

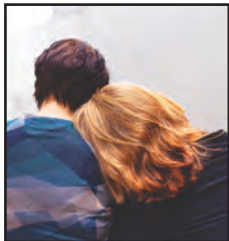
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December 16, 2021

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.

INSIDE



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Members of First Baptist Church Thorsby participate in the church's Manger Project.

Photo courtesy of Marc Hodges

Christmas blessing

Manger Project helps FBC Thorsby teach children skills, service, faith

By Carolyn Tomlin
TAB Media

When Tricia Hodges was searching for a Christmas project that would help families focus on the true meaning of Christmas, she never expected to find one that would have such an impact.

In 2019, Tricia, who serves as children's director at First Baptist Church Thorsby where

her husband Marc is lead pastor, searched online for a unique activity. She found The Manger Project, a ministry of KidMin and, by all measures, it has been a success.

"We started in 2019 and had 25 families to participate," she said.

"Because of COVID-19, we felt that keeping our people safe was a top priority, and this project, like other church programs, was put on hold (in 2020). But this year we're going strong and not only FBC, but the entire community of Thorsby is talking about The Manger Project."

"Our church averages about 150 in Sunday School," Marc

Hodges noted. "To have 25 families participate is a large percentage of our attendance.

"But with an emphasis on children and youth programs, we're reaching families in nearby towns and communities. In fact, we now have two morning worship services instead of one."

Reaching families

With The Manger Project, families enroll and pay a small registration fee.

Before the holidays, a night is scheduled for families to gather at the church, and the lumber is precut for the approximately 2-foot-long mangers. Each kit contains 10 pieces of precut wood, instruc-

tions and all items needed for assembly.

"I tell families, all you need to bring is a hammer," Hodges said. "We supply everything else ... even the nails."

FBC realizes the value of families staying close. Parents are encouraged to oversee the project, but allow children to do the actual work. Parents not only teach responsibility, patience and new skills, but also why the birth of Christ is so vital to faith.

But there is more to The Manger Project. What started as a children's ministry to bring families together goes even further. After the

(See 'Local,' page 13)



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Photo by Doug Rogers/State Board of Missions

In Season 1 we heard the story of Sammy Gilbreath, beloved, longtime state evangelism director, and about a heart condition that has had him sitting at the edge of death for decades. Hear how he is doing after his heart issues came to a head this year, resulting in four surgeries and a possible transplant.

Season 4 of Stories podcast offers updates to previous features

This year has been a crazy ride as we've tried out the Stories podcast, a serial-style presentation that unfolds over several episodes. It's told in the subject's own words, guided by host Grace Thornton.

And it's taken us places we didn't expect.

In Season 1, we heard the story of Sammy Gilbreath, former state evangelism director and current strategist for event evangelism for the Alabama State Board of Missions, a man with stories so tall it's almost hard to believe they happened! And we heard about a heart condition that has had him sitting at the edge of death for decades.

We left it on a bit of a cliffhanger — how's he doing after his heart issues came to a head this year, resulting in four surgeries and a possible transplant?

We'll talk about that in Episode 1 of Stories Season 4, which will

release Dec. 17. And we'll hear another incredible story about how God has used Gilbreath's life to make an impact that keeps going. It will take us to the pitcher's mound of the New York Yankees stadium — a place we didn't expect.

And Episodes 2 and 3 will tell another chapter in the Flatline story from Season 2 and the Eagles story from Season 3. (Episode 2 will release on Christmas Eve, and Episode 3 will release on New Year's Eve, perfect timing for holiday travels.)

Unexpected twists and turns appear in all three.

If you need to catch up, Seasons 1–3 are available now.

New content coming

We've got new content coming in February, but we couldn't turn the page before we told you the next chapter in these stories. (TAB Media)



The crossword puzzle can be found on page 10.

The Alabama Baptist

"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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To listen to the Stories podcast, visit tabonline.org/stories or search for "Stories with Grace Thornton" in your favorite podcast app.

RASHIONAL THOUGHTS

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



jrash@thealabamabaptist.org



@RashionalThts

How do you envision peace on Earth, goodwill toward men?

When you envision peace, what does it look like in your mind? Is it true global serenity where all peoples are kind and courteous to each other, truly working for the greater good?

Or is it related to the continent where we reside, an existence where the toxicity is no more, and we discover ways to co-exist graciously even while disagreeing on various topics?

Maybe it is closer to home with extended family and friends, a community or church family, or even within the walls of your residence, where those around us daily think more of others than themselves?

It's possible peace means everyone finally sees every aspect of life like you do, and we all move forward calmly and peacefully in step toward the same direction, though we know we won't all see eye to eye until we reach our eternal home in glory.

Until then, however, is it possible to do a little better than we've done these past two to three years? Could we strive to find some type of common ground and work to build better relationships with our family, friends, neighbors, co-workers and communities at large?

What a gift the Christian community could give the world if we all captured the essence of Luke 2:14 — “Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” — even if just for this Christmas season.

It might mean deciding to forgive and let go of a grudge we've been carrying against a neighbor down the street or a family member who always dominates the conversation about whatever has him or her stirred up at the moment.

It might mean putting up with jabs, stabs and even uninformed opinions that create unnecessary problems because of an unwillingness to hear other sides of the story.

When we can't respect the right of the other person to view a situation differently, even if we believe with all our heart

the person is wrong, then we are only adding to the conflict. We also most likely lose any opportunity for our position on the issue to be heard, much less understood and respected.

Deciding to give the gift of “peace on Earth, goodwill toward men” this Christmas might mean being the bigger person and realizing that someone has to go first to move toward resolution or reconciliation.

The book of James isn't known for any Christmas-themed references, but I urge you to read the entire book in the next few days. Before you read, pray sincerely for God to speak to your heart about how you can help in the Christendom effort of peace and goodwill this year.

It's always humbling when I search God's word for what

He's saying to me rather than the more tempting option, which is to use Scripture as a tool for scolding or criticizing others.

And as we work through this season of unsettled hearts across our overly weary world, it's important to know we aren't the first to find ourselves in such a predicament and that hope for better days ahead exists.

The poem “Christmas Bells” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807–1882) provides a glimpse of his despair during Civil War days. The ending goes like this:

*It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a
continent,
And made forlorn
The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will
to men!*

*And in despair I bowed my
head;
“There is no peace on earth,”
I said;
“For hate is strong,
And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will
to men!”*

*Then pealed the bells more
loud and deep:
“God is not dead, nor doth He
sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will
to men.”*



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist

Your Voice



Share letters to the editor and comments at news@thealabamabaptist.org

A gift every church member can give

By **Jeff Iorg**

President, Gateway Seminary

Over the past two months, it has been my privilege to attend numerous state convention annual meetings — preaching, teaching, hosting Gateway Seminary events and interfacing with pastors and other leaders.

A common theme in both the meetings and the conversations has been the wearisome ministry season pastors and other leaders have endured since the pandemic began.

To put it in a phrase, ministry leaders — particularly pastors — are weary and worn down. One of the primary sources of emotional depletion among pastors is dealing with petty conflicts among church members over issues like masks, vaccines and other pandemic-related issues.

Pastors are shepherds who prefer

to keep watch over peaceful flocks. They are also peacemakers — people who promote peace rather than look for ways to stir up dissension. When trouble comes among their followers, it takes an emotional toll on pastors and other leaders.

One biblical leader recorded his experience about the impact of conflict among his followers on him.

Paul appealed to the Philippians (2:2) to “make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.”

A leader’s joy is affected by the way his followers treat each other, not just the way they treat the leader.

When a pastor has members arguing, debating or disputing with each other, he pays an emotional price.

Church division is a joy-sucking distraction for a pastor.

