

The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.

Oh come,
let us adore **HIM**

“And behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.”

MATTHEW 2:9-10

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SCAN ME

Looking ahead: A few items to expect in 2024

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

It's almost time to turn the calendar on another year, and your team at The Alabama Baptist is already ensuring the following items will be in place when we see you in January.

1. Expanded opportunity to hear from you.

We are working to implement many of your recent suggestions and want to continue the conversation. We also encourage you to submit even more letters to the editor, columns you have written and other personal writings. Recommend your favorite articles and/or sermons from your pastor too.

2. Enhanced effort on news coverage.

We are hearing about the intense effort coming in early 2024 to fully legalize all forms of gambling in the state and will be covering the detrimental impact this move could have. We also are encouraged about recent moves to shut down illegal gambling operations in some parts of the state and will keep you abreast of what's happening and how we can encourage law enforcement agencies to remain vigilant in this area. Other topics in the works include growing concerns with public libraries and ongoing SBC-related developments.

3. Aging Well features in each edition.

We are already working on various health-related topics such as how hearing loss could lead to early dementia symptoms and medical advice on when and how often to get our hearing assessed. Other features will provide simple tips we can do each day, such as what Vicki Heath shares in this edition on page



Photo by Lauren Grim/The Alabama Baptist

17. We'll also deal with protecting yourself and your loved ones from the various types of scams becoming much more prevalent and savvy these days. In fact, be extremely cautious right now because even more scams surface during the holidays.

4. Sunday School lesson commentaries.

Starting in late January, the Sunday School lesson commentaries will be provided a week ahead for you rather than coming in only a few days prior to Sunday, and with our new every-other-week schedule, you'll also receive the following week's lesson as well.

To make the transition to this new schedule, you'll find Sunday School lessons for Dec. 24, Dec. 31 and Jan. 7 in this edition (see pages 22, 23 and 25) and then lessons for Jan. 14, Jan. 21 and Jan. 28 in the Jan. 11 edition. From there, the next two lessons will appear in each edition.

All lessons also are archived at tabonline.org, and your subscrip-

tion provides free access with your login credentials. If you need help logging in to the website, email subscribe@thealabamabaptist.org or call 800-803-5201.

5. The Alabama Baptist now alternating with The Baptist Paper.

We'll be back in January with our new print schedule. The Baptist Paper publishes first on Jan. 4, then The Alabama Baptist on Jan. 11 — and they will continue alternating from there. Be sure to let us know if you would like to check out The Baptist Paper. We are glad to provide complimentary copies for you to review, and your TAB-discounted rate is only \$10 per year.

Continuing with only The Alabama Baptist works great too, and we'll ensure all vital Alabama Baptist-related news continues in each edition. It's a win-win, whichever way you select. For more information, call 800-803-5201 or email subscribe@thebaptistpaper.org.

Thank you for investing in the ministry of the state Baptist paper and for always being willing to help us continually grow and improve. We are excited you are on the journey with us and look forward to navigating 2024 with you.

Grace and peace to you and yours — Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

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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The crossword puzzle can be found on page 21.

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GUEST EDITORIAL

for this week's edition of The Alabama Baptist

By Bob Terry, Editor emeritus



The unity of the Christmas stories found in Matthew, Luke

The Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of Matthew both share the story of Jesus' birth. Luke's telling is considered the older of the two, written sometime before 60 A.D. Matthew's account was written at least 20 years later, some scholars argue, not before 80 A.D. That means the two gospels were written at different times, under different circumstances (the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.), and to different audiences.

That the two accounts of the birth of our Savior contain differences is to be expected. Luke writes of shepherds, an angelic chorus, a stable and a manger. Matthew tells of Magi, government persecution and a dramatic escape into Egypt.

These differences, however, should not obscure the basic unity of Luke's and Matthew's recounting of Jesus' birth story. Scholars have identified 11 important points shared by both stories that emphasize that unity.

1. Mary and Joseph are legally married but have not yet come to live together (Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:27, 34). It is the time between the groom making a payment to the father of the bride for his loss of a daughter and the community celebration that acknowledges the couple as married.

2. Joseph is from the lineage of David (Matt. 1:16, 20; Luke 1:27, 34, 2:4).

3. There is an angelic announcement about the forthcoming birth of the child. Matthew 1:20–23 describes the angel's appearance to Joseph. Luke 1:30–35 tells of the angel's appearance to Mary. Matthew seems to tell the birth story from the viewpoint of Joseph while Luke reflects the viewpoint of Mary.

4. Mary's conception of the child is not through sexual relations with Joseph or any other man. In Matthew 1:20, the angel tells Joseph the child is from the Holy Spirit. If as to reinforce that reality, the angel calls Mary a "virgin" three verses later. In verse 25, Matthew reports that even after taking Mary into his home, the couple did not have sexual relations until after she gave birth. In Luke 1:34, Mary describes herself as a virgin.

5. The conception is through the Holy Spirit. The biblical emphasis is on the immaculate conception of Jesus. Matthew quotes the angel as telling Joseph the child is "from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:18). Luke quotes the angel as saying the Holy Spirit will "overshadow" Mary.

Recalling the creation story of Genesis, where the Spirit of God "hovered over the waters" as creation unfolded, provides an image to keep in mind. There is no reference to a male-female sexual act in either account.

6. Both Luke and Matthew report the angel instructing that the child was to be named Jesus (Matt. 1:21; Luke 1:31).

"She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Matthew 1:21

7. In addition to commanding the child be named Jesus, an angel announces the child is to be the Savior. After telling Joseph the child will be named Jesus, the angel adds "because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). In Luke 2:11, an angel tells the shepherds, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you."

8. Jesus was born after Joseph and Mary were living together. Luke makes this point by reporting that Mary went with Joseph to Bethlehem so Joseph could be registered in a Roman census (Luke 2:5–6). Matthew states forthrightly that Joseph did what the angel had commanded and "took Mary home as his wife" (Matt. 1:24–25).

9. Jesus' birth occurred in Bethlehem. Matthew offers no explanation for the couple being

in the City of David. He simply writes, "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem ..." (Matt. 2:1). Luke says the couple went to Bethlehem because of a Roman census (Luke 2:4–6).

10. Chronologically, the birth of Jesus is related to the reign of Herod the Great. Matthew 2:1 says the birth occurred "during the time of King Herod." Luke places his story "in the time of Herod, king of Judea" (Luke 1:5). History records Herod died in 4 B.C. There is general agreement that Jesus' birth took place between 6–4 B.C.

11. Jesus was reared in Nazareth. Matthew offers the most context. He shares that after Herod died, the family sought to return from exile in Egypt. But when Joseph learned Archelaus had succeeded his father as King of Judea, the decision was made to go to Galilee where Herod Antipas was ruler. There the family settled in Nazareth (Matt. 2:23). Luke writes the couple returned to Nazareth after "doing everything required by the law of the Lord" (Luke 2:39).

The unity of the two stories is obvious once one looks beyond some of the differences. Our understanding of the story of Jesus' birth is enriched by the differences in the two stories. At the same time, our confidence in the event which they proclaimed is enhanced by the unity of the two stories of Jesus' birth.

Your Voice



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

'Jesus who?': Share the Savior this Christmas

By David L. Chancey
Fayetteville, Georgia

It's easy to get caught up in the wrong things and completely miss Christmas.

Some people missed that first Christmas. The innkeeper was too preoccupied. He had his hands full with a full inn. King Herod was too jealous and paranoid. The religious leaders didn't care about a baby born in Bethlehem.

Their focus was the law. They didn't need a Savior. Jerusalem residents lived only a short distance from Bethlehem, yet they totally missed His birth. Let's not take for granted that everyone knows what and who Christmas is about.

Pastor Sterling Lynn told about his church's missions trip to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, several years ago.

This youth group from First Baptist Church Daytona Beach, Florida,

encountered a teenage girl who asked, "What is your group doing here?" The youth pastor responded, "We're here to help one of the local churches spread the good news about Jesus."

Then came two words that totally shocked the short-term missionaries: "Jesus who?"

Get the picture. They were standing in Bethlehem, and this girl asked "Jesus who?"

One of my church members, Ali, had a similar experience. Ali works as a houseparent at FAME Girls Ranch in Russellville, Alabama. One of her residents was a 16-year old sent to live there by the state.

The girls brought out the boxes of Christmas stuff and pitched in to decorate their house. When Ali opened the box that contained the

nativity scene, this student had no idea what a nativity scene was or what the word meant.

She had been to church, knew about Jesus and had heard about His death and resurrection, but she had never heard about His birth. Ali sat with this teen and had the privilege of sharing the details of Jesus' birth.

The youth was totally fascinated and deeply touched that God loved the world so much He gave His only Son to be the Savior of the world.

How do we prepare to have our best Christmas ever?

Several years ago, evangelist Dennis Nunn addressed that question in a Sunday morning message at our church. Here are his tips:

- ▶ Turn holidays into holy days. Christmas is about Jesus, and we need to keep the focus on Him.
- ▶ Don't go into debt. Overspending for gifts and going into debt is the world's way to do Christmas. If you can't pay for it, don't buy it. Give as you are able, according to the blessings of the Lord (Deut. 16:17).
- ▶ Focus on people and not presents. This is a season to invest in family and build family memories. Spend as much time talking to your children as you do shopping for your children. What memories will you build this year?

EDITOR'S NOTE — David L. Chancey is pastor of McDonough Road Baptist Church in Fayetteville, Georgia. Visit davidchancey.com to read more of his articles.



CHANCEY

Remembering our Hope

Our hope is this and this alone: Christ has come.

The final verse of "Christ Has Come" declares, "Christ will come again. To damn this pain to hell. For He has overcome, and we will reign with Him."

I know It's Advent and not Easter, but the two are unmistakably intertwined. To celebrate one is to celebrate the other. Without Advent, there is no Easter. Without Easter, we have no

reason to celebrate Advent.

And without Easter and Advent, we have no hope. We have nothing to look forward to past the sorrow and pain of this life.

So whether it's a lifeline in a tumultuous season or a timely reminder during this Christmas season, remember this promise:

Christ has come. And Christ will come again.

Jessica Ingram
the-scroll.com

Fix your eyes on Jesus amid busyness

It's really no wonder the holidays are a high time for depression. Financial and family issues surface, and the changes that have occurred in previous months are all brought to attention this time of year.

If you're one that doesn't look forward to the holidays, you're not alone.

Everything in this season tells us we need to be merry, we need to have that picture perfect family and that picture perfect table with our friends surrounding us.

It tells us something is wrong if we don't.

But the pictures we put in frames and on social media don't always tell the true story.

The author of Hebrews tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2). Why is that important? Because we can become distracted by all the things we think we need to be, when the only thing we need is to be at His feet.

Make Jesus the reason for your season this year and keep your eyes fixed on Him. Let your anxieties fall by the wayside and give Him a place at your table. Let this holiday be different in a good way.

Amy Hacker
the-scroll.com

Share online or email news@thealabamabaptist.org

“We’re working to finish the unfinished; there’s still a lot to be done.”

D’LINELL FINLEY

Pastor, Southlawn Baptist Church in Montgomery

Anticipation is as old as time. I can’t imagine the great anticipation God must have felt as He prepared the world for Jesus. He knew their most incredible gift to mankind was on the way.

“God’s Great Anticipation”
perfectionroad.com/blog

The world glorifies ‘self-made’ individuals. But on the Kingdom side of things, we know (and have deeply experienced) the foolishness of independence and self-reliance. Jesus came to save us from this futile way of living. He became the Way to a fruitful life.

@_full.filled_
Instagram

How to make church not “about you” this weekend:

- Pray for others.
 - Serve and volunteer.
 - Be a worshipper, not a consumer.
 - Show up on time.
 - Don’t fill the back seats first.
 - Sing, even if it’s not your favorite song.
 - Participate instead of spectate.
 - Don’t nitpick.
 - Go live out the sermon.
- @shane_pruitt78
X (formerly Twitter)

When hurtful words come our way, we must be humble enough to receive any truth from what’s been said but stable enough to let the rest go.

Their unkindness is usually an indication of unresolved pain in their life that probably has very little to do with you.

@LysaTerKeurst
X (formerly Twitter)

We are all objects of God’s love and the intended recipients of history’s first Christmas present. The Christmas story is a true love story of rescue and redemption that deserves to be both celebrated and shared this month with anyone who is willing to listen. “For God so

loved the world” means that every person in our family, neighborhood, school and/or workplace is someone worth saving.

Mark Dance

Director of pastoral wellness
GuideStone Financial Resources

When life does not make sense and everything seems confusing, do you ask yourself “why?” Do you struggle with making sense out of all the chaos?

I have asked the question “why” many times. I have grappled with trying really hard to understand the purpose of it all.

This Scripture always brings me such peace when I find myself in the confusion. It brings clarity and

hope: “My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,” says the Lord. “And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:8–9).

My friend, I’m not sure what you are going through today, I hope this passage encourages you to rest in this truth too.

His ways are not our ways. God is in control. You and I are not called to figure it all out on this earth but praise God on that. God’s got you and God’s got me. God’s got it all.

@lisajean_silva
Instagram



It really is a wonderful life

By Franklin Kirksey

Robertsdale, Alabama

If you think this is about a banker from Bedford Falls, it is not. It is about a guilty sinner becoming a glorious saint because he met a gracious Savior who appeared on earth from heaven (Titus 3:3–7).

Paul wrote a letter to Titus, wherein he reminds him of the time when Jesus Christ appeared and what that means to believers. Notice three tenses in this text.

