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DISCERN

A Magazine of *Life* *Hope* & *Truth*



Born to Be a **KiNG**

THE DARK SIDE OF GAMING

How a Dangerous Addiction Is
Damaging the Next Generation

A CLEAN START

What Does God Want
21st-Century Christians to
Learn From an Ancient Ritual?

PUT ON THE ARMOR OF GOD

A Look at the Spiritual Weapons
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50 YEARS WITHOUT CHRISTMAS

Two years ago was a special Christmas for me.

It was the 50th consecutive year that I've been without it. Yes, a golden anniversary of not having something!

I remember it well. When you are 11 years old, it's no small thing if your parents make the life-changing decision that it is intellectually dishonest, scripturally untruthful and spiritually hypocritical to celebrate Christmas.

Researching the facts was the easy part—history has never hidden the pagan origins of Christmas and how its customs became integrated into the church by powerful people who called themselves Christians but whose practices bore little resemblance to those of the Christians of the Bible.

The “Christ vs. Christianity” column on pages 28-30 gives a great summary of what the Bible clearly does say, and does not say, about God's view of such behavior. The bottom line is that the pro-Christmas argument can never revolve around the historical or biblical facts; its only defense is human rationalizing and justifying.

It wasn't hard to see the truth

Even as a child, I didn't find it hard to clearly see the truth of the matter. Maybe I was more primed to accept it, since the memories of having been lied to about Santa Claus were still fairly fresh in my young head.

At any rate, it really wasn't all that hard for me to stop celebrating Christmas. That we weren't going to keep Christmas anymore was much more difficult for others than it was for us! I saw my grandparents all the time throughout the year, but one would have thought their world was coming apart when we announced that we were quietly bowing out of the Christmas scene!

Those closest to us, though, adjusted after a while when they realized that we hadn't turned into religious nuts.



They found that we still loved Jesus, that we still loved them, and that, because we loved them, we would continue to give and receive gifts at other times of the year ... just not at Christmas.

Others were less charitable

Other folks were sometimes less charitable. Through abandoning Christmas, I learned one of my early lessons about “freedom of religion”—it's a nice notion, but in reality it usually comes with a price, such as having to deal with the hurts of other people ridiculing and badgering you.

It's funny how the least tolerant were the most religious. Maybe they felt our decision tacitly challenged them to defend their own beliefs. Some people, when they cannot defend the biblically indefensible, resort to personal attacks. But through it all you learn other lessons you will need later in life, such as standing by the courage of your convictions.

Never missed it

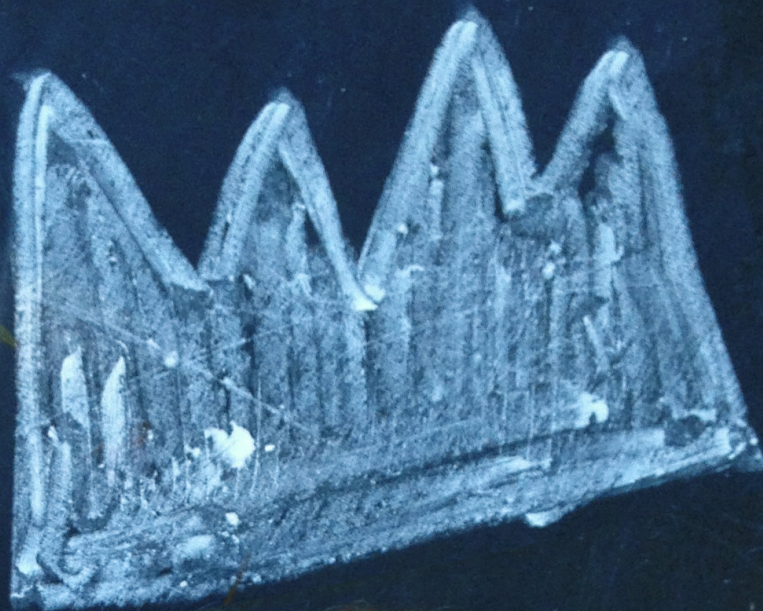
Despite some of those challenges, from year one I never missed Christmas. Maybe it was the way my parents engaged me in the discovery process. I don't remember the exact conversations we had about it, but I do remember coming to comprehend the core issue that I mentioned earlier: Mixing Christianity and Christmas just isn't being honest with the truth.

