



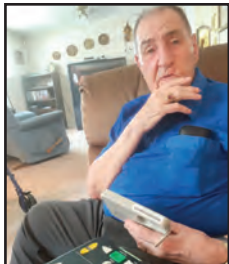
The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.

INSIDE



TAB audio products help visually impaired
◆ Page 2



Gatherings, travel, spending likely to look different during 2020 holiday season
◆ Page 6



After hurricane destroys building, Holly Grove decides to disband
◆ Page 7



Left: UAH campus minister Edwin Hocutt and student Thad Wooley pass out bags. Below: Local WMU groups drop off bags with JSU campus minister Gary Brittain (main photo).

Photo courtesy of Edwin Hocutt

Photo courtesy of Gary Brittain

Photo courtesy of Gary Brittain

Season of giving

Gift bags ministry for international students opens doors to relationships

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

As with a lot of things this year, the International Friends Bags ministry started with the question, “How can we do this differently?”

In the past, the bags — filled with hygiene items, snacks, school supplies, a Bible and a handwritten note — have been collected by Woman’s Missionary Union groups across the state and

given to international students each year at the International Friends Retreat held at WorldSong.

“We have partnered with Alabama WMU each year to pull that off,” said Chris Mills, student missions mobilizer for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. “The focus of that weekend each year is relationship building.

Our goal is that these international students would deepen friendships with American students and that

the American students would become more intentional at befriending those whom God has placed next door to us.”



Photo courtesy of Matt Daniels
Bryant Gobble (left) hands out bags at UNA’s Thanksmas event.

But when the COVID-19 pandemic canceled the retreat this year, Mills and other student ministry leaders began figuring out other ways to use the bags.

Some campus ministers reached out to their university’s

international student office to see if they had a use for the bags in welcoming students to campus.

And many said yes.

“All of the Baptist Campus Ministries are kind of approaching it in different ways. In some cases, students are passing out these bags in a one-on-one relational context,” Mills said. “In other cases, they’re having opportunity to engage them through events.”

‘Thanksmas’ event

That’s what students at the University of North Alabama did Nov. 20 at their Thanksmas event — they invited international students for a Thanksgiving meal outside and gave them a chance to paint a Christmas ornament and talk with BCM students (See ‘Retooled,’ page 13)



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tabonline.org/podcasts

TAB audio products help visually impaired

Jack Kinley says that in the midst of COVID-19, his church hasn't been passing out Sunday School books like usual.

So it's been an extra blessing for him to be able to listen to the Sunday School lesson commentary each week through the TAB News digest, an audio production featuring an abridged version of TAB's weekly print edition.

TAB News is provided free on audio cartridges mailed to those who are visually impaired.

"I enjoy listening to that — it kind of gives me a head start on my Sunday School for Sunday morning," said Kinley, a retired pastor and member of Crawford Road Baptist Church, Phenix City.

Variety of options

Kinley, 92, has a little bit of sight in one eye, so he's able to read some things on a device that magnifies written materials on a large screen.

He says he's fortunate because as a disabled veteran, the government furnishes him with that costly device. Not everyone has that resource available.

That's one reason TAB started

offering the audio cartridges as a ministry to those who have visual impairments (or physical impairments that prevent them from reading).

The digital players for the cartridges are available for free through the National Library Service.

To apply for the service, participants need to fill out a brief form and have a certified professional confirm the impairment.

You can download and fill out the application at tabonline.org/ application. It can be completed over the phone if needed.

Once you have a player, sign up for the free audio version of *The Alabama Baptist* by calling 1-800-803-5201 or emailing tabnews@thealabamabaptist.org.

We maintain a separate database from the National Library Service, so it's important for you to contact us for TAB's audio cartridges.

Another way to access this same resource without the player is through the TAB News podcast.

You can access TAB News and our other podcasts — TAB Talks and TAB Briefs — at tabonline.org/ podcasts or on your favorite podcast platform. (TAB)



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash
Retired pastor Jack Kinley receives cartridges of the TAB News audio digest preloaded for listening.

TAB Media

"If ye continue in My word, then ... ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:31-32

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The crossword puzzle can be found on page 13.

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MY RASHIONALE

By **Jennifer Davis Rash**
President and Editor-in-Chief

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Channeling our inner detective prevents unfair accusations

The older gentleman caught me off guard as I maneuvered through the crowded neighborhood.

People walk and jog in the area frequently, so it didn't shock me when he stepped out toward my moving vehicle.

I eased the brake pedal down slightly in preparation to stop, still weaving around the unusual number of vehicles parked on the street.

He remained a fair distance from my car, but he made it perfectly clear he was talking to me as he pointed a stern finger my way, waving it in rhythm with the intense anger spewing from his mouth.

Truly confused at what was happening, I chose to continue moving and make my way out of the neighborhood. I could hear him yelling for a bit longer, but I still didn't understand what had upset him so much.

Friends happened to be in the vehicle behind me and witnessed the episode. They interpreted the scene for me later.

The gentleman determined I had rolled through one of the neighborhood stop signs — which was not the case but is what he thought he saw — and decided to publicly and loudly scold me for it.

What actually happened was that one of the large vehicles parked on the street blocked his view, so he had not actually seen the full stop I made at the stop sign.

If I had not been so confused by why he was irate, then I

might have taken more offense to his accusation.

In the end, it became a funny story to share and an excellent example of how we all can easily be misguided by what we think we see or determine we know even when we can tell our view is blocked or that we have incomplete information.

All of us have the ability to fill in the holes and develop a seemingly solid storyline about a situation or another person. It takes a lot of discipline and careful assessment to separate definite, no-question facts from assumption and possibility.

During work on a recent news story, our team discovered public comments posted by a pastor on social media about the topic being covered.

He shared his opinion clearly on the matter and seemed to have intimate details about the situation, according to the statements made.

Rather than take the comments and run them as they were, we reached out to the pastor to ask him to share more about what he had said and provide examples to back up the statements.

He responded to our request

quickly and with kindness, and asked that we not publish the comments.

His reasoning? He actually did not have first-hand knowledge of what he had shared.

While he stated it matter-of-factly as if he had seen it in person, he realized he could not actually substantiate the claims.

His post was more of an emotional reaction than anything else, but he now grasps the difference between stating an opinion as fact and taking the time to see all angles clearly before making accusations.✝

RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

What questions do you have about the future of the SBC?

As the extended U.S. presidential election season winds down, Southern Baptists are gearing up for a presidential election of their own.

Current SBC president J.D. Greear remained in office an extra year when the 2020 annual meeting was not held because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bylaws require new officers to be elected by messengers attending the annual meeting, so those who were poised to be on the ballot in 2020 are now determining their plans for 2021.

R. Albert "Al" Mohler Jr., president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, was the first to announce his intention to still be considered for the position.

He shares his views on a variety of topics in an exclusive interview with George Schro-

eder and Jonathan Howe of Baptist Press (official news service of the SBC with oversight provided by the SBC Executive Committee).

The Nov. 18 article can be found at baptistpress.com by searching for "Mohler discusses SBC future." All future candidate interviews also will appear on the site as well.

We at TAB Media will put together a summary presentation of all who are being nominated for SBC president closer to the annual meeting in June, but we also will keep you informed on the in-depth reports as they are released by BP.

Upcoming information

The timing also is good to help with perspective on some of the "state of the denomination" conversations put on hold earlier this year.

Our team is working to gather statistics, articles and other research by longtime pastors and denominational leaders who have

spent years studying all that is happening within the SBC.

The goal is to inform and provide an outlet for varying viewpoints to be considered. We want all of you who are interested in having a calm and respectful conversation about the SBC and where it is headed to be able to do it with us.

The viewpoints, opinions and general information we will share from the researchers, pastors, leaders, etc., are not being endorsed by TAB Media or anyone connected to TAB Media. They are provided to help us all think as we seek clarity and understanding.