In the past tense, remember what you were (Titus 3:3). Remember what it was to be lost. Paul refers to a guilty sinner, but there is an appreciation of love. Titus 3:4a reads, “But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared.” (See Gal. 4:4–5 and John 3:16.)

In the present tense, remember what you are now. Titus 3:4b–5a reads, “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us ...” Jesus Christ is a gracious Savior. (See Eph. 2:8–9.)

In the future tense, remember what you will be. Titus 3:7b reads, “we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” There is an anticipation in hope. Remember you will be heirs in glory. (See Rom. 8:30b.)

James Culross recounts that as William Carey, the great missionary statesman, was dying, he said with a feeble voice, “Mr. Duff, you have been speaking about Dr. Carey, Dr. Carey. When I am gone, say nothing about Dr. Carey — speak only about Dr. Carey’s Savior.”

Many gift cards you receive need to be activated. The gift of God’s Son for forgiveness of our sin is no exception. There is an activation by faith (Rom. 5:1–2).

Believer, don’t lose the wonder! It’s a wonderful life!

3 stories you should know



Facebook photo

As residents of Lahaina, Hawaii, continue to recover from August fires that devastated their island community, Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief chaplains and others recently spent time on Maui, providing comfort and encouragement. Ray Itagawa (left) from Hawaii-Pacific Baptist Convention and the chaplains prayed with residents as they assessed their losses. About 9,000 or so residents of Lahaina remain displaced. Read more at tabonline.org/hawaii-recovery. (TAB)

Abortion-related cases come before courts

Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul said Dec. 11 that he will not prosecute operators of pro-life pregnancy resource centers under a new consumer fraud law after a federal judge called the “deceptive practices” law “stupid and very likely unconstitutional.”

The law seeks to prohibit centers from sharing information on alternatives to abortion and carries up to a \$50,000 fine per incident. There are more than 100 pro-life PRCs in Illinois.

On Dec. 13, the U.S. Supreme Court, which in 2022 ended its recognition of a constitutional right to abortion, agreed to hear an appeal in a case that seeks to preserve broad access to mifepristone, also known as the abortion pill. The case involves how the pill is delivered and distributed. (TAB)

Animated ‘Jesus’ film adaptation in the works

Cru, the evangelical Christian organization that created the “Jesus” film four decades ago, is producing an animated version set to release in theaters next year.

“What an opportunity we have to use a medium that God has ordained to reach not just people, but the next generation with the gospel,” said Virginia pastor David Platt, who spoke at the announcement of the new project at the Museum of the Bible in Washington on Nov. 30.

Platt is former pastor of The Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham and a former International Mission Board president.

The original “Jesus” film, released in 1979, has been translated into more languages — 2,100 — than any other movie, according to Guinness World Records. (TAB)

Persecuted church

Pakistani Christian man’s death may have been religiously motivated

PUNJAB PROVINCE, Pakistan — A 20-year-old Pakistani Christian man was slain Nov. 9 in an attack that sources say was religiously motivated.

Farhan Ul Qamar was killed at home in the village of Talwandi Inayat Khan in Punjab province, sources told Morning Star News. The assailant was identified as Muhammad Zubair, a Muslim who instigated an argument with Ul Qamar the previous day.

Zubair gained entrance to the Ul Qamar home



MS photo

around 3 a.m. and shot the man three times.

In the attack, Zubair called the Ul Qamar family “Jews,” a relative said.

During his escape, Zubair held Ul Qamar’s mother at gunpoint.

Zubair fled the scene on motorcycle. Police later apprehended him, sources told Morning Star.

“Government and police officials need to take notice of growing incidents of violence against religious minorities in Punjab, especially Christians,” noted attorney Lazar Allah Rakha.

Recently, Muslims beat two Christian brothers in Ul Qamar’s village for allegedly expressing support for Israel, a source told Morning Star.

Pakistan is No. 7 on Open Doors’ 2023 World Watch List of places most difficult to be a Christian.

Kidnapped wife of slain pastor in Nigeria reportedly released after ransom paid

Armed assailants in Kaduna state, Nigeria, on Nov. 17 killed a pastor and kidnapped his wife, Morning Star News reported. Joshua Amako

Maraya of the Evangelical Church Winning All in Damakasuwa town was killed at night by “bandits,” said Romanus Ebenwokodi, spokesman for ECWA.

The late pastor’s wife was reportedly released Nov. 19 after a ransom was paid.

In the 2023 World Watch List of countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian, Nigeria is No. 6, up one spot from 2022.



MARAYA

Alabama news

OBITUARIES

► Longtime pastor **Lonnie B. Byrd** died Nov. 28. He was 84.

Byrd was a chaplain with the Alabama Army National Guard for 23 years, culminating with service in Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He retired in 1999 at the rank of colonel.



BYRD

Byrd served numerous churches as pastor during his five decades in ministry, including New Hope Baptist Church, Florala; Ruffner Valley Baptist Church, Irondale; James Memorial Baptist Church, Gadsden; First Baptist Church Childersburg; and

First Baptist Church Theodore. After his retirement from full-time pastoral ministry in June 1997, he served as interim pastor at Zion Baptist Church, Mobile; Montgomery Hill Baptist Church; and First Baptist Church Theodore.

He was a graduate of the University of Alabama and held master's degrees in theology and religious education from New Orleans Seminary.

He is survived by his wife of 63 years, Beverley Shepherd Byrd; daughters, Mona Crawford, Tina Dearborn, and Lonette Kidwell; 12 grandchildren; and 18 great grandchildren.

BLOUNT ASSOCIATION

► **New Emmaus Missionary Baptist Church, Altoona**, celebrated its 75th anniversary Oct. 29, beginning with a luncheon followed by the service at 2 p.m. Special guests included former pastors and several who were licensed and/or ordained into the ministry at New Emmaus. The congregation sang three of the original songs that were sung the day the church was organized in 1948. Special presentations included a plaque from the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission and a painting of the church by member Trevor Thomas, which was given to pastor Kyle Blakeley and his wife, Katey, for pastor appreciation.

CHILTON ASSOCIATION

► **Union Grove Baptist Church, Jemison**, celebrated its 125th anniversary Nov. 12 with a celebration and Thanksgiving meal. Randy Gothard was the guest speaker; the Grove Worship Team led the music.

COLBERT-LAUDERDALE ASSOCIATION

► **Valley Grove Baptist Church, Tuscumbia**, celebrated its 150th anniversary Sept. 24. The

celebration began with several congratulatory videos, including one from Rick Lance, executive director of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, and Richard Nesbitt, third great-



Photo courtesy of Jimmy Austin

grandson of John Rhea Nesmith, a former pastor. The guest preacher was Tim Akers, former children's and youth minister, now serving at Woodmont Baptist Church, Florence, as minister of missions and discipleship. Special music was provided by Tim Spurgeon, former minister of music; Greg Newell, choir member; Jerome Morgan, minister of music; and the choir. Jimmy Austin (right), a commissioner of The Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, presented a plaque to Greg Beasley (left), pastor. Additional special guests included Mike Lockhart, mayor of Muscle Shoals, Jim Warren, the association's former director of missions, and Congressman Robert Aderholt, who presented a flag to the church that had flown over the U.S. Capitol.

► **First Baptist Church Killen** celebrated its 75th anniversary Sept. 17. Special music was provided by the choir and several members shared how the church had impacted their lives. Jimmy Austin (right), a commissioner of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, presented a plaque to David McKelvey (left), pastor.



Photo courtesy of Jimmy Austin

EAST LIBERTY ASSOCIATION

► **LaFayette Heights Baptist Church, LaFayette**, celebrated its 100th anniversary Sept. 24. Members Brent Fuller and Donna Howard shared changes and early history of the church, followed by a video showing the opening of a time capsule from 1968. During the service, Ellen Dewberry, a commissioner of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, presented a plaque to Dave Bearden, pastor. Special music was provided by Deanna Fuller, director of the music ministry. Paul Howard, pastor emeritus, was recognized for his faithful service and ministry by family and friends.

ETOWAH ASSOCIATION

► **Immanuel Baptist Church, Hokes Bluff**, celebrated its 75th anniversary Nov. 12. Craig Carlisle, the association's director of missions, was the guest speaker. Special music was provided by the choir. Wendell Dutton (left), a com-

missioner of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, presented a plaque to Rebecca Means (second from left), church clerk; Kenneth Means (second from right), deacon chair; and Anthony Copeland (right), pastor.



Photo courtesy of Wendell Dutton

MUSCLE SHOALS ASSOCIATION

► **Wear Baptist Church, Moulton**, celebrated its 50th anniversary Nov. 5. Mark Wakefield, former pastor, now serving as chaplaincy and



Photo courtesy of Jimmy Austin

disaster relief strategist for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, was the guest preacher. Additional guests included Todd Appleton, grandson of the church's first pastor, Clyde Good-

lett, and Robert Smith, associational missionary. A commemorative plaque was presented to Steve Dutton (right), the pastor, by Jimmy Austin (left), commissioner of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission. Special music was provided by Jim and Beth Lewis, former youth ministers, and Morgan Whitt and Debbie Latham. The first person baptized in the church was Bertie Wilkerson (now deceased), and four generations of her family were in attendance (daughter, granddaughter, great-granddaughter and great-great-grandson).

SAND MOUNTAIN ASSOCIATION

► **Ider Missionary Baptist Church** celebrated its 100th anniversary Sept. 17. Former pastor Chris Guinn, now serving as Sand Mountain Baptist Association's director of missions, was the guest preacher. Special music was provided by the choir and soloists. Wendell Dutton (center), a commissioner of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, presented a plaque to Dwayne Chapman (left), deacon chair, and Luke McKay (right), pastor.



Photo courtesy of Wendell Dutton

EDITOR'S NOTE — Send news items to news@thealabamabaptist.org. Please include complete details of the event, celebration or honor; at least one high resolution photo of the event or honoree; the name and phone number of a contact person at your church.

'DO NOT FEAR, FOR I AM WITH YOU'

Bible app's top verse of 2023 confronts fear for 3rd consecutive year

In 2023, daily Bible use and installs of the YouVersion apps — which include Bible App, Bible App Lite, and Bible App for Kids — increased at higher rates than previous years, the group announced. And for the third consecutive year, the verse that people engaged with most was Isaiah 41:10:

“So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”

Hope and peace

The top spot reflects the verse people highlighted, bookmarked and shared the most, the group's website reported. The selected verse also “corresponds with the needs expressed in 2023's top in-app searches as people around the world consistently turned to the Bible for answers about love, peace, hope, healing and anxiety,” YouVersion noted.

“From a global perspective, we've all been through a lot in the last few years, so it's no surprise that people continue to feel drawn to the hope and peace promised in Isaiah 41:10,” said Bobby Gruenewald, founder and CEO of YouVersion.

“Even though there's a lot of fear and anxiety felt around the world,” he noted, “we believe faith is the answer, and it's encouraging to see people continue to cling to God and His Word in their greatest moments of need.”

Across its Apps, YouVersion reportedly continued to see Bible engagement surge worldwide throughout 2023.



Edited photo with Unsplash.com

Every month this year ranked among the all-time highest months in YouVersion's 15-year history for both installs and daily use, YouVersion said.

Specifically, they reported, installs increased this year by more than 100 million devices while the previous record from 2020 was 76 million installs in one year.

20% growth in Bible use

Also, compared to 2022, daily Bible use grew by 20% this year — and this represented about 12 million people engaging in the Bible each day, they said.

“Throughout this year, we've seen our global community engage with Scripture at impressively high

rates,” Gruenewald said. “From what we're seeing, this isn't just a momentary surge but something that will last. We anticipate an even greater level of excitement around Bible engagement in the years to come.”

YouVersion launched in 2008 and began with Bible text available in English and Spanish, creating a community that was largely based in North America. Since then, it's evolved into a global ministry, they noted, “that's still experiencing significant growth in daily Bible use in North America while also reaching new people worldwide.”

More than 80% of YouVersion installs, they noted, happened outside of the United States in 2023 with

India, Africa and Latin America standing out most.

'Our vision'

“Our vision is to bring God's Word to everyone, everywhere, every day, and we know we can't do it alone,” Gruenewald said. “More than ever before, we're seeing the global Church unify around God's Word, and it's exciting to think about how many more people will grow closer to God because of the passion and commitment of our partners to work together.”

EDITOR'S NOTE — This story, which was originally published by YouVersion, was edited and adapted by The Alabama Baptist.



Photo by Grace Thornton/The Alabama Baptist

Sandy Crapet (right) helps her husband, Lee (center), and friend David Liles load the bus at FBC Hoover with OCC shoeboxes dropped off there during National Collection Week in November. FBC Hoover was one of 131 collection sites in the state.

‘Enhanced appreciation’

FBC Hoover church member gets glimpse into bigger picture of Operation Christmas Child

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

Sandy Crapet said her church — First Baptist Hoover — has been packing shoeboxes for Operation Christmas Child for many, many years.

It started with individuals making boxes. It grew into packing parties.

And this year, they got even more of a glimpse into the bigger picture.

“I didn’t really know what the process was, and I found out there were churches where you dropped off boxes, and I thought this would be a great way to help,” Crapet said.

So she and fellow church member Onie Wallace got in touch with their area representative for OCC, a ministry of Samaritan’s Purse.

OCC has sent more than 209 million shoeboxes filled with toys, school supplies and hygiene products to children all over the globe since the effort started in 1993.

Volunteers also follow up with discipleship for the shoebox recipients.

This year, FBC Hoover served as one of Alabama’s 131 OCC drop-off locations during National Collection Week in mid-November.

