

The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.



IMB missionary Amber Sroka talks with Jessica and her mother Elisa. Both Jessica and Elisa live at ATINI, a mission center in Brasilia, Brazil, that cares for Indigenous families who were rejected by their tribes.

IMB photo

Sharing hope

Caring for families facing tribal rejection in Brazil

Many Indigenous families in Brazil experience rejection because they refuse to practice infanticide, a cruel tradition still observed by some tribes in Brazil.

International Mission Board missionaries Nick and Amber Sroka live and serve in Brasilia, Brazil, and are bringing the light of Christ into this darkness.

During a summer event, the Srokas worked with a Baptist church group from Missouri to host a VBS-style program at a local ministry center.

Protecting children

Volunteers connected with children like Jessica, who was born with muscular dystrophy, and whose parents made the choice to leave their tribe to protect their child.

The Srokas communicate with other IMB missionaries across Brazil to help identify and support families who experience similar tribal rejections or have children who need medical help that isn't available where they live.

Pray that families would understand the worth of their children and hear the story of a God who loves them. Ask God to send more missionaries and more churches to bring

LOTTIE MOON
CHRISTMAS OFFERING



Alabama goal: \$12 million
National goal: \$210 million

the hope of the gospel to those who live in darkness without Him. (IMB)

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

SPOTLIGHT SPONSOR ...

New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

"We are committed to preparing the next generation of servants in Alabama."



OPINION

RASHIONAL
THOUGHTSSurrounding ourselves
with strength of others
makes everything better

By Jennifer Davis Rash

President and Editor-in-Chief, The Alabama Baptist

She had help — the Proverbs 31 woman wasn't accomplishing all those amazing things strictly on her own. She had people assisting her.

This fact had escaped me until my friend pointed it out recently (see Prov. 31:15), and with that realization we both decided we could breathe a bit easier.

After all, following the example of the Proverbs 31 woman can be overwhelming if it means shouldering everything outlined on our own.

Even the most diligent, disciplined, hardworking and ambitious among us need the support, encouragement and assistance of others. That goes for men too.

We are built to live and serve in community, and we all have gifts, talents and skills God expects us to use for His glory.

We may be the leader, sharing the goals and making the assignments, in some cases. In other situations, we may be the one receiving the assignments.

These are volunteer efforts as well as paid positions, so finding the right rhythm to keep all responsibilities moving in the right direction is vital for sustainability.

I can't imagine life without the incredible team here at TAB Media Group. They are dedicated, hardworking, caring, responsible, professional, skilled, smart and grace filled. They love Jesus, love each other and love you.



Unsplash.com

After 3 emergency calls in one week, Goldman
urges safe travel training for missions teams

By Grace Thornton

The Alabama Baptist

We've been going all these years — we've never had a problem there."

Scotty Goldman said he's heard those words many times from churches that are planning missions trips.

But not too long ago in one of those frequently visited countries, teams dialed his number a lot.

"We had some criminal activity on one of our teams — they were carjacked and all of their passports and phones were stolen," said Goldman, director of the office of global missions at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions.

Around the same time, several other teams also faced problems there, such as a medical emergency and an airport shutdown after a volcano eruption.

Proactive vs. reactive

Goldman said his phone is always open for calls when teams need help, but preparation can prevent the need for some of those calls.

"Why would we want to take a chance on reacting to something if we can be proactive in knowing how to avoid it?" he asked. "What we're trying to do is be proactive in knowing what to look for, whether it's

cultural, criminal or governmental."

And when reaction is necessary, prior planning can make the wheels move faster, Goldman said.

That's why the SBOM offers faith-focused safe-travel training for missions volunteers. The training can cover topics such as dealing with medical emergencies and preventing theft and kidnapping.

Three levels of training

The SBOM can arrange three levels of training for missions volunteers:

Level A — This basic training takes about three hours and includes a video followed by a country-specific safety update that outlines known threats in the location where volunteers will be working.

Level B — This more advanced two-day training is for team leaders and those going into higher risk areas.

Level C — The most advanced training, this weeklong training is for volunteers going to the highest risk areas.

Goldman said Level A is available to teams through video training sessions and Zoom calls. The SBOM hosts Level B training once a year, but churches can host their own class for groups of 12 to 24 people.

The next one will be held Feb. 5–6, 2026, at Southeast Alabama Baptist Association in Dothan.

An additional benefit of safe-travel training is access to a 24/7 emergency response team who can help in times of crisis.

Goldman said he recently got three emergency calls in the same week — all different situations, all from teams that hadn't gone through the training.

"We're happy to help with any situation like that, but some of these things we could help with in a better and faster way if they had training ahead of time and if we knew they were going," Goldman said. "We had to start from scratch on the fly."

He said training is important because "we want them to be able to go safer and longer ... none of us are immune to emergencies."

In addition to helping with training, the SBOM can recommend travel agents and travel insurers experienced in missions travel. Goldman said his office also has dozens of resources, including team leader packets, planning timelines, checklists and legal templates on its website.

For more
information
and resources,
visit [a18c.org/
resources](http://a18c.org/resources).

Your Voice



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

Conduct grows out of relationship with Christ

By **Morris Murray Jr.**

Jasper, Alabama

America is afflicted with a moral crisis. Crime is the No. 1 crisis. Morality has limped along on crutches. We are victims of the disease of change (previously called future shock). Moral distortion is on hand where good is evil and evil is good.

Lack of moral certitude infiltrates and saturates our land today. Yes, we are experiencing a conflict of moral crisis. We are not experiencing moral progress. This moral crisis of our time is the loss of the dimension of the depth of the Christian faith. This has been called “cheap grace.” The road to renewal and change is repentance.

Root of crisis

The root of the moral crisis is found in Proverbs 29:18: “without a vision the people perish.” Without submission to the authority of the Word of God, people become un-

ruly. Some are saying that we are not capable of responding to the moral challenge of our time. The traditional biblical ethic has been either rejected or ignored. It needs to be reexamined. We need to recover the faith once delivered to the saints.

Popular secular theories about morality focus on pleasure, power, duty and existentialism where our own rules and principles determine the proper course of action. Biblical/Christian ethics focuses on “divine commands in the Scriptures which are universal and applicable to all situations” (Carl Henry). Emil Bruner defines this ethic as “the science of human conduct as it is determined by divine conduct.”

However else one may define it, biblical/Christian ethics seeks to clarify the grounds, guidelines and goals of human character and conduct in terms of response to the will of God as revealed in Jesus and made possible by the Holy Spirit.

Sadly enough, this generation is

not concerned with biblical authority but with freedom and emancipation from any ethical guidelines which cramp one’s personal preferences.

Listen: the Bible is the Word of God. It is the record of God Himself and His purposes for mankind which reached its climax in the person of His Son. Through Him we can accept our acceptance even though we are unacceptable!

Honest book

Indeed, in the Bible the Master’s voice comes through. It has survived much shoddy preaching as it is used by the Holy Spirit to radically change lives. It is an honest book and does not seek to cover up the sins of the saints. It tells it like it is.

Jesus is the supreme and ultimate moral authority in the Christian’s life. Any effort to sever Christian authority from Him is heretical. He alone is the ultimate criteria for Christian authority. Indeed, the Bible presents Him as the only One who can provide revolutionary ethical and moral changes in one’s life. Christ is the Lord of life, and apart from Him moral crises, distortions, corruptions and evils abound.

He is the window through which we see God, and He reveals to us God’s moral will and way. Refusal to see and do God’s will and way is a perversion of our humanity for Jesus was truly man. Christian conduct grows out of our relationship with Him. The moral situation cannot find satisfaction and fulfillment apart from Him, for Jesus is truly God.

“Christ made us new. He didn’t recycle us. He didn’t refurbish us. He didn’t patch us back together. ... He took what was old and made it new,” said **Matt Daniels**, who serves on the campus of the University of North Alabama in Florence. “He took what was dead and made it alive. ... That is the work that Jesus does. That should compel us to get up and do the work of helping other people to come to know this hope.”