We need your help in accomplishing this task by considering the information as what it is — each person's research and thus his or her opinion on the matter.

—Jennifer Davis Rash

Your Voice



Share your comments, letters to the editor, blog excerpts, social media posts

'The Spirit intercedes' and God provides at Shocco Springs

By **Russell Klinner**
Executive director, Shocco Springs

Before the arrival of Hurricane Zeta at Shocco Springs on Oct. 29, we were scheduled to host a couple of groups on campus for the following weekend.

With the overall lack of guests so far in 2020, this was set to be a decent weekend, and we were all looking forward to it.

However, the storms came in and wrecked those plans.

The power went out Wednesday night when trees fell across multiple power lines on our campus, as well as on the lines feeding to campus.

We scrambled staff and moved food to generator-powered freezers, cleared the roads and made all the preparations possible for the power to be restored quickly, in hopes that campus would be ready for us to host the expected guests.

On Friday morning, I contacted a former board member who is affili-



Photo by Laurie Mullinax

ated with Alabama Power Company to see if he could do a little research and let me know when our power would be restored.

The news wasn't good. Ultimately, it was late Saturday night when

power was restored to central campus. Sunday morning with my family in the car on our way to church, I shared my frustrations with God.

We worked so hard to be ready for guests that we desperately needed, and now we couldn't host them. This is why we exist as an organization. Why wasn't the power back on earlier on Friday? Why? What's the deal? What were we doing wrong?

Over and over, these doubts and concerns kept running through my conversation with God.

As I walked into Sunday School downtrodden, I received the following text that began to open my eyes to His plan, and answered my why: "Good morning, Russell. Do you have 100 beds?" It was from one of my other friends at Alabama Power

who works with disaster restoration.

What has happened since then has been nothing short of God's will at work. Beginning Sunday night, we were able to host about 180 linemen from Florida Power and Light.

The leader of the group, Michael, came onto our campus frustrated. While working in Georgia, he had been tasked midday with moving 180 crew, trucks, equipment and support staff to Talladega.

As he arrived on our campus, his frustration turned to relief. Instead of the usual logistic problems with multiple hotels and other issues, he found that our amazing staff were prepared and ready to house all of the linemen at Shocco.

Over the course of the week, my staff and I had the opportunity to have true gospel conversations.

As they were leaving, the union leader on their line crew wanted to talk with us. He shared that as a kid he had come to Shocco and experienced what we do first hand. As a result, he and the crew had taken up a generous offering to support Shocco's ministry.

I was so frustrated we weren't able to host the groups we expected during the week, but I realized that if they had been on campus, it would have been nearly impossible for us to serve those incoming linemen.

As always, God was working ahead of me and I am so thankful. God truly works ALL things for good for those who are called according to His purpose.

I am humbled every day as I continue to see God's hand of provision for this ministry of His called Shocco Springs.

TAB staff and friends help double our reach

I enjoy sharing about TAB and sometimes gifting a subscription.

Jim Oakley
Centreville, Ala.

Because I have the best friends on the planet, and because I thought they could use some encouraging news and might like to read some uplifting stories on faith — I invited all my friends

on Facebook to like TAB.

And they ended up encouraging me with all their love and support! #bestfriendsever

Annette Brown
Guest services coordinator

I share TAB with my friends on Facebook and in person.

Deb Lowery
Financial assistant

Share online or email news@thealabamabaptist.org

Letters to the editor

The Oct. 15 My Rationale editorial, “What have you learned in 2020? How has it changed you?” has not been a topic I have thought about on a deep level.

My husband and I discussed this article at length and realized there have been some “good times” and some “not so good times.” But through it all, God has been in control and will continue to be; nothing takes Him by surprise.

After sharing our thoughts that evening, we stepped outside and saw a beautiful rainbow! My immediate thought was, our God keeps His promises, and the words to the chorus of the hymn, “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” came to mind.

“... All I have needed thy hand hath provided ...” was expressed in this hymn by T.O. Chisholm in 1923. Perhaps in the remainder of 2020 and beyond, we will prayerfully say, thank You God for all we have needed, not wanted.

We need the Lord, and we need each other. Let us be ever mindful of opportunities to share Christ with others who are in need.

Sue Rash
Cairo, Ga.

Jennifer, I just wanted to let you know I think you and the TAB team are doing a fantastic job! The *Fruitful* magazine for this year’s Alabama Baptist State Convention was exceptional. The content you and your team continue to deliver is helpful and encouraging to me and so many others. Thank you so much for all that you do!

Pastor Andy Frazier
Grace Baptist Church
Sumiton, Ala.

Just a note to thank you for including Joanne Sloan’s “Heroes of the Faith” in *The Alabama Baptist*. It’s my favorite column. It is timely, informative and well-written.

Anne Counselman
Thomaston, Ala.

“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

FROM “MARY’S SONG”

Luke 1:46–47

We often question His plan; we often doubt Him. In retrospect, we’re like, “Oh, man! He was working something out all along!”

Ayiesha Woods
Christian music artist

You don’t have to agree with me, for me to treat you like a person made in the image of God deserves to be treated. God has given you that right by the essence of your existence. Who am I to deny that?

Pastor Terrence Jones
Strong Tower at Washington Park
via Facebook

Hate leads to captivity, but exercising forgiveness sets you free.

Pastor emeritus Jay Wolf
FBC Montgomery

“Our churches should be little oases of love and harmony in the middle of a world that feels like it’s tearing itself apart.”

Jimmy Scroggins, lead pastor
Family Church in West Palm Beach, Florida, preaching during Nov. 16 virtual Alabama Baptist Pastors Conference

Heavenly Father, thank you for all things. Father, please forgive us our sins. Forgive us when we care less for others, when we forget that we are our brother’s keepers. Forgive us when we strike out in anger with words or with fists. Forgive us when we forget that you created us all — male and female, all races and ethnicities. Forgive us when our hearts are so hard that we can’t see

the good around us. Please, Father, forgive us for continuously grieving your heart with our foolishness. We thank you for each daily mercy, to try again to be better, to do better, to live as you created us — in your own image — in Love.

In Jesus’ name we pray and praise. Amen.

Help us, Lord, to be better.
Vernet Clemons Nettles
vcndailypray.com

Don’t underestimate the power of open, honest and vulnerable dialogue with the youth in your church about their worries, anxieties and fears.

Shane Pruitt
Executive director of next gen evangelism, NAMB

From the *Twitterverse*

@brocraigc

“God loves the church with a love too deep for human imagination: he loves her with all his infinite heart.” — Charles Spurgeon

@jdgrear

Those who are forgiven much, love much. And if you don’t love much, it’s because you are unaware of, or detached from, your forgiveness. #InStep

@jackngraham

Theological progressivism, which produces liberal Christianity, is the greatest threat to America and the world. It destroys every school, institution, church it touches. This is the real battle for the future of our nation.

@Rgallaty

The reason many people burn out in ministry is because they don’t

have an interior life (intimacy with God) to support their busy exterior life (service to God.). One thing you can’t cut corners on is your personal relationship with Jesus.

@alan_floyd

There is power in gratitude that changes us completely. Choose to be grateful, even in 2020.

@philwaldrep

God, help me to rely on Your word for encouragement. Help me to continue on. Create in me a desire to march on mission and to be obedient to what You say, no matter what comes against me.

@jordaneasley

According to Lifeway Research, over 60% of church members have not shared the gospel with anyone in the past six months. The Great Commission is more than a great

suggestion. God calls His people to share His good news!

@JackieHillPerry

Spiritual pride is the illusion that we are competent to run our own lives, achieve our own sense of self-worth and find a purpose big enough to give us meaning in life without God. — Timothy Keller

@DL_Staples

Is this how we are living our lives? “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1–2).

@joelkurz

I don’t cry much. But when I do, it’s usually when I’m writing a sermon. Tears of pure joy in the gospel. Nothing moves me like Jesus.