We were thrilled — we got 1,510 boxes,” Crapet said. “If you think about it — 1,510 children

will get a box that came through our little church and have the potential of learning about Jesus and accepting Him as their Lord and Savior.”

After receiving the shoeboxes, volunteers at FBC Hoover packed them into moving boxes, then took those boxes to Gardendale First Baptist Church to be loaded and transported to the regional processing center in Atlanta.

“Being involved in this ministry at this level has just enhanced my appreciation for this ministry,” Crapet said.

She said last year she visited the processing center in Atlanta and took with her fellow church member Sana Haddad, who is

originally from a Middle Eastern country where children receive the packed shoeboxes. Haddad’s adult son packs dozens of boxes now because he still has items he received as a child and knows how much he was impacted by the gifts.

‘A lot of good’

“She was just overwhelmed to tears to see all the boxes,” Crapet said, noting that the ministry is “a good thing — a lot of good comes out of it.”

In addition to benefiting the recipients, OCC is a good way to involve senior adults in ministry, she said. “Our seasoned adults have so much to give, and maybe not all of them can go to the processing center in Atlanta, but they can pack shoeboxes, they can

give money so I can go shopping for them or somebody else can.”

Crapet said they can help count boxes and put rubber bands around them, and they can also pray with people who drop off the shoeboxes at the church, something Samaritan’s Purse encourages its volunteers to do.

“When people drop boxes off, we would ask them if they have any prayer requests,” Crapet said. “They were surprised and grateful and we got to pray for things going on in their lives.”

Boxes are still being processed for this year, but last year, churches and individuals in the U.S. packed more than 9.3 million shoeboxes. Partnering countries gave an additional 1.3 million boxes to the effort.

For more information, visit samaritanaspurse.org/occ.



Photo by Sandy Crapet
Volunteers at Gardendale FBC load boxes collected at FBC Hoover onto trucks to transport to the regional processing center in Atlanta.



Facebook photo

A group from Chulafinnee Baptist Church in Heflin helps process Operation Christmas Child shoeboxes at the regional processing center in Atlanta. From here, the boxes will be shipped to children in other countries.

Last year, churches and individuals in the U.S. packed more than 9.3 million shoeboxes. Partnering countries gave an additional 1.3 million boxes to the effort.

Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers remove a fallen tree at Brandie Lee's house in Madison, Tennessee, following the storm that hit the Nashville area Dec. 9.

'LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR'



Photo by Shawn Hendricks/The Alabama Baptist

Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers serve in TN following destructive storms

By Shawn Hendricks
The Alabama Baptist

Following a tornado that ripped through her Madison, Tennessee, neighborhood and dropped a huge tree in her driveway — just missing her house — Brandie Lee didn't know where to start with the cleanup.

During the storm, she received a text from a neighbor saying, "Um, our shed is in your tree." "This is like crazy," Lee said. "That was when it was really hitting me, 'This is a real tornado.'"

The young homeowner admitted she was feeling overwhelmed after the storm. It was right about then, she recalled, she heard a knock at the door. It was an Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief volunteer, who traveled with a team to help clean up the damage.

Lee was just one of thousands of Tennessee residents who were on the receiving end of a storm that ripped through the Nashville area Dec. 9 destroying homes, damaging roofs, snapping powerlines and trees like toothpicks — and tragically taking six lives.

For more information, visit sldr.org.

Soon after the storm, Disaster Relief teams in Tennessee and Alabama were called on to assess the damage and help homeowners remove trees and other debris from their property.

While Lee noted she had done some charity work in the past, she'd never needed that kind of help.

She said it was a breath of fresh air compared to other visitors standing at the door.

"I've had so many people knock on my door and give me every quote you could imagine to clean

up the tree," she said. "I've only owned the house for two years, so this is all new territory for me.

"I was overwhelmed ... and that's when [one of the Disaster Relief volunteers] walked up and basically said, 'Hey, we're with Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief.' I saw his ... shirt said Southern Baptist Convention, and I was like 'Yay!'"

"It just really felt like the Kingdom of heaven coming to earth in the most true way for me, where they're meeting a true need. I've just never been the one that ... truly has this big need — and someone comes in and rescues me. ... That was a true answer to prayer."

Figuring out how to pay for costly repairs and how to pay an often pricey deductible is a real issue for many homeowners — especially during the holiday season, noted volunteer Dave "Barney" Self, a "Blue Hat," who helped lead the team at Lee's house.

Help and minister

"Most people can't pay \$10,000 to move a tree," said Self, who has worked on Disaster Relief teams for about 10 years, "but we can do it for them and help them out for free. ... We're able to come help them and minister to them. That's what we want to do."

Wayne Abbott, another Disaster Relief volunteer with the Alabama team, had an opportunity to pray with Lee on her deck and give her a Bible.

"Whatever we can do to honor and serve the Lord, we reach out in anyway we can," he said. "Some-

times it's hard to be approached by people these days ... and sometimes it's in the midst of these tragedies that people really open up their hearts."

Self noted a disaster like this, especially around the Christmas time, can be especially tough for children.

"Because this is the holiday season, I feel for the children who love to see Christmas decorations," Self said. "[After a tornado hits a home]

the decorations are gone. The Christmas trees in their homes ... are gone.

But, he added, "If we know there's a child, we pass out teddy bears to give them, to let them know somebody out there loves them. Christmas is not about Santa, it's about Jesus. That's what we share. Yes, there's devastation, but there's hope in the devastation."

He added, "People say, why do you do it? I do it because that's what Jesus said to do: Love your neighbor."



Photo by Shawn Hendricks/The Alabama Baptist

David Dismukes with Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief is part of the team who arrived in the Madison, Tennessee, area Dec. 11 to assess damage and help with cleanup efforts. Dismukes and Dave "Barney" Self served as "blue hats" on site.



Photo by Shawn Hendricks/The Alabama Baptist

Homeowner Brandie Lee said the Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief team "felt like the Kingdom of heaven coming to earth in the most true way for me."

Sharing the hope of Jesus

First Source for Women reaching out to, loving on those with unplanned pregnancies

By **Grace Thornton**
The Alabama Baptist

Janet Davis has a heart for women facing unplanned pregnancies. She's felt that way for a while, and especially since she started working at First Source for Women, a pregnancy resource center with locations in Cullman and Hanceville.

But that recently hit home in a new way when she found out her granddaughter was pregnant and she brought her to live with her while they figured out next steps.

Davis' great-granddaughter was born in October.

Help and hope

"Now that we've gone through the process with our granddaughter, it makes it even more special with these young women," said Davis, executive director of First Source for Women and a member of Northbrook Baptist Church in Cullman. "We think we know what they're going through, but until you're in that situation, you don't. Now we've

walked through the emotions our granddaughter has experienced and then the birth of that baby, and we are grateful to know we're able to provide that kind of help and hope to people who walk through our doors."

Range of services

At First Source for Women, they provide a range of services starting with free pregnancy tests and ultrasounds.

"Our ultimate goal is to reach women with unplanned pregnancies," Davis said. "We want them to hear their baby's heartbeat and see their baby on the screen."

Then they want to encourage the women and let them know that they've got help and support, she said. "Most women who are abortion minded or abortion vulnerable, they feel like they have no hope; they feel like they don't have the means to take care of a child."

One way First Source for Women helps to provide that hope is through their Earn While You Learn program, which gives the women the op-



Photo by DeeDee Garden

Marveling Grace Harvel — great-granddaughter of Janet Davis, executive director of First Source for Women — takes a photo with Santa. First Source for Women offered photos with Santa to all of the families their center serves as a way to show them love at Christmas.

portunity to earn "mommy money" as they take parenting classes, then shop with that "money" in the center's baby boutique.

"We're able to build a relationship with them when they come in for their boutique visits or classes, and through that we're able to share the hope of Jesus," Davis said.

Starting Jan. 1, First Source for Women will also have a new way to support women and build relationships with them — their new thrift store, which will be located next door to their Hanceville location.

"We're looking forward to getting

[the thrift store] open," Davis said.

At this time of the year, as the center provides needed items for the women who come through their doors, their biggest needs are more size 3–4 diapers and lightweight receiving blankets, Davis said. "For some reason, we have certain sizes we run out of at this time of year."

Part of loving women well is helping them feel like they're part of a bigger family of support, and Christmas is a great time to do that, Davis said. They recently

had an all-day event where families could come and have their babies photographed with Santa, who was played by Mark Summerville. His wife, Tracey, is a center volunteer.

"We had mamas running in all day with their babies," Davis said. "We just want them to know that we love them and through that offer them the hope of Jesus."



Photo by DeeDee Garden

For more information, visit firstsourceforwomen.org.

First Source for Women, a pregnancy resource center with locations in Cullman and Hanceville, seeks to reach women facing unplanned pregnancies.

Year's top findings from State of the Bible 2023

Online worshippers read the Bible more than those who attend church in person. Nonbelievers outpace Christians in valuing several pro-social Bible-based behaviors.

These are among the top findings from the 2023 State of the Bible survey, an annual effort by the American Bible Society to examine how Americans engage with Scripture.

The report affirms that online worship flourished as a necessity during the COVID-19 pandemic, but many continued to favor online engagement after the pandemic waned.

ABS found online worshippers rank higher in several markers of spiritual vitality than on-site worshippers, findings that “dispel any notion that online attenders are less devoted Christians.”

While 32% of in-person worshippers report using the Bible at least weekly on their own, 74% of online worshippers report doing so.”

Advocacy and outreach

On another point, ABS found that the small group of Americans who have a “hostile” response to Scripture actually embrace certain Bible-based behaviors like advocating for the oppressed at higher rates than do scripturally engaged Christians.

However, scripturally engaged Christians outpace those hostile to the Bible in befriending people of other religions, the survey found.

Among other top findings from 2023:

► More than half (52%) of older Gen Z between the ages of 22 and 26 say their lives have been transformed by Scripture; and younger Gen Z (ages 18–21) outpace older Gen Z in Bible curiosity, 56% to 34%.

Bible engagement

► 52% of Americans say they wish they read Scripture more, but only 14% say they have increased their Bible reading in the past year.

► Bible engagement improves human flourishing, a measurement encompassing happiness, close social relationships, purpose, mental and physical health, character and virtue, and financial stability.

► Those who volunteer at church are more than twice as likely to give at the highest financial level than those who don't, and community volunteers are 60% more likely to give at the highest level than those who don't volunteer in the community.

► Faith is stronger among adult Christians who have switched from their childhood religion.

The 2023 State of the Bible was conducted Jan. 5–30 online and by telephone.

Researchers used the University of Chicago National Opinion Research Center's Amerispeak Panel, producing 2,761 responses from a representative U.S. sample of adults 18 and older. (BP)



Photo by Michael J. Brooks/The Alabama Baptist

Ric Camp (left), lead mission strategist for Shelby Baptist Association; Chris Jones (center), pastor of Meadow Brook Baptist Church and SBA moderator; and Beck Taylor, president of Samford University, attend the SBA's Pastor/Spouse Christmas Luncheon on Dec. 7.

Christmas message found beyond story of Bethlehem

By Michael J. Brooks

The Alabama Baptist

Samford University President Beck Taylor said he has found Christmas hope not only in Bethlehem, but also in Emmaus.

Guest speaker for Shelby Baptist Association's Pastor/Spouse Christmas Luncheon on Dec. 7 at The Church at Chelsea Westover where Pastor Rick Wright served as host, Taylor noted three points from Emmaus.

First, the Emmaus story demonstrates how “Jesus captures us with His love and grace.”

“Luke 24 tells the story of two men, only one whose name we know, who may have been the first men to see the risen Christ rather than to hear the word from others, ‘He is risen,’” he said. “I think it's significant that they were living the routine of their lives when Jesus found them and spent time to encourage them.

“I think we learn that Jesus pursues us in our brokenness, and there's no bounds and no limit to His compassion,” Taylor said.

Second, the Emmaus story demonstrates the proclamation of the gospel brings us to faith.

“We must speak the same truth in our pulpits and never hesitate to point others to Jesus since faith in Him changes lives.”

Taylor said Emmaus underscores the work of the Holy Spirit in the process of life change.

“These men felt a ‘burning’ in their hearts, and we know the Holy Spirit worked to make the Word of God real to them,” he said.

“The theme of a recent emphasis at Samford was ‘Walk the Walk,’ and we tried to help 18- to 22-year-olds move what they learned from their heads to their hearts. Many of them learned the truth in your churches when the Holy Spirit first touched their hearts. Our task is to help them be sensitive to the same Holy Spirit and to continue living in obedience to God and to seek His plan for their lives.”

Third, the Emmaus story demonstrates Jesus is more than a prophet or a teacher.

“These men believed that He was only a failed leader, and their hope was dead,” Taylor said. “But they learned that the risen Jesus is now the Lord Jesus. This is the belief and commitment we have that leads to obedience to Him in every respect. His lordship in our lives brings radical commitment.”

“Please pray for us at Samford,” he said. “We want to provide clarity for our students that they, unfortunately, may not find in other places.”



‘I have seen God provide’

Ministry focused on restored smiles gives former addicts new lease on life

By June Mathews
The Alabama Baptist

By the time she was 12, Lilly was addicted to drugs and had been sexually abused by her grandfather. Her life was filled with issues that no child should ever have to face.

After years of struggle, Lilly landed at Birmingham’s Lovelady Center, where she found God and received help overcoming addiction. She also found resources for eliminating some of the barriers that held her back.

But one visible barrier remained: Drugs had done a number on her teeth. They were a broken and decaying mess.

“There were times I would cry myself to sleep because I would look in the mirror and hate what I saw,” Lilly said. “I was ugly in my eyes.”