Seminary presidents are not pastors, but we still lead religious communities. The spiritual maturity of the Gateway community during the pandemic has been energizing for me as their leader.

While our employees and students have many opinions on pandemic-related issues, they have consistently kept our mission at the forefront and worked hard to minimize divisive debates about extraneous issues. They have given me the gift of deference and support.

Give your pastor and other church leaders the same holiday gift this year. Stop needless arguments over divisive issues.

Recognize pastors and other leaders are making hard decisions about nebulous issues with almost no frames of reference or best practices to guide their choices.

Support your pastor and other leaders with humility and deference, rather than add to their burden by sharing your joy-robbing opinions on “what they ought to do.”

Pastors are dutiful shepherds. Most have stayed faithful during the pandemic, fulfilling their calling and providing pastoral care to hurting people. They have demonstrated supernatural patience and remarkable endurance.

Stand with your pastor by choosing to be a cooperative part of their flock. By doing so you add to their joy and contribute to their resiliency.

That’s a Christmas gift every one of us can give this year.

(Reprinted with permission from gs.edu/presidents-blog/a-gift-you-can-give/)

Love is not a suggestion or request. It’s a commandment. That means it doesn’t start with your emotions. It starts with your decisions to seek the well-being of another.

Pastor Tony Evans
Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship
Dallas

I was a late bloomer as far as reading and writing. ... Just because you haven’t attempted something before you’re 50 doesn’t mean you shouldn’t.

Author Katy Shelton
“Christmas Matters: How the Birth of Jesus Makes a Difference Every Day”

Trusting that God will provide is required to be successful in this ministry. He has always provided whatever has been necessary.

John Osborne
Director
Bethel Baptist Association
food ministry

When God provides a resource, He already has a plan for it, whether He has told you yet or not.

Michael Ethridge
Birmingham Metro
Baptist Association

A special thank you

Thank you, for giving to the Lord. I was a life that was changed.”

This is a lyric from a song but it is a message to a man who made a remarkable impact on my life, Brother Al Jackson, who recently retired as pastor of Lakeview Baptist Church in Auburn.

When I was a teenager at Vacation Bible School at Carolina Baptist Church, near Andalusia, he was my pastor.

He asked a simple question one morning: Who in here has never given his heart and life to Jesus

Christ but wants to do that today? I raised my hand. A few of us — all guys, as I recall — went to Brother Al’s office and prayed to receive Christ Jesus as Lord.

I cannot fathom living without Jesus Christ.

Thank you, Brother Al and Carolina Baptist Church and all the people who led VBS when I was there.

Thank you for giving to the Lord. I was a life that was changed.

Terry Wilhite
Loxley, Alabama

“Will this holy season find us lifting songs of praise to God for His gracious and mighty works?”

JERRY BATSON

Retired professor of religion, Theology 101 writer

Saints before the altar bending,
Watching long in hope and fear,
Suddenly the Lord, descending,
In His temple shall appear:

Come and worship, Come and
worship,

Worship Christ, the newborn
King!

James Montgomery
“Angels From the Realms
of Glory”

It is my hope that before I die I
get to see more Asian missionaries
on the field than Western countries
have ever sent in Christian history.
I hope the same is true for Sub-
Saharan Africa.

Jeremiah Farmer
International Mission Board
missionary serving in Asia

We’re not praying for revival. We
are living it!

Pastor John Cernek
Indian Bible Church
Elton, Louisiana

We know it was difficult to try to
do ministry last year, but the Lord
continues to redeem the people for
Himself.

Chris Derry
IMB director of church
and network relations

As I walked along the shore the
other day, I saw a beautiful sea-
shell. It looked perfect. I bent down
and picked it up, but on the other
side was a hole — it was “broken.”

As you walk among the crowds
this Christmas, step carefully and

be kind. The people you pass may
look just fine, but if you were able
to turn them over or see their heart,
there is brokenness.

Our Savior was born to mend
broken hearts; you be His hands,
His feet, His mouth this Christmas
season!

Yvonne Looney
via Facebook

Every great movement of God
is preceded by prayer. ... It hap-
pens when people get burdened for
themselves, the church and those
who are without Christ.

Preston Nix
Professor of evangelism and
evangelistic preaching
New Orleans Baptist
Theological Seminary

From the *Twitterverse*

@brocraige

The sweet tones and sounds of
Christian fellowship that happens
just before the church settles down
to worship ... is one of the most
beautiful sounds there is.

@MattSmethurst

The greatest threat to Christmas
is not secularism or consumerism,
but our own boredom with the most
magnificent story ever told.

@philpnation

As we travel through the Advent
season, let’s replace comfort with
service, consumerism with sacrifice
and nostalgia with missional living.
Let’s proclaim the gospel and live
out its transformative work ...

@shane_pruitt78

God and Satan are not equals ...
God is all-knowing, Satan is not.
God is all-powerful, Satan is not.
God is everywhere, Satan is not.

God is victorious, Satan is not. God
is God, Satan is not. God bows to
no one, Satan will bow to God.

@macbrunson

We all want to be saved from the
results of sin, but down inside we
don’t want to be delivered from the
sin itself. (C.S. Lewis’ “The Red
Lizard”)

@jdsummerlin

If you are a Christian but unlov-
ing, no one will believe you when
you talk about the love of Jesus.

@davidcofield

Our everyday moments might be
ordinary, but when we accomplish
them while displaying the fruit of
the Spirit, they reflect our extraor-
dinary Savior. —Emily Jensen

@ShaiLinne

I’m seeing so many people that
I’ve served with, prayed with
and co-labored with walk away

from the Lord. It produces in me
a strange mix of grief, fear and
gratitude, knowing that apart from
God’s sustaining grace, I would
have fallen away a long time ago.

@ChandlerDonegan

I can’t help but notice while
watching graduation @SEBTS,
our faculty is INCREDIBLE. It is
such a joy to learn from these men
and women as they glorify God in
the academy, equipping students to
#FulfilltheMission.

@PaulTripp

The gift of God’s grace means we
have reason to celebrate every day

@mhenslee

I bow before the throne which
absolves me, I clasp the cross
which delivers me, I serve hence-
forth all my days the Incarnate
God, through whom I am a par-
doned soul. —Spurgeon

Everyone experiences failure

Most pastors fight an
uphill battle against
misconceptions. One is the
thought that those who are
called are different from all
other believers. Not so. A call
from God does not cancel hu-
man failure. The called, wheth-
er for salvation or Kingdom
service, know life is filled with
slippery slopes.

In Genesis 16–17, we see
how God forgives a repentant
child and uses him to populate
the kingdom of God on earth.

Falling and failing are life
experiences for the saved and
the lost. The saved, however,
find God will restore them to a
life of service.

The lesson of Abram is a
word picture of how God for-
gives and restores to service
those who submit to Him daily.
This is the challenge for us.

God gave Abraham an
eternal mandate which exists
with our calling to serve Jesus
Christ. ... Also, the blood sacri-
fice of Jesus Christ has become
the basis of a new covenant of
Kingdom membership with the
promise of eternal life.

Believers cannot overempha-
size this covenant with prom-
ise. The promise of God was
extremely lavish in any age.

Abraham had but one re-
quirement; faith in God. He
was not worthy of the gifts of
God, but neither are we.

There is no begging by Abra-
ham, only a total surrender to
the God of Israel.

It has not changed. When
there is genuine repentance and
absolute trust in the Lord Jesus
Christ, the gifts of God are
unlimited. When we get con-
vinced in our spirit of all God
will give our children, friends
and acquaintances, we will
share Christ. Nothing in Abra-
ham’s gifts exceeds our gift of
life in Christ here and eternally.