Coping with COVID-19 this CHRISTMAS

Gatherings, travel, spending all likely to look different during 2020 holiday season

By Denise George
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Our nation's ongoing battle with COVID-19 has put a definite damper on many of our upcoming holiday plans.

More than 100 years ago, during Christmas 1918, Alabama families huddled together in quiet quarantine to avoid the deadly germs of the influenza pandemic commonly known as the Spanish flu, the most destructive pandemic in recorded history.

Better than 1918 epidemic

The first Alabama flu cases were reported in Huntsville, the spread proving so rapid and deadly that the state closed all "places of public assembly."

Due to ongoing medical needs because of World War I, doctors

were scarce. Medical help came by wagon and often took days to reach Alabama's rural areas.

By October 1918, all but one of Huntsville's doctors and druggists lay sick with the flu. By the end of the month, the flu had infected more than 37,000 Alabamians.

Alabamians have many more advantages this Christmas than they did in 1918. A century ago, doctors didn't understand what caused or spread the flu.

Preventive vaccines were decades away from development. Schools, stores, theaters and churches closed without the advantage of online teaching, worship services, streamed movies or shopping technology.

Those who wanted health updates had to depend on old news coming from slowly delivered print sources.



Unsplash.com

Families had little or no communication with loved ones living away.

Dying Americans (more than 675,000) overwhelmed hospitals.

More than 50 million people died worldwide.

And now, here we are in 2020,

where due to the high risk of COVID-19, many Alabamians will be celebrating Christmas much like Alabamians did in 1918.

Many health care officials are urging caution with social gatherings, especially when someone is at a risk because of age or an underlying condition.

Out of caution, dinner parties and office get-togethers will be limited, as will holiday travel, dining in restaurants and recreation.

Last year, the nation's consumers spent about \$450 billion on holiday travel, eating out, sports events and entertainment. Analysts predict spending and travel will be greatly reduced this year.

With stringent shopping laws, store closings and bankruptcies, holiday gift and grocery shopping will be more challenging.

The National Retail Federation, the industry's leading trade group, encourages shoppers to shop early when stores are less crowded.

Online shopping

Retailers expect online shopping to increase by 25% during this holiday season, potentially amounting to almost \$200 billion.

Traditional delivery providers, such as UPS, FedEx and others, are predicting an avalanche of gift shipping and urge online consumers to order early.

Similar to Christmas 1918, many churches will cancel Christmas concerts, church gatherings and holiday programs out of caution.

Many Alabamians will celebrate the holidays quietly at home with only immediate family members. Some may discover they enjoy the holidays even more this year as they have a legitimate reason to escape the fast-paced, hectic holidays of Christmases past.

In fact, some may even decide to start new and more meaningful family holiday traditions — new Christmas customs directly inspired by the COVID-19 quarantine. 🎄

How can Alabamians celebrate Christ's birth safely in the midst of COVID-19?

Here are some suggestions for adapting plans for your family Christmas in 2020:

► Prepare a quiet Christmas.

Take advantage of the additional time this Christmas will bring and use the gift of extra personal and family hours to reflect upon Christ's birth, pray and study Scripture.

► Rethink elaborate gift giving.

With job closings, worker lay-offs, and fewer holiday-spending dollars, decide to buy, make or give smaller, less expensive gifts, being careful not to drain already-dwindling bank accounts.

Consider early gift and grocery shopping online with home delivery.

► Establish home holiday events. Become creative in plan-

ning Christmas family events at home, making quality time spent together the primary goal.

► For holiday dinners. If you plan to host a family Christmas meal at home, consider inviting only a few people so there's room to social distance.

Also consider having only one or two food preparers, and as in all cases, continue to practice good hygiene. Set out hand sanitizers, extra masks, tissues, etc.

Frequently disinfect kitchen and dining surfaces, avoid buffets, potlucks and sharing serving utensils.

► Celebrate together at a distance. Observe Christmas with loved ones using Skype, FaceTime or Zoom, enabling each person to see, hear, talk and enjoy one another from a safe distance.

► And remain connected be-

yond the holidays. Keep in touch with loved ones through telephone calls, emails, texts and online messages and video chats. Contact neighbors often, helping to meet urgent needs.

Stay informed

For current information regarding COVID-19, call the Alabama Department of Public Health hotline at 800-270-7268 or email covid19info@adph.state.al.us. Telephone calls are answered from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday through Friday. Interpreters are available.

For frequently asked questions and to check your symptoms, visit the Alabama.gov COVID-19 Information Hub at covid19.alabama.gov. (Denise George)



Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Strongholds of Truth

The Church: The Pillar and Ground of Truth

By Jerry Batson, Th.D.
Special to The Alabama Baptist

For several weeks we have been thinking about truth. For Christians, truth is rooted in the nature of God. The Bible captures this in its phrase, “the God of truth” (Isa. 65:16). The Psalmist confessed, “You have redeemed me, O Lord God of truth” (31:5). We have noted that God sent His Son as the embodiment of divine truth. Thus, Christ could say, “I am the ... truth” (John 14:6). The permanence of the incarnation of Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever, according to Hebrews 13:8, serves to remind us that our unchanging Christ is forever the embodiment of truth.

To safeguard the truth as revealed in Christ, God inspired the writing of the Bible as the enduring sourcebook of revealed truth. Being like incorruptible seed, the Bible is without any mixture of error. It is the believer’s safe deposit of God’s revealed truth. Christians will want to ask of any truth claims — Do those claims square with the Bible? In order that the truth might be vouchsafed to the followers of Christ to perpetually remind every generation of believers of that truth, God sent forth His Spirit whom His Word calls “the Spirit of truth” (John 15:26). The Holy Spirit bears witness to the Bible’s truth.

To these strongholds of truth, this week’s Theology 101 considers yet another guardian of divine truth, the Church. We read of this in 1 Timothy 3:15, which calls

the church “the house of God, which is the church of the living God, “the pillar and ground of the truth.” The term for “pillar” brings to mind the columns that support a building’s roof, thereby adding untold strength and stability to the edifice.

While the church has numerous roles in God’s plan of the ages, one of the most important has to do with preaching and teaching God’s revealed truth by holding fast to His truth, not only proclaiming it but also living by it.

Holding tight

The term for “ground” is one that suggests such ideas as foundation, bulwark and buttress. As such, the church ideally guards or protects God’s truth from the weakening intrusion of falsehood or half-truths. Truth attested in what we do, what we say and what we claim is made all the more believable in a world where truth and untruth can be difficult to distinguish.

This important work is at its best when the church holds tight to God’s revealed truth and heralds it to our generation and in our context, as well as passing it on to the next generation. 🌿

Jerry Batson is a retired Alabama Baptist pastor who also has served as associate dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University and professor of several schools of religion during his career.



‘Best-looking country church’ trusts God in difficult decision

Joey Varner remembers the stories his grandmother used to tell of walking down to Holly Grove Baptist Church as a little girl and seeing the sanctuary on fire.

He had no idea that he too would live to see a day when the church’s sanctuary was destroyed again, this time by a giant oak tree thrown across it by Hurricane Sally.

“We used to have two big oak trees, one on each side of the church,” Varner said. “They were pretty important — that’s where we had all our outdoor events. We would take tables outside and sit under the trees.”

They cut one of the oaks down a few decades ago, he said.

“The other one is now sitting in the middle of the church. It pretty much centered it.”

And since the storm hit Sept. 17, the church — which is located in the Lyeffion community in Conecuh County — has had to make some decisions. The church, established in the 1890s, has long been a part of the fabric of the area, and of Varner’s life too — he’s been going there since he was a week or two old.

Church’s heyday

But the church’s heyday was in the ’40s and ’50s, and as the population changed in the decades that followed, so did the church. Before the hurricane, they’d have six people there on Sunday mornings, including interim pastor Hughie Denton and his wife.