“Jesus looked at them intently and said, ‘humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible.’” Matthew 19:26

Todd Unzicker

@ToddUnzicker on X

As a pastor, you genuinely hurt when your people hurt. As a director of missions, you genuinely hurt when one of your pastors, ministers or churches hurt. Why? Because you love the people you’re called to serve.

Craig Carlisle, DOM
Etowah Baptist Association

Viral doesn’t mean virtuous. Be discerning.

Daniel Darling

@dandarling on X

Letters to the Editor

Thank you, Denise George, for the timely article on thealabamabaptist.org: “Why Gen Z women are leaving the faith and how your church can respond.” You answered questions church leaders are asking.

Jesse L. Nelson
on Facebook

Regarding the “Why Gen Z women are leaving the faith and how your church can respond” article, I had no idea these women were struggling. Thank you for writing this important article.

Debbie Phillips
on Facebook

Share online or email news@thealabamabaptist.org

“Sometimes, the smallest churches reveal the grandest expressions of God’s love.”

RICH BITTERMAN
Pastor of Cedar Ridge Baptist Church in Galena, Missouri

“In other words: God isn’t like you. Even the most intense of human love is only a faint echo of heaven’s flood-like forgiveness. His heartfelt thoughts for you outstrip what you can imagine. He intends to restore you into the bright glory for which you were created. And that is dependent not on you keeping yourself clean but on you taking your mess to Him. His power runs so deep that He is able to redeem the ugliest parts of our past into the most beautiful parts of our future.”

Dane Ortlund

“The Heart of Jesus: How He Really Feels About You”

“Of all people in our neighborhoods, we should be known as the light,” said **Andy John King**, pastor of Lindsay Lane Baptist Church in Athens. “We have to know our neighbors to know that our neighbors are

hurting. We are representatives of the Lord Jesus Christ, citizens of heaven. If I read and acknowledge (the “most important” commandment in Scripture) with the understanding that to love God, that also means I’m going to love my neighbor. That’s how change happens.”

“We have to allow God to break our hearts and pay attention to the people around us because they need this Jesus that we’ve got,” said Montgomery Baptist Association pastor **Dewayne Rembert**. “When you have a clear view of Christ’s love for the lost, you’re going to always want to share Jesus with people.” Reconciliation “is simply making right a broken relationship,” Rembert noted. “Christ came to reconcile us back to God the Father as we go and share the love of Christ with others. That is God’s heartbeat.”



“Your wife’s stuffed pork with that interesting glaze is irresistible.”

Lass WORDS

BY KEN LASS
The Alabama Baptist



DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

The truth about us

Wow! I couldn’t believe it. It was right there in front of me in clear black and white text. I read it several times to make sure I wasn’t misunderstanding. Yet I still found it hard to believe.

The Alabama Baptist reported the results of a recent poll by George Barna and the Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University.

Among other things, the poll found “widespread resistance to the idea that everyone is guilty of sin.” In fact, 48% of all adults surveyed — just under half — do not believe everyone is a sinner. Only 52% of adults classified themselves as sinners.

More disturbing was the finding that, among those who identify themselves as Christians, one out of three don’t believe everyone is a sinner.

Need for salvation

This doesn’t make sense. If you don’t consider yourself a sinner, you don’t need a Savior. That would mean the death and atoning resurrection of Jesus for the redemption of sin was meaningless. I don’t understand how one can label oneself a Christian but not accept the need for salvation. Redemption of sin was Jesus’ very purpose in coming to earth in human form. Identifying as His follower is based on that premise.

Then there is the notion that you can be without sin.

Essentially, you would be calling yourself perfect. Really? Never a bad thought? Never a capitulation to temptation? Never jealous, greedy, unjustly angry, selfish? Never?

Rely on faith

I can understand why we struggle to comprehend some of the great revelations of the Bible. How God can be eternal and omniscient. How Jesus can be both God and man at the same time. How the universe can be created in six days.

Our limited ability to understand makes us rely on faith to accept these truths. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord in Isaiah.

Maybe denying our sinful nature is a way to rationalize our lifestyle — to make us feel better about ourselves. But even this is self-deception. Nothing feels better than the security of assuring our eternal future by acknowledging sin and accepting Jesus’ ability to wash us white as snow.

None of us is perfect. All of us are flawed. The most tragic flaw would be failure to admit to it.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Ken Lass, an award-winning columnist for numerous publications and websites, is a retired Birmingham television news and sports anchor.

Alabama news

BIRMINGHAM METRO ASSOCIATION

▶ **Justin Law** is the new education pastor for **First Baptist Church Trussville**. Previously, he served as associate pastor of discipleship for FBC Montgomery. Law and his wife, Anslee, have four children. Buddy Champion is pastor of FBC Trussville.



Facebook photo

BLOUNT ASSOCIATION

▶ **Pleasant View Missionary Baptist Church, Holly Pond**, will host a Christmas singing Dec. 14 at 5 p.m., featuring The Kellys from Lawrenceburg, Tennessee. For more information, call 256-339-1863 or 256-590-1501. Earl Harper is pastor.



Facebook photo

CALHOUN ASSOCIATION

▶ **Rendell Day** is the new pastor of **Pleasant Ridge Baptist Church, Anniston**. He previously served as pastor of Montana Creek Baptist Church,

Talkeetna, Alaska. He and his wife, Teresa, also have served as house parents with the Alabama Baptist Children's Homes & Family Ministries.



Facebook photo

▶ **Adam Morales** is the new pastor of **Valley Baptist Church, Glencoe**. He has served at Wellington First Baptist Church for 15 years in various staff positions, most recently as associate pastor. He is married to Marla.

CENTRAL ASSOCIATION

▶ **Bethesda Baptist Church, Equality**, celebrated its 175th anniversary Oct. 12. Bo Worthy, son of former pastor Charles Worthy was the guest preacher. A historical presentation was shown, and testimonies were shared by several members. Wendy Westerhouse (right), executive director of the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission, presented a commemorative plaque, with Pastor Reuben



Photo by Tom Hall

Prater (left) accepting the honor on behalf of the church. Special music included duets and solos by Prater, Lynn Shoemaker Wyatt, Patsy Worthy Prater and minister of music Rick Hall. Kitty Kelly was recognized as the longest active church member for 61 years. Two video greetings were shown from Rick Lance, executive director of the State Board of Missions, and Matthew Reams, interim director of missions for Central Baptist Association. A fellowship meal followed the service.

CHEROKEE ASSOCIATION

▶ **Sand Valley Baptist Church, Centre**, celebrated its 150th anniversary Oct. 20. Jason Smith, a former pastor, was the guest preacher. Music was provided by current and former church members. During the service, the church received special recognitions: a framed certificate from the Alabama State House of Representatives, along with two presentations made by Wendell Dutton (far right), director of missions of Cherokee Baptist Association and a commissioner of the Alabama



Photo by Megan Williams

OBITUARIES

MARY JANE BARNES

Mary Jane Barnes died Sept. 9 at 74. She was the wife of former director of missions for Fayette Baptist Association Larry Barnes, now of Lexington, South Carolina.



BARNES



COLEMAN

ARLINDA COLEMAN

Arlinda Coleman died Sept. 5 at 76. She was the wife of Travis Coleman, former Alabama Baptist State Convention president and retired pastor of First Baptist Church Prattville.



COX

BARBARA COX

Barbara Cox died Aug. 16 at 86. She was the wife of Henry Cox, former Alabama Baptist State Convention president, who served First Baptist Church Bay Minette and Durant Chapel Baptist Church as pastor.

JOHN HENRY FINKLEA JR.

John Henry Finklea Jr., longtime pastor of First Baptist Church Brewton, died Nov. 3. He was 89.

A native of Monroeville, Finklea thought he would be a professional football player. But after injuring his knee in a college game, God directed him toward ministry.