Jack Green
Retired pastor, missionary
Center Point, Ala.

3 stories you should know



Photo by Eranga Jayawardena/AP

The remains of Priyantha Kumara were returned to his family in Sri Lanka on Dec. 6. Kumara, who helped run a sports equipment factory in Sialkot, Pakistan, was beaten, killed and burned Dec. 3 by a mob of hundreds of Muslims. He was accused of removing a poster bearing Islamic religious content. Reports say Kumara removed the poster due to pending work in the building. Kumara, a Christian, had lived and worked in Pakistan for 11 years. (AP/TAB)

Car damages steps at FBC Montgomery

Still cleaning up from a Sept. 30 arson attack, First Baptist Church Montgomery experienced another destructive night Dec. 1 when an out-of-control car ran into the front steps of the main sanctuary.

In a Facebook post, Pastor Mark Bethea said the car caused “heavy damage to the staircase and railing.” The driver of the car appeared uninjured, he added.

The steps are not currently in use as the main sanctuary is still being restored, Bethea said, urging church members to keep praying “through these trying days.”

The church has been in the process of an extensive cleaning process after four fires were set on campus Sept. 30. Xiaoqin Yan, 27, was arrested Oct. 4 on charges of second-degree arson and also faces federal charges in the attack. (TAB Media)

12 missionaries still held by gang in Haiti

Twelve missionaries held captive in Haiti have entered their third month as hostages.

The group of 17 missionaries, which included five children, were taken hostage Oct. 16 by the 400 Mawozo gang. Two missionaries were released in November. Three more were released Dec. 6.

A statement from their sending organization, Ohio-based Christian Aid Ministries, said those who were released are “safe and seem to be in good spirits.” CAM asked for continued prayer for those still held.

“We long for all the hostages to be reunited with their loved ones. Thank you for your prayer support.”

In mid-November, the U.S. State Department urged U.S. citizens still in Haiti to leave immediately while warning others not to travel to the nation. (TAB Media)

Persecuted church

Police occupation of home provides Chinese couples gospel opportunities

CHENGDU, China — Four believers in China are using police occupation of their dwelling as an opportunity to share the gospel and to show kindness, according to the human rights group China Aid.

Deacon Xu Jiale and wife Qin Ningping, who live in Chengdu Qingyang District, took into their home Shen Bing and wife, Li Xiaofeng, who had recently been expelled from their own home. Both couples attend Early Rain Covenant Church, the report states.

National security officers then forcibly moved into Deacon Xu’s home to discourage Shen and Li from staying. Surveillance cameras also were installed at the home’s entrance.

The two couples share the gospel with the of-

ficers on duty each day and respond to them with meekness and kindness, the report says. After an officer fell asleep at the dining room table one cold night, Li put a jacket over him for warmth.

China is No. 17 on Open Doors’ 2021 World Watch List of places most difficult to be a Christian.

Two Christian sanitation workers die saving another in Pakistan

SARGODHA, Pakistan — Two Christian sanitation workers died Oct. 3 saving another Christian overcome by toxic gases in a sewer.



Photo courtesy of China Aid source

Faisal Masih and Nadeem Masih were ordered into a maintenance hole to rescue Michael Masih, but none of the workers were provided personal protective equipment, according to a report from the relief group Barnabas Fund. Michael Masih had no oxygen tank, the report states.

After rescuing Michael Masih, Faisal Masih and Nadeem Masih were swept away by a strong current before they could escape. An emergency team refused to assist because touching Christians would make them “ritually unclean,” according to the report. Instead, a fourth Christian recovered the bodies.

Michael Masih was hospitalized and faces long-term recovery, the report states.

Community leaders have charged three supervisors in the deaths, the report says. Pakistan is No. 5 on Open Doors’ 2021 World Watch List of places most difficult to be a Christian.

Alabama news

FRIENDSHIP ASSOCIATION

► In the early days of **Center Springs Baptist Church, Trafford**, members met in a “little brown church” next to a spring. The 100th anniversary celebration Oct. 17 was “a time for perspective — to rejoice in the past and continue to walk with God into the future.”

Pastor Luther Williams said the day “went really well.” Church members shared the history of the church and highlighted the missions and giving efforts the church is still engaged in. They celebrated the people who have come to faith in Christ at Center Springs in the past century.

Steve Sellers, interim director of missions for Friendship Baptist Association, was the

guest speaker, and two of the three living former pastors — Dion Staton and Bill Ayers — also were present. After the service, everyone enjoyed a fellowship meal and a singing with the Pine Mountain Possum Pickers in the afternoon.

During the special service, the church honored Janice Griffin, who has been a part of Center Springs for 65 years, as the longest living member. They also honored Mary Frances Noel as the oldest living member at 91, who passed away three and a half weeks later on Nov. 10.



Photo courtesy of Mary Frances Noel

MUD CREEK ASSOCIATION

► David Hobson (right), director of missions for **Mud Creek Baptist Association**, said 150 years is “a huge milestone for a ministry, and one worth celebrating.”

So that’s exactly what the association did at its annual meeting Nov. 4 and during a special worship celebration Nov. 7.

“As we look back on the 150-year history that we have had at the Mud Creek Baptist Association, I am thankful to get to stand on the shoulders

of the men who came before me, like Ken Maddox, Rod Milam and Martin Ray, to lead this organization,” Hobson said. “I believe the best days of the Mud Creek Baptist Association are not

behind us, they are still to come.”

At the annual meeting, Joel Carden (center), pastor of Quinton Baptist Church, presented the moderator’s address. His church hosted the meeting.

Lonette Berg (left), executive director of the



Photo courtesy of Lonette Berg

Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, and Mike Nuss of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions presented plaques to the association.

Bill Kitchens, Mud Creek Baptist Association historian, wrote and presented the association’s history. Scott Dawson preached at the worship celebration, which was hosted by Smithville Baptist Church, Bessemer.

SHOCCO SPRINGS BAPTIST CONFERENCE CENTER

► No matter how large the mounds of laundry got in the summer, **Debra Ledford** always “maintained an optimistic view,” said Russell Klinner, executive director of **Shocco Springs Baptist Conference Center**.

Shocco recently said goodbye to Ledford as she retired after nearly 30 years leading the laundry department.

Klinner called her an “amazing lady” and “a joy to work with.”

“She was here on the first day I came to work at Shocco in 1992,” he said. “She and I shared in a lot of Shocco stories. She humbly served not only the guests here at Shocco but also was an example of Christian service to hundreds of student staff, including myself.”



Photo courtesy of Shocco Springs

SOUTHEAST ASSOCIATION

► **Greg Aman** retired as pastor of Antioch Baptist Church, Ashford, Oct. 3 after 47 years of full-time ministry. The church honored Aman and his wife, Diane, with a luncheon and gifts following the morning worship service. Aman served in Bridge City, Louisiana, as well as Alabama churches in Troy, Ozark and Ashford. He holds three degrees from Troy University, including two undergraduate and one graduate degree. In 1984 Aman earned a master of divinity from New Orleans Seminary. He is a former member of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions executive



AMAN

committee and was actively involved in associational missions, serving as moderator and executive committee member. He is well-known for his “potter’s sermon” which he has shared in many states as well as internationally. Aman intends to continue to minister as God provides opportunities.

► **Tim Willis** said his call came at the age of 13. He didn’t know what God wanted him to do exactly, but he trusted He would show him.

After high school, he began serving as a music

minister as he went to school at Lurleen B. Wallace Community College in Andalusia. Then he served bivocationally for a while as he taught music at local schools.



WILLIS

And then in 1981, Willis answered the call to serve as the minister of music at Ridgecrest Baptist Church, Dothan. He’s been there ever since.