Another Lovelady alumna, Angel, was dealing with a similar problem. Her front teeth had been knocked out when the airbags deployed in a long-ago car accident.

Trapped in addiction, Angel had neither the money nor the motivation to replace her missing teeth. In the meantime, she was too self-conscious to reveal her gap-toothed smile.

“For more than 20 years, I didn’t smile at all,” she said.

As she prepared to graduate from the Lovelady program in early October and search for a job, Angel wondered how she could possibly make a good impression on prospective employers.

But now, thanks to Unforsaken Ministry, Lilly and Angel have beautiful smiles and the confidence to move forward.

Founded in 2022, Unforsaken

helps guide individuals in addiction and their families down the road to recovery.

But as the ministry developed, so did the needs that Glenn Sandifer, founder of Unforsaken, and his team encountered. And quite often, one of the pressing needs for people working to pull themselves out of the mire of addiction is dental services.

Reversing the damage

“Meth takes a terrible toll on teeth, and some of these people have been living that way for years,” Sandifer said. “You can recover from the drugs, but when you look in the mirror every day and can’t smile, there’s still some of that old life hanging on.”

Unforsaken’s dentistry ministry began when Sandifer helped a Lovelady client with broken front teeth regain her smile. But things really took off when he mentioned the

growing dental aspect of his work to a pediatric dentist friend who said, “You know, I might have some friends who are interested in being a part of this.”

So Unforgiven hosted a meal for six dentists, and as a result, every one of them offered to become resources for residents of the Lovelady Center.

“It’s not free and it’s expensive,” said Sandifer. “It’s definitely taken a toll on our bank account, but the dentists are helping us out.”

Charles Hoskins, a dentist in Moody whose practice includes a denture lab, frequently uses his skills and resources to help patients get their smiles back. But to him, serving women like Lilly and Angel is especially gratifying.

“Whether it was addiction, abuse or a terrible unforeseen circumstance, I tell all these women that

whatever they have gone through in their lives is immensely harder than any challenge I have experienced because I want them to be proud of how far they have come,” Hoskins said. “It’s an honor to feel that the work I am doing is having an impact on them.”

To become part of the Unforsaken dental program, Lovelady clients must meet three conditions.

“They have to be at Phase 4 or 5 in the Lovelady program, they have to have clean drug screens and they can have no disciplinary issues for the past six months,” Sandifer said.

“Most of the women in our dental program are within months of graduating, and we want them to be able to graduate with a smile.”

‘Life-changing’

Lilly, he said, has been clean for about four years, but her ruined teeth continued to cast a shadow over her successes. So having her smile restored has been nothing short of life-changing.

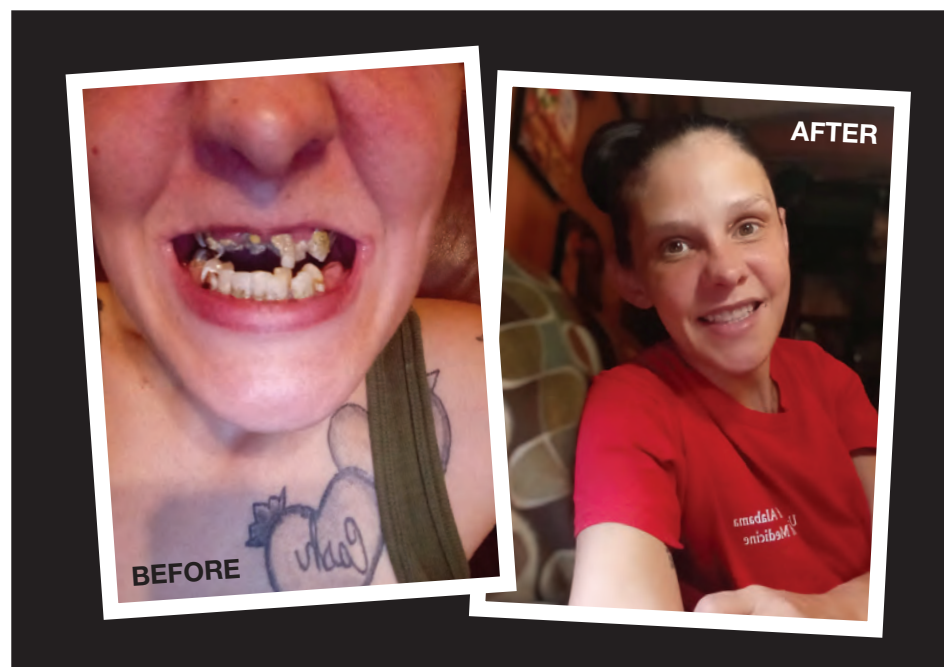
“She was blown away with her new teeth,” Sandifer said.

“She said she would wake up and think that getting her teeth was a dream.”

Angel was amazed that within two weeks of her first appointment — and only two days before graduation — she had “the prettiest set of dentures you’ve ever seen. I can now look for a job without feeling self-conscious when I go for interviews,” she said.

In addition to dental work, Unforsaken helps with housing, along with everything needed for setting up housekeeping, and provides transportation to rehab facilities all over the state.

For more information, visit the website at unforsakenministry.org.



Photos courtesy of Unforsaken

Thanks to Unforsaken Ministry, Lilly has a beautiful smile and the confidence to move forward. She has been clean for about four years, but her ruined teeth continued to cast a shadow over her successes. Having her smile restored has been life-changing.

International missions and helping the hurting

Natural disasters and crises can strike anytime and anywhere. They leave millions of people in need. Those in the path of storms, earthquakes or hurricanes often find themselves hungry, homeless and hopeless.

Thanks to the long-term commitment of Southern Baptists, missionaries can respond quickly to unexpected disasters — and similar situations among those impacted by war in places like Ukraine and Israel — with more than physical assistance. Missionaries understand the greatest need people have when they lose everything on earth — eternal hope in Jesus Christ.

Central Asia is a region where natural disasters are common. Large earthquakes, like February's earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, make the news, but earthquakes of all sizes are also common.



IMB photo

Southern Baptists are faithful to pray, give and go during times of disaster. Much of the relief work is done through relationships with national partners.

Even small earthquakes can block roads, cutting off entire areas from aid. Central Asia also faces other catastrophic events like extreme temperatures, mudslides, floods and avalanches.

Disaster relief ministry is vital in Central Asia, and IMB workers are uniquely

positioned to respond. In the first six months of 2023, they have been involved in more than 80 different projects that have included things like clean water systems, flood and earthquake relief, trauma care, food distribution, women's health initiatives and job skills training for refugees.

IMB workers have been faithful to plan these projects and undergird national believers to help their own villages, towns and people.

For missionaries, their love and compassion for people groups doesn't form when disaster hits. They've loved the people they serve for many years, some decades. They've learned the languages and the customs. And many face the realities of natural disasters along with their national friends.

"For us, it's about relationships," Robert Botta said.

Botta has served among

Central Asian peoples for over two decades. He is one of many workers who focus on relief work.

Partnerships

"Despite the challenges posed by limited resources and a shortage of evangelical churches and believers in the affected region," Botta said, "our national partners have found ways to serve vulnerable communities by supporting compassion-filled local believers."

Missionaries report that national churches find ways

to be the hands and feet of Jesus while sharing a message of eternal hope.

By strengthening local churches and believers, compassion and aid isn't a one-time occurrence or only a response to immediate need. The benefit of working through partners on the field who have relationships with nationals is that aid is closely linked to long-term gospel access. (IMB)

EDITOR'S NOTE — Some names may have been changed for security reasons.

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'I HAVE BEEN PRIVILEGED TO SERVE'

Retiring JSU campus minister Gary Brittain reflects on three decades of ministry

By Julie Donovan
The Alabama Baptist

Longtime Alabama Baptist campus minister Gary Brittain says there are “not enough pages” to tell the story of what God has done and is doing through college ministry.

Brittain is retiring this month after more than 40 years of collegiate ministry, 33 ½ of those as Baptist Campus Ministries campus minister at Jacksonville State University,

“How do you describe 33 ½ years, other than in broad strokes? The story is a lot longer than what is here, and I stood on the shoulders of the people before me,” he said.

Brittain did not start out intending to be a campus minister. Though he knew God was calling him to ministry, all he knew were the traditional pastoral roles. Campus ministry wasn't on his radar.

“God called me to a ministry I couldn't define,” he said.

He was a pastor for three years and earned a degree at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he found his specific calling.

Unexpected tenure

He first served as an area campus minister in northwest Alabama and later as BCM campus minister at Livingston University (now the University of West Alabama). Once he got to JSU, he never left.

“I never asked to come here (to JSU),” he said. “I was asked to move, and that's how God works. I never knew I was coming here to stay this long.”

The BCM students became family to the Brittain family as they experienced milestones: the birth of his children,



Photo by Carrie Brown McWhorter/The Alabama Baptist
Gary Brittain (center), BCM campus minister at Jacksonville State University, celebrates his upcoming retirement during a reception held Dec. 2 at Westside Baptist Church in Jacksonville. Pictured with Brittain are Will Hughes (right), a recent JSU grad and former BCM leadership team member, and Harrison Riggs, a current member of the leadership team.

babysitting, missions trips and ministry throughout the years, the death of Brittain's first wife and a daughter, his own brush with a serious illness. And when he married Donna 14 years ago, students were there as well.

“The students have shared in the joy and in the pain,” he said.

Brittain said his favorite part of campus ministry is helping students realize that God can use them wherever they are, but he also has enjoyed taking students on missions trips to places they never imagined.

“When I think about this ministry I think about people,” he said. “Every one of these students has influenced me in so many different ways.”

The students he served feel the same. Jamie Mackey, minister to students at First Baptist Church

Huntsville, called Brittain “a tremendous influence in my life.”

They began at JSU together, Brittain as a campus minister and Mackey as a freshman.

'Grateful'

“He and the BCM ministry helped expand my world through missions, Bible study and providing an on-campus Christian community,” Mackey said. “Through his influence, I experienced a call to ministry — something I never would have imagined for myself. I am grateful for Gary's ministry.”

Matt Coby, class of 2013, called Brittain a “mentor and father figure.” Brandon Pisacrita, a 2011 JSU graduate, said, “Gary's investment in my life during college helped me to discern God's call on my life.” Logan Huggins, JSU class

of 2012, said he “couldn't have wished for a better minister, mentor and friend.”

“His love of missions, students and above all, the gospel, made him a beloved influence to literally thousands and thousands of JSU students over his career,” Huggins said. “He leaves a huge, lasting legacy for which we, his students, will forever be thankful.”

'Faithfulness'

Ben Edfeldt, director of collegiate and student ministries for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, noted Brittain's years in campus ministry are “filled with a long faithfulness in gospel ministry.”

“As Gary's impact stretches across generations, one of the clear indicators of its effectiveness is seen in Gary's constant ministry to those who have long graduated from JSU,” Edfeldt said. “Gary has embodied our desire to reach students, equip students and send students. We are grateful for Gary Brittain.”

Looking ahead, the Brittain family plan to live in Foley, where they will enjoy time with their family, especially their grandchildren.

Brittain said campus ministry intern at JSU, Timothy Curvin, along with the future new campus minister, will breathe new life into the ministry. They and the students will “keep this moving forward.”

“I am thankful for the Cooperative Program, which allows me to be a state missionary and serve in this way,” he said. “It is only through faith in the Lord and Alabama Baptists that I could have served in this way. I have been privileged to serve.”

UPCOMING EVENTS

sponsored by the State Board of Missions

Pursue conference set for Feb. 9-10

If you're looking for a way to encourage your high school seniors and college students to go deeper, Pursue should be on your February calendar.

The conference — set for Feb. 9-10 at Taylor Road Baptist Church in Montgomery — will devote the weekend to looking at the entire storyline of the Bible and how all the stories of Scripture point to Jesus.

To register, visit pursueal.org or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.



From there, students will be encouraged to grow as disciples and disciple-makers.

The speaker will be Peyton Hill, lead pastor of First Baptist Church Prattville.

"We're going to be walking through the entire storyline of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation to see how the whole Bible forms one story pointing to Jesus Christ as Savior, and also we're going to be looking at how the entire Bible speaks to us about God's great mission to make disciples of all nations," he said.

Iron City Worship will lead music.

For more information or to register, visit pursueal.org.



HILL

MinistrySafe workshop Feb. 20 in Trussville

For several years now, MinistrySafe has been helping equip Alabama Baptist churches to protect their children from sexual abuse.

If your church staff hasn't had the opportunity to attend a MinistrySafe conference, please join us Feb. 20 at First Baptist Church Trussville.

Kimberlee Norris, cofounder of MinistrySafe, will provide awareness training on topics including how sexual predators select and groom their victims, peer-to-peer child sexual abuse and setting up a safety system for your church.

