirred in my heart, a love that only the Lord could have brought to my life, a love that is more beautiful than any other gift on earth.

The greatest gifts, the fruits of the spirit, - love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, and all the wonderful Jesus gifts... they are the reason that I can honestly say, it is my family’s presence that makes life worthwhile and leaves my heart with a smile. Thanks to Jesus, I know what it means to love without conditions or expectations. He showed me a love, agape love, that is beyond description. It is love that is everlasting and love that can’t compare to anything found in this world.

Because of Jesus and this love He gives me, I can – in some small ways, give a bit of the wonder He gives me. Yes. I know better than anyone that love isn’t in the gift. The love, you see, is in the giving. It isn’t the gift that holds the meaning. It is the giving heart that holds the significance. The love of giving came to me from my family and Jesus is the biggest part of that family. I hope that I can, through example, instill this love of giving into the hearts of those I love and give to.

Even though my gifts aren’t great treasures, I hope that – through a small token of my affection, I can put a twinkle in an eye, a smile on a face, a light in a heart. And, through my love, love that was stirred by the One who gave me the greatest love I’ve ever known, I hope that I can inspire another soul to give their heart to the Son.

A Prayer & A Promise:

Dear Lord, I love You more than I can say, more than I can show, more than even I can possibly know. You are my life. You give me the best gifts of all – the joy, the peace, the grace... all the wonders that come from knowing You, the light of the world, and the light that brought me out of the dark. You are the way to eternal peace and joy and I will never be satisfied until I am there beside You, where You are the light that abides, the “PRESENCE” that makes everything right. Thanks to You, Lord, I know what it means to love without conditions and thanks to You, dear Lord, I will love others the way that You intended. Thank You, Lord, for all that You are all that You’ve been, and all that You are in eternity.

God continues to work miracles in my life. - Willie Aames

Regina McIntosh is a heart who loves Jesus. She is a poet and writer from the mountains of WNC. She has written two books of Inspirational Christian poetry - *A Light In The Darkness* and *Gift Of Grace*. All of her books can be found on Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble or Christianbooks.com. She is currently working on devotional books that will be published soon. Her words can be found on her website at <https://reginariddle.wixsite.com/reginamcintosh/blog>

Mt. Zion Community Church

Have You Made Your New Year's Resolutions?

By Naomi Houston
Avery County



Have you made your New Year's Resolutions? Yes, it's that time again. A New Year is beginning and once again most of us are thinking of ways in which we would like to improve our lives in the coming year. Those unfinished projects, that extra 10 pounds, making changes in how we spend our time and money – perhaps even changing jobs – and the list goes on as we look back at the old year and examine ways we can make the year ahead better. Sadly, the majority of those resolutions so seriously considered will have already been broken or modified before the end of January.

Civilizations around the world have been celebrating the start of the New Year for centuries with the earliest dating back to the Babylonians over 4000 years ago. The practice of making resolutions is thought to have begun with them as they made promises to their gods to gain favor and begin the New Year on the right foot.

Bidding farewell to the old year and welcoming the New Year usually begins on New Year's Eve and lasts well into the early hours of New Year's Day as people attend parties, eat special foods thought to bring good luck, make resolutions, watch fireworks, and numerous other traditions depending on the country or ethnic group to which they belong.

Individually Christians, and churches, may also find themselves putting together a list of resolutions. Most likely they will be more than simply about losing weight or decluttering the house. While symbolically those two resolutions can mean more as emphasis is placed on relationships with Jesus and strengthening one's faith in God by shedding the "weight" of, and "decluttering" our lives of those things that interfere with our relationship with God.

While making resolutions is not a biblical concept, having a list of resolutions that are meant to motivate us in our faith in the coming year can help us be mindful of putting God first. 1 Corinthians 10: 31 reminds us that *"whether then you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"*. Ultimately, whatever followers of Jesus do should be to the glory of God, and making resolutions can help Christians stay accountable for putting God first in their lives.

So what are some of the resolutions we might want to consider making as we begin the New Year? We read in Matthew 14: 23 that Jesus often set aside time to pray and commune with the Father so spending more time with God and praying for His guidance in the year ahead is a good start. Another area to consider is to become more involved with the church, the body of believers, by using the gifts with which God has blessed us to build up the church and advance the kingdom of God. Resolve to develop the habit of spending more time reading and studying the Bible for by doing so we learn more about who God is and understand His great love for us. Pray for opportunities to share the Gospel as Jesus commanded *"Go therefore and made disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"* (Matthew 28:19).

Certainly, New Year's resolutions are popular, but for Christians, they can be more than a list of new habits and changes. Through prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Christians can make resolutions that will motivate them to grow in their relationship with Jesus and develop a stronger faith. Happy New Year and may God bless each of you!

Naomi Houston and her husband, Lt Col Clay Houston USMC Retired, live on Henson Creek in Avery County. They are members of Mt Zion Community Church where Naomi is the adult Sunday School teacher. Both have been actively involved in church throughout their 68 years of marriage and Naomi wrote a weekly column for the Avery Post for many years.



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What Will We Wager

By Steve Bietz
Burke County

He was born Dimetrios Georgios Synodinos in 1918. He is better known as Jimmy "the Greek" Snyder and was an American sports commentator and Las Vegas bookmaker. He was a regular contributor to the CBS program The NFL Today. Snyder predicted the scores of NFL games, which sports bettors used to determine the point spread.

But it was a wager Snyder made, long before he was Jimmy the Greek when he was 30 years old in 1918 that put his name on the map. Snyder bet on the 1948 Presidential election between the challenger, Thomas Dewey, and sitting President, Harry Truman. All the predictions said that Dewey would win in a landslide over Truman. Snyder recounted that he decided to vote for Truman to win because he had determined that women were distrustful of a politician with a mustache.

The odds were set at 17-1 for Dewey to win the election of 1948. Snyder put a \$10,000.00 wager on Harry Truman to win. On election day, November 2nd, 1948, Harry Truman shocked the world and won another term and Jimmy Snyder had turned a \$10,000.00 wager into a \$170,000.00 payday. We would consider that a very good exchange. Seventy-five years later in today's value, Snyder's winning total would be over 2 million dollars.

Now I must admit that I don't gamble. I don't even play the lottery which actually means my chance of winning a jackpot is just about the same as someone who does play the lottery. But I am aware of what Jesus said about a very important wager. *"For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"* (Mark 8:36, 37) What is the exchange rate for eternal life through faith in Jesus? What on earth would we be willing to exchange for eternal life? The answer is obvious. There is nothing worth forfeiting eternal life in Christ Jesus. There is no adequate answer to the question proposed.

As we begin a new year, may you and I make sure that we are not gambling with our eternal future? May we realize that the lifestyle that scripture promotes is not only best for us here on this earth today, but it's also what's best for receiving God's wonderful gift of eternal life.

Steve Bietz, Pastor, Morganton Seventh day Adventist Church.



Robert Treat Paine

By David Streater, Ph.D.
Burke County



This vignette is an educational moment in American history. It is about those who made a difference during the Revolutionary War era and how they served our country.

Robert Treat Paine was a Founding Father known for having a complex personality and earned the nickname "The Objection Maker." Born in Boston in 1731, Robert was known as "Bob" and was destined to become a servant-leader. He was a gifted student educated at Boston's Latin School and graduated from Harvard at 18. Bob studied religion; his family expected him to follow their history and become a minister, but he chose instead to be a schoolteacher. Paine taught school but realized that teaching was not his strength.

In the mid-1750s, Robert was the provisional chaplain of the Assault of Fort Saint-Frédéric, Crown Point, New York. Living at the fort turned out to be an awakening and helpful experience for Bob in the future. This involvement gave Paine a valuable taste of military life and its requirements. With life's lessons combined with his poor health, Bob chose to work as a merchant marine, hoping outdoor work and the salt air would aid his health as he sailed along the East Coast and to Europe.

After returning to America, Paine studied law and became an attorney. He prosecuted British soldiers who murdered defendants from the Boston Massacre. Being the prosecutor in this trial began Paine's political involvement and the quest for democracy. During the 1770s, Bob had several joyous events: In 1770, he married Sally Cobb, and they went on to have eight children. Paine was elected to the Massachusetts legislature in 1773 and soon was assigned to the Continental Congress. Some of his duties included acquiring gunpowder for the Continental Army and signing the Olive Branch Petition to England. As Paine objected to all Congressional proposals except his own, his peers called him "The Objection Maker." During this time, Paine chaired the Committee on Ordinance. Most importantly, he signed the Declaration of Independence.

After his return to Massachusetts, Robert was the first attorney general (1777-1790) and later helped create the constitution of Massachusetts (1780). Also, in 1780, owing to his interest in astronomy, he became a charter member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Paine led the prosecution of insurrectionists involved in Shay's Rebellion, an uprising in the Massachusetts countryside during 1786-1787; a debt crisis brought it on at the end of the American Revolutionary War.

This great American patriot accepted an appointment to the state's supreme court in 1790 and remained a justice until his retirement in 1804. Robert Treat Paine died on May 11, 1814, at age 83 and was buried in the Granary Burying Ground, Boston, Massachusetts.

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 to the Charters of Freedom in the National Archives, Washington, DC. Please visit FoundationForward.com to learn more about our existing settings. Vance and Mary Jo Patterson are the benefactors and originators of Foundation Forward, a 501(c)(3) education non-profit.

Teachers are encouraged to contact Dr. Streater for information and complementary student education materials to enhance experiential field trips to Charters of Freedom settings. In addition, everyone is welcome and urged to obtain a personalized engraved legacy paver for placement at their local Charters of Freedom setting. Please contact Dr. Streater (david.streater@mymail.barry.edu) for engraved legacy paver information and complementary 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.

Love is patient, love is kind, it is not jealous; love does not brag, it is not arrogant. 1 Corinthians 13:4

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Measuring Up To God’s Holiness
God’s Message Coming Down Through The Ages

By Glenda Ward
McDowell County



Some people carry their sins around with them. But those sins become a burden that wears people down. Before you find yourself worn out and useless, turn to the One who promises to take away your burden of sin and replace it with Spiritual Rest that is a joy to fulfill (see Matthew 11:28-30). When people do not carefully observe the distinction between evil from good, destruction soon follows. When you make excuses for ungodly actions, you break down the distinction between right and wrong. If God’s Word, in Scripture, is not taken as your standard, soon all moral choices appear vague and disillusioned, and contradiction of beliefs will soon leave you feeling lost and disconnected. Without God, we are left without hope and headed for a breakdown and much suffering. It is sad today to see so many people searching for meaning in life while tossing aside God’s Word. In Isaiah 5:24-25: “...because they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the Word of the Holy One of Israel. Therefore is the anger of the Lord kindled against His people, and He hath stretched forth His hand against them, and hath smitten them: and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still.” Avoid the error of destruction by making not only just reading the Bible a part of your day, but also understanding and obeying it, making this a high priority in your life.

Israel’s people suffered because they disregarded God’s Law. People were searching for meaning in life while tossing aside God’s Word. Isaiah 5:26-30 describes what God said He would do if the people disobeyed Him, (Deuteronomy 28). The country of Assyria began to torment Israel during the reign of King Ahaz (735-715 B.C.). Note: Remember the years count down to 0 before Christ Was Born. This powerful aggressor destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C. and scattered the people throughout its own empire. Sin has consequences and this judgment was not immediate. Eventually, Israel was punished. It is during this time of anxiety and political unrest that God calls the prophet Isaiah to deliver His message of hope to the few remaining groups of believers. In God’s Word when He calls something evil, it is evil. When He labels a thing bitter, no multitude of religious authorities can make it sweet through their solemn declarations. Isn’t this where our country is today? God is our only and absolute authority!