He married his high school sweetheart, Deloris, and graduated from New Orleans Seminary.

For 63 years, Finklea served as a pastor, including 25 years at FBC Brewton.

He retired in 1999, and the church named him pastor emeritus. After retirement, he served 24 more years as pastor of Sepulga Baptist Church and published two books.

Finklea is preceded in death by his wife. He is survived by his son, Jeff; daughter, Lynn; and several grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

JAMES ROBBY "BUTCH" HENDERSON

James Robby "Butch" Henderson, founder of Metro Changers and longtime youth minister, died Nov. 28. He was 71.



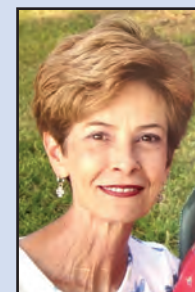
FINKLEA

Henderson earned a bachelor's degree from the University of North Alabama, Florence, and a master's degree from New Orleans Seminary.

He served as youth minister at First Baptist Church Athens, FBC Tuscaloosa, FBC Dothan and FBC Birmingham.

While at FBC Birmingham, he also served as education minister. He then served as director of World Changers at the North American Mission Board; church community missions specialist for Birmingham Metro Baptist Association; and founder and director of Metro Changers in Birmingham.

Henderson is survived by his wife of 50 years, Cherri; daughters, Beth and Jama; son, Alan; and six grandchildren.



WARREN

BETTY LYNNE WARREN

Betty Lynne Warren died Nov. 6 at 85. She was the wife of retired director of missions for Colbert-Lauderdale Baptist Association Jim Warren.



HENDERSON

NEWS

Baptist Historical Commission. Pictured (l to r) are members of the anniversary planning committee: Aubrie Elder, Emily Prickett, Sarah Williams and Sheila Green, who shared the church's history. David Jenkins is pastor.

COVINGTON ASSOCIATION

▶ **Tommy Fike** is the new director of missions for **Covington Baptist Association**. He has been in ministry 34 years, serving churches in Alabama, Georgia and Mississippi. Most recently Fike served as pastor of Dalraida Baptist Church, Montgomery, having been on staff for more than 11 years. He holds an associate degree in music from George C. Wallace State Community College, Dothan; a bachelor's from the University of Montevallo; a bachelor of interdisciplinary studies from Liberty University; and is pursuing a master's in theology from Andersonville Theological Seminary, Camilla, Georgia. He and his wife, Melissa, have one son.

▶ **Bill Pritchett** wrapped up his time as interim pastor of **Rawls Baptist Church, Dozier**, Nov. 2.

ELMORE ASSOCIATION

▶ **Kevin Garrett** is the new missions strategist for **Elmore Baptist Association**. He has served in various church positions since 1987 including most recently as pastor of First Baptist Church Atmore for the past seven years. He holds bachelor's and master's degrees from Jacksonville State University and a master of divinity and doctor of ministry from New Orleans Seminary.

Garrett and his wife, Tina, have two adult sons and three grandchildren.

ETOWAH ASSOCIATION

▶ **Coosa Valley Baptist Church, Rainbow City**, celebrated its 50th anniversary Oct. 5 with several charter members in attendance. Barry Cosper (pictured), a former pastor, was the guest preacher, and a reunion choir of former members provided special music. A luncheon followed the service.



Photo by Melissa Gerrish

FAYETTE AND PICKENS ASSOCIATIONS

▶ **Calvary Baptist Church, Fayette**, celebrated its 25th anniversary Oct. 12, beginning with a music service at 9:30 a.m. followed by worship at 11. The message on God's faithfulness was shared by the three pastors who have served: David Cullison, founding pastor; Blake

Thompson, second pastor; and Jaime Owens, present pastor. John Killian, director of missions for Fayette County Baptist Association, brought greetings and congratulations. A commemorative plaque was presented by David Nelson, a commissioner with the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission.

Pictured are (l to r) Cullison, Owens, Thompson and Killian. The church's annual fish fry was held the previous day.



Photo by David Nelson

LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN ASSOCIATION

▶ **Welcome Hill Baptist Church, near Fort Payne**, celebrated its 75th anniversary Nov. 2.



Photo by Theresa Hulgán

During the service Wendell Dutton, a commissioner for the Alabama Baptist Historical Commission made a special presentation to the church. Pictured are (l to r) Margaret

SOUTHEAST ALABAMA ASSOCIATION

▶ **Liberty Baptist Church, Pansey**, held a special service Oct. 26 to ordain David



Submitted photo

Ralston and Ron Williams. Pictured are (l to r) Ralston; wife, Tana; and Williams. Jeff Peacock is pastor.

▶ **Smyrna Baptist Church, Dothan**, celebrated its 160th anniversary and homecoming Nov. 2. Hosea Parker was the guest speaker with music by Mack and Scott Thomley. Billy Womack is pastor.

ST. CLAIR ASSOCIATION

▶ **Cropwell Baptist Church, Pell City**, will hold its annual Christmas Eve candlelight service Dec. 24 at 4 p.m. For more information, call 205-338-7995. Bill Johnston is interim pastor.

TALLAPOOSA ASSOCIATION

▶ **Charles Teague** is the new associate/executive pastor of **First Baptist Church Alexander City**. Previously he served as minister of education/outreach/media of Sardis Baptist Church, Boaz. He and his wife,



TEAGUE

Angie, have two adult children and two grandsons.

WEST CENTRAL ASSOCIATION

▶ **Thomas Fletcher** is the new pastor of **Orrville Baptist Church**. He previously served as pastor of Livingston First Baptist Church. He and his wife, Bethany, have one son.



Facebook photo

EDITOR'S NOTE — Please send news items to news@thealabamabaptist.org.

Big Hurricane Baptist burns note, dedicates historical marker during 194th anniversary celebration

Big Hurricane Baptist Church in Brookwood had a big weekend for its 194th anniversary Nov. 8–9 — they dedicated a new historical marker in their cemetery, and they burned the mortgage note to celebrate their new sanctuary being paid in full.

“For nearly two centuries, Big Hurricane Baptist Church has stood as a beacon of faith, fellowship and community in Brookwood, Alabama,” a post on its Facebook page read. “From its founding in 1838 by 21 charter members to the care of its historic cemetery — home to veterans from the War of 1812 to the Gulf War — our story is woven into the very fabric of Tuscaloosa County.”

The church honored its past, celebrated “the blessings of today” and looked “for-



Facebook photo/Big Hurricane Baptist Church

Vial Fontenot, pastor of Big Hurricane Baptist Church in Brookwood, prays next to John Scott, pastor emeritus.

ward to the future God is preparing for us.”

Also during the weekend, the church enjoyed a potluck meal and held a gospel singing. (Grace Thornton)

Robert Smith Jr. shares during an Intentional Leader Series event in Prattville at the State Board of Missions.

HOLY SPIRIT'S 'PLAYGROUND'



Photo by Doug Rogers/Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions

Hard work of preparation key to good preaching, says Robert Smith Jr.

By Michael J. Brooks
The Alabama Baptist

While all pastors have times of struggle, they should be “empty pitchers before the fountain of God’s Word,” said Robert Smith Jr.

Smith, who shared during an Intentional Leader Series event at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, was professor of Christian preaching at Beeson Divinity School more than 25 years, where he held the Charles T. Carter Baptist Chair of Divinity. Previously he was the Carl E. Bates associate professor of Christian preaching at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

The theme of the ILS was the minister as “preacher who expository Scripture,” and Smith told the audience that preaching involves “something old and something new.”

“We preach what the Reformers did,” he explained. “Calvin and Luther and Melancthon preached the same doctrine we hold. This is orthodoxy. But we must be open to communicating doctrine in a fresh way.”

‘Right-brained’

“Psychology explains that we’re ‘right-brained’ when we use images, metaphors and pictures. We define, but we also give a picture. These things will move our hearers.”

Smith provided two examples of fresh interpretation of doctrine, or what he called “grabbing hold of words.”