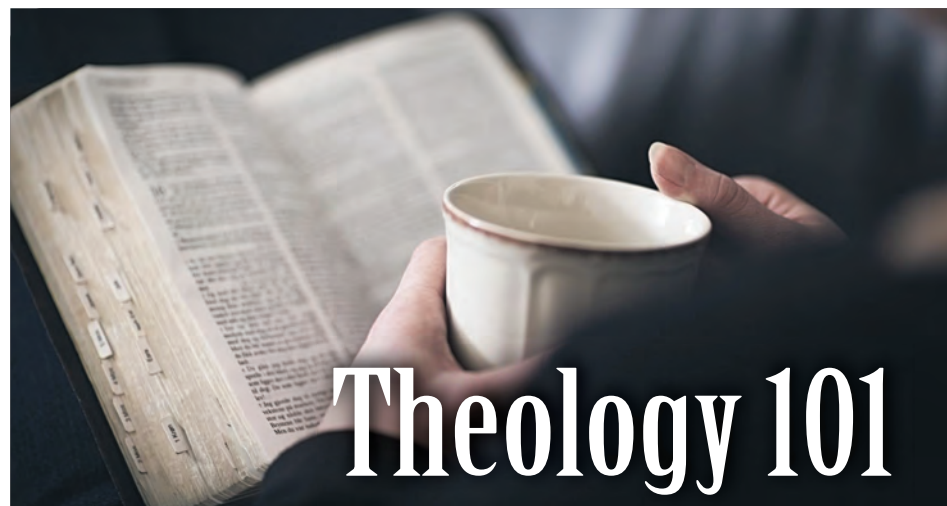
The workshop will equip you with awareness, understanding, and tools and strategies needed to protect children from sexual abuse.

There will also be a session at the workshop focused on responding to an allegation.

Norris — along with her husband and MinistrySafe cofounder, Greg Love — has decades of experience addressing child sexual abuse issues along with decades of student ministry.

The cost for the event is \$20 per person.

To register online for the event, visit alsbom.org/ministrysafe.



Theology 101

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

Christmas

A Savior's Birth

By Jerry Batson, Th.D.
The Alabama Baptist

Scripture gives us a variety of titles for Jesus, but none is more to the point of His coming into the world than that of Savior.

An angel announced that coming, saying, "There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). After Jesus had spent two days in Samaria, people confessed, "We know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world" (John 4:42b).

While the Bible frequently refers to Christ by the noun Savior, the verb "save" is also often used when speaking of Christ's mission.

Saved by grace

The Apostle Paul testified, "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15a). Believers today often use this verb when speaking of their Christian experience as one of being saved by grace through faith. Salvation has three distinct dimensions to it.

Through faith in Jesus as Savior, we are saved from the penalty of sin. The classic statement of this truth is Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."

Doctrinally, this aspect of the Savior's work is commonly termed justification.

Christ also seeks to be our Savior from the practice of sin. This dimension of His saving work is related to our learning to obey the admonition of Galatians 5:16. "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh."

Delivered from sin

Deliverance from sinful practices is an ongoing or gradual ministry of the Holy Spirit in believers. Doctrinally, this aspect of the Savior's work is commonly termed sanctification.

Ultimately, Christ will be our Savior from the very presence of sin. This aspect of His Saviorhood awaits our reception into heaven about which Revelation 21:27 declares, "There shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie." The sinless perfection of heaven awaits every genuine believer in Christ as his or her personal Savior. This aspect of the Savior's work is commonly termed glorification.

Christ the Lord came to be our Savior in every sense of the word. In light of these truths, we can give thanks to Him this Christmas season.

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.



Keep from getting overwhelmed

Five things you can do right now to feel better during pressures of the holidays

By Vicki Heath

Special to The Alabama Baptist

Feeling a bit overwhelmed these days? Holiday pressures combined with the pressures of daily life can build up. Sometimes I feel like I'm coming apart!

But I'm determined not to come apart. Instead, I'm coming up with my personal checklist to make sure that the pressures of life are not leading me into a dangerous mindset and reverting to old bad habits.

Here's what's on my list:

1. Go outside. Studies show stepping outside into the sunshine can have a positive affect on your mood. Vitamin D is also known as the sunshine vitamin. You get it naturally when directly exposed to the sun. It has lots of benefits like aiding in absorption of calcium, boosting your immune system and helping grow healthy bones and teeth.

2. Stretch. Stand up and touch your toes. I have to do this several

times a day to keep my hamstrings from tightening up and to keep my artificial knees healthy.

Stretching your hamstrings and lower back also helps to boost circulation. It's important to get blood and oxygen to your joints. Stretching also helps with long-term mobility and balance. Even if you can't touch your toes, reach as far as you can and hold it for at least 10 seconds. Feeling better?

Benefits of water

3. Drink a glass of water. Hydration is exhilaration. The benefits of drinking a glass of water, especially first thing in the morning, are amazing. Research shows the benefits include clearer thinking, a metabolism jumpstart and an immune system boost. At work and feeling a physical or mental slump? Drink a glass of water. You will feel energized immediately.

4. Write a thank you note. My friend Ginger altered my favorite workout tops so the arm holes are



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not so big. I love these tank tops but because of the way they are made, I feel like I have to wear two.

I am so grateful Ginger is a seamstress. I buy lovely thank you cards at the dollar store and keep them by my Bible. As I was giving thanks for Ginger during my quiet time, I wrote her a thank you card. Expressing gratitude will always make you and the one receiving it feel better. I know it works. I get this encouragement all the time from friends.

5. Take a praise break. Sit quietly and turn off your modern technology. Meditate on a favorite Scripture verse; sing a praise song or read a psalm out loud to God. Or if you are one who needs movement, get up and praise Him with a dance. I can guarantee a change of heart will

come. God inhabits the praises of his people. I am especially in love with the song "Good Morning Mercy" by Jason Crabb. Check it out, you will immediately feel better.

Put into practice

As I am finishing up this article, it's about 3 p.m. I was feeling a little lethargic but not anymore. I have just put into practice all of the above, and wow, do I feel better.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Vicki Heath is national director of First Place for Health. Vicki is a certified fitness instructor, a certified life coach and wellness coordinator for her church in Edisto Beach, South Carolina. Her books include "Don't Quit Get Fit" and "My First Place."



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"Sit quietly and turn off your modern technology. Meditate on a favorite Scripture verse; sing a praise song or read a psalm out loud to God."

Make the most of Christmas Eve this year

By **Sam Rainer**
President, Church Answers

Christmas Eve lands on a Sunday this year. I understand the temptation to scale back. We briefly discussed this option at my church. The reality is this Christmas Eve may be one of the biggest opportunities you have for several years to come. You should do more, not less, this year. Here is why:

▶ **The unchurched (and dechurched) will show up in greater numbers.**

Families are often together during this time. That uncle who refuses to attend church will often capitulate and go to a Christmas Eve service since the rest of the family is going together.

Sentimental reasons

Those who are detached from the church will often return for sentimental reasons. For most churches,



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approximately one-third to half of attendees will be guests at a Christmas Eve service. Since Dec. 24 is a Sunday, anticipate more guests, not fewer.

▶ **Everyone can participate together.** The unchurched will recognize many Christmas songs, so they are more likely to sing with the congregation. If the New Year is all about resolve, then Christmas is

all about hope. Christmas is one of the few traditions in our culture that is universally accepted.

Simple and classic

Remember, keep it simple and classic. Sing songs everyone knows. It's not the time to be avant-garde. Most people expect a traditional feel and tone to the service.

▶ **Go shorter and make**

guests feel welcome. Hospitality is your best investment on Christmas Eve. A giant production may be memorable, but people will return because of genuine hospitality.

Less than an hour

The service should last less than an hour. The message should be about 10 or 15 minutes. Younger families tend to come to an afternoon service, while those without young children prefer an evening service. I recommend having both if possible.

▶ **Your tone should be encouraging, not pointed.** Should pastors call out the woes of culture and stand against the rising force of secularism? Yes. Is Christmas Eve the right setting for an angry message? No. Be encouraging and communicate the hope of the gospel.

▶ **Solve the scheduling dilemma with an easy solution.** Since Christmas Eve is a Sunday, how should you structure your service schedule? I recommend having your typical morning services during the usual timeslot, then adding your Christmas Eve services in the afternoon and evening. Your regular people will likely come to both services, while your guests are more inclined to attend the afternoon and evening services.

Why do both morning and evening? It could be your highest-attended Sunday in years! Even more importantly, Jesus deserves a giant celebration on His birthday.

Christmas Eve services are always a great opportunity to connect with guests and people from your community. This year could be one of the biggest yet.

Now is the Time

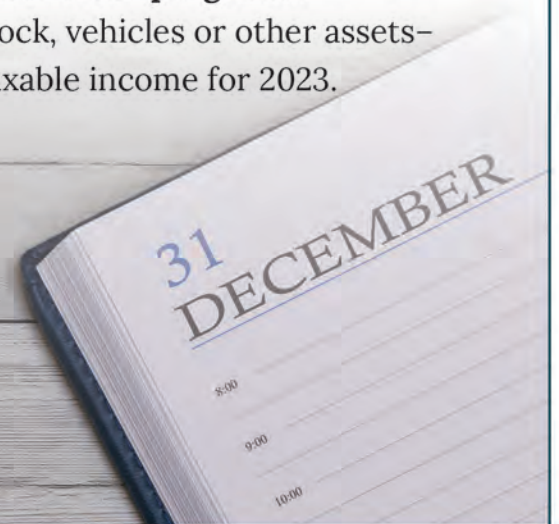


There are more people than ever in our community recovering from homelessness after losing everything. Time is running out to help them in the spirit of the holidays before the end of the year.

Your tax deductible gift before December 31st will help share God's life-changing love with clients in our programs.

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A SPECIAL GIFT

7 gifts your pastor would appreciate this Christmas season and throughout the year

By **Melissa Busby**
Baptist Churches of New England

It's that time of year when many people are buying special gifts to thank those who have helped them throughout the year — like their mail carrier, hairdresser or child's teacher. Many also consider a special gift for their pastor.

Many options

As a pastor's wife of nearly 25 years, I can say that these gifts have always been appreciated. From delicious baked goods to gift cards and cash, my husband has always been overwhelmed with gratitude that people take the time to remember him and our family.

As much as those material gifts are enjoyed, I'd like to suggest some additional gifts that I know your pastor

would appreciate as well:

1. Write him a letter or email telling him something specific that encouraged you from a recent sermon or Bible study he led. Share with him how you applied something you learned from a sermon to your life. Such encouragement can help him see the value and purpose in his efforts.

2. Love his family well. If your pastor is married or has children, take time to get to know them. Ask them how they are doing. Manage expectations you may have for his family, and give them grace as much as possible. Your pastor will be blessed to see his congregation caring for his family well.

3. Be a friend to your pastor. One of the top issues that pastors face is loneliness. Many pastors say they



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struggle to forge genuine friendships. Invite him to play golf. Schedule a game night. Take him to lunch. Take time to talk to him about things outside church responsibilities so he can just relax.

4. Be a good church member. Make attending church a priority. Invite your friends, co-workers and neighbors to a church service or outreach event. Give, volunteer and serve. It can be the biggest encouragement to a pastor to have

someone anticipate a need and step in to help before he even has to ask.

Speak positively

5. Squelch negativity. I'm not saying that you can never disagree or voice your opinion. But ask questions about a decision you don't understand before getting upset. There may be much more to the decision or situation than you know about. When you hear gossip or complaining, encourage those people to go directly to the pastor or people in-

olved to resolve that conflict. Don't let a few negative voices control the narrative of your congregation. Disagreement can weigh so heavy on a pastor as he shepherds his flock.

6. Pray for your pastor. I know that can often sound cliché, but I would encourage you to set aside specific time each week to pray for your pastor and other church leaders. Pray for their spiritual life, their time management, the conversations they will have that week and for wisdom and discernment as they counsel others and make decisions.

7. Work diligently on your relationship with God. The goal of all believers should be the same: to love God and to love others. When we are praying, studying God's Word and looking to glorify God with our lives, we will accomplish that goal. God gives us pastors to lead our congregations, but we must also take responsibility for our spiritual lives.



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UPCOMING EVENTS

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Feb. 15 event offers help reaching Gen Z, Gen Alpha

Looking for ways to minister to Gen Z and Gen Alpha?

Our Next Generation Conference is for pastors, discipleship pastors, student pastors, children's ministers and preschool ministers who are looking for methods to aid in the ministering to the Gen Z and Gen Alpha population groups.

Shelly Melia, associate dean and program director for the master of arts in children's ministry and the master of arts in family ministry at Dallas Baptist University, will lead the conference.

Melia has spoken at

To register, visit alsbom.org/nextgen or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.



national conferences such as ETCH Family Ministry Conferences, D6 Family Ministry Conference and the Children's Pastor's Conference. In addition,

she is a frequent speaker for local churches and state conventions in Oklahoma, Texas, Georgia, Louisiana and Missouri. She has led webinar presentations on topics ranging from international children's ministries, to gender identity and kids, to helping families in crisis and leadership trends and transitions.

The conference will be held Feb. 15, 10 a.m.–3 p.m., at the State Board of Missions in Prattville. The cost is \$20 per person, which includes lunch.

To register, visit alsbom.org/nextgen.

2024 State Evangelism Conference: Jan. 28–29 at FBC Pelham

Mark your calendar now for the 2024 State Evangelism Conference, set for Jan. 28–29 at First Baptist Church Pelham.

This free event encourages and equips believers to make a difference through evangelism. It will feature a Monday luncheon with a

keynote message by Herb Reavis, pastor of North Jacksonville Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Florida.

Matt Queen, professor of evangelism at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, will also teach a session on "Getting to the Gospel" in our conversations.

Other speakers include Reginald Calvert, Jamie Dew, Charles T. Carter and Rick Lance.

Can't make it in person? Watch the Sunday evening session online at live.alsbom.org.

For more information, visit evangelizeal.org/sec.

Get your tax questions answered

Do you have questions about IRS deadlines and forms for your church? Are you a pastor wondering about special tax rules for you on topics like housing allowance and dual tax status? The Tax Conference will help answer questions

about those topics and more.

Join us Jan. 4 at the State Board of Missions, Prattville; Jan. 11 at the Birmingham Metro Baptist Association; or Jan. 18 at First Baptist, Scottsboro, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

The cost of the event is \$15, which includes lunch and materials.