We have just come through the most glorious season imaginable, celebrating the Birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is my prayer that during the past month of December Christmas Day was observed and served as a reminder of the true reason for the joyous season of Christmas.

God’s Message Coming Down Through the Ages

In the Old Testament Isaiah 6:1-4; Isaiah had a lofty vision which was his call to be God’s messenger to His people. It was important for Isaiah to see God in all His Holiness. Holiness means morally perfect, pure, and set apart from all sin. It was in this Scripture that Isaiah saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and His train filled the temple as a symbol of glory and splendor, triumph, and victory. This was the greatest recognition for a King that He was victorious and was signified. It was in Old Testament times; that the length of a king’s robe would be a sign or indication of his greatness. The longer the robe, the more victories he had won, and the more kings he had defeated. Isaiah’s statement conveys the magnitude of God’s glory compared to any earthly king. The glorious robe that fills the temple signifies:

- 1-His Absolute Authority. There is no room for anyone else in this high-exalted place. God is all in all.
- 2-His Divine Perfections. There is No one else who is all-powerful, all-knowing, unhindered by limitations of time and space, and perfectly just, merciful, and righteous in all He does.
- 3-His Incomparable Splendor. The revelators Isaiah, Daniel, and John, gave us glimpses of their heavenly visions. They saw a high exalted throne encircled by an extremely delicate and light rainbow seemingly too perfect for this world. Isaiah saw Seraphims (angelic beings belonging to the highest order serving as a throne guardian of God, having two or three pairs of wings), standing above the throne and one cried unto another, saying Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts and the whole earth was full of His glory. And they saw lamps blazing, lightning flashing, thunder rumbling, ground shaking, and angels and saints worshipping.

Isaiah 6:2 is the only place in the Bible where Seraphims are mentioned. They functioned as God’s agents in commissioning Isaiah. Isaiah could understand them when they spoke to him and when they praised God because they hovered around God’s throne. Isaiah also sees God’s Son clothed in a royal robe. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, sitting upon a throne seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus Christ. In Isaiah 6:5-13 Isaiah realized he was common and unclean before God, with no hope of measuring up to God’s standard of Holiness. Read this account of the prophet Isaiah and how he was forgiven and cleansed by God, and he in response submitted himself entirely to God’s service ...for he said “Here am I; send me.” Isaiah brought a message of hope to the house of David. “Therefore, the Lord Himself shall give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel;” (Isaiah 7:14). Jesus’s name Immanuel means, “God with us”. And so, some two thousand years ago the prophecies of the Old Testament times came to pass.

The Virgin Birth is important to our Christian faith. Jesus was born without the sin that entered the world through Adam. He was born Holy, just as Adam

was created sinless. In contrast to Adam, who disobeyed God, Jesus obeyed God and was able to face sin’s consequences in our place which makes us acceptable to God (Romans 5:14-19). Jesus Christ, God’s Son had to be free from the sinful nature passed on to all other human beings by Adam. God’s Word came as a baby born of a virgin. He was a human being; but as the Son of God, Jesus was born without any trace of human sin. Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. God sees into eternity the plight and disease of a man struggling in sin, having no hope and doomed to despair and darkness. God asks who will go for me and make a way for sinful men to be saved. And Jesus the Son says, “I will go send me”. The Father continues, Son you will have to take on human flesh and die a sacrificial death, you will experience the pain and suffering of the flesh, and I will forsake you in your darkest hour. You will pay a sin debt and satisfy my wrath against the sin of the people. Royalty, the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords comes to earth as a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. God removes the Royal Robe in exchange for grave clothes. God spoke His Word in sending Jesus, the Messiah into the world who brings about life eternal!

God’s Holiness, God’s living Word. THANK YOU JESUS!

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.

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To Be The Real You

By Jan Merop
Cleveland, Tennessee



Sitting down at the table at our ladies' Christmas Tea last December, I discovered a lovely gift. The wooden circle designed as a hanging ornament read, "Be who Jesus wants you to be."

I immediately felt a connection to that thought and the gift became very personal.

I remembered many years before when my identity had become obscured by divorce. My thoughts were muddled and confused. I was still a mother to my precious son and that in itself gave great meaning to my life.

However, I still felt defined by my failure.

Until I heard a radio pastor say, "Let your identity be in Christ."

Those few words impacted me significantly. That truth became a turning point in my life...a signal, if you will, to move forward using the past as stepping stones to the future the Lord had for me.

Though I didn't have this new ornament with those words, they had been written across my heart by the One who knows me best.

As I embraced being the daughter of the King of kings, my attitudes, aspirations, and hopes were centered on him. My faith took root more deeply.

It wasn't long before my desires reflected my faith and I longed to serve the Lord and others with gifts I'd been given.

The spirit of gratitude to the Lord permeated my being and led me to joy despite my dire circumstances. In turn, my strength and purpose returned.

Psalm 95: 1 & 2 NKJV says, "*Oh come, let us sing to the Lord! Let us shout joyfully to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving; let us shout joyfully to Him with psalms.*"

And then in Nehemiah 8:10 we read, "*the joy of the Lord is your strength.*"

The spirit of gratitude leads us to joy and the joy of the Lord living within us becomes our strength. Why would that be?

When we practice having a grateful heart, our spirit becomes joyful because it is like telling the darkness to leave as we light the candle of thanksgiving and hope.

Being despondent makes us weak and without purpose. But joy brings hope and in that hopefulness confidence and strength are renewed.

As it says in Isaiah 40:31, "*But those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.*"

So, be who Jesus wants you to be and your life will be full of joy, strength, peace and fulfilling purpose. Selah

A CANDLE IN THE DARKENESS

Darkness encompassed the quiet space.

*Every parishioner stood still
holding an unlit candle.*

*And then, the darkness was dispelled.
Just one candle illuminated the room.*

*Music joined in uplifting spirits,
as candle after candle reflected the joy
and peace on each face.*

Go forth! Be that candle in the darkness.

*"Let your light so shine before men,
that they may see your good works
and glorify your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:16*



After six years in the mountains of Avery County, Ken and Jan Merop are now living in the hilly Tennessee countryside of Cleveland, TN...just outside of Chattanooga. Ken's photos can be seen at kenmeropphotography.com.



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The Place To Begin

By John McCoury
Roan Mountain, Tennessee



And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mark 1:4 John announced this great word: that repentance is the way people come to God, and the result is the forgiveness of sins. The greatest blessing people can experience is to have their sins forgiven. This is what the people who streamed out of Jerusalem to listen to John were looking for, and this is what they found. They found forgiveness of sins, and it came by way of repentance. That is why the prophet Isaiah said John's message would be like a great bulldozer, building a highway in the desert for God to reach the isolated stranger amid the wilderness. Without a road, you cannot drive out into the desert to help somebody. You must have a road, a highway in the desert. John was God's bulldozer to build that highway. You know how roads are built—exactly as Isaiah describes in chapter 40: Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain (Isaiah 40:4).

That is what repentance does. It brings down all the high peaks of pride that we stand on and refuse to admit are wrong. It takes the depressed areas of our life, where we beat and torture and punish ourselves, and lifts them up. It takes the crooked places, where we have lied and deceived, and straightens them out. And it makes the rough places plain. Then God is there at that instance of repentance. John brought people to Christ the only way they can come—through acknowledgment of guilt. When people come this way, God meets them, cleanses them, and forgives them. John demonstrated that by the baptism he performed. But there is a greater baptism—that of the Holy Spirit. And on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit of God came, Peter stood up and offered people two things: forgiveness of sins and the promise of the Spirit.

From that time on, God has made these things available to any man or woman who will begin at the beginning—the place of repentance. Have you ever repented? Have you ever changed your mind, stopped defending yourself and trying to blame everything on others, and said, No, Lord, no one else is to blame, only I? This is the way I am—and I need help. That is where God will meet you. He always meets humans at that point, washes away guilt, cleanses, and forgives. That is where you will find forgiveness of sins. If you have never repented before, I urge you to do so now. God will meet you right there. In the quiet of your own heart, where God alone hears, you can say to Him, Lord, I repent. Lord, send me the Holy Spirit through Jesus. And He will. Lord, thank You that You promise to meet me in this place of repentance. I come to You now on that basis. A New Year can begin with the liberating gift of forgiveness. Have we understood and embraced how this blessing may be known?

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



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The 12 Days of Christmas

By Dennis Love
McDowell County

Referring to the shepherds, the Bible says this: “*And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.*” (Luke 2:17)

After the shepherds saw the baby Jesus, they knew there was something very special about Him, and they couldn’t wait to tell others about it. And throughout history since the first coming of Christ, millions of people who have met our Lord have been prompted to go and tell others. BUT..... there were times and places where it was hard, and sometimes even illegal, to talk about Jesus. The Reformation period, centuries ago in England, was such a time and place. God’s church was changing, and some people didn’t like the change. Some people were even being put to death because of their faith.

There were many English Christians who wanted to share their faith and pass it on to their children despite the persecution they faced. So, they found creative ways to do it without the risk of imprisonment or death. One way was to write songs in code or hidden meanings. One such song was “The 12 Days of Christmas.”

Many believe that the things listed for each of the 12 days of Christmas represent something biblical. It’s hard to say that it’s a proven fact because it was so long ago. However, I would like to think this song, which I’ve been singing since my childhood, means more than what I always thought were really weird gifts received from someone who supposedly loves you.

As the tradition goes, the “True Love” spoken of in the song is Jesus Christ Himself. Here is what many believe the 12 gifts represent.

- A Partridge in a Pear Tree = the sacrifice of Jesus. The partridge is a bird that will fake injury to draw prey away from the nest, sacrificing its own life to save its young.
- 2 Turtle Doves = The Old and New Testaments.
- 3 French Hens = Faith, Hope, and Love.
- 4 Calling Birds = The 4 gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
- 5 Golden Rings = The first 5 books of the Bible.
- 6 Geese a Laying = The 6 days of creation.
- 7 Swans a Swimming = The 7 gifts of the Holy Spirit (Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Knowledge, Fortitude, Piety, and the Fear of the Lord).
- 8 Maids a Milking = The 8 beatitudes Jesus taught from the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5:3-12.
- 9 Ladies Dancing = The 9 fruits of the Spirit (Love, Joy, Peace, Kindness, Goodness, Patience, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-Control).
- 10 Lords a Leaping = The 10 Commandments.
- 11 Pipers Piping = The 11 faithful disciples.
- 12 Drummers Drumming = The 12 points of the Apostles’ Creed (a summary of the teachings of the Apostles written in the early church but widely read today).

Though our Christian brothers and sisters many years ago may have had to devise elaborate codes to share their faith, aren’t you glad that we don’t have to now? Though our Christian faith is being confronted on many fronts, still here in America we enjoy the freedom to tell others about Jesus. So, since we can, let’s do what we can! As we enter a New Year, may we have boldness and joy in sharing our faith in Jesus? SO, go ahead and sing “The 12 Days of Christmas” all year long!