And isn't honesty, sincerity and truth supposed to be a cornerstone of our relationship with God? Isn't that one of the most important gifts we can give to our children?

Clyde Kilough
Editor
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**Despite some of those challenges, from year one
I never missed Christmas.**

Prophecy



Most have heard that Jesus Christ was born to be our Savior. But how many really think about the fact He was born to be a king—and He wants us to be kings too?

Born to Be a KING

By Peter Hawkins



Have you ever wondered why the wise men presented Jesus with gold, frankincense and myrrh? These precious gifts were typical of what would be presented to a king—just as the queen of Sheba presented gold and spices to King Solomon (1 Kings 10:10).

And have you ever wondered why the magi asked King Herod, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?” (Matthew 2:2). They obviously took the prophecies of the Christ as the anointed King literally. And so did Herod, who then tried to kill any possible competitor for the throne.

Matthew clearly shows that Jesus was of the royal lineage of Israel’s most famous king, David. And Jesus Himself plainly stated to the Roman governor Pilate, “You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth” (John 18:37).

The angel’s message to Mary

Before Jesus’ birth, the angel Gabriel brought an important message to Mary: “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:31-33).

This everlasting Kingdom was foretold in many Old Testament passages, such as in Daniel: “And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever” (Daniel 2:44).

As the Son of the Highest, Jesus would die and become the Savior of all mankind. The name Jesus is from the Greek form of *Joshua*, which means

“savior” in Hebrew. The title *Christ* is the equivalent of the Hebrew term *Messiah*, which means “anointed.”

The biblical tradition was for kings to be anointed as David was (1 Samuel 16:12-13). As shown in Matthew 1, Jesus Christ is a direct descendant of David. As Messiah (the anointed One), He will inherit David’s throne, and He will also become the King of Kings over the whole world. He is ready to take up His position when the time is right.

Naturally, His disciples wondered *when* Jesus would take over as King. They asked the risen Christ, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

A question of timing

In the minds of the apostles, the messianic King would soon bring freedom from Roman oppression and usher in the peace and prosperity pictured by prophecies they had heard since childhood.

But Jesus knew there was much to be done in preparation for His return when He comes as a conquering leader for the benefit of all mankind. He told His disciples that only the Father knew when the time would be right. Until then, His people are to be involved in a special work right up until the end of the age:

“And He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth’” (Acts 1:7; see also Matthew 24:36).

God’s Church is to teach the gospel (good news) of the coming King, His Kingdom and His laws to all who will become His subjects (Matthew 24:14; 28:18-20).

But when will He take over as King? Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would

fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here” (John 18:36).

Not of this world

What did Jesus mean when He said that His “kingdom is not of this world”?

This society—this world—has been conditioned over thousands of years to the way of *getting* rather than *giving*. We often respond to life with self-concern instead of obedience to God and caring for others as much as ourselves. The apostle John said, “For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (1 John 2:16-17).

God’s way is the way of giving. Jesus’ rule will always be for the benefit and development of humanity.

This is not the way that most national rulers behave in the world. As Christ told His disciples, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles [nations] lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

That devotion to serve mankind will be the hallmark of the reign of the King of Kings. We read that He will “judge between the nations,” and the result will be the beating of swords into plowshares, bringing peace and understanding between longtime national enemies (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3).

Taking over as King of Kings

The Bible describes the awesome time when Jesus Christ will take over the kingdoms of the earth at His second coming.

“Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, ‘The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!’ And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: ‘We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was and who is to come, because You have taken Your great power and reigned’” (Revelation 11:15-17).

Jesus Christ will carry the title: “KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS” (Revelation 19:16).

But who are the *kings* Christ will be “King of Kings” over? The Bible shows that the human, selfish leaders of this age will be replaced in the age to come by caring rulers, converted from selfishness to concern and changed to spirit by the resurrection at Christ’s return (Revelation 5:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

Christians called to be kings

The apostle John described Jesus Christ’s role as both our Savior and King and showed how He is preparing us now for our future roles assisting Him:

“To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever” (Revelation 1:5-6; see also 20:4).