“The building was beautiful — the best-looking country church

I’ve ever seen,” Varner said.

And Cheryl Womble says it was a loving little community too — she joined the church about a decade ago and says it’s felt like home.

“It’s a very caring group of people,” she said.

‘Broke our hearts’

But in the end, the little church decided rebuilding wasn’t the best decision, and so they decided to disband.

“It broke all of our hearts, but we’re so few in number that we can’t see a good reason to build it back,” Womble said.

Varner agreed.

“It had a great impact and we sure hate that it ended like it did, but it doesn’t make sense for us to build another one,” he said. “Holly Grove has definitely been a big part of the community, and I can’t tell you how many people I have heard express their sorrow about the church, even in surrounding counties.”

But the legacy of Holly Grove Baptist will live on, and part of that will be in other churches, Varner said. As they’ve gone through the church, they’ve taken supplies like tables, hymnals and offering plates that could be salvaged and given them to other congregations in the area.

“We’ve had other churches offer to help us clean up and even rebuild, but we’ve prayed, and we don’t feel like that’s what we’re supposed to do,” he said. “It’s sad. But we feel like God’s hand is in this, and we trust Him.” (Grace Thornton)



Photo courtesy of Cheryl Womble

The sanctuary of Holly Grove Baptist Church in Conecuh County was destroyed by a giant oak tree blown over by Hurricane Sally on Sept. 17.

3 stories you should know



Facebook photo

Alabama Woman's Missionary Union expects around 9,000 backpacks, each including a Bible and Christmas story plus school supplies, hygiene items and toys, to be collected this year for use in evangelism efforts in Appalachia and the Mississippi River Delta. Each year, volunteers across the state, like those from Cave Spring Baptist Church, Decatur, (above) gather donations and pack the bags. Full coverage coming later this month in TAB. (TAB)

Chinese government seizes, converts churches

The Chinese government has seized numerous churches and converted them to centers for promoting the Communist Party.

According to *Bitter Winter*, a magazine that covers religious freedom, countless churches and ancestral temples have been converted.

The first floor of a Three-Self church in the Xiuyu district's Daitou town was converted in October. On Nov. 6, more than 100 government officials attended an opening ceremony for the center. The church pastor was forced to integrate stories about Mao Zedong in his sermon that day, sources said.

In April, a Three-Self church was shut down, and officials destroyed religious symbols inside the church. The cross outside the church was painted white to blend in with an exterior wall. (persecution.org)

Court upholds 'reason bans' in TN abortion law

A federal appeals court ruled Nov. 20 that "reason bans" in Tennessee's new abortion law can stand, at least for now.

The regulations passed by the Tennessee legislature in June ban abortion because of a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome or when the decision to abort is based on the race or gender of the baby. The laws make it a Class C felony for a doctor to perform an abortion if they know a patient is seeking the procedure for a banned reason.

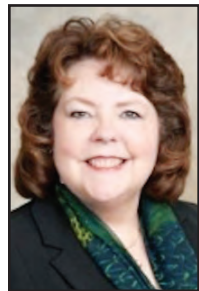
The law includes several other abortion prohibitions.

Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee signed the bill into law in July, and it was immediately challenged by abortion proponents. The "reasons ban" ruling does not affect separate cases involving other provisions of the law. (TAB)

Alabama news

OBITUARY

► **Lori Spikes**, executive director of Baptist Nursing Fellowship, a ministry of national Woman's Missionary Union, died Nov. 21 after being hospitalized with COVID-19.



SPIKES

A graduate of Samford University, Spikes was a registered nurse for more than 40 years. She served as an IMB Journeyman in Honduras from 1980 to 1982. She and her husband, Jim, served 20 years in Chile, where she was a parish nursing volunteer, coordinator of volunteer medical teams and administrative assistant. They also served with the American Peoples Diaspora in Europe and Canada for five years before returning to the United States in 2015. Spikes was chosen to lead BNF in 2018.

Spikes is survived by Jim, her husband of 38 years; daughters Amanda Johnson, Allyn Farmer and Andrea Spikes; and five grandchildren. (TAB)

BALDWIN ASSOCIATION

► **Mack Morris** is the new interim pastor of **Daphne Baptist Church**. Morris retired from Woodridge Baptist Church, Mobile, in 2019 after more than 50 years in ministry. ► **Phil Christopher** is the new pastor at **Three Rivers Baptist Church, Seminole**. ► **Henry Wilson** is the new pastor of **New Providence Baptist Church, Bay Minette**.

CLEBURNE ASSOCIATION

► On Oct. 11, the congregation of **Bethsadia No. 1 (Abel) Baptist Church, Delta**, held a special service to celebrate its 150th anniversary and honor the church's past and future.

During the service, Larry Vinson, director of missions for Cleburne Baptist Association, preached a sermon



Photo courtesy of Sonja Adams

called, "History Makes Us What We Are."

Pastor Pete Frames shared the history of the church and distributed a book he had compiled about it. Former pastors Curtis Collett and Buford Gaines also shared memories.

As part of the day, several certificates were presented to the church, including one from Sonja Adams, a commissioner for the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission. Frames also presented a certificate to Willie Freeman, the church's oldest member and oldest deacon.

"It was an enjoyable time for everyone," Frames said. (TAB)

ETOWAH ASSOCIATION

► **Robby Joplin** is the new pastor of **Macedonia Baptist Church, Gadsden**. His first Sunday will be Jan. 3, 2021. ► **Gary Wright** is the new minister of worship and discipleship at **First Baptist Church, Glencoe**.



WRIGHT

Headline news

from around the Southeast

Snapshot of six state conventions' budget realities

Each fall, messengers to Baptist state conventions typically gather in annual meetings to hear ministry reports, celebrate accomplishments and conduct business.

This year, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, annual meetings were as unique as the year itself, with some meetings happening virtually, some taking place in person but abbreviated, and others not happening at all.

For those not meeting, bylaws provided guidance for how to handle necessary business items.

One major business item front and center for all state conventions was budget planning for 2021, and this report focuses on what took place in Alabama and the five contiguous states.

Of the six reviewed, three state conventions — Alabama, Louisiana and Tennessee — left budgets unchanged for 2021, two — Georgia and Florida — decreased budgets, and one — Mississippi — is still to be determined.

Budgets remaining same for 2021:

Alabama

\$37.5 million budget to be split 50/50 between state causes and Southern Baptist Convention causes. No annual meeting was held. Alabama's budget has remained unchanged since 2019 and has remained relatively consistent in recent years after a few significant adjustments following the record \$46 million in 2009.

Louisiana

\$18,653,700 budget with 63.26% dedicated to state ministries and 36.74% going to SBC causes. Abbreviated annual meeting was held Nov. 10. Louisiana convention leaders indicated maintaining a consistent budget from 2020 to 2021 is a positive for the state after seven straight years of declining budgets going into the global pandemic year of 2020. The budget for 2013 was \$21,627,235, and it has decreased every year since then until the flat budget for 2021 was recently approved.

Tennessee

\$35 million budget with 52.5% for Tennessee ministries and 47.5% for SBC causes but 2020 formula adjusted for 2021 because of financial uncertainty. First \$25 million will be split 60/40 favoring Tennessee; next \$5 million split 50/50 and last \$5 million split 18.7% to Tennessee and 81.3% to SBC. Any monies over the budget amount will shift back to the original formula. No annual meeting was held, but the budget decision was made by the convention board of directors in a virtual meeting Nov. 11. Tennessee's current budget amount reflects a decade of

State Convention	Budget	State Staff (approx.)	Churches (approx.)	CP gift to SBC October 2020 (most recent report)
Alabama				
2020	\$37.5 million	62	3,225	\$1,626,991.81
2021	\$37.5 million	62	3,225	---
Georgia				
2020	\$40.25 million	140	3,500	\$1,303,199.87
2021	\$37.8 million	>100	3,500	---
Florida				
2020	\$30 million	47	2,800	\$1,147,566.15
2021	\$28.5 million	47	2,800	---
Louisiana				
2020	\$18.65 million	53	1,600	\$488,242.92
2021	\$18.65 million	53	1,600	---
Mississippi				
2020	\$31 million	87	2,100	\$984,140.34
2021	\$31 million (pending)	87	2,100	---
Tennessee				
2020	\$35 million	80	3,000	\$1,316,344.60
2021	\$35 million	80	3,000	---

gradual decreases since its record-high budget of \$39 million in 2009.