Dr. Dennis Love is the Associational Missions Strategist for the Blue Ridge Baptist Association in McDowell County. Dr. Love has been in full-time ministry work for 31 years. He and his wife Vicki have been married for almost 42 years, and they have lived in Marion for almost 8 years. They have two sons, four grandchildren and two step-grandchildren. He can be reached via email at: dlovebrba@yahoo.com

Sudoku

Solution on page 14

5		8		7			4	
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The Integrity of God’s Word

By Ryan Bridgeo
Avery County

In Matthew 5:18 Jesus says, "*For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.*" "Jot or tittle" is a phrase that means a very small amount. Jot comes from the Greek letter iota which is the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet. A tittle is a small dot or mark that helps identify one letter from another, similar to the dots in our i’s or j’s or an apostrophe in English. Jesus is saying in this text that everything will be fulfilled right down to the smallest, finest detail, even things that appear to be insignificant.

Henry Liddon, an English theologian said that in the Old Testament, there are 332 distinct predictions (prophecies) which were literally fulfilled through Christ. Amazingly, these scriptures were written 400-1000 years before Jesus was even born. In this lesson, we will see the wonder of this by looking below at a mere 15 of the 332 prophecies.

Prophecies about the Birth of Jesus
Isaiah 7:14 “*Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.*”
Hosea 11:1 “*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.*”
Psalm 72:10 “*The kings of Tarshish and of the isles will bring presents; the kings of Sheba and Seba will offer gifts.*”

Prophecies about the Life of Jesus
Psalm 78:2 “*I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings of old.*”
Isaiah 35:5-6 “*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. 6 Then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.*”
Zechariah 9:9 “*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation, Lowly and riding on a donkey, A colt, the foal of a donkey.*”

Prophecies about the Betrayal of Jesus
Psalm 41:9 “*Even my own familiar friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, Has lifted up his heel against me.*”
Zechariah 11:12-13 “*Then I said to them, “If it is agreeable to you, give me my wages; and if not, refrain.” So they weighed out for my wages thirty pieces of silver. 13 And the LORD said to me, “Throw it to the potter”—that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD for the potter.*”

Prophecies about the Flogging and Crucifixion of Jesus
Isaiah 50:6 “*I gave My back to those who struck Me, and My cheeks to those who plucked out the beard; I did not hide My face from shame and spitting.*”
Psalm 22:16 “*For dogs have surrounded Me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet.*”
Psalm 34:20 “*He guards all his bones; Not one of them is broken.*”
Psalm 22:18 “*They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.*”
Psalm 22:7-8 “*All those who see Me ridicule Me; They shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, 8 “He trusted in the LORD, let Him rescue Him; Let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!”*”
Psalm 69:21 “*They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.*”
Psalm 22:1 “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning?”*

This doesn’t even include Isaiah 53.

Peter Stoner, M.S. Chairman of the Departments of Mathematics and Astronomy at Pasadena City College, and Robert Newman, Ph.D. in Astrophysics, Cornell University, also Professor of Physics and Mathematics, wrote the book entitled Science Speaks, Scientific Proof of the Accuracy of Prophecy and the Bible. In this book, they took eight of the 332 prophecies fulfilled by Christ and determined the odds of one person fulfilling those eight. The results were amazing! They calculated the odds to be 1 in 10 to the 17th power or 1 in 1.7 sextillion. Dr.Stoner said, “Suppose that we take 1017 silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the states two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state. Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, providing they wrote using their own wisdom.”

Well, that is what Jesus did. Except Jesus didn’t fulfill only 8 prophecies, or 15, but over 300. The odds of one man doing all of these would be almost incalculable.

God honors His Word right down to the smallest jot or tittle. This should give us great assurance and comfort to know that the God who was faithful over these 332 prophecies will be faithful over every Word and promise that He has ever made. We can have confidence in the integrity of God and His Word. For God truly does watch over His Word to carry it out until completion (Jer. 1:12).

Ryan Bridgeo can be reached at 828-765-6919. For more information you can visit the church website at www.plumtreechurch.com or email pastor@plumtreechurch.com

We Know Who Holds Tomorrow

By Bruce Cannon
Mitchell County



As this article is read the New Year will most likely have already come. The previous year will have passed and we will be facing many challenges and opportunities ahead. I am so thankful that while we do not know what tomorrow holds, we know who holds tomorrow. This is the message of the song: I Know Who Holds Tomorrow by Alison Krauss

**I don't know about tomorrow; I just live from day to day.
I don't borrow from it's sunshine, For it's skies may turn to grey.
I don't worry o'er the future, For I know what Jesus said.
And today I'll walk beside, Him, For He knows what is ahead.**

**Many things about tomorrow, I don't seem to understand
But I know who holds tomorrow, And I know who holds my hand.**

Our Heavenly Father knows everything and is already in our tomorrow ready-ing grace, arranging circumstances, and will be our merciful and faithful High Priest when the trials of life come. Psalm 91:1 tells us that we can hide in the shelter of Almighty God and that we will always be blessed there.

Our world is constantly changing. When we think we have seen everything and heard everything that is against biblical teachings, something new and even more bewildering, and awful, happens. Be it a decision made by our government or some act of violence perpetrated by someone/group upon another, we are left flabbergasted and bewildered.

Consider some of the current issues facing our nation.

- So much antisemitism when God says He will bless those who bless Israel and curse those who curse her.
- Our borders have not been secure for so long which has allowed so many who do not hold our values to come in illegally. Walt Kelly's phrase, "We have met the enemy and he is us," holds true now more than ever. Think about how we have so many living here illegally who would love to destroy the United States. Terrorists, much like those who committed the acts of atrocity on 9/11 now reside here along with many who see Christians as the enemy that must be destroyed. An exact quote from the Quran says, "And when the forbidden months have passed, kill the idolaters wherever you find them and take them prisoners, and beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush." Who are the "idolaters?" People just like you and I who see Islam as a threat.
- While some are attempting to remove all restrictions regarding performing an abortion, there are others heroically trying to save the unborn. How we applaud them and pray they are successful in their efforts.
- The fact that evil is becoming much more emboldened is exactly what Jesus taught when He said that there would be "Noah Days" and "Lot Days" at the time of the coming of the Son of Man. Also, "iniquity is abounding" and "the love of people is waxing cold" just as the Lord said it would.
- The Word of God is being mocked and cast aside when it is the only means of truth we can live by. We need to embrace Its teaching and live by it as best as we can.

When I think about many of the decisions our nation is making, a Scripture from Paul in Romans 1:22 comes to mind: "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools," The decisions of our government can bring about, and will bring about, many dire consequences upon every American if they are not biblically based.

While all of the above is true, and while there are many more issues facing us, our God is unchanging and able to see us through any situation that comes our way! What must we do to tap into His power, His wisdom, and His grace? In the epistle of James, James writes some valuable words of insight and instruction in 4:6-10: "But he giveth more grace. Wherefore he saith, God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double-minded. Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep: let your laughter be turned to mourning, and your joy to heaviness. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up."

Draw near to the Lord. Live, as best as you are able, just as close to Him spiritually as possible. Be under the shadow of the Almighty. Living there you will be in a position to experience His blessings, His protection, His peace, and His power!

How do we do this? Be still before Him. Have the boldness to say as David, "Search me, O God." Let Him reveal things in your life that are not pleasing to Him and as 2 Chronicles 7:14 dictates, "shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways," that we might have His full blessings in our lives.

We can then, with confidence, peace, and hope, face whatever challenges 2024 may bring. Amen!

Bruce Cannon has been called to serve as pastor of Pine Branch Baptist Church in Spruce Pine.

Little children, let's not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. 1 John 3:18

Remember When?

By Todd Abraham
Athens, Tennessee



You woke up in the morning to the sound of that awful alarm clock. Or the blaring of your favorite radio station. You begrudgingly got out of bed, threw on your robe, and sauntered to the kitchen for that first glorious cup of coffee. Past the push button phone hanging on the wall which you prayed wouldn't ring until after the 2nd cup. After starting the coffee, you leaped into your comfy recliner and popped on the morning news to check the traffic and make sure the world hadn't collapsed. Your 30 minutes of bliss are now over as the sounds of your children begin to echo through your home. Alas, the zoo is sprung upon you and the hour-long whirlwind of preparation has begun to get everyone ready for their day. You to work and your children off to school. You secretly thank God for the help of your children's teachers taking at least some of the weight off of you in the child-raising conundrum.

Climbing into your car and heading off to work, you tune your radio into the local morning show so you can keep an ear out for traffic accidents. Ten minutes into your commute, you remember you forgot to tell your spouse to pick up one of your children from school early for a doctor's appointment. Whipping into the local convenience store, fumbling for a few quarters, so you can call them from the pay phone. After a somewhat busy but normal day at work, it's back home in the afternoon drive with what seems like clouds of endless cars. Arriving home, your spouse wants the family to have dinner out tonight. The children's report cards were better than expected and we are going to celebrate. On the way to the restaurant, the family sang along to their favorite song on the radio and talked about their respective days. Dinner is lovely and the family conversations and laughter are even better. Tuck the kids in goodnight after prayer time and off to dreamy time you go.

The next day, it is the bus ride to work because the car is in the shop getting serviced. Folks on the bus either conversing with each other, reading a book, magazine, or newspaper or just observing the world around them. One young man jamming out with his hip-borne radio and headphones on. Work is busy and the only sound you hear, other than lots of people, is the sound of phones ringing occasionally. Everyone is pretty focused. During break, you sit in the break room and chat with your coworkers about your upcoming vacation to Yellowstone National Park. A few days later, vacation time at last with one whole week of relaxation and recharging the batteries. Hours and hours of quality time with your family and, most importantly, time to meditate on the Lord without the daily hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Life is good and simple as you navigate day-to-day walking in the ways of the Lord. There are distractions that you could probably live without but they all are easily put aside as necessary. The world and all of its problems are on the outside of your self-contained world flowing in normal cycles. You cherish what God allows you to experience realizing He never intended for you to see it all and know everything that goes on in it. Life and its problems and the attacks of the enemy are more than enough to occupy you without the weight of the entire world also being on your shoulders! Remember when? 1 John 2:16 "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father; but is of the world."

My name is Todd Abraham. I'm an evangelist of the gospel of Jesus Christ and publisher of Heartbeat Christian News which has been in publication for 9 years now by the grace of God. You can read all about it at www.HBCNewsMonthly.com.

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Roan Mountain Baptist Church

“Resolution or Repentance?”

By Russell McKinney
Mitchell County



Little Johnny’s mother plainly told him not to eat any cookies before supper. As soon as her back was turned, though, Johnny ate some cookies. When the mother discovered what he had done, she asked him, “Didn’t you know it was wrong to eat those cookies?” Johnny answered, “Yes, mamma, and the whole time I was eating them, I was asking God to forgive me.”

Sadly, this story sums up how many of us — including many of us Christians — deal with our sinful conduct. We keep on sinning and keep asking God to forgive us. Over and over again the pattern repeats itself: sin – ask for forgiveness – sin – ask for forgiveness – sin – ask for forgiveness. It’s like we’re stuck in a loop, one that will never result in any real change.

Genuine repentance, on the other hand, is much more serious. The Greek verb that gets translated as “repent” in our English translations of the Bible is “metanoeo.” Interestingly, this verb doesn’t primarily involve actions. Any change in action only comes at the end of the process. First and foremost, the verb involves the mind. In his Word Studies in the New Testament, Greek scholar Marvin Vincent explains that “metanoeo” is the combination of a preposition that means “after” or “with” alongside a verb that means “to perceive.” Thus, he says, “...the whole compound means to think differently after.” We find this same basic definition in Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, which defines “repent” as “to perceive afterward.”