“Clarence Jordan of Koinonia Farms translated 2 Corinthians 5:19 to read, ‘God was in Christ, hugging the world to Himself,’” Smith noted.

“And Gardner Taylor said the incarnation made Jesus ‘death-eligible.’ These images help people move the

truth from their heads to their hearts, and this 18-inch journey can be the longest journey in the world.”

Smith added that illustrations also are vital in communicating.

“No illustrations are better than Scripture, and your study of Scripture means Scripture should be ‘dripping off’ you,” he said. “Use Scripture with excellence to tell the story of redemption.”

Smith noted biblical characters provide wonderful illustrations.

“Every biblical character is stained with sin and failure,” he said.

“They are not models for morality, but mirrors for identity. These characters come out of the picture frame of the Bible, and we use them to illustrate our shared humanity and struggle.”

Another source for illustrations is the hymnal, Smith said.

“I think the Bible and the hymnbook should be side-by-side in the preacher’s study.”

He told of speaking at a recent conference and asking the young musician to play, “Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross” during a closing prayer.

“This young man was gifted, but he did not know the hymn,” Smith said. “We preachers are the caretakers of dying truths from the classic hymns.”

Smith exhorted ILS participants to use the six senses to teach biblical truth. “The olfactory glands, our sense of smell, cause the unconscious to be conscious,” he asserted.

“John specifically said Peter warmed his hands by a charcoal fire

when he denied knowing Jesus, and then Jesus served him a meal from a charcoal fire after His resurrection. Surely Peter smelled that odor, remembered his sin and experienced the grace of Jesus.

“And John told us also about the stench of death at Lazarus’ tomb. We should help our hearers reflect on the smell of death and know that Lazarus’ death was real, and Jesus’ power was great.”

In response to an audience question, Smith suggested shorter sermons due to shorter attention spans is a myth.

“There’s no deficit of attention span at a three-hour football game,” he noted. “The difference is engagement, and this is the work of the preacher.”

Preparation is key, Smith noted, and the modern preacher must make time for earnest study.

‘Read your text’

“Read your text all week and every day,” he exhorted. “Think about it all the time. Psychology says the last thing we see at night can be part of our dreams, so don’t watch that horror movie on Saturday night. Read your text and let your brain do some work for you as you sleep. Preparation gives you freedom to improvise, or to ‘riff’ on Sunday morning like a jazz musician does.”

“Preparation is hard work, but preaching is fun,” Smith declared. “We’re actually on the ‘playground’ of the Holy Spirit and there’s joy in making God’s Word real for our congregations. It’s the greatest work in the world!”



Photo by Doug Rogers/Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions

For more information, visit leadercareal.org.

Kicking for a Cause



Rob Ashworth, a kicker for Montgomery Academy and member of FBC Montgomery, has used his kicking this season to raise money for Respite Ministry in honor of his grandmother.

Photo courtesy of Rob Ashworth

Montgomery Academy student uses kicking to raise money for Respite Ministry

By Grace Thornton
The Alabama Baptist

Rob Ashworth said he remembers asking his mom why the Sonic trips stopped.

“My grandmother used to take me and my brother to Sonic, and we would get Slurpees and mozzarella sticks,” he said. “One day I asked my mom, ‘Why don’t I ever go out with Dee Dee anymore?’”

At that point, his grandmother, Dee Dee Jackson, hadn’t been diagnosed with dementia yet, but she was already showing signs of the condition. It began to disrupt their family’s regular rhythm of life.

And as time went on, Jackson started attending Respite Ministry, a program hosted by First United Methodist Church of Montgomery.

Finding a way to help

“They have brain games for people struggling with memory loss,” Rob said. “It gets their mind going but at the same time it gives the caregivers an opportunity to unwind and relax a little bit.”

Rob, a senior at Montgomery Academy and member of First Baptist Church Montgomery, got

a chance to volunteer with Respite Ministry in the spring, and he immediately knew he wanted to be involved in a bigger way.

“I wanted to figure out a way that I could contribute to that community,” he said. “I thought it would be through volunteering, but with football and school I realized I wouldn’t be able to volunteer and help out. I was really upset; I thought that was the end of it.”

But then someone crossed his path — a kicker from another high school football team. He had started an effort to raise money for every kick he made, with the proceeds going to benefit a charity in his area.

For more information, visit kicking4acause.com.

“I told him, ‘It’s awesome that you’re doing this; would you mind if I replicated this in Montgomery with something I care about?’ And he said 100% and helped me figure out how to get started,” Rob said.

‘It’s just taken off’

The result was Kicking for a Cause, a platform to raise money for the work done by Respite Ministry. During the football season, supporters gave one-time donations or pledged a certain dollar amount for each of his extra points, field goals and

touchbacks.

His team ended its 3A playoff run Nov. 21 against Bayside Academy with a 30–13 loss. At the end of the

season, the amount pledged was \$25,133.

“I’m so thankful for how it’s developed,” Rob said. “I had set the goal for around \$10,000 thinking that might be the limit, but man, it’s just taken off.”

He also hopes the idea can be passed down to another kicker who could then choose a cause that is “near and dear to his heart.”

His father, John Ashworth, president of The Baptist Foundation of Alabama, said he and his wife, Ivy, are “super proud of Rob for creating Kicking for a Cause.”

Making an impact

“He came up with Kicking for a Cause as a way to give back to the ministry that has done so much in the lives of families like ours,” John Ashworth said. “Ivy and I think this is a great way for him to do that in conjunction with something he loves.”

He said Rob did all the work, from running with the idea, to setting up the website, to promoting the fundraiser, to updating his supporters.

“We are grateful for the way the Lord has used Rob to make an impact for those walking this road with us,” he said.

“We are grateful for the way the Lord has used Rob to make an impact for those walking this road with us.”

JOHN ASHWORTH

Rob’s father; president of The Baptist Foundation of Alabama

UPCOMING EVENTS
sponsored by the State Board of Missions

Register now for State Evangelism Conference

Why come to the State Evangelism Conference? Rob Jackson said there are several reasons.

“Everyone should come to be inspired but also to be equipped,” said Jackson, director of the office of evangelism and church revitalization for the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. “It will also be a great chance to sharpen your skills in sharing your faith and fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ.”

The conference — set for March 1–2 at Heritage Baptist Church in Montgomery

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



— will encourage and train attendees to share and live out the gospel.

Speakers will be:

▶ Mark Johnson, presi-

dent of Louisiana Christian University

▶ David Burton, long-time evangelism director for the Florida Baptist Convention with 54 total years of evangelistic ministry

Parker Webb will lead music, and breakout sessions will also be offered.

The event is free except for an optional \$5 lunch on Monday featuring Sam Rainer.

To register, visit evangelizeal.org/sec.

Can't make it in person? Sunday evening and Monday morning sessions will be livestreamed at live.alsbom.org.

Student Missions Weekend

Student Missions Weekend is a great time for guys and girls in grades 7–12 and their leaders to bond while serving and learning about missions together.

The weekend — set for Jan. 16–17 at WorldSong Missions Place in Cook Springs — includes Bible study, worship and fun camp

activities. Students will hear from summer missionaries and learn what missions opportunities are available for them in their next phase of life.

Jacob Freeman, Baptist campus minister at the University of Montevallo, will be the Bible study leader for the weekend.

Student Missions Weekend starts Friday at 8 p.m. and concludes Saturday at 3 p.m.

The cost for early bird registration (by Dec. 18) is \$55 per person. The standard cost (before Jan. 12) is \$65.

For more information or to register, visit alabamawmu.org/smw.

Youth Ministry Conclave annual leadership event in Chattanooga

Are you involved in leading youth ministry in a staff or volunteer capacity?

We would love to see you at Youth Ministry Conclave, an annual leadership event in cooperation with ten state conventions.

Each year, Conclave serves as a training event for youth pastors, leaders and volunteers.

Corporate worship, breakout sessions and networking are designed to equip and rejuvenate your

youth ministry team.