Budgets decreasing for 2021:

Georgia

\$37.835 million, a \$2.415 million or 6% decrease from the 2020 budget of \$40.25 million. The budget is split 60% for state causes and 40% for SBC causes. An abbreviated annual meeting was held Nov. 9. Georgia's budgets have fluctuated since its record budget of \$53.3 million in 2008. Also, more than 30% (49 of the 140) of Georgia Baptist Mission Board staff members were offered voluntary retirement incentives. To qualify, employees must be at least 55 years old with at least 10 years of GBMB service, and the decision must be made by Dec. 4. (Read more at tabonline.org/ga-convention.)

Florida

\$28.5 million budget, a \$1.5 million or 5% de-

crease from the 2020 budget of \$30 million. Florida's budget has gradually decreased for more than a decade from its record high of \$41 million in 2008. The budget designates 49% for state causes and 51% for SBC causes. No annual meeting was held, but the State Board of Missions adjusted the budget, acting as the convention ad interim. The Florida convention also led the SBC in baptisms in 2019, reporting 25,338.

Budget yet to be determined for 2021:

Mississippi

2021 budget was to be determined Dec. 1 meeting by the 100-member convention board and executive committee, which took place after press time for this issue. The 2020 budget is \$31,073,945 split 62% state causes to 38% SBC causes and comes after a gradual decrease from the state's record-high budget of \$35 million in 2009. No annual meeting was held.

(Compiled and written by Margaret Colson)

Someone You Should Know

ROSALIE HUNT

By Leigh Pritchett
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Rosalie Hunt, 82, of Gunterville and her husband Bob were International Mission Board missionaries more than 30 years, serving in eight countries.

She has been and continues to be very active in Woman's Missionary Union at local, state and national levels. She teaches Girls in Action (GAs) and children's Sunday School and serves on ministry-related boards including TAB.

A graduate of Oklahoma Baptist University, Hunt additionally earned three master's degrees and attended New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary. Hunt has written six books about missions heroes.

Describe where you focus your greatest ministry efforts.

I love being part of WMU and a member of the board of the national WMU Foundation. I have a burning desire to pass on our missions legacy — that which has been handed to us by our missions heroes — and especially love researching their lives and writing their stories.

DO YOU KNOW
A PERSON
WHO SHOULD BE
FEATURED AS
*Someone You
Should Know?*

Send his or her name, a contact number and the reason you think he or she should be featured to Someone You Should Know, c/o The Alabama Baptist, 3310 Independence Drive, Birmingham, AL 35209, or to news@thealabamabaptist.org.

Q: Who was or is one of the most influential people in your faith life? Why?

A: No doubt on this — my mother and father. Growing up as a missionary kid in China, I saw depths of faith lived out every day in the lives of my parents.

They taught me early about God's love; but beyond that, they lived what they said. As a child, I thought everyone had parents like that — came to find out that this wasn't the case! I was blessed.

Q: Identify a turning point in your life and how God was involved.

A: A watershed moment for me came on Christmas morning 1947 in Zhenjiang, Central China, where my parents were IMB missionaries. A beggar, a leper, appeared at our front door begging for food and explaining he was starving.

As a 9-year-old child, God spoke to my spirit in

that moment and, as I gave the leper bread, I realized I needed to spend my life telling needy people like this man that Jesus is the Bread of Life. What a privilege it has been to be able to follow that call.

Q: What has God been teaching you lately?

A: Along with the many millions in our nation (and around the world), my family and I are experiencing the "new normal" and encountering anew the need to examine the depths of our own faith and trust in the only One who is able to guide us through this pandemic.

Q: If there were one thing you could tell your younger self about faith, what would it be?

A: I knew from early years as an MK growing up in China — learning Scripture about faith and watching faith in action in my parents' lives — that God



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CHURCH NAME: First Baptist Church, Gunterville, in Marshall Baptist Association

LIFE VERSE: "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purpose." (Rom. 8:28)



never did fail them or fail me. And yet, I spent way too much time fretting and worrying in the ensuing years.

That was wasted time! His promises never failed, no matter where I was and what was going on. 🙏

TAB CLASSIFIEDS

Place a classified ad for \$1 per word. For more information call 205-870-4720, ext. 102, or email ads@thealabamabaptist.org.

CHURCH POSITIONS

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First Baptist Church of Charleston, a rural, mission-minded church in Southeast Missouri, is seeking a full-time pastor. Our conservative congregation has a growing music program, as well as active programs for our youth and young and senior adults. Salary and benefits negotiable based on experience and education. Resumé, cover letter and/or recommendations should be sent to: fbcharlestonmo@gmail.com or 301 South Main, P.O. Box 442, Charleston, MO 63834. Resumé deadline is Jan. 31, 2021.

ASSOCIATE PASTOR/ MINISTER OF MUSIC

First Baptist Church of Woodstock, Alabama, is seeking a full-time candidate to lead our worship ministry. Please submit resumé to: office@fbcwoodstock.org.

FAMILY DISCIPLESHIP MINISTER

Liberty Hill Baptist Church, Clanton, Alabama, is seeking a full-time minister of children/youth family discipleship. Send resumé to: search@libertyhillonline.org.

PART-TIME CHILDREN'S MINISTER/DIRECTOR

Valley View Baptist Church in Leeds, Alabama, is searching for a part-time children's

minister/director. To apply, please mail your resumé to: 7254 President St., Leeds, AL 35094 or email to: jennifer.freind@valleyviewbaptist.com.

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Photo courtesy of Kevin Ward

Limestone Baptist Association DOM Kevin Ward has distributed 70,000 pounds of potatoes since May.

Limestone Association shares potatoes with community

Kevin Ward says one thing he didn't expect from 2020 was to end up with a nickname like Tater King.

But back in the spring, he got a call from a friend at a local BBQ chain who said they had lots of potatoes they couldn't use. Before COVID-19, they would choose the sizes they needed for their baked potatoes, then send the rest back.

So Ward, director of

missions for Limestone Baptist Association, started thinking, and since May he has distributed 70,000 pounds of potatoes to ministry centers and churches all over the area.

He's also given them out to neighbors and in local parking lots and ball fields.

"We've been able to make some connections and get to know people we haven't known before," he said. (TAB)

Effort in Mobile 'beautiful picture' of church partnerships with Children's Homes ministry

By Martha Simmons
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Hurricane Zeta's last-minute intensification and change-of-course left many in Mobile unprepared and in the dark, the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes in the Gulf Coast city among them.

Thanks to some swift action by staff and members of Eastern Shore Baptist Church, Daphne, however, the campus care homes quickly got powered up and back to normal.

"After Hurricane Zeta, Dana Watson called me to say they had no power," said Chip Colee, chief administrative officer of Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries. Watson, chief operations officer for South Alabama, directs the Mobile campus.

Immediate action

"The houseparents were pretty concerned about all the food they store for the kids in the freezer and fridge," Colee said. "Addi-

tionally, you've got houses full of kids and no air conditioning, hot water, etc."

One home at the Mobile campus houses nine girls, the other seven boys.

"I sent a quick text to a friend on staff at Eastern Shore Baptist in Daphne," Colee said. "Within a couple hours, he shows up with other staff members from Eastern Shore, bringing generators, bottled water, gift cards ... and a load of encouragement for our hard-working house parents."