The point is that there is a distinct process that works itself out regarding repentance. First, you sin, either once or a hundred times. Second, somewhere along the line after you have sinned, you realize that what you did was wrong and you are actually sorry that you did it. Your sorrow shows that you are now thinking differently about sin and seeing sin as a problem. Third, now that your thinking has changed concerning sin, you have the inner motivation necessary to stop sinning.

By understanding this process, you can understand why repentance has been defined as “a change of mind that leads to a change of action.” Also, you can understand why the apostle Paul said, “*For godly sorrow produces repentance...*” (2 Corinthians 7:10, N.K.J.V.). Admittedly, the specific context for those words from Paul has to do with salvation, but the link between feeling sorry for your sin and repenting of that sin always applies.

This explains why high-pressure tactics, threats, and even emotional pleas don’t produce repentance that lasts. If someone badgers, threatens, or begs you enough to get you to stop committing a particular sin, but deep inside your mind you don’t feel sorry for having sinned in the first place, you will almost certainly eventually return to the sin. Why? It’s because your repentance was not produced by a change of mind and what Paul calls “godly sorrow.”

I’ve always loved that illustration about the little boy who was told to sit down but wouldn’t. Finally, his mother walked over to him and manhandled him by picking him up and plopping him down into a chair. As the little fellow sat there stewing, he said, “I may be sitting down on the outside, but I’m standing up on the inside!” That, my friend, is why so much so-called “repentance” doesn’t last in our lives. Even as we are outwardly doing the right thing about the sin, inwardly we are still thinking wrongly about it. We are rationalizing it, minimizing it, or attempting to explain it away. Like that little boy, we are still standing up on the inside, mentally. And what will that mean in the long run? It will mean that at some point, sooner or later, we will run back to the sin. It’s virtually inevitable.

Therefore, as we begin this New Year let me say that repentance is infinitely better than resolution. While resolutions are typically barely skin deep, repentance goes way deep, penetrating even to the inner recesses of the mind. Accordingly, show me a person who says, “I’ve got to change my way of doing,” and I’ll show you a person whose attempts to stop committing his pet sin won’t go the distance. On the other hand, show me a person who says, “I’ve got to change my way of thinking,” and I’ll show you a person who has an honest-to-goodness chance of laying a pet sin in the dust once and for all. You see, the battleground is the mind, not the body. If you can get the mind turned around, the body will naturally follow.

Russell McKinney lives in the English Woods area of Spruce Pine and serves as the pastor of Roan Mountain Baptist Church in Bakersville



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A New Year's Resolution That Could Save Your Retirement

By Steve Gaito
McDowell County



As we embark on another year, many of us find ourselves making New Year's resolutions that we may or may not keep. Whether it's committing to a healthier lifestyle, sticking to a budget, or finally hitting the gym regularly, these resolutions often fade away within a few weeks. However, if you're nearing retirement or already enjoying your golden years, there's a resolution that can truly make a lasting impact: protecting your retirement savings from the looming threat of government taxation. Enter Steve Gaito's Tax Shield program, a revolutionary approach to safeguarding your hard-earned nest egg from the clutches of the taxman.

The Looming Threat to Retirement Savings

With the United States government accumulating unprecedented levels of debt in recent years, it's only a matter of time before measures are taken to address this fiscal crisis. Unfortunately, one of the prime targets for generating revenue in the future could be your retirement accounts. As the government grapples with its financial obligations, retirees may find themselves facing increased taxation on their retirement income.

Understanding the Tax Shield Program

So, what exactly is Steve Gaito's Tax Shield program, and how can it help secure your retirement from potential government taxation? The program's first step involves a comprehensive assessment of your exposure to taxes on your retirement savings. By analyzing your unique financial situation, the program's experts can pinpoint areas where you might be vulnerable to future tax liabilities. Once your tax exposure has been identified, the next crucial step is to develop a customized strategy aimed at minimizing or even eliminating taxes on your retirement income. Remarkably, depending on your specific circumstances, this can be accomplished in just a few years. The key to success lies in addressing this issue as early as possible, as proactive planning yields the best results.

The Sooner, the Better

One of the key takeaways from Steve Gaito's Tax Shield program is the significance of acting promptly. The sooner you address the potential tax threats to your retirement savings, the better the results you can achieve. Retirement planning is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor, and the Tax Shield program understands that tailoring solutions to fit your unique needs.

The Tax Shield Advantage

- Here are some of the key advantages offered by Steve Gaito's Tax Shield program:
- 1. Personalized Strategies: No two retirees are the same, and Tax Shield takes that into account. The program offers tailor-made strategies that suit your circumstances, ensuring maximum tax savings.
 - 2. Expert Guidance: With Tax Shield, you don't have to navigate the complexities of tax planning alone. Expert financial advisors work with you to develop and implement a tax-saving strategy that aligns with your retirement goals.
 - 3. Protection Against Future Changes: The tax landscape is ever-evolving. Tax Shield is designed to adapt to changes in tax laws and regulations, ensuring your retirement savings remain secure no matter what the future holds.
 - 4. Peace of Mind: Knowing that your retirement income is shielded from potential government taxation allows you to enjoy your retirement with peace of mind, free from the worry of losing a substantial portion of your savings to taxes.

Real-Life Success Stories

To illustrate the effectiveness of Steve Gaito's Tax Shield program, we spoke with several individuals who have already benefited from its strategies.

Martha and John - A Stress-Free Retirement

Martha and John, a retired couple in their early 70s, were initially concerned about the tax implications of their retirement savings. With the help of Tax Shield, they were able to restructure their assets and minimize their tax exposure. Now, they enjoy a stress-free retirement, knowing that their income is protected from potential government taxation.

David - Retiring Early with Confidence

David had always dreamt of an early retirement, but he was worried about the impact of taxes on his retirement income. Through Tax Shield, he was able to create a tax-efficient withdrawal strategy that allowed him to retire several years earlier than he had initially planned. Now, he spends his days pursuing his passions instead of worrying about taxes.

Linda - Securing Her Legacy

Linda, a widow in her late 60s, was concerned about the tax implications for her heirs. Tax Shield helped her develop a comprehensive estate plan that not only minimizes her tax liability but also ensures a smooth transition of assets to her children and grandchildren. Linda can now rest assured that her legacy will remain intact.

Conclusion

As we enter a new year, filled with resolutions and goals, consider making a resolution that truly matters securing your retirement from potential government taxation. Steve Gaito's Tax Shield program offers a unique and personalized approach to safeguarding your hard-earned savings, providing peace of mind and financial security during your retirement years. The sooner you act, the better the results, so don't wait; make 2023 the year you take control of your retirement finances and protect your future. Your golden years deserve nothing less.

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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YOUR GOVERNMENT PAGES

NC Senate District 47



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

With the start of the new year comes the time to turn our attention to the slate of candidates for local, state, and national offices. The primary election will be held on March 5, 2024, and the general election on November 5, 2024.

North Carolina may be an important swing state in the presidential election. This is also the state's first year with 14 congressional districts, having gained an additional seat due to a population increase as recorded in the 2020 U.S. Census. North Carolina does not have a U.S. Senate seat open this year.

At the state level, 2024 will bring elections for all 170 members of the General Assembly (elected every two years) along with all executive branch Council of State positions (elected every four years).

The Council of State is constituted of 10 elected officers, including the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Attorney General, State Treasurer, State Auditor, Superintendent of Public Instruction, Commissioner of Labor, Commissioner of Agriculture, and Commissioner of Insurance. Republicans currently hold six of the 10 state-wide offices.

I have filed to run again to serve District 47 in the state Senate. If elected, this will be my 8th term, having been first elected in 2010. It has been an honor to serve the people of western North Carolina for 13 years, and I hope to continue serving my district.

Some important, but often overlooked, races in 2024 will be for our state judges. There are four judicial elections in 2024, including one seat on the state Supreme Court. These positions are of the utmost importance. Activist judges threaten the integrity of our system of checks and balances by legislating from the bench. Instead, we should elect jurists who respect the Constitution by seeking to apply it fairly and correctly.

In a purple state like North Carolina, every vote counts. Statewide races are sometimes decided by narrow margins. It is important to be an educated voter and select candidates that best align with your values as well as encourage people who share those values to vote.

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

NC Commissioner of Labor



NC Commissioner of Labor
Josh Dobson
1-800-625-2267

The month of December was quite a busy month for me. The Christmas season was in full swing at the N.C. Department of Labor. My schedule was filled with events, parties, and activities. I was blessed to travel and see many of our employees who work across the state in our regional offices. I was also very happy for the time to spend the holidays with my family and friends.

On Dec. 6, I traveled to Fayetteville to present Rodgers Builders with their Carolina Star recertification award. On Dec. 14, I traveled to Durham to present GE Aerospace with their Carolina Star recertification award. It was an honor to be able to present these awards to both companies because they are part of an elite group of about 150 companies in North Carolina that have this certification. I appreciate Rodgers Builders and GE Aerospace for their continuous commitment to safety and health. Congratulations!

The N.C. Department of Labor held its 25th consecutive Toys for Tots drive benefiting the Marine Toys for Tots Foundation on Dec. 13. Thanks to our partners and our regional offices in Raleigh, Charlotte, Asheville, Winston-Salem, and Wilmington, we had our overall best year ever! We collected 2,121 toys, which included 10 bicycles/trikes, and had \$5,000 in monetary donations. Christmas time is the season of giving and I am so happy to participate in the Toys for Tots campaign. It makes my heart happy to know that hundreds of children will wake up on Christmas morning with new toys under the tree.

January 2 marks my final year as Labor Commissioner. It is hard to believe that I only have one year left. 2023 has been another great year of learning, traveling the state, and meeting great people. I am thankful for your continued support and encouragement, and I am looking forward to the new opportunities to come in 2024.

I hope everyone's 2024 is filled with many blessings, opportunities, peace, love, and joy.

NC House District 86



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

New Sewer and Water Projects Coming to Burke County

North Carolina's newest budget appropriates \$2 billion for a variety of water and sewer infrastructure projects across the state. As a result, several Burke County municipalities will receive sizeable allocations for those purposes. The biggest project funded in the new budget involves a total of \$24 million for upgrading the water facilities of the Town of Valdese, linking it to the City of Lenoir's water grid to provide for the growing water needs of its customers. Valdese has existing, excess water capacity. With the upgrades to its system and an extension of water piping across the Catawba River to connect to Lenoir's system, Valdese will be able to sell water to Lenoir. Those substantial new water sales, in turn, are expected to help Valdese significantly spread the town's water operating costs to the new customers, thereby taking some pressure off costs to the town's existing customer base. Of the total project cost, \$7 million is allocated to Valdese with the balance going to Lenoir for its new lines and connections.

Other significant state funding is going to the City of Morganton. It will receive \$13.56 million for various water projects designed to expand the capacity and efficiency of its water and sewer systems, both renovating dated facilities and allowing for expansion to meet new service demands. The Town of Connelly Springs receives \$2.548 million to construct new water/sewer lines in currently unserved areas of the town. This expansion by Connelly Springs is intended, in particular, to open up new areas to help meet the county's major housing needs.

Finally, Burke County itself was granted \$500 thousand to study and map existing water/sewer infrastructure in the eastern part of the county. One of the impediments to housing or other development is inadequate information on proximity to available infrastructure in that area of the county. This study and mapping will hopefully put county and municipal officials in a better position to make decisions on sewer and water need that obviously impact our citizens in such significant ways.