And as he retires in January after 40-plus years at the church, he says he “can’t thank God enough for the privilege of getting to serve.”

“I’ve had a lot of good people around me who have really helped me to grow through the years and mature in the faith,” he said. “The Lord’s just been so good.”

Serving in that capacity at Ridgecrest has been “a wonderful time,” Willis said. “I had the chance to raise my family in one location, and my children and grandchildren, they’re all in church with us, and there’s no greater blessing than that.”

Ray Jones, Ridgecrest’s pastor, called Willis a “pillar of spiritual integrity.”

“He has humbly served our Lord and the Ridgecrest family with faithfulness and fruitfulness,” he said.

Jones has been at the church for the past 21 years alongside Willis.

TUSKEGEE LEE ASSOCIATION

► **First Baptist Church Opelika**, hosts Matthew West, Dec. 19, 7 p.m. Tickets available at matthewwest.com.

WEST CENTRAL ASSOCIATION

► Miriam Bearden (right) has sweet memories of walking to her church — Central Baptist — with her grandmother and other friends. Back in the 1920s, it had changed its name from Second Baptist Church to Central. After much prayer, in the 1990s, the church moved out of downtown Selma and changed its name to **Valley Grande Baptist**.

The congregation, led by interim pastor Bill Garner, celebrated 125 years of ministry Nov. 14.

Ray Wuerzer, who served as pastor from 1995 to 2000, was the guest speaker for the day. Lonette Berg (left), executive director of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, presented the church with a certificate.

“It was good to think about how the church started, where we came from and where we are today,” Bearden said. “We were overwhelmed by the people who came back for the celebration.”



Photo courtesy of Lonette Berg

Headline news

from around the Southeast

ARKANSAS

How do you almost triple a church's missions budget and increase a church's Cooperative Program gifts by more than 40% over the course of four years? One key is the leadership of a missions-minded pastor. Michael Daugherty, pastor of First Baptist Church Sheridan, said the church "has decided that we are not going to be an earthly investment firm but a Kingdom-investing church. ... When God called me to pastor, He laid on my heart the necessity and urgency of using whatever influence He gives me to lead His people to give." Daugherty believes ongoing education helps members understand the importance of giving generously to help spread the gospel, Arkansas Baptist News reported. The church spends time in its worship services, often through the use of video, providing education on the need to give to support state, North American and international missions. "Lives depend on us understanding that we must destroy our idol of self and steward everything of God's well," he said.



Photo courtesy of Arkansas Baptist News

FLORIDA

"We want to help train the American church to become missionaries to the unchurched, unsaved Vietnamese in their community," said Quang Nguyen, pastor of the Vietnamese congregation of First Baptist Church Jacksonville. Feeling the burden of lost Vietnamese people in the Jacksonville area, Nguyen founded "Nails for Eternity," a ministry that trains Americans to share Scripture and the gospel in both English and Vietnamese with nail salon techs who work in the 300-plus nail salons in Jacksonville, reported the Florida Baptist Witness. Nguyen understands that by reaching one person, an entire family has been reached, even family still in Vietnam. The process is meant to be slow and deliberate so Christians get to know their nail techs. "First you must have a caring heart," Nguyen said. It's important to form a relationship so the nail



Photo courtesy of Florida Baptist Witness

salon techs are more receptive to God's word, he believes. "You are successful if you sow the seed of the gospel."

GEORGIA

"Every generation needs revival," said Baptist Retirement Communities chief executive officer Shannon Watson in response to a tent revival at Palmetto Park Senior Living in Georgia. Executive director Matthew Galyon organized a five-night tent revival for residents, bringing in pastors and worship teams from churches in the community, reported The Christian Index. Galyon understands the importance of igniting a spiritual fire in residents' hearts. "I want our tenants' faith to be renewed, know that they are not alone and that God still has a purpose for their life," he said. Tom Patterson, a retired pastor, explains many seniors "know there's 'something' lacking, and they're finding that 'something' is Jesus." Palmetto Park leaders plan to expand the outreach once the pandemic is over, giving residents the opportunity "to find a new purpose in not only growing in their relationship with the Lord, but also in serving Him through true community outreach and evangelism."



Photo courtesy of The Christian Index

KENTUCKY

Feeling unsure about being asked to pastor the church where he was baptized as a child, Joey Woods took his family to prayer walk outside Union Baptist Church one evening, reported Kentucky Today. Woods decided he wanted to pray inside the church, and he remembered a "basement door that was faulty. I was able to squeeze my youngest daughter in, and she unlocked the door." Praying in the sanctuary, Woods sensed the Lord's peace in the decision. He had no reason to leave his current church where he served as associate pastor, but he could not deny the call. During the pandemic, a deacon from Union asked if he would be willing to preach a few Sundays. Those few Sundays turned into week after week until the church



Photo courtesy of Kentucky Today

asked him to become its pastor. This November marked Woods' one-year anniversary at Union. Woods has focused on growing the children's ministry. "I knew if you do things for kids, the parents will follow," Woods said. As for that faulty basement door at the church? "Yeah," he said, "that's been replaced."

LOUISIANA

Two Louisiana Baptist church plants recently celebrated first baptisms, reported the Baptist Message. SweetWater Church in Abita Springs, baptized two sisters, Natalie and Sarah Cowell, in a horse trough. The girls' mother watched through tears. In 2019, after her husband passed away from cancer, the mother became angry at God and stopped going to church until she heard about SweetWater. "I knew it was time for us to get back into church and for my daughters to finally take that next step of baptism several years after they had accepted Christ," she said. Harvest Church in Tremé also celebrated its first baptism during its initial service as a congregation. "It was a special and sweet moment," said Pastor Andrew Hanna. "There were a lot of people who walked with us along this journey, and they were there the day we had our first service."



Photo courtesy of the Baptist Message

TENNESSEE

"Off the Grid" is a unique ministry that allows pastors to rest together while hiking on the Appalachian Trail, reported the Baptist and Reflector. This outlet allows pastors to "hike with one another, share with one another, learn from one another and encourage one another," said Marty Shadoan, pastor of First Baptist Church Rockwoode. Officially launched in 2020 by Kevin Perrigan, camp manager at Carson Springs Baptist Conference Center, the ministry "started as a discussion with a pastor friend ... about the idea of a backpacking trip just for pastors, with the purpose of allowing them to disconnect from the stresses of the ministry," Perrigan said. "Off the Grid" offers pastors the freedom to be vulnerable with each other, which strengthens them and their ministry.



PERRIGAN

Grief during the holidays

Encouragement, faith-based resources for the hurting can help those coping with loss

By Tracy Riggs
TAB Media

Hallmark movies. Christmas commercials. Magazine spreads. All show happy celebrations, bright smiles and perfectly decorated homes, sending an implicit message that the holiday season is a joyful time for everyone.

But for those who are grieving, the holidays can be just the opposite.

Erik Reed, lead pastor of The Journey Church in Lebanon, Tennessee, and founder of Knowing Jesus Ministries, understands grief well. Reed and his wife unexpectedly lost their 15-year-old son, Kaleb, on Dec. 1, 2019, following Kaleb's long battle with kidney problems.

Reed defines grief as "the right response to loss and tragedy in a broken world."

Enduring trials

"Everybody is going to go through trials and challenges and afflictions of different kinds," he said. "Not everybody's challenges are going to be the same. Some people are going to struggle with maybe a financial situation or maybe a job situation.

"Maybe somebody is having relationship problems. Maybe it's a struggle in a marriage or a wayward child. It could be health issues that somebody has to learn to live with, something like anxiety or depression ... things that are still very real."