Upon receiving Colee's text, Tony Higginbotham, worship pastor at Eastern Shore, swooped into action.

"We had already been through Sally and had access to three generators. I called people in the church and asked if I could take their generators to the children's home," Higginbotham said.

"We went around with a truck and trailer and picked them up and took them.

"They were extremely grateful," he said. "It was a

treat for me to go on campus and see what a great facility they have there. Children were everywhere. They kind of swarmed us when we got there, and they helped us get the generators unloaded."

Gift of giving

Eastern Shore also brought gift cards purchased with the church's missions offering funds. "When disasters like that happen, you have unexpected expenses to get your household up and running. We knew that these families would experience the same," Higginbotham said.

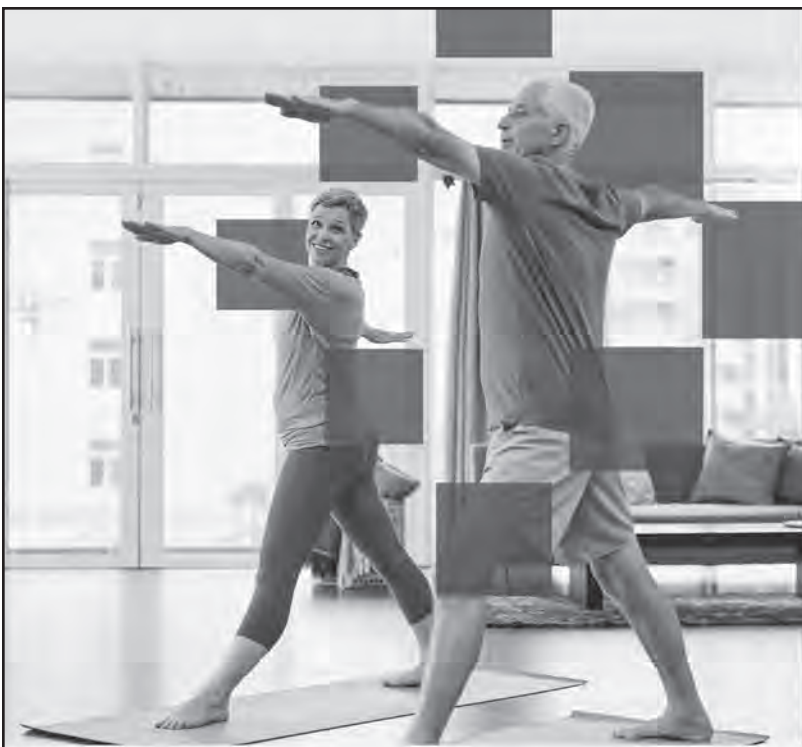
Watson said the gesture was greatly appreciated by the houseparents. "It was completely unexpected and also so thoughtful that they brought the gift cards so our kids could eat and relieve that stress on the house parents," he said.

"It really meant a lot to the houseparents," Watson added, noting that they've been through "a really strange time, with COVID and two hurricanes disrupting the homes' routine, structure and school schedules."

When the power resumed and the generators were no longer needed, Eastern Shore donated one of them to the campus homes for future needs. That generator was itself a gift to the church and turned out to be a gift that keeps on giving.

"When our power was down here in Daphne with Sally, some friends of mine in Mississippi found out we were in need of a generator," Higginbotham said. "When this need arose, it went to the children's home, and the people in Mississippi said to keep it."

Colee added, "This is a beautiful picture of the body of Christ at work and the partnership we have with so many churches, who support us with finances, prayers and in countless other ways." ✠



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UPCOMING EVENTS

IN PERSON: MAKING HIM KNOWN IN SOUTH ASIA

South Asia

Saturday, December 5, 10 a.m.-3 p.m., First Baptist Church Prattville



Join us for the South Asia Missions Spotlight, where South Asia missionaries will be sharing their stories, their ministry and how Alabama Baptists can be involved.

Learn more information and register at alsbom.org/southasia.

ONLINE: CONNECTING WITH THE CORE: DISCIPLE MAKING

Tuesday, December 8, 10-11 a.m.

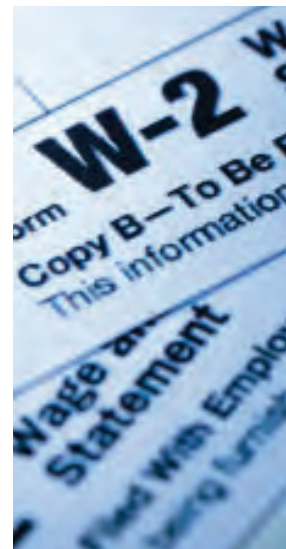
Join featuring State Missionary Daniel Edmonds, Alabama Baptist pastors Robert Mullins, Andy Frazier and Mark Gainey, and the Office of LeaderCare & Church Health for this session which will engage pastors in moving members to the core of every church: disciples who make disciples that serve the Kingdom and bear fruit that remains. Register at PinnacleAlabama.org under Upcoming Training.



ONLINE: EARLY BIRD TAX CONFERENCE

Thursday, December 10, 10 a.m.-Noon

What tax changes will be taking place in the new year? In this webinar, State Missionary Lee Wright will help answer questions to get you started out right. If you have questions about this webinar, you may contact Lee Wright at lwright@alsbom.org or 334.613.2241. Register at PinnacleAlabama.org under Upcoming Training.



Retooled approach allows broader reach

(continued from page 1) about holiday traditions.

And as the international students were leaving, the BCM students handed them a bag and asked them about their Thanksgiving plans.

Matt Daniels, UNA's

Baptist campus minister, said it created a natural bridge to build a relationship.

"What we found is that as students would ask, 'What are your Thanksgiving plans?' many would

say they didn't have any," Daniels said. "It worked out where a lot of the students are now going to Thanksgiving with our students and their families."

This sort of thing helps to "create student-to-student relationships so they can build on those relationships for the sake of the gospel," he said.

Four times as many

Mills said that's the goal, and even though they weren't able to have the retreat this year, it's possible their reach was significantly broader because of the way they were able to retool the ministry. Because they weren't limited to the 100-125 bags they normally give out at the retreat, they've already given out more than 400 bags on campuses around the state.

"That's been something we've rejoiced in, this unique opportunity," Mills said. "It's allowed Baptist Campus Ministries across the state to partner with international student offices and offered a chance to



Photo courtesy of Candace McIntosh
Acteens and their moms at Eastern Hills Baptist Church, Montgomery, assemble international friends bags and write personalized notes to include in each bag.

bless the students and love them."

And Alabama WMU and Acteens groups have gone the extra mile to make it happen, he said.

Some universities' international student offices have said they would take a bag for every single international student on campus, and area missions groups have risen to the occasion to fill that order.

Mills said too that the handwritten notes they include in each bag really make an impact.


"Over and over again, we've had international students say, 'This just means a lot that someone's thinking of me,'" he said. "It's built a bridge."

Gesture of love

Candace McIntosh, Alabama WMU executive director, said they know students will use up the toothpaste and the shampoo but that the gesture of love will last.

"That's been good motivation for our groups to hang tough and be faithful," she said.✝

Thank you





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Christian Crossword

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Across

1. Bachelor. (abbr.)
4. Limb.
7. Toi sent ___ his son. (2 Sam. 8:10)
12. Sea level. (abbr.)
13. Greek letter.
14. A land of oil ___ and honey. (Deut. 8:8)
15. Till there stood up a priest with Urim and ___. (Neh. 7:65)
17. Milk source.
18. Egyptian sun god.
19. Midpoint.
21. Elf.
23. Gloomy.
24. Ye ___ Antique Shoppe.
27. Extremely.
29. Direction.
30. Wing.
31. Fool.
33. Extra duty drill instructor.
35. Brown.
36. Added to a letter.
38. Man's name.
39. Ogle.