God Bless America

NC Senate District 46



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

Happy New Year! I hope that each of you has experienced a peaceful and blessed Christmas holiday filled with family, fellowship, and remembrance of all our blessings. As we move forward into a new year, I am reminded of how quickly it seems that time passes. It was fourteen years ago, in late 2009, that Lydia and I decided together that I would seek to represent the citizens of Burke and Caldwell counties in the NC Senate. As I look back on the past fourteen years, I am thankful for all the wonderful people that I have had the opportunity to meet and work with in our district, in the NC House and Senate, and all across state government. Even more rewarding has been the opportunity during those years to serve (at different times) those living in Avery, Burke, Buncombe, Caldwell, Cleveland, and McDowell counties, and to work with the local elected leaders of those counties and their municipalities. I truly consider it an honor to have worked with you, and for you, to improve our communities. 2023 saw several important pieces of legislation regarding faith and family.

This month I would like to highlight two bills signed into law by Gov. Cooper near the end of 2023. House Bill 8 was signed into law on October 2, 2023. This bill had a very long journey through the General Assembly and ended up being a vehicle for many different changes in education law. However, Section 3 of HB 8 deals creates a new Article in the General Statutes, “Pornography Age Verification Enforcement Act.” This new law will require age verification tools for commercial publications and distribution of material harmful to minors. If a commercial entity, including a website or phone carrier, neglects to verify the age of a user, the entity is subject to civil action by individuals or by class action. Hopefully, this provision will add a layer of protection for children and parents against harmful electronic content. A related bill, SB 579 Prevent Harm to Children, was also signed into law on October 2nd. This new law creates a Class H felony for any adult or business entity that promotes the sale or delivery of printed materials, dances, or other performances that are considered obscene under the definition of obscenity found in NC law. This law will also allow a court to grant restitution for injuries and damages to children who are victims of sexual exploitation.

As the new year 2024 begins, I hope that it will bring new and renewed friendships, cooperation, and bipartisanship across all levels of our state and local governments as we face new challenges and opportunities that are sure to come. I’ll conclude with this thought: We are all at the beginning of a new year. What plans do you have for yourself in the year to come? And how will you choose your goals for this year? Scripture guides in answering those questions: *“Trust in the Lord with ALL your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in ALL your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.”* (Proverbs 3: 5-6). If we can understand and apply God’s definition of the word “ALL” in this passage, we will surely begin the year on the right path.

May He bless and prosper you and your family in 2024.

Clint’s Chronicles on the Funny Farm

The Rest of the Story

Clint had many strengths; a vivid imagination was certainly one of them. He often said that Harrell Hill was his haven of safety and solitude. Clint had had his share of hard times, some of his own makings, as we all do. His worldly experiences were amazing. He had traveled the world over in his very successful corporate life, and yet he was a little child in so many ways. He tended to see things with both fear and joy to the degree that escapes most of us, and that is our loss. Oh, for the ability to exhibit the enthusiasm for life that Clint was able to do in life, and in death.



Farmer Doug

Dear Friends,

Many of you have written or called about Clint’s Chronicles on the Funny Farm. It seems that you take great pleasure in my many foibles and near –misses with danger. Also, some of you question my veracity – that would be TRUTH telling – regarding these tales. A couple of things you should know: clearly the Lord is protecting me from myself and the myriad monsters and events that seek to snuff me out, and these stories are absolutely true (not to say I don’t exaggerate a teeny tiny bit) Now get a load of this.

Coyotes in the Corridor!

Since moving to Harrell Hill farm back in March my insomnia has all but disappeared. At first, I considered it a miracle but I think it has more to do with arising at 4:00 am, working like a pack mule in the torrid sun, gorging myself on Barbara’s marvelous home cooking, fighting off all manner of vermin and dodging life-threatening equipment at every turn. Whatever the cause(s), one night in August I was snoozing peacefully at the Harrell’s farmhouse, a cool mountain breeze wafting through my open windows.

Doug told me a few days prior that packs of coyotes – I think he said packs... hmmm, or did he say platoons, or pods, or wads... just not sure. Anyway, I was awakened by howling, snarling, moaning monsters I knew could only be the coyotes...and they were very near the house.

With my newfound farmer courage and a strong desire to protect Doug and Barbara, I bolted upright in my comfy bed, sprung into my city slicker flip flops and galloped down the stairs to investigate the ruckus.

I never experienced true darkness before Harrell Hill. I guess the fact that there isn’t a city light, an interstate light pole; not even a spotlight in the holler makes nighttime real. In any event you get the picture...it was DARK outside. I stood on the porch listening as the howling critters moved closer and closer to me. (By the way, I was on the back porch because Barbara had seen a groundhog – and you remember what they do to me – on the front porch days earlier. I wasn’t tempting fate by invading his lair.)

So, it’s about 2:00 am and I can literally hear the coyote paws striking dew-

covered grass nearby. Well, it seemed the right thing to do to GET OUT OF THERE now. I quickly sauntered, okay I stumbled and dashed, into the back door to escape what could be a catastrophic event.

The inside of the Harrell farmhouse is dark like an underground coal mine, so my hands are ‘feeling’ for the walls as I struggle to again find the staircase and retreat to my warm bed. I was thankful to have escaped yet another vicious wild animal attack...at least so I thought.

It seems that sometime during the early evening house, long after farmer Clint had passed out in my bed, the Harrell’s son, two granddaughters and their itsy-bitsy teacup Yorkie dog named Kringle had come for a visit.

I finally came upon the stairs and began the steep climb to safety, all the while contemplating the sheer terror of what might have happened to me had the savage coyotes managed to corner me on the porch.

Suddenly, out of the pitch black of night, an animal screamed, it jumped on my bare leg and growled like a grizzly bear...the nightmare was true. I screamed – not sure how my friends slept through the cries for help – and nearly plunged backward down the staircase. I sensed the soft fur and a very wet tongue attacking my legs. I knew it was only moments before the creature would take its first chunk of farmer Clint flesh.

I regained my balance, dropped to my hands and knees, and duck-walked quickly up the mountain staircase...arriving at the landing and frantically searching for the light switch. I knew this was the end; the carnivores would soon drag my lifeless carcass into the woods. But at least I would confront my attackers and put up a fight.

The blinding light shattered the pitch-black night, startling me and the beast. When what to my wondering eyes should appear...but the itsy-bitsy Yorkie named Kringle, so glad to see me. I first thought it was a mirage, possibly an out-of-body, near-death experience. So, this is what a coyote looks like? Not what I expected.

My heart nearly stopped...my breathing was labored...my nerves completely frayed...is there no safe place at Harrell Hill Farms? Can a farmer not feel secure in his own farmhouse? (Well it’s not actually my farmhouse but you know what I mean.)

I slouched in the corner; unsure of the vision before me...what was it, where did it come from, why was it now sitting in my lap licking my face at 2:30 am? Where were the coyotes, they must be close behind?

That’s when I remembered Doug telling me that his son, Greg, and granddaughters were coming for a short visit and would arrive at 9:00 pm or so. “That’s it,” I said aloud. “This vicious teacup Yorkie must belong to Greg.”

I rubbed Kringle’s belly, rustled his fur a bit, shooed him down the STEEP staircase and slinked back into my bedroom.

The beasts continued to howl outside, nearer than ever now, but I didn’t care. I was tired...I was safe...I was happy...I was home. I had cheated death once again, a new adventure on the Funny Farm.

Still humbled in these hills,
Farmer Clint

Christian Voters

By Laura Macklem

The primary season for the 2024 election has started, and during this time you will hear many candidates in Republican primaries claim to be conservative. But as Christians we need to look beyond the talking points and slick ads to answer the question--will this candidate stand up for Biblical values?

After redistricting, candidates rushed to declare their intentions to run in newly drawn districts with a conservative bend. In some primary races, up to 10 candidates are jockeying for the top spot to face off in the general election, including Congressional District 13 and Lt. Governor. The abundance of candidates does provide the advantage of choice but can also confuse, especially when conservative candidates are proclaiming their commitment to family values.

We should be aware that professed Christians don't always vote for Biblical values. In the North Carolina General Assembly, we have two pastors who vote with the abortion lobby and against parental rights, along with other Christian members. Cabarrus County's Representative Diamond Staton-Willims (HD 73) said she consulted with her pastor and Christian church, and having an abortion was the right thing because another child would disrupt her family's opportunities and schedule. In Wake County, School Board member Monika Johnson-Hostler said her Christian faith guides her, but she fights to keep pornography in schools. Don't look for labels, look for fruit.

Christian voters can make informed decisions by referencing trusted organizations for endorsements, voter guides, and candidate surveys. The Christian non-profit policy group NC Values Coalition partners with iVoterGuide, a free Christian digital voters' guide available on your phone or computer. iVoterGuide rates candidates conservative to liberal, based on a questionnaire they send out on candidates' positions, issues, candidates' endorsements and voting records, donations, and public comments. This year iVoterGuide will have a new red 'thumbs up' feature indicating North Carolina candidates thoroughly vetted and endorsed by NC Values. Included in the survey is a direct question about faith. NC Values also just produced a Legislative Scorecard indicating how NC General Assembly members voted for family values. Voters interested in a more hands-on critique can attend candidate forums, do online research, follow social media, and contact contestants directly. The responsibility of voting isn't just on election day or during early voting, it begins with research and prayer. Share your research with friends and family and encourage your socially conservative friends to vote.

According to the group Christians Engaged, "Americans who call themselves born-again Christians only vote on average 2% more than the general public." For a demographic whose values are under daily attack, we can do better. Election after election I see races called by razor-thin margins demanding recounts, proving that every vote does count. This past session lawmakers passed a pro-life bill limiting abortions, legislation to prevent males on female school sports teams, protecting minors from medical gender transitioning, and upholding parental rights. None of these pieces of important legislation would have been possible if Christians stayed home on election day, but the reality is that we need more pro-life conservatives in the General Assembly. While conservatives have a super-majority, it's too close for comfort without a vote to spare. When Christians decline to vote, it's another vote for the radical left. We have to increase our numbers as voters.

North Carolina conservatives have the opportunity to increase the conservative super-majority by 7 seats, elect another conservative to the Supreme Court, three more justices to the Court of Appeals, 11 conservatives to Congress, and Council of State members including the Governor, Lt. Governor, Attorney General and also President of the United States. Don't forget the school board races where decisions are made about curriculum and parental rights.

The left is motivated now more than ever. They are organized, militant, and well-funded, but their values aren't in line with most North Carolinians. When Christians are committed to voting for candidates with Biblical values, they are voting against the spiritual war waged against families. They are protecting the unborn, parental rights, truth, justice, and religious freedom. As committed, informed Christian voters, we can make change for God's glory and the future of our state and nation.

Laura Macklem is Press and Political Director for NC Values Coalition



"Imperatives For The Christian In 2024"

By Toby Crowder
Mitchell County



2 Chronicles 15:4 "But when they in their trouble did turn unto the lord god of Israel, and sought him, he was found of them."

Welcome to the New Year! If you are like me, you are still writing the date as 2023 and wondering where the last year has gone. For some, the New Year is time for a "fresh start," and can also serve as a time to ponder the past year and progress in our churches. It is a joy to know that God has always used His people to help accomplish His plans that God still has a plan for this world of ours, and that He has a part for you to fulfill while serving in your local church body! You have a part in the future of His church... In its success.... Or its failure.