To register, visit alsbom.org/churchtaxconferences. Questions? Call Lee Wright at 334-613-2263 or email lwright@alsbom.org.

New children's book shares Lottie's story

A new book, "Lottie Moon: The Girl Who Reached the World," tells the story of how the Christmas offering name-sake left behind all she knew and dedicated her life to taking the gospel to China.

The book's author, Amy Whitfield, first heard about Moon as a child. As she served with various Southern Baptist Convention entities, Whitfield learned more about Moon's life and ministry. When the

opportunity to write a children's book on Moon presented itself, Whitfield jumped at the chance.

"I hope that readers will see that Lottie was just a regular girl who was changed by the gospel, and she lived the rest of her life out of that reality," Whitfield said.

"Everything she did was to share the good news of Christ.

The book is part of the "Here I Am!" series from B&H Kids (Biblical Recorder).



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CHURCH POSITIONS

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR
Silver Run Baptist Church in Seale, Alabama, located in rural Russell County, is seeking a bivocational pastor that the Lord would have to serve here. Resumés may be sent to: P.O. Box 8, Seale, AL 36875, ATTN: Kenny Harris.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR
New Life Baptist Church located in Bay Minette, Alabama, is seeking a bivocational pastor who unashamedly preaches the Word of God. Please email resumé/profile to: newlifebaptistbmal@gmail.com or mail to: Pastor Search Committee, 15011 Glasgow Lane, Bay Minette, AL 36507.

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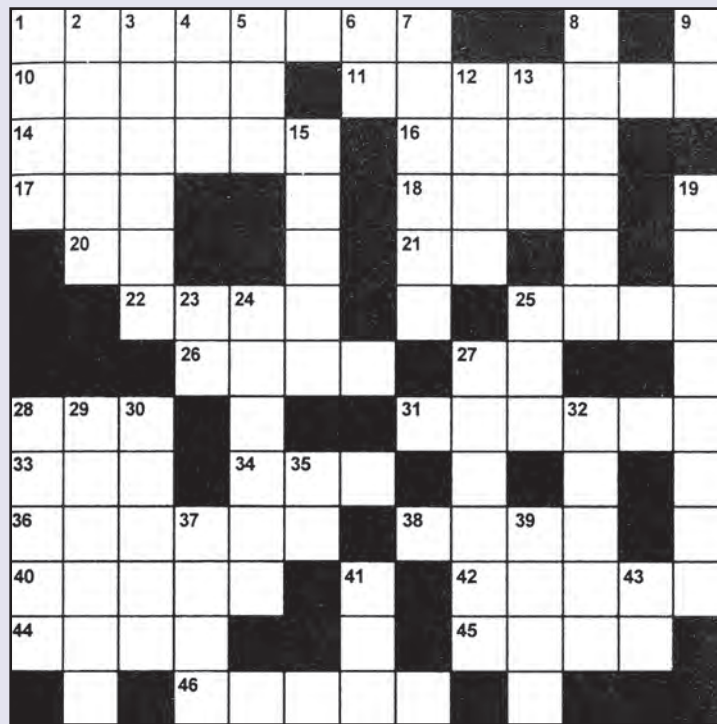
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CHRISTIAN crossword

ACROSS

1. Joseph's firstborn. (Gen. 41:51)
10. Kings of armies did flee _____. (Ps. 68:12)
11. Then _____ my present. (Gen. 33:10)
14. _____ with her suburbs. (Josh. 21:32)
16. Cut off the ropes of the _____. (Acts 27:32)
17. Do they not _____ that devise evil? (Prov. 14:22)
18. Gather a certain _____ every day. (Ex. 16:4)
20. Greatly _____ be praised. (Ps. 48:1)
21. Built there an altar, and called the place _____ beth-el. (Gen. 35:7, KJV)



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22. Had devils long time, and _____ no clothes. (Luke 8:27)
25. Noah begat three sons, _____, Ham and Japheth. (Gen. 6:10)
26. Puttest thy _____ in a rock. (Num. 24:21)
27. _____, every one that thirsteth. (Isa. 55:1)
28. Judge me, O God, _____ plead. (Ps. 43:1)
31. Shechem which is in the land of _____. (Gen. 33:18)
33. For the _____ that is in the land of Assyria. (Isa. 7:18)
34. Ye shall not _____ my face. (Gen. 43:3)
36. They _____ to and fro. (Ps. 107:27, past tense)
38. Thou art Simon the son of _____. (John 1:42)
40. Driven up and down in _____. (Acts 27:27)
42. As the _____, because he cheweth the cud. (Lev. 11:4)
44. Benjamin's _____ was five times. (Gen. 43:34)
45. Men shall _____ him out of his place.

DOWN

1. I will _____ thy seed to multiply. (Gen. 26:4)
2. Thou shalt set _____ unto the Lord. (Ex. 13:12)
3. There were _____ windows. (Ezek. 41:26)
4. To pass his _____, his strange act. (Isa. 28:21)
5. Israel went into the midst of the _____. (Ex. 14:22)
6. _____, Judah's firstborn. (Gen. 38:7)
7. Two men of the _____s strove. (Ex. 2:13)
8. An adder ... that _____ the horse. (Gen. 49:17)
9. They shall _____ ashamed. (Hosea 4:19)
12. Having a live _____ in his hand. (Isa. 6:6)
13. Thou shalt not _____ of it. (Gen. 2:17)
15. The _____ of the children of Israel. (Ex. 28:9)
19. They shall call his name _____. (Matt. 1:23)
23. _____ unjust man is an abomination. (Prov. 29:27)
24. Cast them into the _____. (Ex. 10:19, 2 words)
25. And thou his _____, O Belshazzar. (Dan. 5:22)
27. Sons of Reuben: _____ and Phallu. (Gen. 46:9)
28. So _____ departed, as the Lord had spoken. (Gen. 12:4)
29. As though he _____ anything. (Acts 17:25)
30. The roebuck, and the fallow _____(s). (Deut. 14:5)
32. The similitude of _____ transgression. (Rom. 5:14)
35. The children of Gad called the altar _____. (Josh. 22:34)
37. Whithersoever the governor _____eth. (James 3:4)
39. Heber's wife took a _____ of the tent. (Judg. 4:21)
41. Cast down your slain _____. (Ezek. 6:4)
43. The abbreviation for the 17th book of the Old Testament.

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

WORD search

- | | |
|--------------|-----------|
| ANGEL | JERUSALEM |
| BETHLEHEM | JESUS |
| CENSUS | JOSEPH |
| CHRIST | MAGI |
| DONKEY | MANGER |
| EGYPT | MARY |
| ELIZABETH | MESSIAH |
| EMMANUEL | MYRRH |
| FLOCK | NATIVITY |
| FRANKINCENSE | SAVIOR |
| GABRIEL | SHEPHERDS |
| GLORIA | STABLE |
| GOLD | STAR |
| HEROD | VIRGIN |
| INN | ZECHARIAH |



"Blessed is the Lord, the God of Israel, because He has visited and provided redemption for His people."

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For December 24

Explore the Bible

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.

Executive Director of the Center for Christian Calling, University of Mobile



THE FIRST CHRISTMAS Luke 2:1–15

For the last 40 years, family tradition in the Wilson home has included gathering in the living room on Christmas Eve to read the birth narrative of Jesus from Luke 2:1–20 (KJV). Along with sweets and gifts and bustling children, we remind ourselves that Christmas is all about Jesus. For our readers, you might want to consider making this Bible reading part of your family tradition if you haven't already.

The Location (1–5)

“And it came about in those days ...” Luke provides a simple explanation for how the supernaturally pregnant Nazarene virgin and her Galilean fiancé relocated temporarily down south in Bethlehem of Judea, where she bore her first child. The Roman government made them move to the ancestral hometown of David for tax purposes.

Matthew focuses on fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy as reason for a Bethlehem birth, alluding to the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants before quoting directly from Isaiah 7:14 and Micah 5:2 (Matt. 1–2). By contrast, Luke points to the historical (Augustus) and political (Quirinius) and economic (taxing) contexts of the events.

The Birth (6–7)

“And so it was, that, while they were there ...” These verses provide details that answer questions often raised about Jesus' birth and family.

Luke's reference to “her first-born son” rules out the perpetual virginity of Mary. Swaddling clothes for the newborn served the dual purpose to protect the baby and to provide burial cloth in the event that he did not survive his early days (hence, naming and circumcision occurred on the eighth day).

A manger is a feeding trough, though scholars differ about the

nature of this one. Was it a free standing cradle-like structure, or was it a sunken portion of a floor where livestock could stand and eat while under the covering of a home? And the inn — was it a caravansary (like a modern travel lodge) with a no vacancy sign, or was it a side room of a home?

Kenneth Bailey argues for the latter in “Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes.”

Humble beginnings. This would be an apt description of our Savior's birth. Mary placed Jesus in a borrowed feeding trough in an overcrowded town among distant cousins all there for a census.

How appropriate that his entire life was characterized by humility, from his borrowed manger at birth to his borrowed burial site in death.

The Declaration (8–15)

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field ...” Winter is not normally the best season for shepherding in open fields. Some Messianic Jews contend that Jesus' birth occurred in the fall, on Rosh Hashanah. Since Luke does not identify the season, it will remain as undetermined from the text.

The other details are clear, and what a contrast! It began when the night shift started with sunset: dusk, deep darkness, bright stars and quietness as the bleating gave way to an occasional baa. And then a terrifying display of sight and sound pierced the darkness and awakened them from their nighttime stupor.

These shepherds were audience to an unexpected angelic revelation. Behold! Good news! Great joy! A Savior is born! Let's go!

By the time the celestial messengers finished their concert, the night watchmen were heading into town with eager anticipation. How would this baby be different from all others? They would have to wait to find out.

Bible Studies for Life

By Rony Kozman, Ph.D.

Assistant professor of Biblical Studies, Samford University



THE SALVATION EXPRESSED IN GOD'S NAME Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18–25

With the name
**Emmanuel, God promised
to be with us. (Isa. 7:14)**

The looming domination of the Assyrian empire is the stage of Isaiah 7. The northern kingdom of Israel feared the encroaching power of Assyria, so Israel allied with its neighbor Aram. Together they threatened the southern kingdom of Judah and its king with war since Judah would not join their coalition (vv. 1–3).

Israel and Aram wanted to replace King Ahaz with a king who would join them. King Ahaz and his people were afraid, so God sent Isaiah to Ahaz. Isaiah came with a message from God, that Ahaz should trust God and not be afraid of the plot against him because it wouldn't be successful.

God wants to help increase Ahaz's trust, but Ahaz refuses to ask God for a sign on seemingly pious grounds, saying he won't put God to the test. Despite Moses' warning to Israel in Deuteronomy 6:16, in his case, Ahaz's refusal to test God is a failure to do what God has asked him to do.

Since Ahaz will not ask for a sign, God will give it. And this sign will be that of a young woman who will “have a son and name him Emmanuel.” The child's name is significant.

It means “God with us,” and for Ahaz and Judah, it means that God will protect them from the threat of Israel and Aram.

The two threatening kingdoms of Israel and Aram will go on to be destroyed by Assyria, and their threat to Judah will be thwarted.

**Jesus is the
One who
saves us.
(Matt. 1:18–21)**

In Matthew 1, we read about the birth of Jesus. Mary was pregnant before she and Joseph had lived together, so Joseph planned to quietly divorce her.

An angel tells him that this Child is from the Holy Spirit and that this Child who they are to name Jesus will save His people from their sins. Matthew immediately cites Isaiah 7:14, revealing that the way God is with us is through Jesus saving His people from their sins.

**Jesus is the One who is
with us. (22–25)**

For Matthew, the sign that God gives to Ahaz is not simply fulfilled in Ahaz's time, but it reaches its fullness in Jesus' birth. And unlike Ahaz, who does not comply with the request for a sign, Joseph “did as the Lord's angel had commanded him.”

We ought to be like Joseph rather than Ahaz and respond to the sign of Emmanuel's birth with faith.

Matthew's Gospel ends with Jesus commissioning the disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (28:19). As the disciples engage in this mission of making the nations subject to the Son of David who has “all authority” (v. 18), Jesus gives them the promise of Emmanuel: “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (v. 20).

In Jesus, God's presence is with us by forgiving our sins and by strengthening and comforting us in our mission of making disciples who respond positively to the sign of Emmanuel.

“She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet.”

Matthew 1:21–22

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For December 31

Explore the Bible

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.

Executive Director of the Center for Christian Calling, University of Mobile



THE FIRST MURDER Genesis 4:1–15

Adam's sin broke the world. He hid from God. He blamed his wife. He blamed God. Then God established blood sacrifice as the symbol of atonement, with the promise that the woman's seed would bruise the serpent's head.

They were banished from paradise on earth. Adam and Eve were experiencing pain in the labors of providing for the family and of pregnancy, respectively. But God blessed them with sons.

Rivalry (1-7)

Cain was entrusted to care for the flora, and Abel was given responsibility to steward the fauna. They were following the pattern of their dad, who cared for both in the garden.

Evidently, Adam also taught his boys that God is worthy of offerings from the land and from the livestock.

So Abel offered a sacrifice from among the flocks, and Cain brought an offering from the crops. God accepted ("had regard for") Abel's sacrifice, but not Cain's.

With siblings comes sibling rivalry. Cain took offense with God and his face reflected his displeasure. God warned Cain about imminent sin in his life, and his need to rule over it.

Why did God accept Abel's offering but not Cain's? Some point to the blood sacrifice, but grain offerings were also acceptable to God (see Lev. 1–7).