40. Sounds of laughter.
42. And Adam called his wife's name ___. (Gen. 3:20)
43. He leadeth me ___ the still waters. (Ps. 23:2)
45. That I will give you the rain of your land ___ his due season. (Deut. 11:14)
46. I will extend peace to her like a ___. (Isa. 66:12)
50. And took upon him the form of a ___. (Phil. 2:7)
52. By mouth.
53. A son of Gad. (Gen. 46:16)
54. Symbol for Beryllium.
55. That he may dip the tip of his finger in ___. (Luke 16:24)
56. They shall say no more, the ___ of the covenant. (Jer. 3:16)

Down

2. For I am not ___ of the gospel of Christ. (Rom. 1:16)
3. Chartered Life Underwriter. (abbr.)
4. Bearing weapons.
5. African animals.
6. Second and third days of the week. (abbr.)
7. Journal. (abbr.)
8. Ancient.
9. Make free, disencumber.
10. Hail.
11. Meridian. (abbr.)
15. Not important.
16. Master of Ceremonies. (abbr.)
20. Emergency room. (abbr.)
22. Having a tendency.
24. Margarine.
25. Long-handled spoon.
26. Distinguished.
28. Second person possessive.
32. Tennessee. (abbr.)
34. Practicer of deviation.
36. The peace of God which ___ all understanding. (Phil. 4:7)
37. More bashful.
40. Blessed be ___ that cometh in the name of the Lord. (Ps. 118:26)
41. And we were driven up and down in ___. (Acts 27:27)
43. British. (abbr.)
44. Electron volt. (abbr.)
46. And the second ___ shall be an emerald, a sapphire and a diamond. (Ex 28:18)
47. And also the Jairite was a chief ruler about David. (2 Sam. 20:26)
48. Large tub.
49. Eel. (Old English)
51. Arab cloak.

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For December 6

Explore the Bible

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.
Dean of Christian Studies, University of Mobile



PLANNED Luke 1:13–25

Luke begins his gospel account with a plan. He has a context — others have compiled data about Jesus. He conducts a careful investigation of the events regarding Jesus. He communicates his testimony to Theophilus (“friend of God”). Then, he carries out his plan to provide an orderly account for the reader to be confident of the testimony.

Following the prologue, Luke focuses upon God’s plan to communicate His message of redemption. He is careful to provide historical and religious context, identifying the civil authority, the priestly connection and the specific reasons for one certain priest to be in the temple. In this passage, Luke describes an encounter between Zechariah the priest and an angelic messenger.

Prayer Answered (13–17)

Casting lots may seem like random chance in the 21st century, but throughout the Scriptures, it was a common practice to discern God’s providential direction (see Josh. 18, 1 Chron. 24, Acts 1).

Zechariah’s priestly division was chosen by lot, and he was chosen by lot to offer incense on the altar. God had a plan for this encounter.

When Zechariah entered the Holy Place to perform his duty, he saw Gabriel standing by the altar.

In the midst of his terror, Zechariah listened as Gabriel explained how God was going to answer his prayer and give the priest and his wife a son in their old age (1:7). Keep in mind, the active years of service for a priest were ages 30–50, according to the Torah (see Num. 4, multiple references).

Gabriel provided specific details about the boy. He would bring joy to his parents. He would abstain from alcohol. He would be filled with the Spirit. He would fulfill prophecy from Malachi 4:6. He would lead many to repentance. They would call his name John.

Doubt Expressed (18–20)

Zechariah questioned the message delivered by Gabriel. As a priest, he

would have been well acquainted with biblical stories of barren women who were made fertile — Sarah, first and foremost, who gave birth at the age of 90. Did Zechariah ignore the former works of God? Surely, he didn’t, especially considering the way Luke described both Zechariah and Elizabeth: “righteous ... living without blame” (v. 6). Nonetheless, he did not take Gabriel at his word.

Consequences follow attitudes, words and actions of unbelief. Zechariah would not be able to speak until after John was born, named and circumcised (1:57–64). He learned a valuable lesson not to question direct revelation from God.

Reality Seen (21–25)

Evidently, the temple encounter took more time than a priest would usually take to place incense on the altar. When Zechariah exited the holy place, the observers noted that he could not speak and he had seen a vision. Fulfillment of Gabriel’s words of judgment against Zechariah were immediate.

Following the completion of his priestly responsibilities and return home, the intermediate fulfillment of Gabriel’s message occurred.

Elizabeth conceived and remained isolated — quarantined, if you will — for the first five months of her pregnancy. For Elizabeth, the scourge of being childless was removed.

God fulfills our personal needs, and yet fulfills His greater plan, which affects countless people.

Centuries before this event, Isaiah prophesied: “A voice of one crying out: Prepare the way of the LORD in the wilderness ...” (Isa 40:3).

All four evangelists testify that John was the fulfillment of that prophecy (Matt. 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23).

How does God orchestrate unpredictable casting of lots, unknowable reactions of individuals and impossible events of nature?

He is “able to do above and beyond all that we can ask or think” (Eph. 3:20).✠

Bible Studies for Life

By Will Kynes, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Biblical Studies, Samford University



WALKING IN GRIEF Psalm 116:1–9, 15–17

We are emotional beings. Scripture does not ignore this vital human characteristic but addresses it directly, as it both reflects our emotional responses to this broken and beautiful world and seeks to shape those emotions toward God’s glory and our good. The Psalms are a prime example.

John Calvin, who called the Psalms, “An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul,” observed, “There is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn ... all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.”

As the psalmists express their emotions to God, he argued, they draw us to examine ourselves, revealing both our spiritual infirmities and vices, and purging hypocrisy from our hearts.

The Christmas season has a particular emotional power. Repeating annual traditions to the soundtrack of favorite Christmas songs brings waves of nostalgia, which leave many awash in joy. But for those who have experienced the loss or death of a loved one, those memories may bring a torrent of grief. This grief is natural; it reflects the love we have for what was lost.

Even so, grief can be devastating when we’re unable to move beyond it. However, when balanced with hope and trust in God, grief can be healthy. In psalms like Psalm 116, we see the psalmists express their grief to God. Reading their words, seeing how they mirror our emotions, we learn to see life, loss and even death from God’s perspective, and are able to move forward in His mercy and love.

Call to God when you are in sorrow. (1–4)

Significantly, the psalmist begins by proclaiming his love for the Lord. This love doesn’t require him to accept his grief without

struggle. Rather, the relationship he has with the Lord grounds his honest expression of his pain, as well as his gratitude for divine deliverance.

When he called, “Lord, save me!” the Lord answered and delivered him. But, from what? Like most of the psalms, the affliction is only vaguely described. Even the description we receive is difficult to understand. The NIV translates verse 3 as the “anguish of the grave,” while the CSB offers the more literal “torments of Sheol” and the KJV the somewhat anachronistic “pains of hell.”

The psalmist clearly fears for his life and is overwhelmed by distress and sorrow. One of the strengths of the Psalms is this unspecified affliction, enabling us to apply their words to our situation whatever it might be and encouraging us similarly to cry out to God in our sorrow.

Rest in God, who is compassionate toward us. (5–9)

The tone of this psalm changes abruptly, as the psalmist follows his cry for help with a reminder of the character of the God to whom he cries. The Lord is gracious, righteous, full of compassion and a protector, even of the simple and lowly. Knowing who God is and remembering what He has done for us in the past will enable us to find rest in Him when we face grief in the present.

Trust in God, who cares for us in our darkest hour. (15–17)

Having reflected on how God has heard his cry, at the end of the psalm, the psalmist expresses his commitment to continue to call on the Lord in tribulation. He knows God cares for him. The death of His servants is “precious” to the Lord, not because God takes pleasure in it but because it is so costly to Him. Because the psalmist trusted in God, he declared to the Lord his grief (v. 10), and because God cares for him, he finds hope to endure it.✠



Media reviews

BOOK

Alabama author helps young readers learn spiritual truths

By Tracy Riggs

Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Sally Blass Murray, retired music teacher and first-time children's author, had to leave the profession she loved on her doctor's advice.