The conference will be held Jan. 29–31 at Chattanooga Convention Center in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

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

WORD search

- | | |
|--------------|----------|
| ADORE | JUDEA |
| BETHLEHEM | KING |
| DREAM | LAMB |
| DWELL | LIGHT |
| EVERLASTING | MAGI |
| FORETOLD | MAJESTY |
| FRANKINCENSE | MESSIAH |
| GIFTS | MYRRH |
| GLORY | PRIESTS |
| GOLD | PROPHET |
| HEROD | REDEEMER |
| HOLY | REJOICED |
| HOUSE | SAVIOR |
| IMMANUEL | SCRIBES |
| JESUS | SEARCH |
| JOURNEY | STAR |

X N P R O P H E T X H E R O D
W Y E S N E C N I K N A R F C
P S B Y J R L M K M R V C H C
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K T L U H L C N J D C E R G M
L M J R D R E A M L Q R R V V

“After hearing the king, [the wise men] went on their way. And there it was — the star they had seen at its rising. It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was.”

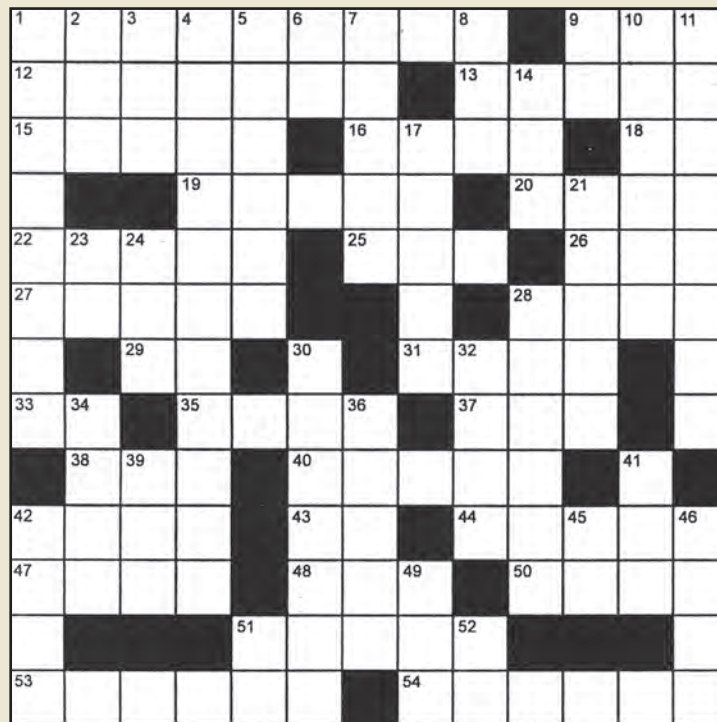
MATTHEW 2:9

CHRISTIAN Crossword



ACROSS

- 1. Jesus Christ the same _____. (Heb. 13:8)
- 9. The beginning and the _____. (Rev. 22:13)
- 12. ____ this day. (Ex. 12:17)
- 13. Seek to ____ in. (Luke 13:24)
- 15. To take away weapons.
- 16. The ____ which He promised. (Deut. 9:28)
- 18. Electrical engineer. (abbr.)
- 19. At the ____ hand of God. (Rom. 8:34)
- 20. The people ____ mind to work. (Neh. 4:6; 2 words)
- 22. The ____ of the sea. (Gen. 49:13)
- 25. They departed from _____. (Num. 33:45)
- 26. Money or goods given to poor, in love. (singular)
- 27. ____ prophet. (Rev. 16:13)
- 28. A fig _____. (Mark 11:13)
- 29. Foot. (abbr.)
- 31. Any three.
- 33. _____, I am with you. (Matt. 28:20)
- 35. Thunder and _____. (1 Sam. 12:17)
- 37. No room for them in the _____. (Luke 2:7)
- 38. The children of _____. (Ezra 2:57)
- 40. Unto the ____ down. (Ps. 50:1)
- 41. ____ Lord. (Ps. 120:2)
- 42. Let him be Anathema Maran_____. (1 Cor. 16:22)
- 43. Hemoglobin. (abbr.)
- 44. The ____ of the Lord. (2 Cor. 3:18)
- 47. "And sun" in Spanish.
- 48. Tailor. (abbr.)



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- 50. Prefix indicates "inside" or "within."
- 51. I will ____ thee. (Gen. 22:17)
- 53. _____, thou shalt love. (Rom. 13:9)
- 54. Glory and _____. (2 Pet. 1:3)
- DOWN**
- 1. Flee also ____ lusts. (2 Tim. 2:22)
- 2. East by north. (abbr.)
- 3. Social Security Administration. (abbr.)
- 4. The glory of the _____. (1 Cor. 15:40)
- 5. A weasel.
- 6. Revised Version. (abbr.)
- 7. Capital of India.
- 8. Basic monetary unit of Japan.
- 9. Eastern time. (abbr.)
- 10. The eye of a _____. (Matt. 19:24)
- 11. Nor to your _____. (Jer. 27:9)
- 14. Newspaper Designer's Handbook. (abbr.)
- 17. Inclined upward.
- 21. Moses and _____. (Lev. 13:1)
- 23. Associate in arts. (abbr.)
- 24. Very low frequency. (abbr.)
- 28. His ears shall _____. (Jer. 19:3)
- 30. Teachest _____. (Luke 20:21)
- 32. With a gold _____. (James 2:2)
- 34. Grasses.
- 36. Not many _____, are called. (1 Cor. 1:26)
- 39. A unit of conductance, reciprocal to the ohm.
- 41. Airport code for O'Hare Field, Chicago, Ill.
- 42. Sixteenth letter of Hebrew alphabet.
- 45. Multiply ____ the face of the earth. (Gen. 6:1)
- 46. My ____ is easy. (Matt. 11:30)
- 49. Revised Standard Version. (abbr.)
- 51. ____essed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God. (Luke 6:20)
- 52. Yes. (Spanish)

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

Upcoming Tax Conferences

It's already time to start thinking about taxes, and your state missionaries have got you covered with a number of ways to learn more up-to-date information about taxes for churches and ministers.

► **Church Tax Conferences** — Numerous changes are expected for 2026. This conference will cover basic IRS forms such as the 941 and W-2, deadlines, what is taxable and more. There are three opportunities available for this event — Jan. 8 at the SBOM,

Jan. 15 at Calhoun Baptist Association and Jan. 29 at Colbert-Lauderdale Baptist Association.

► **Ministers Tax Conferences** — Learn how to save money on your taxes, maximize the housing allowance and more. These conferences will be held Feb. 5 at the SBOM, Feb. 12 at Calhoun Baptist Association and Feb. 26 at Colbert-Lauderdale Baptist Association.

For more information or to register, visit alsbom.org/ events and search by date.

Bivocational Minister and Spouse Retreat

Bivocational ministers, bring your spouses and join us for this time of encouragement, fellowship, inspiration and prayer, including a Friday evening session with pastor and associational missionary Craig Carlisle.

This retreat will be held Feb. 6–7 at Shocco Springs Baptist Conference Center.

For more information or to register, visit leadercareAL.org/bivo.

For more information or to register, visit leadercareAL.org/bivo or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.



There's still time to give to the Myers-Mallory Offering

Remember it's not too late to give to the Myers-Mallory State Missions Offering. Gifts are received until the end of the year and help support Alabama Woman's Mis-

sionary Union, disaster relief, church planting, church revitalization and partnership missions.

For more information and resources, visit Myers-Mallory.org.

God at work in Tanzanian people group

By Tracy Riggs Frantz
The Alabama Baptist

Three years ago, God opened the door to a ministry effort among Tanzania's Maasai people that has resulted in thousands of salvations and ongoing discipleship.