Losing a job doesn't hold the



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same weight as losing a child, Reed acknowledged. However, for the person who lost the job, that trial is as real to her as the trial of losing a child.

"Don't minimize your trials in comparison to someone else's trials," he advises.

After Reed lost his son, some well-meaning friends told him they couldn't imagine going through that experience. Reed's response was always, "You're absolutely right. You can't imagine it, ... and you're not supposed to. That's not how it works."

Reed encourages those who are grieving to lean on God's grace. The

grace necessary for Reed and his family to endure Kaleb's death is the same grace anyone struggling with any trial needs, he said.

"I can't imagine going through [another's] circumstance because I'm not in it," he said. "I need to cling to His grace for my circumstance."

To help others in the grieving process, Reed founded the Hopeful Sufferers Weekend, a time for those who are grieving the loss of a child to come together in community.

He is both facilitator and participant in the event.

Christians need to be allowed to grieve, Reed said.

"Too many people either have this mentality or are counseled in the mentality that to be a Christian means you need to soldier on and tuck away emotions," he said.

Following a death, it's not uncommon to hear assurances that a loved

one is now "with the Lord." While that may be true, death still leaves a hole, he said. We aren't supposed to be comfortable with death, he said. Death is the enemy.

Tips for coping

For those grieving, Reed offers these tips:

▶ Allow yourself to talk about your child or your situation; don't act as if the loss doesn't exist.

Tears and sadness are expected. It's also OK to laugh and enjoy the holidays.

There is a lot to be thankful for, such as memories to be celebrated with family and friends.

▶ Embrace whatever mood you are in that day.

It's OK to either celebrate old traditions or make new ones. Do what makes the most sense to you. Neither option is inherently wrong.

For family members, friends and churches who want to help the grieving, he offers these tips:

▶ Be there and listen. Don't "fill the air" with self-help tips.

▶ Let the person know you are there for her.

▶ Find ways to meet practical needs. Ask if the one grieving wants privacy or help.

▶ Resist the temptation to offer answers. Give more hugs than answers.

To learn more about the lessons Reed learned through his journey after the loss of his son, read "Uncommon Trust: Learning to Trust God When Life Doesn't Make Sense" which can be found at Amazon and other booksellers.

For other resources, including information on the Hopeful Sufferers Weekend, visit tabonline.org/hopeful-sufferers.

For more resources on coping with grief, go to tabonline.org/coping-with-grief.

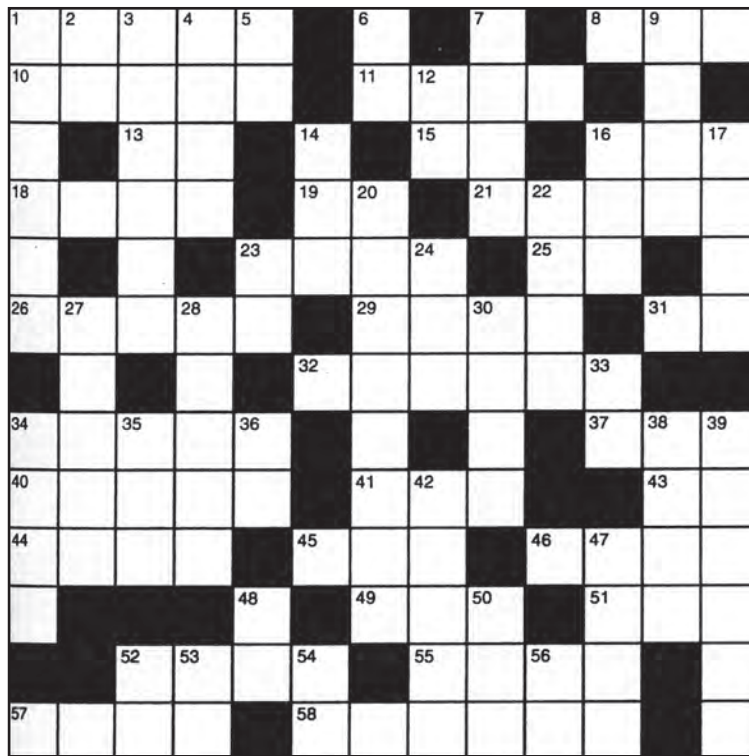
"Too many people either have this mentality or are counseled in the mentality that to be a Christian means you need to soldier on and tuck away emotions."

Erik Reed, lead pastor of The Journey Church in Lebanon, Tennessee, and founder of Knowing Jesus Ministries

CHRISTIAN crossword

ACROSS

1. ___; for thy servant heareth. (1 Sam. 3:10)
8. Screech ___ also shall rest there. (Isa. 34:14)
10. They rose up in the morning _____. (1 Sam. 1:19)
11. I have given you every herb bearing _____. (Gen. 1:29)
13. Roll over. (abbr.)
15. For example. (abbr.)
16. ___ me, and know my thoughts. (Ps. 139:23)
18. Not accused of _____. (Titus 1:6)
19. Obituary. (abbr.)
21. That I may ___ him out of sleep. (John 11:11)
23. Unto us a child is _____. (Isa. 9:6)
25. Her Majesty. (abbr.)
26. Ye shall eat it in _____. (Ex. 12:11)
29. Flow out slowly.
31. Irish. (abbr.)
32. Be ___ and of a good courage. (Josh. 1:9)
34. Written in the ___ of the book. (2 Chron. 24:27)
37. A ___ caught in a thicket. (Gen. 22:13)
40. Recorded.
41. Every ___ shall see him. (Rev. 1:7)
43. Bachelor of Arts. (abbr.)
44. Creative works, skills.
45. Vote in favor.
46. Newborn child.
49. The going down of the _____. (Deut. 16:6)
51. Exclamation of disgust.
52. Singing or piloting a plane alone.
55. Give us a ___ in His



By Arlene Walker Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.

22. ___ he shall appear.
 23. And ___ ye kind one to another. (Eph. 4:32)
 24. Neither/_____.
 27. If thou bring thy gift to the _____. (Matt. 5:23)
 28. The ___ are gathered and burned. (Matt. 13:40.)
 30. Region, space.
 33. Sound of roaring lion.
 34. The Lord was my _____. (2 Sam. 22:19)
 35. Choose.
 36. Yard. (abbr.)
 38. We cry, ___, Father. (Rom. 8:15)
 39. Perhaps.
 42. ___ and old. (Josh. 6:21)
 47. God is ___ to make him stand. (Rom. 14:4)
 48. Sunshine state.
 50. To constantly scold.
 52. Salvation Army. (abbr.)
 53. Outside diameter. (abbr.)
 54. King of Bashan. (Ps. 136:20)
 56. Illinois. (ZIP code abbr.)
2. Father.
 3. Who can understand his ___? (Ps. 19:12)
 4. A large amount.
 5. Kentucky. (abbr.)
 6. Bachelor of Science. (abbr.)
 7. Great.
 9. The men did the ___ faithfully. (2 Chron. 34:12)
 12. Electrical engineer. (abbr.)
 14. Is any thing ___ hard for the Lord? (Gen. 18:14)
 16. Short for Scottish cap.
 17. 365 days.
 20. Am I my ___ keeper? (Gen. 4:9)
 22. ___ he shall appear.
 23. And ___ ye kind one to another. (Eph. 4:32)
 24. Neither/_____.
 27. If thou bring thy gift to the _____. (Matt. 5:23)
 28. The ___ are gathered and burned. (Matt. 13:40.)
 30. Region, space.
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Place a classified ad for \$1 per word. For more information call 205-870-4720, ext. 102, or email ads@thealabamabaptist.org.