Jesus also discussed the future jobs of His followers several times in the Gospels. At one point in their training, the disciples asked Jesus, “See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?” In other words, is this really worth the effort?

Jesus encouraged them: “Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has

left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:28-29).

One of Christ's parables described some of His followers being given "authority over ten cities," some over five and so on. This shows that those who use the responsibilities given to them for the profit of the Kingdom will be better able to serve mankind as rulers under Christ (Luke 19:11-27; Matthew 25:13-30).

So how do we train for such awesome responsibilities?

Training to be kings and priests

Jesus is already King over all repentant and converted Christians, and He is preparing His followers for responsibilities in His Kingdom. As the apostle John recorded, "For You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth" (Revelation 5:9-10).

How are kings trained? Consider the example of future kings or queens in nations where there is a constitutional monarchy today. They are taught to handle responsibility and the affairs of state from an early age. Prince George, third in line to the British throne, at the tender age of 1 has already become a loved representative of the British monarchy, and he will have a rigorous training program ahead. And, of course, his parents, William and Kate, duke and duchess of Cambridge, endure intense scrutiny as they perform duties on behalf of Queen Elizabeth. When people see attitudes of service and love in spite of stressful circumstances, it can endear their monarchs to them.

Our training to be kings in an everlasting Kingdom must be even more rigorous. But this can also

include small matters we may consider insignificant. Jesus is looking for faithfulness in all things and will commend those who succeed in His training program: "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over *a few things*, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord" (Matthew 25:23, emphasis added throughout).

We don't have to have many possessions to show God's nature in our lives. Jesus said of the generous widow who had very little, "Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; for all these out of their abundance have put in offerings for God, but she out of her poverty put in all the livelihood that she had" (Luke 21:3-4). This trust that God would provide for her needs is part of the trust we need to have in our Father's loving care, in good and bad times.

Our training needs to include:

- Learning and obeying the laws of the Kingdom. These are the laws of God in the Bible and are expanded by Jesus Christ to show their spiritual intent (see Matthew 5:17-48). Download our booklet [*God's 10 Commandments: Still Relevant Today*](#) for more details.

- Thinking and acting the way the King of Kings thinks and acts. This involves repentance from the selfish ways we used to follow and allowing the Spirit of God to dwell in us. Our booklet [*Change Your Life!*](#) can help you begin this process.

- Developing the character of the King. Jesus Christ was willing to give His life for humanity. We are told we must put away sin and follow Him:

"Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who *for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross*, despising the shame, and has sat

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down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

When Jesus returns He will establish the millennial Kingdom of God, bringing all that man has always wanted—peace, security, a meaningful life, happy families and a relationship with God, who is waiting to welcome us into eternity.

Then the prophecy about this great King, and the kings who serve Him, will be fulfilled: "And He who sits on the throne will dwell among them. They shall neither hunger anymore nor thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any heat; for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them to living fountains of waters. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:15-17).

Jesus Christ was born to be Savior and King for the good of all mankind, and indeed all creation! Download our free booklet [*The Mystery of the Kingdom*](#) to understand more about this inspiring but often-misunderstood truth of the Bible. **D**

PUT ON THE ARMOR OF GOD

In our war with Satan, his society and our human weaknesses, we need spiritual help. God provides the powerful armor we need for protection—and victory!

By Mike Bennett

The Bible tells us we are in a war, and our adversary, Satan the devil, is bent on destroying us. The apostle Paul warns us to beware of Satan's devices and tactics (2 Corinthians 2:11). How can we defend ourselves from his stealthy and deadly attacks?

Paul addressed this in Ephesians 6:10-20 where he talks about putting on the whole armor of God. Ephesians was one of Paul's letters written from prison. During Paul's time in prison he obviously became well acquainted with the armor worn and carried by his captors in the Roman army. Following Isaiah's lead (Isaiah 59:17), Paul drew a powerful comparison between a soldier's armor and the spiritual armor of God.

Paul wrote: "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might" (verse 10).

You see, we don't have to be discouraged by Satan's devices or by his power and stealth. We aren't in this battle alone. We have access to the greatest power in the universe!

Verse 11 continues: "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil."

This is a comprehensive defense strategy, and we have to pay attention to all parts of this armor God offers. But if we do, we *will* be able to withstand Satan's attacks.