It began through a conversation in a gift shop between a couple from the United States and a young Maasai warrior. Anne-Marie and John Touliatos were in the

country to summit Mount Kilimanjaro. The young warrior, Lamnyak Siria, told them about his people's need for clean water as he showed them around the shop. In turn, the Touliatos couple shared the gospel — the living water — with Siria.

In October, Siria, who is now minister of evangelism for International Ministry of Jesus, and Charles Loleku, IMOJ's minister of discipleship and orality training, traveled from Tanzania to share what God has done since that conversation. He reported that in the past three years, more than 10,000 Maasai have accepted Jesus.

On Oct. 26, Siria, Loleku and the Touliatoses shared an update with the congregation of Raleigh Avenue Baptist Church in Homewood, the first church that prayed for this venture.

"These guys went ... to Tanzania just a few short years ago, expecting God to move. ... They had no real clue but just to be faithful and pray throughout the op-



Photo by Tracy Riggs Frantz/The Alabama Baptist

Michael Ent, pastor of Raleigh Avenue Baptist Church in Homewood, prays for Lamnyak Siria (right), IMOJ's minister of evangelism, and Charles Loleku, IMOJ's minister of discipleship and orality training, at the end of a service at the church.

portunity," said Michael Ent, pastor of Raleigh Avenue.

Gospel partnership

The International Ministry of Jesus, for whom Anne-Marie Touliatos is the director, headed up the effort. Africa Inland Mission, Here's Life Africa and Ethnos360 each contributed by using the specialties of their particular ministries.

IMOJ is "dedicated to making disciples for the glory of Christ by serving

those in need, faithfully proclaiming the Word of God and teaching others to do the same."

One of their goals within Tanzania is to provide clean water to the Maasai people.

Three months after the initial conversation between the Touliatos and Lamnyak, IMOJ, working with Africa Inland Mission, drilled a well and hit water. Due to a two-year drought, no one believed it was possible.

In addition, the water was

found near a church building — one made out of mud. Because they found the water so close to the church, the people believed that God saw and loved them.

Clean water

Since then, the organization has drilled or fixed 13 additional wells that provide clean water to more than 40,000 Maasai and their livestock.

Since more than 80% of the Maasai people cannot read, Here's Life Africa partnered with IMOJ to bring the Jesus film to the Maasai and distribute written and audio Bibles in their language to the newly saved.

Ethnos360 came alongside IMOJ to teach storytellers in the orality method, an ancient way to share Scripture with those who cannot or prefer not to read.

As a result, ministers have been raised up, churches have been built, and many have been discipled. And all of this is the result of one conversation, ministries working together and the faithfulness of God.

To learn more about and partner with the ministries that are involved with the Maasai people, go to:

- ▶ **International Ministry of Jesus**
theinternationalministry-ofjesus.org
- ▶ **Africa Inland Mission**
aimint.org
- ▶ **Here's Life Africa**
hereslifeafrica.com/tanzania
- ▶ **Ethnos360**
ethnos360.org



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CHURCH POSITIONS

SENIOR PASTOR

First Baptist Church Scottsboro, is seeking a Spirit-led, biblically grounded, full-time senior pastor. Please send resumés to: Pastorsearch@fbcscottsboro.org. Deadline for resumés is Dec. 31.

SENIOR PASTOR

Central Baptist Church, North Little Rock, Arkansas, is seeking a senior pastor. Three years minimum senior pastor experience required; seminary experience preferred. Send resumé to: cbcnlrcpastorsearch@gmail.com. Deadline to apply: Jan. 31, 2026.

PASTOR

Full-time pastor — Jasper, Alabama. Pastor retiring. Prayerfully seeking a pastor to preach the inerrant Word of God and shepherd our flock. (SBC) Resumé: northsidebaptistchurchjasper@gmail.com

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Brent Baptist Church in Bibb County, Alabama, is prayerfully seeking a part-time pastor (up to 20 hours a week) who has a heart for missions, outreach and growing disciples. Please email resumé to our church office at brentbaptist.office@gmail.com.

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Fairview Baptist in Samson, Alabama, is seeking a bivocational pastor. Please email resumés to: fairviewbaptist.samson.al@outlook.com or via USPS to: 3159 N State Highway 87, Samson, AL 36477.

MINISTER OF MUSIC

Clanton First Baptist Church (Clanton, Alabama) is prayerfully seeking a full-time minister of music. This position will be asked to lead both choir and congregational worship and oversee all aspects of music in the life of our church. A degree and/or formal training in music is preferred. Candidates should have experience with digital sound equipment, ProPresenter and live-streaming services. Clanton FBC is an active, mission-minded church in a growing area. Additional information about the church may be found at clantonfbc.org. Resumés may be emailed to: justin.nelson@clantonfbc.org.

MUSIC/WORSHIP LEADER

Cedar Bluff First Baptist Church in search of a music/worship leader, bivocational. Email resumé to: CBFBC@tds.net or mail to: Cedar Bluff First Baptist Church, 3500 Old Hwy 9, Cedar Bluff, AL 35959.

WORSHIP LEADER

Seeking a full-time worship leader in dual services with praise band and choir. We are a growing congregation of 450 just 90 minutes from the beaches. View the job description at <https://sbcanalusa.com/worship-pastor>.

PASTOR OF WORSHIP & EQUIPPING MINISTRIES

First Baptist Church of Tallassee, Alabama, is searching for a full-time pastor of worship and equipping ministries. For more information and to send a resumé, please see fbctallassee.com/jobs.

YOUTH MINISTER

Seeking youth minister at The Baptist Church at McAdory (McCalla). Candidate must be SBC member with passion for discipling students and leading Christ-centered ministry. Submit resumé: Personnel Committee, 4954 Eastern Valley Rd., McCalla, AL 35111, or tbcam.bcm@gmail.com.

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Persecuted church

NEWS ITEMS COMPILED BY THE ALABAMA BAPTIST STAFF

Christian pastor, others slain in Nigeria

Violent religious and ethnic conflict in Nigeria has led to 24 deaths in recent weeks.

Two pastors are among those killed, reported Christian Daily International–Morning Star News. Several others were kidnapped, many of them members of Christian churches. Recent violence was centered in Kaduna, Plateau, Benue and Nasarawa States.

In October, the U.S. government designated Nigeria as a “Country of Particular Concern” for violations of religious freedom. A report issued by the Associated Press in November attributes violence in the country to several causes, including a lack of law enforcement, increasing gang violence and economic pressures.

Mother, children beaten for putting faith in Jesus

A Ugandan woman and her two children, ages 12 and 9, were hospitalized in October after being beaten by her husband for putting faith in Jesus Christ.

Later, the woman’s husband and a Muslim mob reportedly destroyed the church building, according to Morning Star News.

Uganda’s constitution and laws allow freedom of religion, including converting

from one faith to another. However, Christians and churches increasingly have been targets of violence in the Muslim-minority country.

Man seeks to seize church property; pastor jailed

On Oct. 28 in Sudan’s River Nile State, police allegedly arrested Daud Fudul Kachu, pastor of Sudan Presbyterian Evangelical



KACHU

Church, in what appears to be a case based on a Muslim businessman’s desire to seize church property.

The pastor was released the next day without bail. The fight over church properties in Sudan, where an estimated 93% of the population is Muslim, has spanned several years, according to Morning Star News.

Numerous falsely accused Christians vindicated in India

Scores of Christians have been vindicated by India’s Supreme Court, which recognized that the judicial system was being used as a “tool of harassment of innocent persons.”

According to a judgment

issued Oct. 17, a number of people who had been charged under anti-conversion laws in India’s Uttar Pradesh State were vindicated, Morning Star News reported.

Among them were a pastor, staff members of a Christian hospital and officials with Sam Higginbottom University of Agriculture, Technology and Sciences in Prayagraj, which operates as an autonomous Christian minority institution.

Christian jailed 17 months on false charges granted bail

A 29-year-old Christian mother jailed in Pakistan has been granted bail after being arrested May 12, 2024, on false charges related to the country’s blasphemy laws.