CHURCH POSITIONS

SENIOR PASTOR

Dawes in Mobile, Ala., is seeking a full-time senior pastor. Email resumés to: fbcdpastorsearch2021@gmail.com or mail to: FBC Dawes, 3941 Dawes Rd., Mobile, AL 36695. ATTN: Pastor Search Committee. Please include links to online sermons or other reference materials.

SENIOR PASTOR

First Baptist Church of Jemison is seeking a full-time senior pastor. He should possess a conviction to preach from the Holy Bible, teaching biblical truths and doctrine of Christianity, as stated in the Baptist Faith & Message 2000. Must provide pastoral care and counseling; be engaged to all age groups; mentor and supervise church staff; and provide visionary leadership for the future of our church. He will shepherd our congregation in worship, Christian spiritual growth and community outreach as we strive to carry out The Great Commission. Mail resumés to: Jemison First Baptist Church, P.O. Box 760, Jemison, AL 35085, or resumes@jemisonfirstbaptist.com.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Hughes Memorial Baptist Church in Bradford, Ala., is prayerfully seeking a bivocational pastor. Please send resumés to: ATTN: Pastor Search Committee, 535 Buck Ridge Road, Remlap, AL 35133 or email: hmbcpastorapps@gmail.com.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Northside Baptist Church, Selma, Ala., seeks bivocational pastor. Email resumés to: NorthsideBaptist2021@gmail.com.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Mount Philadelphia Baptist Church, Cordova, is prayerfully seeking a bivocational pastor. Please send resumés to: Mount Philadelphia Baptist Church, ATTN: Pastor Search Committee, 1885 Cordova-Gorgas Road, Cordova, AL 35550.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Liberty Baptist, Opelika, seeks bivocational pastor. Receiving resumés: Pastoral Search Committee, Liberty Baptist Church, 2701 West Point Parkway, Opelika, AL 36804. Email: liberty_baptist_oa@protonmail.com. Text msg: (334-444-9626).

WORSHIP PASTOR

Second Baptist Union City, Tenn., is prayerfully seeking our next worship pastor. We average 700-800 (post-COVID) in Sunday morning worship and our musical style is intentionally blended in all services, with a large choir. A detailed job description/qualifications can be found at secondbaptist-uc.com. Competitive salary based upon experience, health, dental, vision

and retirement benefits. Submit resumé to: apply@secondbaptistuc.com.

MUSIC MINISTER

First Baptist Church of Red Bay, Ala., is in search of a part-time music minister. Anyone interested mail or email a resumé to the church office. P.O. Box 616, Red Bay, AL 35582, or firstbaptistc110@bellsouth.net.

PART-TIME/BIVOCATIONAL YOUTH MINISTER

Buhl Baptist Church is seeking someone with a passion for leading youth in their walk with Christ, teaching them to be disciples. Please contact us via email: timpatrick80@gmail.com or jgsv400@yahoo.com. We are located in West Tuscaloosa county, 10 minutes outside of Northport, Ala.

BIVOCATIONAL CHILDREN'S MINISTER

East Highland Baptist Church, Hartselle, Ala., is prayerfully seeking God's choice for a bivocational children's minister who will lead the children's ministry program. Applicants should subscribe to the doctrinal statement of the Baptist Faith & Message. See additional information under the announcements tab at ehbc.church. Please send resumé to: cmcs@ehbc.church.

OTHER POSITIONS

CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTER DIRECTOR

Southside Baptist Church in Troy is seeking to fill the ministry position of child development center director. This is a full-time position that requires excellent management skills and experience in day-care or educational roles. Please send resumés to: southside@troycable.net.

SIGNS

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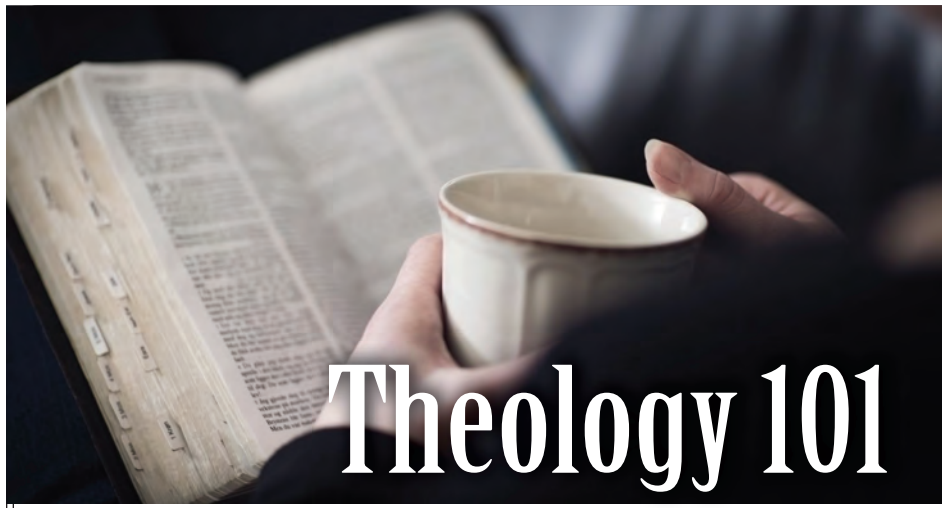
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Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Songs of Christmas

The Angels' Song

By Jerry Batson, Th.D.
TAB Media

Hymns and songs are time-honored vehicles of praise. They also can be notable and memorable vehicles of theology. Mary's song gave voice to several theological truths. The same is true of Zacharias' song.

Here we give attention to this shortest of the biblical "songs of Christmas" — a single verse, Luke 2:14. At Jesus' birth an angelic choir visited a band of ordinary shepherds on a Judean hillside and serenaded them with praise. That praise song has been given the title, "Gloria in Excelsis," stemming from the Latin version of the opening words of the passage, which translates for us as "Glory in the highest."

From the example of the angelic host, we learn the most appropriate response to God graciously sending a Savior into the world is to praise Him and give Him glory. Joyous praise is the proper response to God's saving work in sending His only begotten Son into the world.

We also learn heaven is the place of perfect praise: "Glory in the highest." One day redeemed sinners will join the heavenly chorus in rendering perfect praise to our God and Savior.

In passing, we might also note praise belongs to the most glorious object — God Himself, not His human servants.

While perfect glory to God occurs in heaven, His perfect peace is available on earth. Not only is the coming of Christ into the

world as Savior cause for praising God, it also is His provision of divine peace for those who receive His Son in faith. Hence, the heavenly choir sang of this "peace on earth."

Another takeaway truth from the angels' song is that Christ is the agent through Whom forgiven sinners can experience both divine peace and human goodwill. The prospect of heavenly glory and peace on earth have potential and practical outcome as "goodwill" among men. In a world torn and divided by sin, prejudice, aggression and hardness of heart, the path to goodwill winds its way by a rugged cross, an empty tomb and an upper room.

Personal response

This peace, possible even in the midst of the chaos, tensions and hatred of human society, doesn't depend on outward circumstances but upon our personal response to God's grace. Christ's saving death, victorious resurrection and outpoured Spirit are essential ingredients for peace on earth.

When we examine our hearts this Christmas season, do we find God's peace residing within?

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.



Coffee County WMU in 95th year of special cake ministry

By Grace Thornton
TAB Media

Not too long after John Granger became director of missions for Coffee County Baptist Association 21 years ago, he noticed a living example of the longevity of one of the association's ministries.

Carrie McDaniel, a member of Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Enterprise, came up to the office in her apron to bake coffee cakes, which were part of an annual associational Woman's Missionary Union ministry to the children of the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries.

She was 12 years old when the ministry started in 1926.

"She has passed on now, but it was so nice seeing someone participate in the ministry who had been there since the very beginning," Granger recalled.

The coffee cake bakers are still going strong on the 95th anniversary.