This time of year, most people will make some sort of "resolution" either publicly or privately. To resolve means "to make a decision or to solve a difficulty." We often think about resolutions or things that we can intentionally improve including our weight, our finances, or our social calendar. Rather than focus on a resolution, which we may or may not keep, (remember that unused gym membership from 2021?) I would like to offer to you some "imperatives" that I believe are critical to our church bodies. By using the word "imperative," we need to think about vitally important things; they are not just suggestions but are absolutely necessary. The word imperative means: critical, crucial, or essential. Humanly speaking, some imperatives for us are food... water... physical activity... etc. These are not only suggestions, but they are considered critical to our health and well-being, and without them, our bodies will eventually not be able to function and perform as they were designed to do.

May I recommend to you reading 2 Chronicles 15 and the example set forth by Asa. We learn in v. 3-4 above that they had been outside the will of God for some time, and in their distress, they returned to God after a period of decline. Without some particularly significant changes, they would be unable to serve and follow God as they should. The Bible is as relevant to our lives today as it was when it was written, and we can still apply these principles to our lives and churches in the coming New Year and see God move among His people.

Firstly, there was a RETURN of God's people to Him. Verse four tells us that they turned to God and sought Him. Friend, that is a plan that has always worked! When we turn to God and seek Him, that is the first step in giving Him the place that He deserves in our lives and our churches. Before God will send revival and heal our homes, our churches, and our land, there must first and foremost be a return to God of His people. If we want to make the most of 2024, we must follow the example of Asa and realize as God's people, that whatever we strive to do.... We need Him!

Secondly, there must be a REMOVAL from our lives of all the things that do not honor God. If you read v.8 of this chapter, you will find out that Asa "put away" all of the abominable idols of the land and made a conscious decision that they would only honor and serve the one true and living God. For Asa and the people, it was the idols and the high places that induced them to follow other gods. We only need to take a quick look at our society today to see that there are many "idols" that come between us and the service of God.

Lastly, in v. 8, we see that they "renewed the altar of the Lord." If you continue to read this entire chapter, you will find that they renewed several things including an offering, their covenant, their worship, their praise, and the list goes on. True sweeping change is what will happen when revival comes, and revival comes when we make a conscious decision to RETURN to the Lord. This return is imperative for God's people in 2024! I pray that God blesses you, your family, and your church in this New Year.

Toby Crowder serves as Pastor of Mt. Carmel Baptist Church in Spruce Pine. He and his wife Leslie have been married for 28 years and have two daughters, Emilee, and Katy. He can be contacted via the church's website MCfamily-forChrist.org or mtcarmelsprucepine@gmail.com

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Obedient Heart Fellowship

Lest We Drift
By Jim Huskins
McDowell County



Temptation creeps quietly under every garden gate. “Did God really say...?” The father of lies revealed much of himself as he led Adam and Eve astray. One of those insights is his astonishing ability to sow doubt. Unchallenged, doubt bears the fruit of confusion, redefinition, and rejection of truth.

Our culture is awash in satanic doubt. One of our Supreme Court Justices cannot define the word “woman.” A startling number of professing Christians attempt to blend the religion of evolution with the worship of Creator God. “People of faith” consider marriage optional and same sex relationships acceptable. “Freedom in Christ” is an excuse for sinful practices which the Bible labels abomination. Some Christians endorse the murder of unborn babies. None of these heresies would be thinkable had not the ancient adversary been able to instill doubt in the minds of well-intended people.

This rejection of Biblical truth is blatant in the widespread misunderstanding of what constitutes “worship.” Modern Christians believe that “worship” is about singing or listening to other people sing. The Bible teaches no such thing.

The Hebrew word for “worship” is shachah, Strong’s 7812. It means “to bow down.” In traditional Eastern cultures, the act of prostrating oneself before another is an acknowledgment of inferiority. The one being worshipped is affirmed as greater, stronger, and more significant. Hebrew worship always includes sacrifice. Implicit in the Hebrew act of “bowing before” is a commitment to absolute obedience. Nowhere in the Bible is worship defined as “singing to” or “singing about” someone.

Unquestioning obedience is evident in Abraham’s response when he was called to sacrifice the son of the promise. The word shachah occurs twice before. In Genesis 18:2, Abraham bowed before three visitors to his camp. In 19:1, Lot bowed before two angels at his home in Sodom. The first account where the definition of shachah is fleshed out through action includes Genesis 22:5, “*Then Abraham said to his young men, ‘Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you.’*”

Abraham’s example provides startling perspective on the nature of worship. God told him to take the long-awaited son of promise, travel to Mt. Moriah, kill the boy, and offer his body as a burnt offering. His response leaves no doubt that worship is unquestioning obedience. Also, worship never involves arguing with God.

“But God, you promised us this boy. We waited a long time. We’re too old to have another. This is going to break his mother’s heart. Surely you don’t expect me to kill my own son. You’ve never before asked for human sacrifice.”

None of these natural reactions were included in Abraham’s response. Instead, he devoted himself to the details of carrying out what he had been told. He rose early, saddled his donkey, selected two servants to assist, split wood for the sacrifice, and set out for the assigned destination. When they arrived, Abraham told his servants that he and Issac were about to worship.

But how was that possible? They had no choir, no stage, no keyboard, no electric guitar or bass, no microphone, no amplifier, no drum kit, and no laser lights. The closest thing to a smoke machine was a simple altar and some firewood. Who could worship under those conditions? When Abraham bound his only son with a rope and placed him on the altar, no one sang. No one waved their hands. No professional musicians presented a concert. The worship Abraham offered was nothing but obedience.

All of us come to God with a sinful nature. He expects us to change. He demands that our every desire be to honor Him by following His Son’s example. Jesus walked in perfect obedience. Many churches tell us that all we have to do is nod our head and repeat a little prayer. Jesus says that we must hunger and thirst after righteousness. He says to every disciple, “*If you love me, keep My commandments.*” Grace does not mean that we are excused from obedience. Grace is what covers our human frailty when we fail in spite of sincere effort.

The Second Chapter of Hebrews offers us this challenge: “*Pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.*” Our old enemy’s demonstrated goal is to trick us into paying attention to the wrong things. His plan is working. Jesus left us to carry out the most important work in history. He assured us that He will return to finish the job. He commanded us to gather each Sabbath to be instructed and encouraged so that we might do a better job. How did the devil convince us that our job is to show up on Sundays for entertainment and emotional catharsis? How did he distract us from the fact that “worship” is what we do the rest of the week?

Hebrews 11:6 teaches that “*Without faith it is impossible to please God.*” Most Churches claim that “faith” is something you think. The Bible teaches that “faith” is what you do. Here is that lesson in James 2:21, “*Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?*” Saving faith always leads to a sincere attempt to live in obedience. An obedient life is an unending act of worship.

The ancient deceiver led Eve down that garden path to rebellion. The cost of the first sin is unimaginable. Now he has redefined “worship” as “singing.” When we gather as believers, we should sing joyfully and loudly. Singing helps focus and express our delight and devotion to the One who died in our place. But singing is not worship, and “Church” does not exist merely to meet my needs. Hebrews 11:17 says that, “*By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Issac.*” We could sing nonstop for the next hundred years and never scratch the surface of that level of commitment.

Obedient Heart Fellowship meets each Sabbath (Seventh Day) at 3023 US 221 N. Marion, NC. 10:00 A.M. 828-460-7913

Jim Huskins is pastor of Obedient Heart Fellowship.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through Him. John 3:16-17

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Making a Difference
By Our Relationship to the Scripture

By Dr. Tom Walker
McDowell County



2 Tim 2:15 says, “*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*”

There is a famine of Bible study in these days. Due to people being occupied with lesser important things, there is a deficient knowledge of what the Scriptures have to say to our generation. It is about time we wake up and realize how important the Word of God is to our daily lives.

One of my greatest treasures is my Dad’s old KJV Thomas Chain Reference Bible. Many of its pages are worn, not from abuse but rather from use. The most damaged pages in his Bible is the book of Ephesians. My dad would not have lived the quality of spiritual life he demonstrated if he had not been a diligent student of the Bible.

So much is said in the Bible about the importance of the Word of God in our lives. Here are a few examples from God’s Book, looking only at one chapter in the Bible, referring to Psalm 119:

Psalms 119:9: “*Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word.*”

Psalms 119:11: “*Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee.*”

Psalms 119:16: “*I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word.*”

Psalms 119:25: “*...Quicken thou me according to thy word.*”

Psalms 119:28: “*...Strengthen thou me according unto thy word.*”

Psalms 119:38: “*Stablish thy word unto thy servant...*”

Psalms 119:42: “*...I trust in thy word.*”

Psalms 119:50: “*This is my comfort in my affliction: for thy word hath quickened me.*”

Psalms 119:67: “*Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.*”

Psalm 119:74: “*...I have hoped in thy word.*”

Psalms 119:101: “*I have refrained my feet from every evil way, that I might keep thy word.*”

Psalms 119:105: “*Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.*”

Psalms 119:133: “*Order my steps in thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me.*”

Psalms 119:140: “*Thy word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it.*”

Psalms 119:148: “*Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word.*”

Psalms 119:162: “*I rejoice at thy word, as one that findeth great spoil.*”

Psalms 119:169: “*Let my cry come near before thee, O Lord: give me understanding according to thy word.*”

Psalms 119:172: “*My tongue shall speak of thy word: for all thy commandments are righteousness.*”

Let’s go back to our text found in 2 Tim 2:15, which says, “*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.*”

The Command

Notice the word “study.” That word is translated to other places in God’s Word as “do diligence, be diligent, endeavor, and labour.” It can imply using speed, making an effort, or being prompt and earnest.” It suggests we are to exert ourselves for something beneficial or valuable.

Word studies are very beneficial. There are several truths we can learn from examining the verb “study” in our text. It is a singular verb, which may tell us there is a benefit to doing personal, private Bible studies. Although we give that emphasis, it in no way takes away from or discredits the value of studying the Scriptures with other people.

It also is aorist tense, which gives reference to doing something at a certain time. We need to allot specific times to study the Word of God. If we do so, we mustn't let circumstances around us steal the time we have set aside for laboring in Bible study.

It is an active voice. No one else can do this for us, it is our responsibility to be motivated to actively spend time seeking an understanding of what the Word of God has to say. No one can do this study for you, because you must dig in and do it for yourself, knowing how beneficial it will be to your Christian life.

It is in the imperative mode. In simple form, that means it is a command, not just a suggestion. God specifically and purposely inspired the use of the imperative mode in expressing the action involved in studying.

Consider a verse in Ecclesiastes 12:12: “*...Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh.*” A diligent scriptural investigation is tiring, but the benefit is well worth the effort exerted.

The Objective

The Bible says in our text verse the objective of our Bible study is to: “*Show thyself approved unto God.*” It is too often that we do what we do to obtain the approval of others.

What God thinks about what we are doing is far more important than what other people think about what we are doing.

2 Timothy 2:4 says, “*No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier.*”

In Galatians 1:10 the Apostle Paul asks a couple of questions and then gives

his own response to those two questions: “*For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ.*”

God is very pleased when we set aside time, and give diligent effort, to spend valuable time in searching the Scriptures.

Pleasing God should be of supreme importance in our lives. Here is what we must not forget; one day we will have to stand before Him. If a person is lost, he or she will stand at the Great White Throne judgment, where degrees of punishment in Hell will be decided. The Great White Throne judgment will occur after the tribulation and the thousand-year millennial reign of Christ is completed. Saved people will stand at a separate judgment, the Judgement Seat of Christ, right after Jesus comes to rapture His bride, the church. Jesus said in Rev.4, “*My reward is with me.*”

Pleasing God will never be regretted. Those who possess regrets will be the ones who have little or no concerns about pleasing or gratifying God. Saved people want to delight the heart of God; we want Him to take pleasure in the way we daily conduct our lives.