Spiritual battles

"For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (verse 12).


The Bible describes unseen spiritual battles, such as the titanic battle at the end of the age that the apostle John witnessed: "And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was any place found for them in heaven any longer. So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world" (Revelation 12:7-9).

All this is happening behind the scenes in the spiritual world, but it has great influence over the physical world. Satan and the demons are invisible, and he is a master of camouflage. He is able to convince people that he doesn't exist, and he is able to sway society and suggest wrong thoughts to us without our even realizing he is there.

Paul continued in Ephesians 6:13: "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."


What does he mean, "to stand"? He was emphasizing that with God's help, we will be able to hold the line, to not retreat, to not give up an inch of God's territory.

Now Paul starts to list the individual elements of this spiritual armor.

	verse 14	BELT
	STAND THEREFORE, HAVING GIRDED YOUR WAIST WITH TRUTH	

A belt was the first piece of equipment put on, and it secures all the other pieces of our armor. Wearing the belt showed that the soldier was ready for action, since he would only loosen his belt when he went off duty.


Truth should surround us like a belt. Knowing God's truth is the surefire antidote to Satan's lies and deception. And to be truly ready for the battle, we must be completely truthful ourselves in our inner being, like our Creator.

	verse 14	BREASTPLATE
	HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS	

Next, Paul tells us to "put on the breastplate of righteousness."

Without righteousness, we leave ourselves open to Satan's attacks. To be righteous is first of all to repent and be forgiven of our sins, and then to do what is *right* in God's eyes. Psalm 119:172 tells us that God's commandments are righteousness. So to be righteous is to obey God's laws of love.

Isaiah 59:17 says that God Himself puts on righteousness as a breastplate! This may be part of what inspired Paul to use this analogy. Isaiah 59 starts by explaining that "your iniquities have separated you from your God" (verse 2). Iniquity is the opposite of righteousness, so when we give in to sin without repenting, we are removing our breastplate and leaving ourselves open to more of Satan's attacks.

	verse 15	SPIRITUAL FOOTWEAR
	AND HAVING SHOD YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE	


Shoes might not be the most exciting piece of armor, but the *Zondervan NIV Bible Commentary* highlights their importance:

"The military successes both of Alexander the Great and of Julius Caesar were due in large measure

to their armies being well shod and thus able to undertake long marches at incredible speed over rough terrain.”

The word “preparation,” denoting *readiness*, reminds us that we are to be eager to preach the gospel of peace. The Church of God is sent to announce the good news of God’s Kingdom, which will spread His way of peace around the whole world. Having our spiritual shoes on, we will be ready to spread the news to others.


Albert Barnes’ Notes on the Bible tells us that the sandals of the Roman soldier “often were fitted with nails, or armed with spikes, to make the hold firm in the ground.” God’s good news and our mission—our marching orders—to preach it serve as our firm foundation.

	verse 16	SHIELDS UP
	ABOVE ALL, TAKING THE SHIELD OF FAITH WITH WHICH YOU WILL BE ABLE TO QUENCH ALL THE FIERY DARTS OF THE WICKED ONE	

When our **faith** in God’s power and love is strong, it is impossible for Satan to break through our shield and land a blow. Faith means more than just believing that God exists, of course. It includes a firm belief that everything God does is truly for our good. Also, faith is the absolute conviction that God will always do what He has promised (Romans 4:18-21).

Faith protects us in many ways. Think about **Daniel in the lion’s den**. Faith was like a force field to protect Daniel from those vicious teeth! And **Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego** were protected from the fiery furnace! Faith is powerful and protects us not only from those physical dangers, but from the spiritual temptations and dangers.


The shield of faith is not just for personal protection. The Roman soldiers had a strategy of joining their shields together. If we join *our* shields—that is, strengthen each other with our faith, building up and serving as we are able—we will be able to take on any challenge.

	verse 17	HELMET
	AND TAKE THE HELMET OF SALVATION	

We can receive tremendous hope and comfort by focusing on the incredible sacrifice Jesus Christ gave to save us and the wonderful Kingdom that is the goal of our **salvation**. This hope protects our minds from the discouragement and despair in this world.