Others suggest that Abel brought first fruits, while Cain just brought "some of the land's produce."

The writer of Hebrews explains the difference was Abel's faith: "By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was approved as a righteous man, because God approved his gifts" (Heb. 11:4).

Like Cain, one can make offerings to God without truly trusting God or being surrendered to Him.

Sentenced (8-12)

Whether or not Cain invited him, Abel met Cain in the field, where Cain murdered his brother.

The Hebrew foundation of our English Bible does not contain Cain's invitation to Abel to accompany him to the field, but several early Jewish and Christian versions include the phrase, "Let's go out to the field," as noted in the footnotes of the Christian Standard Bible.

While this may not be significant for a children's Bible storybook, these textual footnotes help the Bible student understand the reason why English Bible translations read differently.

God asks Cain a question, offering an opportunity for Cain to confess. Cain does not hide or blame like his father did. He lies to God — "Where is your brother? ... I don't know."

Adam was ashamed when confronted with his sin. No such shame is evident with Cain. He gets angry with God, ignores God's warning, kills his brother and then lies to God. Even when sentenced for his crime, he expresses no faith and no remorse.

So what was Cain's sentence? He is to become a nomad, never again to enjoy the fruits of the agrarian life he previously knew.

Plea (13-15)

Even a lost man pleads with God. Cain characterizes his sentence as leaving the face of the earth and the presence of God. And who is he afraid will kill him? His father? His mother? Sisters who are not named in the text?

God grants him a measure of grace by placing a nondescript mark on Cain indicating that he was not to be murdered. Even though God extends grace to him, Cain ceases to acknowledge God as God. "Cain went out from the Lord's presence" (v. 16).

Bible Studies for Life

By Rony Kozman, Ph.D.

Assistant professor of Biblical Studies, Samford University



THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD'S NAME Jeremiah 23:5–6; Romans 3:10b–13, 21–26

God promised a King who is defined by righteousness. (Jer. 23:5–6)

In Jeremiah 22, God tells Jeremiah to go to the house of the king of Judah and tell him to practice justice and righteousness, which includes rescuing those who have been robbed and taking care of the aliens, orphans and widows. If the king obeys, then the house of David will prosper, but if not, David's house will be ruined.

Then Jeremiah pronounces judgment on three kings for acting in unrighteousness and in injustice: Shallum son of Josiah, Jehoiakim son of Josiah and Coniah son of Jehoakim. They are contrasted with King Josiah who did practice justice and righteousness.

In Chapter 23, Jeremiah pronounces, "Woe to the shepherds" (the kings) because they "destroy and scatter the sheep" (v. 1). God is going to bring judgment upon them and gather His sheep and raise up rulers who will care for the sheep.

God promises that He will raise up a king from David's line who "will reign wisely as king and administer justice and righteousness in the land."

When this Son of David comes, Judah and Israel will be saved, and the king will be called "the Lord is our righteousness." In other words, because the Son of David will rule with justice, God will deliver his people.

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it — the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Romans 3:21–23

There is no righteousness apart from God. (Rom. 3:10b–13)

We have all been like the kings who Jeremiah condemns — unrighteous and unjust. Paul makes clear to us in verse 10 that all humans are unjust.

Paul gives us a portrait of human beings whose throats, tongues, lips, mouths, feet and eyes are full of sin.

Paul's portrait of the human being shows us a person whose whole body is ruled by sin, and this is a portrait of both Jews and Gentiles. Paul tells us that "both Jews and Greeks are all under sin" (v. 9).

God's righteousness has been fully revealed in Jesus. (21–26)

How then can we find ourselves on the side of God's saving justice, if we are unjust? God has revealed His righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ.

God justifies us by His grace. But how can God be just if He is justifying those who are unjust? After all, it is a miscarriage of justice to justify the ungodly. How then does God maintain His justice? In verses 25 and 26, Paul answers this question.

The blood of Jesus demonstrates God's justice since through Christ's blood, our sins can be forgiven and God can justify us.

Not only does God remain just while acquitting us, but He also rescues us from the tyrannical, enslaving and oppressing power of sin that dominated us (Rom. 6:6, 8:2).

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SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS

For January 7

Explore the Bible

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.

Executive Director of the Center for Christian Calling, University of Mobile



JUDGMENT

Genesis 6:13–22; 7:20–24

God is the measure and author of justice. From the inception of His interaction with humanity, God clearly stated that the just punishment for disobedience is physical death (2:17). The serpent lied when he said “You will not die” (3:4). The liar and accuser in the garden suggested that death is not the just sentence for sin. To deny that God’s justice is fulfilled and His wrath satisfied through a death sentence is to deny a fundamental doctrine of historical Christian faith; namely, that Christ died for sinners according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:3).

During the course of the first 10 generations of humanity, the thoughts and actions of Adam’s progeny grew darker and darker. Those who worshipped God intermarried with those who did not acknowledge God, leading to a society characterized by these words: “every inclination of the human mind was nothing but evil all the time” (6:5), and “The earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with wickedness” (6:11).

If Adam’s sin broke the idyllic material world of God’s creation, successive generations that followed smashed it to bits. God’s plan was to wipe the slate clean, leaving only Noah, his family and the animals that God chose to save.

Judgment Announced (6:13–17)

God announces to His favored servant that the rest of the world faces His judgment. All humanity and every land and sky creature will experience certain death. “Everything on earth will perish” (6:17).

Noah and his family are going to survive and thrive by trusting God. Noah’s faith will be demonstrated by building a long wooden box, measuring 45 feet high, 75 feet wide and

450 feet long. It will have three floors, one door and a roof.

Read some of the negative commentary directed toward Ken Ham and his full-size ark in Kentucky. That might help you to imagine the responses heard while “Noah & Sons” worked on their decades-long building project.

Rescue Promised (6:18–22)

Once the ark is complete and passengers are secured, it will carry pairs of animals delivered by God to board the ark. God will establish His covenant with Noah and his family.

By contrast, all of humanity and the corrupt world will be destroyed.

This is the reality of our world and of the gospel. We live in days of unprecedented wickedness. The apostle Peter likens baptism as the message of crucifixion and resurrection to Noah’s ark, offering rescue for all who trust in Jesus (1 Pet. 3:20–22). The finished work of Jesus Christ saves sinners,

but sinners must get on the boat to be saved.

Judgment Executed (7:20–24)

God brought pairs of animals to Noah to save in the ark. Where there were seven (or seven pairs) of a kind, they were understood to be clean animals. After they disembarked, the family would offer clean animals as sacrifice to God, and they would eat some of the others.

While God’s covenant favor was extended to Noah and his family, His righteous judgment was being poured out on the rest of the world: “He did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly” (2 Pet. 2:5).

As we enter this new year, may we herald the message of salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Bible Studies for Life

By Rony Kozman, Ph.D.

Assistant professor of Biblical Studies, Samford University



THE PROTECTION OF GOD’S NAME Psalm 91:1–6, 9–16

We can trust God’s power to protect us. (1–6)

The main theme of this psalm is that God rescues those who trust in Him. Those who love God and who are righteous will be delivered by God from their distress. God will vindicate the righteous.

As we pray this psalm, we repeatedly address the “you.” On one hand, we may address ourselves as the “you.” On the other hand, if we pray this together in community, we can address each other.

You can be sure of God’s deliverance since God is faithful to those who trust in Him. As we recite this psalm, not only do we address the “you” of ourselves and each other, but the psalm also has us speak in the first person as the “I” who trusts in God and confesses that the Lord is “my refuge and my fortress.”

We can rest in God’s power to keep us secure. (9–13)

We will not fear when disaster strikes because we have “made the Lord [our] refuge.” The psalm continues to emphasize that God will protect us.

Not only will He send His angels to protect us, but we will even defeat threats as menacing and life-threatening as lions, cobras and serpents.

“Serpent” can refer even to gigantic serpentine creatures (e.g., Gen. 1:21; Ex. 7:9, 12; Isa. 27:1; Ps. 74:13; Ps. 148:7), and the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures may use the term “dragon.” The serpents of verse 13 are chaos-causing creatures.

We need to beware how we understand God’s deliverance and

be careful not to misuse this psalm. The devil used this very psalm to test

Jesus in the wilderness. Matthew invites us to see that Jesus did not take the dragon’s bait but demonstrated that He was the Son of God by His patient endurance and obedience through suffering.

As we read Psalm 91 in light of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection, we see it does not promise that those who trust in God will not suffer, nor does Jesus’ life show us that we will not die.

The psalm promises that in the end, those who trust God are children of God who will be vindicated and rescued in the future resurrection from the dead, even if we suffer disaster and death now.

We can experience satisfaction because God works on our behalf. (14–16)

The Son of God loved the Father and called to the Father to rescue Him from suffering when He was in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39–42) and while He was being crucified (27:46). And as Psalm 91 tells us, the Father did not abandon the Son but was with Him and rescued Him.

The Father showed His salvation when He raised the Son from the dead and gave Him a long life. So we who are in Christ can also trust that God is always with us, even when we suffer, and we can trust that God will one day make all things right and rescue us from all trouble and calamity.

Christ defeated the dragon by His suffering, and we also share in Christ’s reign and vindication and God’s deliverance if we share in Christ’s suffering and patient endurance.

“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.”

Psalm 91:1–2

‘Missions begins at home’

Music minister says leaders should consider planning youth choir tours

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

As youth ministers and music ministers are planning their calendars for the new year, Jeff Stith said he'd recommend that they consider something that they might not have thought about in a while — a youth choir tour.

Although for many churches they've become a thing of the past, for him they've consistently been a thing of great impact.

“When we would sit down over at my last church and talk about trips, the number one trips they would talk about was our youth choir tours before the trips to Six Flags or camps or Disney or whatever else they'd done that year,” said Stith, who currently serves as minister of music at First Baptist Church Birmingham. “Four kids in the past 10 years have been saved on our choir tours through our devotional times at night or our experiences with the churches. It's a great bonding experience for the group as well.”

Not only that, he said it provides a place for students to get a passion for music, something he had a lot of opportunity to do growing up.

“Some of my greatest memories

are from Shocco Springs, from youth music weeks that don't exist anymore. That's where we got called into ministry and fell in love with music ministry,” Stith said of himself and his peers. “I think the youth choir is the one place left that these kids can experience music in the church.”

Music and missions

A tour offers the opportunity to pair music with missions experience, he said, adding that churches with youth groups of any size can do it if they join forces.

In early 2023, Stith joined the staff at FBC Birmingham and learned about how Nathan Lyon, who was directing the student choir at the time, had done some joint projects with Grace Life Baptist Church and Tannehill Valley Baptist Church, both in McCalla. They wanted to plan a youth choir tour for the three churches, so he and Lyon started planning that with Mike Jones, minister of worship ministries and media at Grace Life, and Joe Marchetti, music minister at Tannehill Valley.

“Our church had all girls — nine girls,” Stith said. “Joe's church had five guys and girls. And then Grace Life had about 15.”



Photo courtesy of Jeff Stith

A joint youth choir with students from FBC Birmingham, Grace Life Baptist Church in McCalla and Tannehill Valley Baptist Church in McCalla sing at The Oaks on Parkwood retirement community in Bessemer during their May 2023 choir tour.

The three combined their groups for a youth choir tour that was low cost — they stayed at Grace Life — and offered a lot of different experiences for the students.

“They did six concerts in five days,” Stith said.

They called the tour Missions Begins at Home because they were staying in the Birmingham area, and during the day they served and sang at several local ministries — Daniel Cason Ministries, Jimmie Hale Mission, The Changing Station and The Oaks on Parkwood retirement community.

“It was a great experience for the kids, and a lot of them didn't know each other before the tour,” Stith said.

Stith said the ministers also divided the load — Jones and Marchetti directed the music, Lyon played piano for the group and Stith helped with logistics and meals.

Jones said the experience was

great “because it brought three local churches together without fostering competition, but promoting family.”

He said he hopes the opportunity to be involved in local missions showed them that they can share the love of Jesus right in their own city anytime they want.

‘Compelling people’

He saw the musical part make an impact in those missions contexts too — on the people they were serving and on the students themselves.

“Singing has an incredible way of compelling people to stop what they are doing and listen to your message and bringing people together,” Jones said.

“Singing about freedom in Christ took on a whole new meaning for many of our students when we sang at the Jimmie Hale mission where we saw people who had overcome their addictions rejoicing in the freedom they have now.”

Students help in the food pantry of Daniel Cason Ministries in Birmingham as part of their May 2023 choir tour. The tour offered daily opportunities for them to experience missions in their local area.



Photo courtesy of Jeff Stith

MEDIA REVIEWS

By Tracy Riggs Frontz

The Alabama Baptist

New book gets to the biblical foundations of worship leadership

Kenny Lamm, worship ministries strategist for the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, knows that leading worship in the 21st century can be overwhelming. That's why earlier this year, Lamm released "The Worship Ministry Guidebook: Engaging Your Congregation in Transformational Worship" for those who need help but can't attend one of the three-day worship training sessions that Lamm conducts.

"Part of what I wanted to do was set out to write a book that starts out with biblical foundations and an understanding of what worship is, what worship leaders' roles are, and build on top of that the nuts and bolts of how to go about leading the worship ministry in your church in a way that truly changes lives," Lamm said.

Dwindling resources

When Lamm felt God was calling him to lead worship, he had access to resources for worship leaders from Lifeway Christian Resources and other sources. However, many of those are no longer available or relevant to today's worship styles.