The Lahore High Court ordered that Stella Khawar, the mother of a 5-year-old son, be released for lack of evidence, Christian attorney Lazar Allah Rakha told Christian Daily International–Morning Star News.

Five believers slain, dozens hurt in protest of Christian shops

A peaceful demonstration by Muslims in Yumbe, Uganda, on Nov. 4 devolved quickly into violence. Five Christians were killed, and churches, shops and homes owned by Christians were vandalized, looted or burned, a pastor reported.

A video circulating on social media Nov. 3 appeared to encourage Muslims to protest the selling of pork in proximity to Munir Mosque in Yumbe, Morning Star News reported. Islam prohibits consumption of pork.

Police arrested the sheik and some 30 other people in connection with the Nov. 4 riots.

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EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Sunday School Lessons

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.

Professor of Biblical Studies, University of Mobile



For December 21

WORSHIP THE KING Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew called the men wise men, not kings. There were multiple visitors but not necessarily three. Based on the testimony of the Magi and the response by King Herod, the boy Jesus may have been up to 2 years of age (v. 16), not a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.

They also visited Jesus in a house. It's amazing what we learn when we rightly divide the Word of truth!

Seeking the King (1-3)

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem ..." How long after? It was long enough for them to travel from a distant land in the East to worship the King of the Jews. Since they came some time after Jesus was born, our family leaves the "three kings" out of the nativity scene at Christmas. We suggest setting them in another room, still seeking the King.

"Wise men from the East arrived in Jerusalem ..." The star rose and provided for them enough general revelation to make their way to the city of the king. After all, why would the One born King of the Jews be anywhere other than in the presence of the king among the Jews?

"King Herod ... was deeply disturbed ..." Why would the king and all Jerusalem be bothered by this inquiry from the Magi? The answer is that he was an ethnic Idumean (an Edomite) and was granted the position as king of Judea as a political favor. He was not born with that title, and he had no room for another king in his kingdom.

Finding the King (4-8)

The scribes. Everyone in the city was talking about these foreign dignitaries and their strange request. Herod gathered the most learned religious men in the city to discern what the Scriptures

revealed about the birthplace of the Anointed One.

The scribes copied the sacred texts, and the priests studied the Scriptures for worship and community life so they should have known.

The Scriptures. God's special revelation was required for them — and us — to find the King. One of the Minor Prophets held the answer.

Micah 5:2 states that a ruler who would shepherd Israel would be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah of Judah. The Christ would be found in Bethlehem.

The secret. Herod held a meeting with the Magi to ascertain when the star first appeared and to send them on a secret mission: Find out exactly where the King was located.

Herod's mission for them was under the guise of personal worship, but his intent was to rid Judea of his competition.

Worshipping the King (9-12)

Going in. Once the Magi made their way to Bethlehem, they went into the house where Jesus was staying with Mary. Having found Him, they were filled with joy, bowing in humility to worship the King.

Giving gifts. They offered gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold is appropriate for a king, frankincense for a priest and myrrh for a prophet who warns of impending judgment. Each gift was fit for someone with an anointed role, and Jesus is the Anointed One.

Going home. The Magi discerned from a dream that they were not to return to Herod. They would have nothing to do with the massacre of the innocents that was about to take place.

Like the Magi before us, let us bow down, worship and offer our gifts to the King.

EDITOR'S NOTE — The Sunday School lesson outlines are provided by Lifeway.

For December 28

TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS Matthew 5:13-20, 43-48

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is an exposition on Kingdom living and a warning against pharisaic self-righteousness. Pharisees were right to recognize the priority of the Torah in covenant living, but they were wrong in their attitude that they were able to fulfill the law on their own. True righteousness is imputed by the King for His glory.

Influence Your Culture (13-16)

"You are the salt of the earth." Salt preserves meat. Anyone who has ever had a country ham can confirm. Salt stings in a wound but it also promotes healing. Salt seasons, making bland foods savory. Rock salt serves to melt ice, but it is trodden underfoot. May the Lord use you to preserve, to promote healing and to provide seasoning (Col. 4:6).

"You are the light of the world." Disciples of Jesus are light in the world the way the moon is light at night. We reflect the light of the Son much like the moon reflects the light of the sun. Jesus Himself is the true Light of the world (John 1:9; 8:12; 9:5).

"Let your light shine before others." "This little light of mine ... Hide it under a bushel? Don't let Satan blow it out! ... Let it shine." These simple lyrics to a children's song accurately capture the essence of the Master's teaching here.

Obey Your Father (17-20)

"I did not come to abolish but to fulfill." The word "fulfill" is a key term in Matthew's presentation of Jesus. Prior to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), the evangelist already narrated that Jesus fulfilled Isaiah 7:14 (1:22), Hosea 11:1 (2:15) and Isaiah 9:1-2 (4:14-16). The Son came to fulfill the Father's will.

Not a single "letter will pass away from the law." Jesus underscored the complete trustworthiness of the Old Testament, highlighting that every word of its promises would be completed in Him. Jesus reiterated how He fulfilled the prophecies of messianic suffering after His resurrection (Luke 24:27, 44, 46).

"Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees ..." Experts in the Torah knew there were 613 laws written in the Books of Moses.

A person may be self-righteous without ever knowing the righteousness of Christ. How can anyone practice a righteousness that surpasses the experts in the law? The answer is found in the Torah: "Abram believed the LORD, and He credited it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Still more is explained in the Prophets: "The righteous one will live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4).

Love Your Enemies (43-48)

In the intervening passages in chapter 5, Jesus distinguished the teachings of contemporary rabbis from Himself. They often quoted the oral law — verbal rabbinic interpretations passed down through the generations until they were codified in the Mishnah.

Their practice was to quote from rabbis who cited earlier rabbis who quoted from the Scriptures: "You have heard that it was said ..." (5:21, 27, 33, 38, 43). Jesus distinguished His teaching from theirs: "But I tell you ..." (5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44).

Not only did Jesus distinguish His approach from theirs, but the crowds also recognized His authoritative teaching (7:28-29).

Loving God. Loving our neighbor. These are reasonable commands, but how do we love our enemies? We follow Jesus.

**"You are the light of the world.
A city on a hill cannot be hidden."**

Matthew 5:14

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

Sunday School Lessons

By Jeffery M. Leonard, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of Biblical & Religious Studies, Samford University



For December 21

WHEN YOUR UNDERSTANDING FALLS SHORT Luke 1:26–38

Because the Bible is God's Word, we naturally approach it quite differently than we do other books. When we read the Scriptures, we read them with a respectful attitude and a ready ear to hear what God would have us believe or do. Sometimes, though, our great respect for the Bible can cause us to read the Scriptures in such a spiritual way that we become blind to the practical issues certain stories raise.

The accounts of Jesus' virgin birth certainly fall into this category. When we read the accounts of Jesus' conception and birth in Matthew and Luke, our minds drift toward "spiritual" thoughts about Mary's purity, whether the virgin birth took place to ensure that Jesus did not inherit a sin nature from Joseph and so on and so forth.

What we miss when we read the text this way is a host of very practical considerations that attended Jesus' birth. Did Mary and Joseph actually tell any of their friends and relatives in Nazareth about the virgin birth? Would anyone have believed them if they did? Does the subtle dig at Jesus in Mark 6:3 reveal the people's skepticism about how Jesus was conceived? Did Joseph drag Mary along on the journey to Bethlehem because he was worried about what might happen to her if she, an unmarried pregnant woman, were left alone in Nazareth? Were Mary and Joseph treated so inhospitably in Bethlehem (2:6–7) because even there questions were being raised about how Mary got pregnant?

However beautiful Jesus' virgin birth might be from a spiritual standpoint, it raised a host of complications on a practical level.

God's presence opens up unexpected possibilities. (26–30)

Perhaps because the manner

of Jesus' conception would be so problematic, God chose to alert both Joseph (in Matthew's account) and Mary (in Luke) to the events that would shortly follow.