As a starting place, please download our booklet showing the essential first steps God wants us to take: *Change Your Life!* It’s vitally important—and it’s totally free of charge to you.

	verse 17	OUR ONLY OFFENSIVE WEAPON
	THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT, WHICH IS THE WORD OF GOD	

The sword of the Spirit, like the Roman *gladius*, can also help us to conquer all our enemies, including that most difficult one, our entrenched human weaknesses. Hebrews 4:12 explains: “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”

Remember how Jesus used the Word of God to defeat Satan (Matthew 4:1-10)? Christ used scripture quotes three times. He brought to mind the scriptures that dealt with the situation, that showed what He should do and that strengthened His resolve. And so should we.

Our sword won’t stay sharp on its own. We must continually sharpen it with regular and focused **Bible study**.

	verse 18	THE POWER OF PRAYER
	PRAYING ALWAYS WITH ALL PRAYER AND SUPPLICATION IN THE SPIRIT	

Paul ends this section encouraging us to **pray** fervently for ourselves, for each other and for the work of the Church.

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints—and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak” (Ephesians 6:18-20).

The **Church**, and each of us individually, moves forward on our knees. Praying reminds us of the battle, reminds us of the source of our strength and defense, and reminds God that we are fully committed to following Him as obedient and faithful soldiers. Prayer and Bible study are the most powerful tools for combating Satan’s weapons.

When we put on this whole armor of God, we will be prepared for Satan’s attempts to attack us with pride, envy, lust for forbidden pleasures, itching ears, disappointment, discouragement, doubt or division—or any other tricks he may use.

There is so much more we can learn from this powerful list of defenses God makes available to us. Hopefully, this article has whetted your appetite to study this important subject in more detail. Make it a goal to study the armor of God in greater depth.

Remember, we’re at war. Let’s be alert to Satan’s devices, and let’s put on the whole armor of God! **D**

Is water baptism essential for salvation, or do participants just get wet? What does God want 21st-century Christians to learn from the ancient practice of baptism?

A Clean Start

By David Treybig

Jennifer stood waiting at the steps of the pool, giving her friends and family time to gather around in order to witness her baptism. She had been thinking and praying about this commitment to God for quite some time. And she had gone through a series of counselings with her pastor that helped her understand and further convicted her about the step she was taking.

Jennifer felt good about her decision and was confident that it was the right course of action. It was just about time for her to step into the water and formally make her covenant relationship with God.

Is baptism necessary today?

But was it really necessary for Jennifer to undergo this ancient practice that originated in type under the Old Covenant (Hebrews 9:10)? Must Christians be baptized today?

According to some groups, including Christian Scientists, Quakers, the Salvation Army and Unitarians, the answers to these questions are both “No.”

Those who do not practice baptism vary in their explanations as to why they do not, but in general, they consider baptism to be an outdated ritual that

is no longer necessary under the New Covenant. Reasons given often include:

- What one experiences in his or her heart is what is most important.
- External actions to reflect one's inner thoughts are superfluous.
- The scriptures on baptism are ambiguous.
- People can live holy lives without being baptized.

So are the Scriptures really that vague? Is there any value to being baptized? Instead of relying on human opinions and reasoning, let's see what the biblical record shows.

Christ's example and instruction on baptism

A quick review of Christ's actions just before the beginning of His ministry is insightful as a lesson for us today. As we will soon see, Jesus taught that baptism was very important.

When John the Baptist began preaching in the wilderness of Judea, people from "Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him and were baptized

and make disciples of all the nations, *baptizing them* in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19, emphasis added throughout).

Jesus also pointedly stated, "He who believes *and is baptized* will be saved" (Mark 16:16). Christ's teaching on the importance and necessity of baptism is quite clear!

Since Jesus clearly taught baptism, let's now consider what we learn by following His instruction.

What we learn and receive from baptism

Repentance. When people in Peter's audience on the Day of Pentecost in A.D. 31 asked the apostle what they should do, he told them to "repent, and let every one of you be baptized" (Acts 2:38). Repentance, which is the initial step toward baptism, means changing our way of life because of a change in our thinking. It means that in hindsight, we realize that the way we had been living was not in accordance with God's good and beneficial laws.