Over the years they've made hundreds of cakes for ABCH at Christmastime, which went to the Troy campus until ABCH expanded.

Now the cakes, cookies and brownies are divided into vans and transported to other campuses around the state.

The women also send packs of mixes with frosting that can be used anytime. This year they collected 1,102 baked goods for distribution Dec. 6.

Faye Allen, association WMU president, said the baked goods give the association's WMU "an opportu-

nity to minister to the children at the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes by letting the children know they are loved and thought about throughout the year on their birthdays."

"Birthdays are special to each child, and we feel each child should have a special way to celebrate," she continued. "The items that are sent also give them a way to learn to cook, measure, mix and bake and have the experience of planning and preparing for their own families one day."

The goal, Allen said, is to support the mission of ABCH.

"We hope as Women on Mission that these children will know (of) the love we have for them (and) that Jesus loves them even more," she said.

For the children

Granger noted the ministry started when some of the women at Mount Pleasant decided they would do something special for the children at Christmastime. Other churches found out what they were doing and joined in.

"It's been a WMU thing all these years — still is," Granger said. "They have done it continuously since 1926."

That even includes 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, although they changed it up a bit — instead of baking, they sent some 900 prepackaged items to ABCH campuses.

"We've heard over the years that it has been a big help to the house parents," Granger said, noting that the association's WMU has "moved the ball, as far as ministry in missions in Coffee County goes, a lot."



Michele Smith (left), Coffee County Baptist Association treasurer, and Kathy King, a member of Victoria Baptist Church in Elba, pack baking supplies Dec. 6 for Alabama Baptist Children's Homes campuses.

Photo courtesy of Emily Boykin



ONE MISSION: The Great Commission ONE PROGRAM: The Cooperative Program MANY MINISTRIES: Great Commission Ministries

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MONDAY MORNING
Dean Inserra, Lawrence Phipps & Daniel Atkins



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SUNDAY EVENING
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MONDAY MORNING
Lee Strobel & Daven Watkins



MARCH 13-14, 2022

First Baptist Church, Cullman

SUNDAY EVENING
Ronnie Hill & Ed Litton



MONDAY MORNING
Tim Beougher & Tom Richter



Sunday evening sessions at all locations are being livestreamed at live.alsbom.org. If you can't attend in person, consider gathering a group and participating online!

Ministers' Wives Gathering at each location, Monday 9-10:30 am
More info at alabamawmu.org/ministerswivesgathering



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evangelizeAL.org/sharinghope

York Bluff member sells paintings for Lottie at 90th birthday party

Irma Freeman says she's painted all her life. She hasn't always had time to do a lot of it — she raised four children and worked for Head Start for a while.

But over her 90 years of life she's piled up some art, some "absolutely beautiful" art, according to Kim Douthit, director

of children's ministries and ministry assistant at York Bluff Baptist Church in Sheffield.

Freeman started talking to Douthit about what she might do with all those paintings. As the two talked, Douthit realized two important events would soon intersect — Freeman's 90th birthday and the Lottie

Moon Christmas Offering season.

Douthit decided it was a perfect time for a party. And Freeman decided her 90th birthday celebration would be a great place to sell some of her paintings, with the proceeds going to the offering that supports missionaries through the International Mission Board.

"The Lord gave me the talent, so I just thought I would give it back to Him," she said.

The party, held Nov. 20, raised \$510 for the LMCO. Freeman's paintings range from still life, to architecture, to trees and flowers.

"I've always enjoyed painting," she said. "It's a way I relax, and I still am painting now." (Grace Thornton)



Photos courtesy of York Bluff Baptist Church
Irma Freeman (center) celebrates her 90th birthday with members of her family.



Photo courtesy of Marc Hodges
Children from FBC Thorsby participate in The Manger Project. Each kit contains 10 pieces of precut wood, instructions and nails.

Local ministries benefit from Manger Project

(continued from page 1)
manger is complete, each family takes it home and fills it with items to help local charities. Small containers of shampoo, toothpaste and other toiletries fill the manger, then they're delivered to a homeless shelter in Thorsby or a nearby community.

Another ministry that benefits is Care Net Chilton.

"The Manger Project has been such a blessing to our center," said Ashley Liveoak, executive director. "The travel-size items collected last year went in our Mom's Goodie Bags when they receive a positive pregnancy test. We continue to use the manger that was given to us in another way — it is placed in our entryway and is filled with knitted blankets for parents to pick one out for their child.

"The Manger Project is a true blessing, and we are incredibly grateful!"

Getting involved

The evening of manger building included a hot-chocolate bar, and families were encouraged to have a family Christmas photo taken with their manger.

"I would say The Manger Project turned out to involve most of our church. Everyone wanted to participate," Hodges said.

Church members Amy and Warwick Naylor realized the importance of teaching their children about service to both God and people in need.

"We placed the manger under our Christmas tree," she said. "Each time we purchased a gift for someone, we also bought a gift for the manger."

Homeless ministry

"As of now, we haven't decided which charity to support this year," she continued.

"Our children are always concerned about children who do not know about Jesus. The first year, we noticed many homeless people living under a bridge in Birmingham. We filled Ziploc bags with snacks and \$5, and the children used some of their own money. Then we filled the manger with individual bags, snacks, bottles of water and small Bibles and left it where the homeless congregate."

"The Manger Project is a true blessing ..."

Ashley Liveoak, Care Net Chilton


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Explore the Bible

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.

Dean of Christian Studies, University of Mobile



GOD JUDGES Ezekiel 24:1–14

Throughout biblical history, recipients of God's special revelation have presumed upon God's grace and forgiveness.

They assumed their complaints against God and His servants, as well as their disobedience and rebellious idolatry, had no bearing on their fellowship with God.

Though God clearly states sinful disobedience would separate them from God, they thought they could acquire wisdom from God according to their timetable.

David writes that if he treasured sin in his heart, God would not listen (Ps. 66:18). Isaiah explains there is a time and an attitude in which to call upon the Lord (Isa. 55:6–7).

He also reminds Judah and Israel their unrepentant rebellion, not any inability on God's part, was the reason for God's silence when they called to Him (Isa. 59:1–2).

Ezekiel the prophet must confront exiles for their presumption to inquire of the Lord.

Confronted (1–4)

"Some of Israel's elders came to inquire of the Lord." Here they are in the midst of exile, an exile resulting directly from Judah's refusal to honor God by honoring His word. Now, they want to hear a word from God?

Ezekiel sits down with those who have the audacity to assume God has a new word for them. His response: God has no word for you.

This is not the first time in Israel's history where God was not providing new special revelation, nor was it the last.

When Samuel heard from God, Eli was initially unaware because "the word of the Lord was rare and prophetic visions were not widespread" (1 Sam. 3:1). Amos prophesied a famine "of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11) would occur. And now, God says He will not give counsel to the elders because of the wicked, idolatrous practices of their fathers.

Early Signs (5–9)

God instructs Ezekiel to review Israel's history, including the early signs of their bent toward rebellion and idolatry. In the days of Moses, God demonstrated power over the false gods of Egypt, reclaiming Israel as His own.

At Sinai, God spoke to Moses, while Israel's tribes abandoned their Deliverer and returned to their idolatrous ways.

God spared these hardheaded, idolatrous people for the sake of His own name.

A brief review of Exodus underscores Israel's marred history. It also reminds us our deliverance from sin and death is based upon the grace of God, not on our worthiness to be saved.

We, too, are prone to idolatry, even if that idolatry comes in different forms than theirs.

Repeated Rebellion (10–14)

After leaving Sinai and transitioning to the wilderness of Kadesh Barnea, Israel continued to rebel.