Pleasing God will reap eternal benefits and rewards. Jesus said if a person gives a cup of cold water in His name, that person would in no wise lose their reward (Matt.10:42). We are wise if we live not just for the present, instead we should live with eternity in view.

The Courage

Our text verse says, “*A workman that needeth not to be ashamed.*” The more thoroughly we know the Bible. The word “ashamed” speaks either of the frame of mind of the Bible student or the way it is presented.

Many people should be ashamed of the way they interpret the Bible. Any doctrine can be taught when you take the Bible out of its context. There is a whole Bible context, a book context, a passage context, and a verse context. For instance, if one tried to prove one can lose his or her salvation from Matthew 7:19, which says, “*Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire*” is a false interpretation. To try to say that is a believer, who is cast into the fire, would violate the context, or the surroundings of that verse; plus, it would contradict many other passages that prove a genuine, born-again child of God can never be lost (Rom. 8:38-39; John 3:16; Heb.7:25 and many others).

In attitude, we should never be ashamed of the Word of God. We must realize it is settled in Heaven (Ps. 119:89). We need to handle the Scriptures carefully because it is God’s settled, eternal truths.

In presentation, we must compare Scripture with Scripture as found in its context. To fail to do so is to err in Biblical presentation and proclamation.

The Goal

Consider the words- “*Rightly dividing the Word of Truth.*” We should interpret the Bible with the view to discover what God is seeking to say to us. We are to handle the Word of Truth rightly and correctly. Since the Bible is God’s truth, it is a serious matter to misrepresent what the Scriptures are telling us; that is what the people who are not born again do.

Interpreting the Bible correctly is so important, we have a warning in Revelation 22:19—“*And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.*” To use this verse as proof that once a person is saved and born into the family of God, he or she can lose the free gift of salvation, is to take this verse out of context. This passage assumes a child of God will not tamper with the Scriptures. He may not understand all that is written in the Book of Revelation, but he will recognize it as a declaration of hope that has been assured to him in grace through salvation in Christ.

You can make a huge difference in life if you have the right attitude and relationship to the Scripture.

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



Under the Spout
Where the Glory Comes Out

By Kurt Bomar
Avery County

“But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost, Keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.” Jude 20,21

There is a wonderful old hymn entitled “Get under the spout where the glory comes out.” There is also a deep profound truth hidden in it.

First, let me dispense with a common misconception. It doesn’t mean that this upcoming year we can earn God’s love by being a “good little boy or girl.” Oh, how we miss so much when we think that God’s love for us depends on our obedience to Him. This can be proven by looking at Rom. 5:8. There Paul tells us that God loved us even before we knew Him. While we were still in a sinful state. Does it make sense that after we are saved, His love for us would turn conditional?

God doesn’t make a list and check it twice like Santa. Rather we make the list and He blots it out!

If this is true, then why are we told to “keep ourselves in the love of God?” It’s very simple. It means we are wise to be in the place where we can receive His blessings. Think of God as a refreshing waterfall on a hot day. We can get under it and enjoy that blessing, or we can wander down a path that separates us from it.

Here’s the point. When we wander away and we don’t feel the blessings of God we need to know that He didn’t shut off the waterfall. It’s still going full power. He is faithful even when we are not. God doesn’t monitor the volume based on how well we are doing. He simply gives us the choice to bask in His blessings or not. But His love for us is always there.

It’s up to us to get back under the spout where the glory comes out.
Selah (think about it)
Come join us on Sundays at 11:00

Kurt Bomar is the Asst. Pastor of Walnut Grove Church.



Humor

By Buddy Freeman
Madisons County



A dog followed his owner to school. His owner was a fourth grader at a public elementary school. When the bell rang, the dog slid inside the building and made it all the way to the child’s classroom with him before a teacher noticed him and shoo’ed him back outside, and closed the door behind him. The dog sat down outside the door, whimpering and staring at the closed doors and not understanding in the least as to why he was refused entry. Then – God appeared beside the dog, patted him on the head to comfort him, and said, “Don’t feel bad fella’ they won’t let ME in there either.”

The speaker at the county Farm Bureau picnic had been on the platform far too long, and his audience had become in-attentive and started chatting among themselves. He kept rambling on even though no one was listening. Exasperated, the speaker interrupted his talk and turned to the chairman. “Mr. Chairman,” he complained, “there are so many people talking in the audience that I can barely hear myself talk.” “Oh, that’s all right,” the chairman assured him, “You’re not missing a thing!”

To help untangle my fishing gear, I asked my wife and her sister to walk the fishing line across our front yard and hold it taut while I reeled it back in. A man strolling by saw the two good-looking women and did a double take. “I don’t know what you’re using for bait, “ he said to me, “but I’ll take a dozen.”

Like a lot of young people, I was eager to get out of the rural community where I was raised and move to the city. My boyfriend, on the other hand, wanted to stay put. “This place is booming,” he told me. “It’s not just a farm town anymore.” He almost had convinced, until one afternoon when I dropped by the local Laundromat. On a washing machine was posted the sign, “For Horse Blankets Only,”

Carol, a clerk in our local Christian bookstore, often refers to a church as “the body.” One week, several members of a local “body” had come to the bookstore to buy birthday gifts for their beloved pastor. Later, that pastor, John, stopped at the store. He told Carol about the surprise party his congregation had given him the night before. Carol’s heart was touched. Spontaneously, she exclaimed, “Oh, John, I just love your “body!” The customers in the store burst into laughter, leaving a startled look on John’s face and Carol’s, too.

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





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Crossword 279

ACROSS

1 the One who ___ enthroned on high (Ps 113:5)

5 If the ___ wishes to redeem the animal, he must add (Lev 27:13)

10 husband of Jezebel (IKing 19:1)

14 Terah became the father of ___, Nahor and Haran (Gen 11:27)

16 "We have ___ only five loaves of bread and two fish" (Matt 14:17)

17 before me was a ___ horse! Its rider was named Death (Rev 6:8)

18 They hatch cockatrice' eggs, and ___ the spider's web (Isaiah 59:5)

19 Two men ___ money to a certain moneylender (Luke 7:41)

20 Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth ___ (Josh 7:2)

21 But the Pharisees and ___ in the law rejected God's purpose (Luke 7:30)

23 together with her royal ___ and her father (Dan 11:6)

25 Peter denied it, at that moment a rooster began to ___ (John 18:27)

27 in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the ___ angels (1 Tim 5:21)

28 Persia, Ethiopia, and ___ with them (Ezek 38:5)

31 Then he said unto him, Come ___ with me, and eat bread (1 King 13:15)

34 the inscription that was written: MENE , ___, TEKEL, PARSIN (Dan 5:25)

35 abbr. for the 20th book of the O.T

37 branches from poplar, almond and ___ trees and made (Gen 30:37)

41 They were seared by the ___ heat and they cursed the name (Rev 16:9)

43 He ___ the temple area and began driving out (Luke 19:45)

45 The ___ the builders rejected has become the capstone (Matt 21:42)

46 went to war against ___ king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah (Gen 14:2)

48 I cast my ___ against them (Acts 26:10)

49 shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising, a ___, or bright spot (Lev 13:2) KJV

51 Esther's ___ and her chamberlains came and told it her (Esth 4:4)

53 Flee, save your lives, and be like the ___ in the wilderness.(Jer 48:6) KJV

56 I have not been drinking wine or ___ ; I was pouring out my soul (1 Sam 1:15)

59 Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or ___ joking (Eph 5:4)

60 therefore now make ye ____
 ____ with us (1,6) (Josh 9:11)
 KJV
 64 and it vomited Jonah ____ dry
 land (Jonah 2:10)
 65 returned to their place and ran
 at flood ____ as before
 (Josh 4:18)
 68 I will measure into their ____
 the full payment (Isa 65:7)
 69 things full of marrow, of
 wines on the ____ well refined
 (Isa 25:6) KJV
 70 does man gain from all his
 labor at which he ____ under
 the sun? (Eccl 1:3)
 71 They cooked it in ____ or
 made it into cakes (1,3)
 (Num 11:8)
 72 from Jerusalem, and from the
 coast of ____ and Sidon
 (Luke 6:17)
 73 with tumors, festering ____
 and the itch (Deut 28:27)
 74 Then the beasts go into ____,
 and remain (Job 37:8)
 DOWN
 1 hewed stones, ____ with
 saws, within and without
 (1 King 7:9)
 2 the gazelle, the roe deer, the
 wild goat, the ____ (Deut 14:5)
 3 You hypocrites, why are you
 trying to ____ me?
 (Matt 22:18)
 4 You are my God; ____ your
 servant who trusts in you
 (Ps 86:2)
 6 ____ loveth instruction loveth
 knowledge (Prov 12:1) KJV
 7 A ____ command I give you:
 Love one another
 (John 13:34)
 8 Sir, come down ____ my child
 die (John 4:49) KJV
 9 To ____ them that were under
 the law (Gal 4:5)
 10 their mighty ones are beaten
 down, and are fled ____
 (Jer 46:5) KJV
 11 Isn't he the man who raised
 ____ in Jerusalem (Acts 9:21)
 12 be ____ and always keep on
 praying for all the saints
 (Eph 6:18)
 13 As she wept, she ____ over to
 look into the tomb
 (John 20:11-12)
 15 Do not withhold your ____
 from me, O LORD (Ps 40:11)
 22 they will become snares and
 ____ for you (Josh 23:13)
 24 I ____ but my heart was awake
 (Song 5:2)
 26 to see if there are any ____
 understand, any who seek
 God (Ps 14:2)
 28 I have neither ____ on usury,
 nor men have lent to me
 (Jer 15:10)
 29 the Lord said unto me, Arise,
 and go ____ Damascus
 (Acts 22:10)
 30 for I have ____ a Nazarite
 unto God from my mother's
 womb (Judges 16:17)
 32 and gave them power ____
 unclean spirits (Mark 6:7)
 33 Darius the ____ took over the
 kingdom, at the age of sixtytwo (Dan