For Mary, it was the angel Gabriel who would deliver the news. While Mary was still in Nazareth anticipating her marriage to her betrothed, Gabriel appeared to her and greeted her with words of blessing. As was the case with most biblical characters, Mary responded to this angelic appearance with genuine fright.

God's plans are not hampered by our lack of understanding. (31–34)

Gabriel had not arrived to bring words of judgment, however. Instead, he revealed to Mary that she would soon stand at the center of the greatest of all spiritual dramas, the birth of Israel's Messiah. There was just one problem, however. Mary was still a virgin. How could she give birth to a son — however great he might turn out to be — if she had never done the one thing that was required for pregnancy?

God's power can do great things through us. (35–38)

Gabriel's response to Mary's quite legitimate question must have been difficult to understand and nearly impossible to believe. Mary would become pregnant with the Messiah in an unprecedented fashion. The Holy Spirit would overshadow Mary and cause her to become pregnant — without the participation of her soon-to-be husband, Joseph.

This was an outlandish explanation, one that no one could believe. And yet, Mary did believe. In one of the great examples of faith in the Scriptures, Mary replied, "See, I am the Lord's servant. May it happen to me as you have said."

In direct contrivance to everything she had ever experienced before, Mary chose trust over sight and went on to become the very mother of the Messiah.

For December 28

WHEN YOUR PROVISIONS FALL SHORT 1 Kings 17:5–16

While the stories surrounding Elijah are rightly some of the most famous in Scripture, their theological significance is often underappreciated. As we arrive at the middle chapters of 1 Kings, a religious battle looms just over the horizon, and this battle will determine the trajectory of Israel's theological commitments for centuries — and millennia — to come.

The combatants in this religious conflict will be the God of Israel in one corner and the storm god Baal in the other, although their human emissaries will play an outsized role in the battle. Representing Baal will be the infamous Queen Jezebel with her too-compliant husband Ahab at her side. Representing the God of Israel will be Elijah himself, a prophet whose very name means "my God is Jehovah." Jezebel struck the first blow as she began promoting Baal worship and killing off the prophets of the Lord. It was at that point that Elijah struck back, taking the fight directly to Baal.

Baal's followers claimed he was the god of the thunderstorm. Elijah would put this to the test as he proclaimed there would be no more rain until he said so. In the end, it would take more than three years of drought to demonstrate that Baal was no god of the thunderstorm — and indeed no god at all.

God's provision may not always come in the way we expect. (5–7)

We often imagine that when we are following God's will, the circumstances of life will show us that we are on the right course. Perhaps as a sign of God's satisfaction with our obedient service, things will just "fall into place" for us. Elijah's life would tell a different story, however.

Although he had been exceedingly zealous for God and entirely obedient to God, he nevertheless found himself in a time of trial and difficulty rather than comfort and ease.

The very drought Elijah had sent to confound the worshippers of Baal had affected him too — so much that the prophet had to seek refuge at the Wadi Cherith, east of the Jordan.

God's provision for Elijah took a most unusual form. He drank water from the brook, and God used ravens to bring him bread and meat each morning and evening. But even this miraculous provision eventually failed as the water finally ran dry.

God's provision often comes through others. (8–12)

Now, God's provision would take the form not of ravens and brooks, but of a woman in the land of Sidon. As Elijah arrived at the little town of Zarephath, he found a most unpromising patron.

The woman to whom God directed his attention was a poor widow who responded to Elijah's request for food with little more than a lament: "I don't have anything baked — only a handful of flour in the jar and a bit of oil in the jug." She was preparing for her last meal.

God's provision comes when we trust and obey Him. (13–16)

Fortunately for the prophet, God's plan for the widow went well beyond her planned last supper. Elijah announced to her that until rain returned upon the earth, her jar of flour would not be spent and her jar of oil would not run empty.

Though both Elijah and the widow had endured various hardships, God was still in control of their circumstances. They had only to continue to obey as He directed them and then to trust that He would care for them.

"The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD."

1 Kings 17:16

Praying for women to choose life

Sanctity of life: IMB-founded pregnancy center brings hope to teen moms

Pregnant and 17, Olive was depressed and scared. Being a teenage mom wasn't what she envisioned for her life. But maybe being a teenage mother didn't have to be the trajectory of her life. It could all be over with a trip to a clinic, and no one would know. Except her sister and family knew. And they wanted her to keep the baby.

Olive's 14-year-old sister, Violet, was also pregnant and already connected with Christians from a pregnancy center in Chiang Mai, Thailand, that was founded by International Mission Board missionaries.

IMB missionary Beth Hipps said the goal of the ELM Pregnancy Center is to equip and empower Thai women to choose life by affirming the sanctity of life and providing care and resources. This includes educating women on their three options — pregnancy, adoption and abortion — with the hope and prayer that the women choose life. The gospel is central to the mission of ELM, which had its first client in 2019.

The pregnancy center, which currently has two locations and 30 women serving, utilizes volunteer care teams to help women. Two are paired together to walk alongside the mother during her pregnancy.

They continue to support her as long or short as she wants, through age two. The care teams visit the women in their homes. Care teams often visit the mother and baby in the hospital, sometimes sitting in the waiting room during labor and delivery.

Sometimes providing care for pregnant women looks like affirmation and encouragement and information on what to expect before and



IMB photo
Volunteers with the ELM Pregnancy Center in Chiang Mai, Thailand, speak to a classroom of children about the sanctity of life, using life-size models of babies to show the size of babies at certain months.

during labor and delivery. Care also includes sharing the gospel and connecting women with a local church.

For women who do not choose life, Hipps and the other volunteers offer to meet with them after the abortion and walk with them through any emotional trauma.

Abortion was once illegal in Thailand, though women still found ways. In 2021, it became legal in Thailand up to 12 weeks and in 2022 up to 20 weeks.

A flowering hope

Hipps and a Thai care team member visited Violet in the hospital the day after she gave birth to her daughter, Daphne, to pray with her and talk about the responsibility of parenting.

Violet shared that her sister was also pregnant and considering an abortion. Could they help her too?

Hipps formed a care team to serve both sisters since they lived together.

Olive decided not to abort her baby. The care team offered to help her with an adoption plan. However, she decided to keep her baby, naming her Marigold.

The sisters' family are supportive of their decision and are helping the girls with their daughters. The sisters live with their mother and grandmother, who also had babies in their teenage years.

Hipps marveled at how quickly Olive's hesitancy, fear and disinterest in becoming a mom turned to a wholehearted embracing of her baby and motherhood. She decided she wanted to stay home and not go back to work so she can care for Marigold. She also watches Violet's baby while she works.

The care team continued to meet with the sisters, helping provide postpartum information, care and support, information on breastfeeding, parenting and nutrition, while also providing prayer, Bible teach-

ing and encouragement. They met physical needs of the sisters by bringing food on their visits and helping after a devastating flood.

On their visits, the care team ask if they can share stories from the Bible. Olive and Violet's grandmother used to, in Hipps' words, "create a ruckus" when the care team shared Bible stories. The noise level made it difficult to be heard, but the care team continued. After time though, the grandmother hushed others in the household so she could hear the stories.

Olive was eager to learn Bible stories. She and her boyfriend, Jay, began participating in discipleship training led by ELM staff to learn more. She told her family about what the Bible says about heaven and that their names "needed to be written in the Lamb's Book of Life."

Answered prayers

The IMB's prayer office shared requests about Olive and Violet, and for 18 months, Southern Baptists faithfully prayed for her journey.

This past Christmas, Olive and Jay attended church for the first time, and this spring, nearly two years after Olive began meeting with her care team, she chose to commit her life to Christ. The team continues to disciple the couple.

Most of the women who volunteer at ELM are Thai, so if the Western missionaries all leave, the work will continue. The pregnancy center currently has seven care teams in two cities in Thailand. A third branch is now active with two clients.

EDITOR'S NOTE — Names have been changed for security reasons. This story was originally published by the International Mission Board.