Let the reader take note of the repeated phrase "in the wilderness." This is the Hebrew name for the book of Numbers, recording the four-decade transition from Sinai to Kadesh to Moab.

The book serves as a review of many rebellious acts of Israel against God.

The result: An entire generation of Israel would be refused entrance to the promised land.

As the chapter continues, so does the history lesson.

God reminds the elders of Moses' teaching to the second generation not to follow the pattern of their parents.

Throughout Israel's history though, they continued to choose their own way or the way of the inhabitants of the land rather than God's way.

We cannot live in rebellion against the words of the Master and presume to ask God's counsel. May God grant us a hunger to read and apply His word daily.

Bible Studies for Life

By Jeffery M. Leonard, Ph.D.

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THE SAVIOR WHO CAME TO US Luke 2:4–12, 16–20

My mother-in-law was for many years a kindergarten teacher. One year as Christmas approached, she set aside time for her students to draw pictures related to Jesus' birth.

Among the familiar scenes of barns and magi, shepherds and mangers, one young boy had drawn an airplane. Assuming the boy had drawn what he wanted to rather than what he had been told to, she asked why he had not drawn a Christmas picture. The boy protested, "But I did, Mrs. Renicks, this is the flight to Egypt!" Looking more closely, my mother-in-law recognized figures on the plane that did, in fact, appear to be Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

"Who," she asked, "is this fellow here then?" The boy promptly responded, "That's Pontius, the pilot." As this little boy's story illustrates, the story of the birth of Jesus, while one of the most familiar in the Bible, is also one with details easy to misunderstand.

Jesus' humble birth in Bethlehem fulfilled the promise of God to David. (4–7)

One of the most readily misunderstood elements of the nativity story has to do with the "inn" where Mary and Joseph were turned away.

While the Greek language has a perfectly good word for "inn" (pandokeion), that word isn't found in this story.

The place from which Mary and Joseph were turned away was a kataluma, the "upper room" in a house. Mary and Joseph were poor people; they were not likely to stay in a hotel but rather with relatives. Unfortunately, their relatives turned them away, telling them no room was available.

Perhaps this was true; a small room, perhaps already crowded with other guests, was no place for Mary to give birth. Of course, the chivalrous thing would have been for the men to leave so the women could assist Mary in the birthing process. Instead, the couple went downstairs to the working part of the house where animals set aside for sacrifice were

kept indoors. This is where the manger, not made of wood in Israel but of stone, was found.

Angels proclaimed the good news that the Savior was born. (8–12)

The visitors who attend Jesus' birth in Luke's Gospel are shepherds. Shepherding conjures up images of green pastures, gently rolling hills and stone walls separating field from field.

Shepherding in Israel could hardly be more different. Shepherds lived at the edge of society, moving from place to place with their flocks to find water, scrambling over dry, rocky hills, always under threat from weather, predators and unsavory characters. Shepherds were poor, tough people. And yet, these were the first to receive the message of the Messiah's birth. The good news came first to a ragtag band of shepherds living out in the fields.

People rejoice when they recognize the truth of salvation. (16–20)

Luke tells us Mary "treasured up all these things in her heart and meditated on them." Mary seemed to know even then that the events surrounding her son's birth would echo throughout the rest of His life. This would certainly prove to be the case.

At the beginning of His life, Jesus would be treated inhospitably in a kataluma; He would be treated the same way at the end of His life in the more famous kataluma where the Last Supper was held.

At the beginning of His life, Jesus was wrapped in strips of cloth and placed in a hollowed out stone manger; at the end of His life, Jesus would be wrapped again in strips of cloth and placed in a hollowed out stone tomb. Jesus was born alongside the sacrificial animals; Jesus would one day die as the ultimate sacrifice. And the message of this unlikely Savior would be embraced not by the rich and powerful, but by the poor and lowly, by those like the shepherds who had nowhere to turn.

MEDIA REVIEWS

By Tracy Riggs
TAB Media

‘American Underdog’: A story of the Warners’ faith, hope

December 25 is a day to celebrate the hope found in Jesus. This year families across the nation can celebrate another kind of hope by watching the new movie release “American Underdog.”

It is the story of Kurt Warner and his rise from stocking shelves to becoming one of the best quarterbacks in the National Football League.

Starting as an undrafted player, Warner later became a two-time NFL MVP and Super Bowl MVP. He also is the only player ever inducted into both the Pro Football Hall of Fame and the Arena Football Hall of Fame.

However, Warner’s focus in life is not football — it is his faith. He attributes his achievements to God working in his life and says, “First things first — faith and family — is my formula for success.”

Though “American Underdog” tells the story of Warner’s rise to stardom, the film is not just about football — it’s about struggles in everyday life.

Single mother

Before Kurt met and married his wife, Brenda, her son became disabled at a young age. She was told he would never walk or talk. Two years later and eight months preg-



ZACHARY LEVI PLAYS KURT WARNER

Photo courtesy of Mike Kubeisy

nant with her second child, Brenda discovered her husband was cheating on her. She left him and became a single mother with a newborn and a child with a disability.

“The person sitting in that chair watching this movie is going to relate to those times in my life,” she said. “I am not special in that way. I don’t have superpowers. I am just a person doing the best I can. [This movie] is going to show ... that I’m a flawed person.”

Warner later adopted Brenda’s children and said he learned more about his own mother, also a single parent, as a result.

“[My mom] didn’t get to live the life that I know she wanted because of some of those stereotypes and things that went with [being a single mother],” he realized.

Jon Erwin, director of American Underdog, said, “I love the idea that Kurt Warner first became a champion off the field before he became a champion on the field. It was him discovering his faith, a relationship with Jesus Christ. It was him em-

bracing his role as a husband, as a father, and realizing life was bigger than he was.

“So many of us think, ‘Well, I’ve made some mistakes in my life. God can’t use me because of the mess I made,’” Erwin said. “Brenda felt that way. She had been told when she was very young by someone in church, ‘Hey, God’s gonna do something great with you.’ She thought that ship had sailed because of the choices she’d made and the things she’d messed up.”

‘Crazy dream’

Erwin said he put himself in the same category but noted that if Warner “can accomplish His dream and endure, and they can stay together as a couple, maybe we can, too. Maybe my crazy dreams are not as impossible as I once thought.”

Erwin said he is living proof of fulfilling a “crazy dream.” A native of Birmingham, a city not known for filmmaking, Erwin didn’t attend college. Now he’s directing major motion pictures.

“So many people give up too early. You never know when that breakthrough moment that God has for you is right around the corner,” Erwin encouraged. “If you give up too soon, you’ll never experience it. If God calls you to something, even when everyone in your life says it’s crazy, maybe the great lesson is just to never ever quit — remembering that success is long obedience in the same direction.”

Team effort

The team making American Underdog had to persevere to get the movie completed. COVID-19 erupted just as production was supposed to start, then a major blizzard hit the Midwest during filming. Erwin called it a “blizdemic.”

One morning Erwin received a call from the hotel clerk who said, “There’s a guy out shoveling snow in the parking lot and getting cars out. We’ve investigated, and it’s NFL legend Kurt Warner.”

“[Warner] said, ‘I’m from Ohio; I can do this!’ There was that level of commitment,” Erwin said, to which Warner responded, “We had a movie to make!”

Andy Erwin, Jon’s brother, partner and co-director of “American Underdog,” noted, “I’ve never been as satisfied by a film, and that’s not because of something Jon and I did. Really good filmmakers can try their hardest to make the film you want, and it just doesn’t work out.

“But when you get the right people in the room, with the right story, you need to just sit back and watch magic happen,” Andy Erwin said. “I’ve never been so proud of a story, so, in my mind, that is a success. I can’t wait for people to see it Christmas Day.”

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.



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