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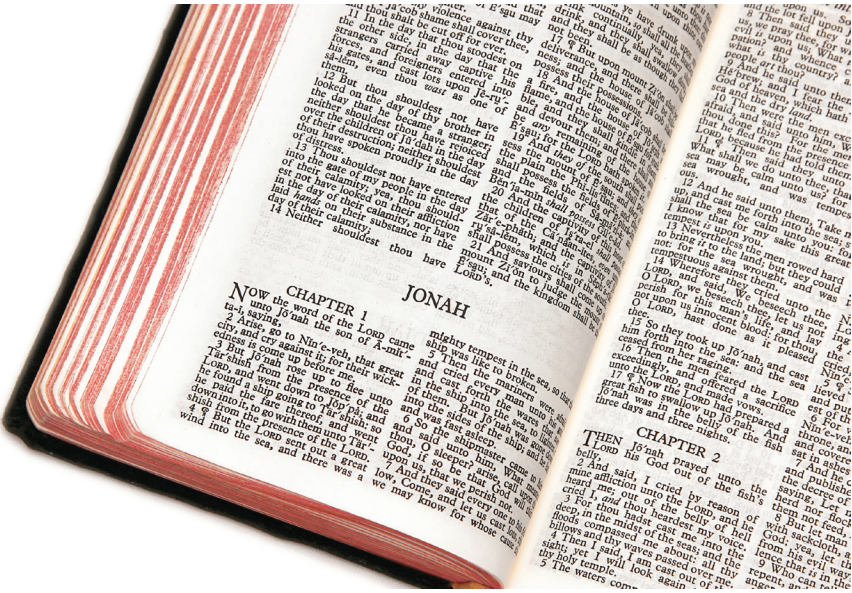
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5:31)
34 But there went up a _____
from the earth, and watered
(Gen 2:6)
36 Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur and
_____ the five kings of Midian
(Num 31:8)
38 one of the tribes of Israel
39 Thou shalt break them with
_____ of iron (1,3) (Ps 2:9)
KJV
40 John his brother, who also
were in the ship mending
their _____. (Mark 1:19)
42 Jesus replied, "Foxes have
holes and birds of the air have
_____ (Matt 8:20)
44 A base and _____ brood, they
were driven out of the land
(Job 30:8)
47 as their lives _____ away in
their mothers' arms
(Lam 2:12)
50 and wore golden sashes
around their _____ (Rev 15:6-7)
52 Their feet _____ swift to shed
blood (Romans 3:15)
53 So I ate it, and it tasted as
sweet as _____ in my mouth
(Ezek 3:3)
54 He replied, "Out of the _____

something to eat; out of the
 strong (Judg 14:14)
 55 Early the next morning they
 ____ and worshiped before the
 LORD (1 Sam 1:19)
 57 soar like the ____ and make
 your nest among the stars
 (Obad 1:4)
 58 As for men, God ____ them so
 that they may see that they
 (Eccl 3:18)
 59 brought the ass, and the ____,
 and put on them (Matt 21:7)
 KJV
 61 Nevertheless ____ saw
 them, and told Absalom (1,3)
 (2 Sam 17:18) KJV
 62 They ____ at me and say,
 "Aha! Aha! (Ps 35:21)
 63 The Holy Spirit will come
 ____ you (Luke 1:35)
 66 Such knowledge is ____
 wonderful for me (Ps 139:6)
 67 over the fowl of the ____, and
 over the cattle (Gen 1:26)

Solution on page 14



Losing Your Worldly Identity and Finding Your Path to Christ

By Elkanah Zanatta
Conyers, Georgia



My Off-Course Church Friend

“I don’t think I want to go to church anymore,” my new friend said, shortly after getting into the passenger seat.

“What?” I asked bewildered. “Did something happen at church?”

My new friend, whom I will address as Emily, is in her early 20’s. She recently moved to the area with her husband, whom I will call Derrik. A few days before, she had called me intoxicated and asked for some advice about her marriage. The conversation quickly turned into a long tale of background abuse and her sinful addictions and struggles. Emily and Derrik have been married for only a few years, and as the conversation continued, what was presented was a lot of infidelity, hurt, and unforgiveness.

I took a deep breath and recommenced my question: “Is it because of the past or a current situation that has happened?”

“It’s everything Elkanah. I believe in God, but I feel so lonely. I go on social media – and I download these apps, and the compliments I receive feel good. I then have a few drinks, and I end up calling Derrik and confiding in what I had done or threatening him on what I will do. I know he regrets marrying me. Why is God not helping me? I don’t want to continue to cheat on him.” Her face became red with frustration and sadness, and she began to cry.

Childhood Chaos

As we continued to talk, I learned that she didn’t have a stable upbringing, and she encountered a lot of spiritual abuse and abandonment. She confessed she was looking for love and attention. She admitted she just couldn’t get enough affection. Additionally, she was lost in her identity. I could sense she was looking for something more out of life. Her unhealthy coping skills didn’t help her mental state of mind, nor did the unresolved regret and shame she was enduring.

I paused as we stopped at a red light, and I put my hand on her shoulder. Then I said something she didn’t anticipate: “Everything you’ve expressed to me; in some capacity, I have had to deal with. I too have regret and shame. I too have said or done things I wish I didn’t do. You are not alone. We all try to find our identity in the world – but the world will not fill us. It will provide a big side dish of sin and consequences.”

“It doesn’t feel that way...It seems like your life is perfect. I walk into church, and everyone’s life seems like they just have it all together. Even when I pray, I just have a brain full of muffled voices. I have gone through so much over the years. My pain became my birthright to sin. The more I tried to bury my hurt, the more my struggle with bad habits and ongoing affairs continued. I do feel bad for what I do, and sometimes I can’t even look in the mirror. Yet – I just keep doing it.”

Choosing to Care

After a brief moment, I continued. “I am so sorry for the things you went through when you were younger. I can’t fill that deep hole. Derrik can’t fill that deep hole. And your addictions will only dig the hole deeper. But you know what? God can not only fill the hole but fill it to the top, where there is no longer a pit for you to fall in.”

We stopped at our destination, a local hiking trail, and headed for our walk. I then shared my struggles with regret and shame, and how all God’s children struggle with sin. I advised her that we just need to hand over our lives to God. I passionately dived into a few scriptures I memorized. One of these scriptures is in Isaiah 1:18 (KJV) which says, “*Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.*” I explained to Emily that although we do commit sins, God does not look at us the way that humanity looks at us. It doesn’t matter what we have done, if we submit ourselves to the Lord, He will wipe our slate clean. I also continued to remind her that a father will correct his children. In Hebrews 12:6 (KJV) it says, “*For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.*”

Being a Christian does not mean we are going to be perfect. On the contrary, as Christians, we will experience temptations and struggles.

A New Creation in Christ

As Emily listened, a new spirit came upon her, and her guilt was being released. After a short prayer, the words “shame” and “regret” turned into “repentance” and “submission”. She had a new enthusiasm for life. It is a joy to report that Emily and Derrik are together. They sought out Christian counseling, started over in a new town, with a new church family, and they both rededicated their life to Jesus Christ.

No matter the choices we make in our lives, God won’t desert us. He values us and we are his children. Emily, like many others, tries to find their identity in this world, but we know that the world only leads to carnal sin. With the Light of Jesus, we can make our way back to our Heavenly Father’s arms, and be assured in truth, who we are and where we belong.

Elkanah Zanatta is a former Youth Leader, Christian Counselor, and she is currently finishing up her degree as a Christian Life Coach. She has an online commentary and she is a regular contributor to a variety of Christian blogs, where she dives deep into theology, sharing her testimony, and the liberating truth of God's love.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, this person is a new creation; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. 2 Corinthians 5:17

The Answer

By Billy Graham



Question: I work hard to live right, though I fail most every day in some way. I try hard to please God. I do want to be in Heaven someday and want to know if I can be assured of this if I keep working at it.

Answer: From the writings of the Rev. Billy Graham

It is wrong to want to please God for the wrong reason. Many people hope they can somehow get God to like them. They think they can earn God’s love by being a good person. Then there are others—far too many—who simply ignore God or don’t care what He thinks about them. The Bible urges us to “*please [God] in every way: bearing fruit in every good work*” (Colossians 1:10, NIV).

No matter how good we think we are, we can never earn God’s love because God’s standard is perfection. Even one sin—just one—would be enough to keep us out of Heaven. The Bible says, “*For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all*” (James 2:10, NKJV).

This doesn’t mean that God will never love us. It doesn’t mean that we cannot be saved. No human is perfect. But Jesus in His perfect righteousness came to forgive mankind their sins and make us part of His family forever. He did this because He loves us and wants us to be in Heaven with Him for eternity. God offers mankind salvation. It is a free gift from Him because Christ has already paid for it by His death on the cross. But we must repent and receive Him as Savior and follow Him as Lord. Jesus said, “*He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life*” (John 5:24, NKJV).

Faith is the only approach to God. No one goes to Heaven until he or she has faith in Jesus Christ.

(This column is based on the words and writings of the late Rev. Billy Graham.)

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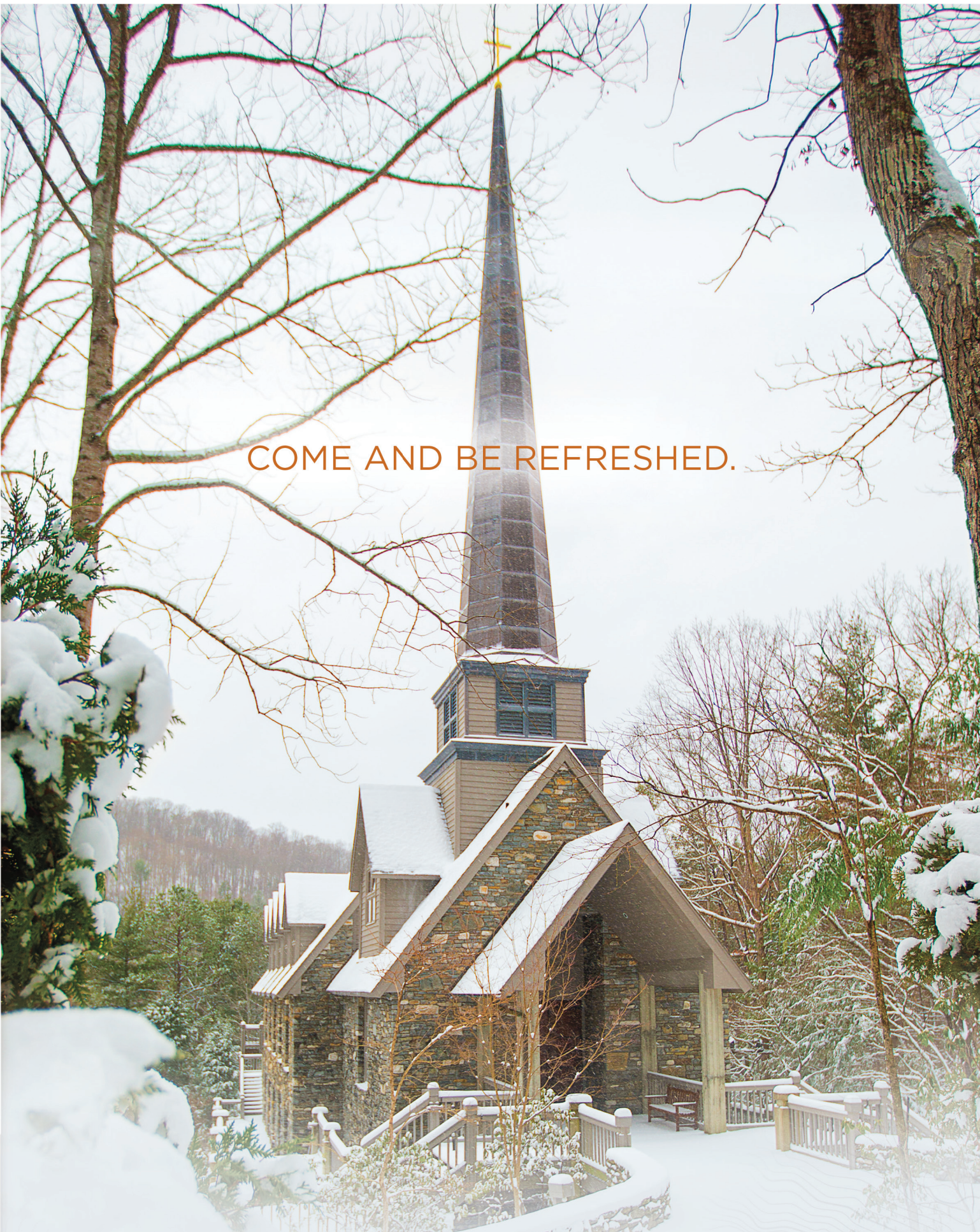
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