He never planned to write a book, but while in Cambodia leading a worship conference, a missionary

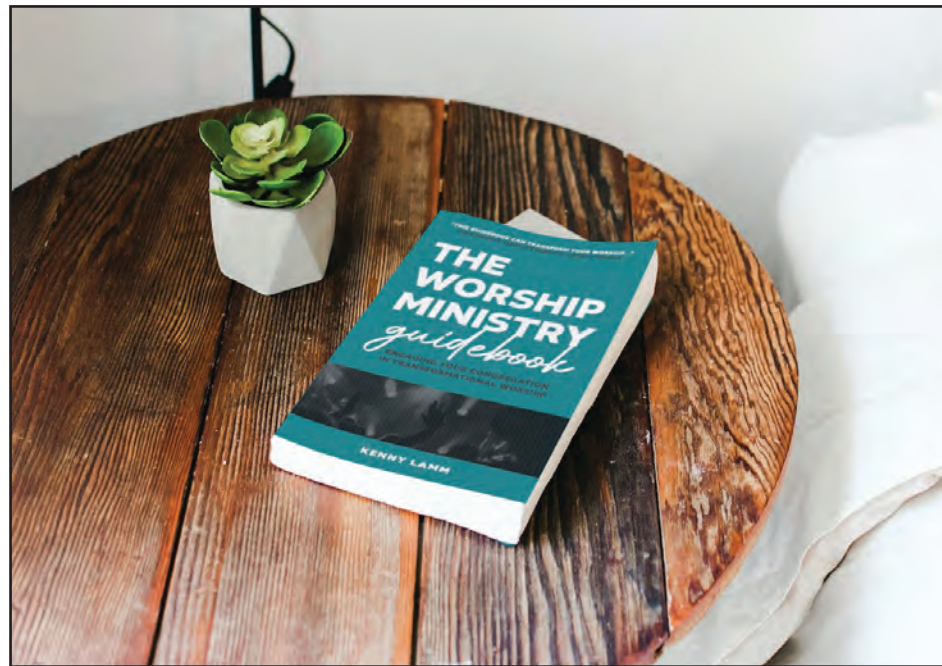


Photo courtesy of Kenny Lamm

with ACTION Cambodia told Lamm he was looking for a book on worship and suggested that he write one.

After praying and thinking through the idea, he decided to do it.

Written for both bivocational and seasoned leaders, the book is based on training he does with North Carolina Baptist worship leaders and curriculum developed for one of his classes at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Factors that can overwhelm both new and experienced worship leaders are choosing songs suitable for the congregation and sermon while keeping in mind who is on the worship team that week, preparing the music and tech teams, choosing appropriate keys for the songs and doing it all within the timeframe allotted for musical worship. These can easily change something made to glorify God and edify the congregation into a performance.

"I think one of the things that is widespread — and it's not just in the

United States — is something of a mentality of worship leaders. They may not be thinking this. They seek to emulate the look and sound of artists they see on YouTube or other places," Lamm said. "There's really not a great understanding of what their actual role should be in worship."

This is why Lamm begins his book with 13 topics about understanding worship, addressing the foundation first.

"The reason the book starts with those foundations is that you really can't begin that discussion — what songs to choose, what keys to put them in, what the lighting will be like, what you wear, what you say between songs — until you understand completely biblically what worship is and what our role as worship leaders is. Then all of the other stuff grows out of that," he said.

After this section, he tackles another fundamental area in "Understanding Worship Leadership." Here,

Lamm discusses everything from discipling the worship team, to mentoring, to noting the difference between the volunteers and the called.

The last half includes sections on planning, preparing for, leading and evaluating worship. This is where Lamm highlights the day-to-day problems that contemporary worship leaders face and offers suggestions.

One of the topics Lamm is most adamant about is the nine reasons congregations don't participate.

"Maybe what's happening on stage musically is amazing. The technology utilized is amazing. As you look around, everybody is just watching for the most part," Lamm said. "Nobody's participating; nobody's singing. The lights might be so dark in the congregation that you can't see people around you. That just loses that whole biblical mandate that worship should be vertical and horizontal in times of corporate worship."

Increasing participation

When asked to name the top two reasons congregations don't participate, Lamm said that the "worst abuses" were having a congregation sing in keys that the majority find too high or too low and changing songs so often that there is no familiarity with any of the songs.

Overall, Lamm's focus is to help worship leaders do what they were called to do — lead worship.

"Once you understand what your role as a worship leader is, there are so many nuances that come to light that you maybe never thought about before. It's kind of like an 'aha!' moment, and then you can start designing and leading worship services in a way that's really going to be engaging.

"That's what I've tried to address in the training I do and in this book."



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EDITOR'S NOTE

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Photo by Grace Thornton/The Baptist Paper

Church signs you need: Are you ready for guests?

By Mark MacDonald

BeKnownforSomething.com

It's fall, which means many people will return to regular church attendance and you may see more visitors and guests too. Does your church signage help everyone find where they need to go?

Remember, you drive onto the church property more than most. So you probably don't notice the signage.

But those who are new to your church need certain signs to feel welcomed.

Top five

If you have a sprawling campus, you certainly recognize the value of church signage. But even smaller church properties benefit from helpful directional signage.

There are five signs you need:

1. Main sign to church campus/property.

This large sign needs to be visible by traffic so they can identify the church building or campus.

It can be simple with just the name of your church or it can be

more complex with your church logo, brand fonts and colors. Some main signs even have service times.

Be careful about cluttering the main sign with too many details — most only want a church name.

You probably don't need pastor names, website address or other details most discover when they search your name online.

Make the church name on the sign large and use a professionally designed and constructed sign. Resist cleverness.

2. Directional signs.

Any intersection in your parking area that requires a decision needs simple, legible and brand-controlled directional signs. Ideally, these will match all your other signage.

If you can't see your main entrance from the decision point, be sure to add directional signs to lead people to it.

3. Entrance signs.

The main door needs signage to catch the eyes of guests. This can be a prominent door color with a

simple sign that says "Welcome" or "Worship."

You want to lead people from their parking spot into their next location. If there are other doors that could be confused with a main entrance, be sure to identify those doors as secondary and why someone might use them. Be clear.

Additionally, encourage your regular attenders to recognize visitors and guests and to help them transition from one area to another (like from the parking lot to the sanctuary or from a Bible study class to worship service).

Similar look

Church entrance signs should look similar to the main sign.

Match the shape, color, font and construction type of your main sign as much as possible.

4. Guest parking signs.

If you have designated guest parking, be sure to mark those spots with signs that can be viewed above parked cars. These signs need to match the overall design of all other

signs. Keep the signs simple and legible.

"Guests" over a parking area is all you probably need to get them to park there.

Be sure you have someone at the door to give a special welcome to anyone who parks in the special spots.

5. Indoor signage.

Once people arrive inside the main entrance, are there ways proper signage could help them feel more comfortable getting seated in the sanctuary or navigating to the bathroom, classrooms or other spaces?

Keep signs above head level in a busy foyer or hallway. At each decision intersection, be clear where all the important rooms are: Worship, Bathrooms, Nursery, Sunday School, etc.

It also can be helpful to label exits in a way that points people back to the parking lot at the end of the service.

Maintain design standards and brand consistency on interior signs.

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Time away

By Erin Roach
The Baptist Paper

Pastors' families offered free retreat to rest, rejuvenate

Pastors' families often bear the brunt of ministry stress, yet among the qualifications for an overseer, the Apostle Paul instructed that "he must manage his own household well." To cultivate healthy ministry families, Lake Yale Baptist Conference Center in central Florida offers free retreat time.

"One thing that people don't fully understand is the demand on a pastor's time, resources and energy. They see him as maybe working a couple days a week, and nothing could be further from the truth,"

Jeff Yant, executive director of Lake Yale, told The Baptist Paper.

"From pastors who are taking calls while they're on vacation to somebody [dying] or somebody in the hospital needing a visit or the multitude of things that go on, churches would do well to make that investment in their pastor, to say, 'We will give you this time,'" Yant said.

Comfortable setting

Lake Yale, located in Leesburg and supported in part by the Florida Baptist Convention, offers "comfortable hotel accommodations"

and activities such as canoeing and kayaking, fishing, a ropes course, horseshoes and a walking path.

Southern Baptist senior pastors are invited to bring their families for retreat time that could last a couple of days up to a month, and associate pastors' families may attend with a recommendation from the senior pastor, Yant said.

The conference center will even provide meals for the ministry families if meals are otherwise being served on campus at the time.

Because money is often scarce in ministry, Lake Yale seeks to take the

financial burden off such families when considering time away.

Last year, nearly 50 families took advantage of the offer.

'Life-changing experience'

"I remember one instance that we had of a pastor and his wife coming through for a sabbatical, and at the end of it, he came to us in tears and thanked us and said that they were contemplating leaving their ministry because of the stress, but because of the sabbatical, God had confirmed in them that they were to continue," Yant said.

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with the local Church

We are committed to ministry preparation in partnership with the local church — because fulfilling the Great Commission is best done together.



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Facebook photo

Pastors are invited to bring their families for free retreat time at Lake Yale Baptist Conference Center in Florida.

For a Baptist conference center, offering free retreat time to pastors' families is "almost the low-hanging fruit," Yant said. Though the facility bears some cost, the impact is far greater.

"We exist to make Christ known through a life-changing experience in an opportunity-rich environment. What better life change can

there be than to see those who are called into ministry continue on in strength and willingness to go forward for the gospel?"

Lake Yale has a space with a couple of bedrooms set aside for what they call pastor sabbaticals, but they can always open up additional space if needed, Yant said.

Some pastors may struggle with

asking for such time away, even if it's without charge. Yant's advice is to help the church understand the pastor's daily life and to emphasize the need for a healthy pastor's family in the overall ministry of the church.

"Nobody goes through life and doesn't have time to themselves. Most factory workers, when they go home, they leave the factory there. Teachers may not leave the stuff there, but they do get a summer where they can rest and rejuvenate," Yant said.

"Pastors don't have that ability, so we need to be building into them and allowing them to have that time that is specifically theirs."

Also, because of the nature of their jobs, pastors rarely have a confidante to share life struggles. For pastors, their families are the people they can share their hearts and lives with, and they need to spend time with them, Yant said.

"For pastors to be able to step away and to be able to devote that time and effort to that first ministry

calling of the family, I think that's vital," he said.

Strengthening lives

Time at Lake Yale is an opportunity for pastors to let someone "love on them" for a change, Yant said. Churches can even set the terms for the sabbatical, such as requiring that the pastor only be away during the week and back for Sunday or that the trip is limited to one or two weeks, Yant said.

Giving a pastor that uninterrupted time away, Yant said, will strengthen his family, the church and the ministry impact.

"A church would do well to do that, and their pastor would come back much more refreshed, much more on fire and excited about continuing

to do the ministry there. The worst thing a church can do is continue to burn out its pastor. That's what happens a lot of times," he said.

To locate a similar camp nearby, visit sbccamping.org. "I encourage you to call them, whatever state you might be in," Yant said.

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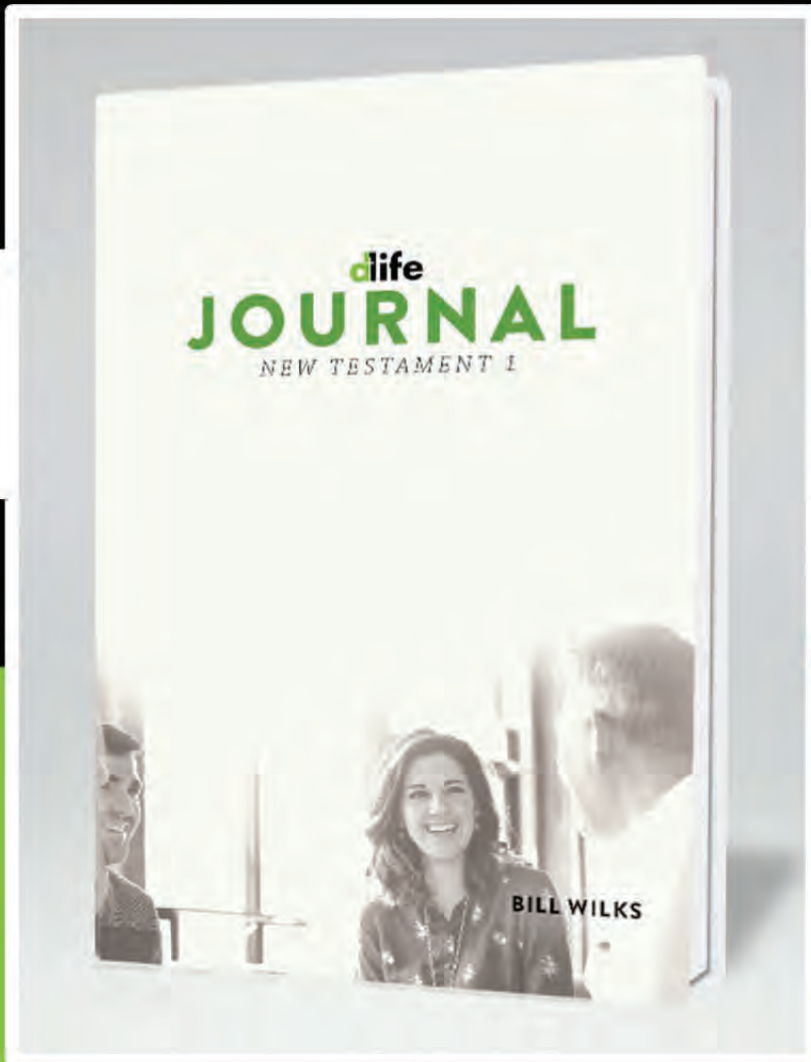


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