Diagnosed at 25 with rheumatoid arthritis, there came a point when her body could no longer keep up with the demands of teaching.

"I know that I wasn't created with this, but the Lord has allowed this for some purpose of His. I cling to that. I'm still wonderfully made and remarkably made. Regardless of what it looks like and regardless of my limitations, His works are still wondrous," Murray said.

This theme has been central to her life and is the basis for her, "God Made Me! Who Am I?" series, of which the first book was just published. Murray wanted to show 3- to 7-year-old children through fun, playful books that whatever they face, the way they are made is wondrous and remarkable, and God has plans for them.

Meeting the emotional needs of students while also trying to teach them music was a ministry for Murray.

"Many children don't know that they are made in the image of God;



Sally Blass Murray

Photos courtesy of Sally Murray

that they are created special and loved," Murray said.

Through her years of teaching, she worked hard to celebrate the uniqueness of each individual student.

Nothing thrilled her as much as finding a child's gift and seeing them feel good about themselves.

The idea is carried throughout her books.

Murray gained writing experience through meeting a need as a K-2 music teacher. She found that most musicals and plays were geared toward older students and began filling the gap by writing songs of her own.

"Lyrics from a song are nothing but a poem," Murray explained.

Just what she needed

That preparation was just what she needed to write books for young children.

Murray never really planned to be an author. One day in 2012, she woke up with an idea for a book series about a little girl named Susie and her sheepdog named Solomon. These "Paws and Pray" stories are about pondering God's word before acting on impulse.

Murray got the ultimate praise concerning her artwork from a young reviewer. When she showed the book to her grandchildren, her oldest said, "Bibby, you a good dwawer [sic]."

Publishing a book is a big feat for any new author. Murray is working with Soncoast Publishing, which she found through friends and family connections.

'God will make a way'

"It's hard to get a foot in the door like that. That song — 'God will make a way where there seems to be no way' — He's done that for me my whole life. I'm so thankful and so grateful. He's done that with this, too and I'm very excited," Murray said.

Each book in the series will contain a different focus. This first one is about farm animals. Future books will include zoo animals, ocean animals, jungle animals and insects.

She also is working on a book for the music classroom about having a unique voice.

When Murray left teaching, she said it broke her heart. She felt she had no purpose.

But, she says, "regardless of where you are in life, what has happened, your limitations or whatever ... as long as He leaves you breathing, He's got work for you to do. ... [I'm] just following His lead, where He opened doors and I walked through. Whatever He does with it is His business."

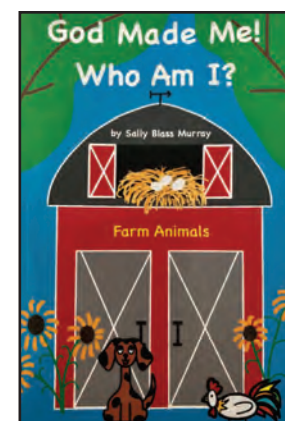
"God has given me a new song, a new way to serve Him. I'm thankful for that and I'll keep doing this until He tells me to do something else."

Listen to a TAB Talks interview with Murray, "Teaching children through books and music," at tabonline.org/podcasts.

"God Made Me! Who Am I?" can be ordered through Amazon.com or Soncoastpublishing.com.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Reviews of films, books, music or other media that appear in TAB are intended to help readers evaluate current media for themselves, their children and grandchildren in order to decide whether to watch, read or listen. Reviews are not an endorsement by the writer or TAB Media.



Leading by GODLY EXAMPLE

'It would be impossible for me to tell my story without Him in it,' says UWA tennis player

By Bill Sorrell
Correspondent, The Alabama Baptist

Valeria Arevalo doesn't count calories on Sundays and for a good reason. "Calories make me happy, and Jesus wants to see me happy," said Arevalo, a redshirt senior on the University of West Alabama tennis team, with a laugh.

The other days of the week, she eats healthy, preparing nutritious vegetables, her favorite foods to cook, in many of the ways she learned in her native Cali, Colombia.

But it's her serving on the court that has garnered attention and made her one of the Tigers' best players.

"Valeria is a great competitor and team player. She has been a great addition to our team, not only as a player but as a leader on and off the court," said Jeff Beaman, head men's and women's tennis coach at UWA. "She's been a huge asset to the team and UWA community.

"This year (2021 season) we can compete for a (Gulf South) conference championship and be top 10 in the nation, and I feel Valeria's work ethic, practice attitude and support of teammates is a big part of this," Beaman said.

'Giving her all'

A transfer from Eastern Florida State College, Arevalo was 5-3 in singles and 4-2 in doubles during the COVID-shortened 2020 season.

"She had some great wins," Beaman said. "She always competes, giving her all."

While hard work, commitment and passion to the sport have made an impact, so has her faith.

"Val is my strongest Christian/spiritual influence on the team," said teammate Morgan Bishop, a senior from Muscle Shoals. "She leads herself in a godly example that makes me want to be better and do better. She encourages in a Christian way."



Valeria Arevalo

Photo courtesy of University of West Alabama

Arevalo, 22, prays God will be with her during matches. She asks God to help her physically, mentally, technically and tactically.

"People that succeed in tennis have perfected those four aspects," she said.

Bishop added, "I am confident watching her play or playing with her because her mentality is so strong.

"She finds the zone and stays in the zone and it is very hard to break her concentration."

Arevalo's forehand is a big part of her game. After the 2020 season, Arevalo was named a Division 2 Scholar Athlete by the Intercollegiate Tennis Association.

Arevalo's sportsmanship also is evident. Her parents and tennis taught her to have good manners, she said.

"A lot of people recognize how polite I am on the court."

Before her first year at Eastern Florida, Arevalo began learning "little by little" about Christ.

Her sister, Nataly Jiménez, a

dentist in Colombia, and mother, Luz Marina Parra, led her to Christ, showing how she can apply the Bible to her life.

While her prayers were sporadic, she began to take her faith more seriously, especially as she faced personal struggles like her parents' divorce.

"My mom committed to Jesus. My daddy (Emiro Arevalo) is a very strict Catholic and didn't agree [with her conversion], so they had many problems," Arevalo said.

She learned the power of prayer when she tore the cartilage in her right shoulder in 2017 while a student at Eastern Florida.

Reprioritizing life

She had surgery and underwent months of rehab, but the experience helped her reprioritize.

"God showed me that tennis was not the most important thing in my life," Arevalo said. "I could live without tennis but not without God. I can still have passion doing it without having to put it in first place."

Once "obsessed" with being a professional tennis player, she told God she now wants to do what He created her to do.

"I wanted to set aside my preferences and trust Him and rely on Him to show me what is the best for my future," she said.

One of Arevalo's biggest dreams when she came to college in the U.S. was to help her parents economically.

At Eastern Florida, she had only a partial scholarship. She began praying that God would provide a full scholarship. West Alabama did.

'God started providing'

Then she began praying about a job. She wanted to start tithing and learning how to manage money in a way that would honor God.

She soon got a job tutoring UWA students in biology, kinesiology and anatomy.

"God started providing a lot. He was blessing me, and ... I am learning how to manage finances based on the Bible," she said.

Active in Fellowship of Christian Athletes on campus, Arevalo leads a Bible study with teammates, soccer players and volleyball players so others can learn who Christ is.

While Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," is her favorite verse, she thrives on Colossians 3:23: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not merely for people."

"I have a huge passion for everything I do — job, school, tennis, following Christ," Arevalo said. "I am going to do my best because that pleases the Lord."

Arevalo shares her story to help others know how Jesus can change someone's life.

"It would be impossible for me to tell my story without Him in it," she said. 🙏



AREVALO