The process of repentance—which we are led to by God (Romans 2:4)—helps us understand the seriousness of sin. It



is far more than a symbolic exercise.

by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins" (Matthew 3:5-6). Though Jesus had no sins to confess, He asked John to baptize Him (verse 13).

After being baptized, the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus and a voice from heaven said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (verse 17). Why did God the Father make this statement after Jesus was baptized? And, of special concern to us, will the Father be pleased if we are baptized? It seems obvious that He thinks baptism is important!

Scriptures such as 1 Peter 2:21 and 1 John 2:6 show that Christians are to follow the example of Jesus Christ. We are to walk as He walked, do as He did. We are indeed to be baptized as He was. When we follow Christ's example, God the Father is, no doubt, pleased with us as well.

Jesus' teaching on baptism was not limited to His personal example. During His earthly ministry, He had His disciples baptize those who believed (John 3:22). It is also insightful to note that Christ's disciples baptized more people than John the Baptist (John 4:1-2).

After His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples and gave them instructions on how they were to take His message to the world. Note that His instructions, which are sometimes referred to as the commission of the Church, include baptizing those who respond: "Go therefore

is marked by a strong desire on our part to be forgiven of our sins, to stop sinning and to change our sinful nature (Jeremiah 17:9). It includes the recognition of the value of Christ's sacrifice—His blood that covers our sins (Ephesians 1:7).

Repentance is part of the message that Jesus told His disciples to preach (Luke 24:47). Why? Because, as Jesus had earlier said, "Unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). To learn more about this important subject, see the LifeHopeandTruth.com articles in the section "[Repentance](#)."

Death, burial and resurrection. After one repents of his or her sins, the next step is to be baptized—which means being immersed in water. This act symbolizes three important concepts.

First, baptism represents the death of the old man—the way we lived before repenting. Paul twice described this concept as being "crucified" with Christ (Romans 6:6; Galatians 2:20).

Next, after someone dies, he is generally buried. Baptism pictures the burial of the old man with all of his sins, which earn one the death penalty. This reminds us to put away the old way of life completely. As Paul explained, "We were buried with Him through baptism into death" (Romans 6:4).

The third concept symbolized by baptism is resurrection. Coming up from under the water after being bap-

The Teaching of the Apostles About Baptism

Only a few days after receiving the commission to make disciples of all the nations and baptize them, Jesus' disciples gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost—one of God's annual festivals (Acts 2:1). It was there on this holy day that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the believers (verses 2-4). Jesus had told His disciples that He would send this special power that proceeds from the Father to them after He left them (John 15:26; 16:7).

Empowered by this special gift from God, Peter—the disciple who had previously denied Christ three times—now publicly explained that Jesus Christ was responsible for sending the Holy Spirit that day (Acts 2:14-33). Peter also advised those who were listening to repent “and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ” (verse 38). Peter didn't present baptism as simply an option.

The approximately 3,000 people who were baptized following Peter's preaching also received the Holy Spirit that day (verse 41). As Christ's apostles preached the gospel of the Kingdom and the Church grew, baptism was the common practice and expectation of those who responded (Acts 8:12, 36, 38; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16). When Paul was called by God, he responded by being baptized (Acts 9:18).

Jesus' disciples taught others as they had been taught by Christ. And this teaching included baptism. When we respond to God, we, too, need to be baptized!

tized represents our resurrection to a new life in Christ. As Paul further noted, “If we have been united together in the likeness of His [Christ's] death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection” (verse 5).

Baptism helps impress these three important concepts within our minds. This physical act helps us realize the spiritual significance of baptism. For further study, see the article “[What Do the Symbols of Baptism Mean?](#)” on our website.

Forgiveness of sins. Baptism is far more than a symbolic exercise. Indeed, there are two very significant benefits derived in addition to the spiritual understanding we gain from obeying Christ's command to be baptized. The first is the forgiveness of our sins. Indeed, this is one of the key reasons for being baptized. As Peter said, “Let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for *the remission of your sins*” (Acts 2:38). Through baptism we accept the sacrifice of Christ, which washes our sins away (Acts 22:16).

Receiving the Holy Spirit. A second important benefit of biblical baptism is the opportunity to receive the Holy Spirit. Again, Peter's teaching was: “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and *you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*” (Acts 2:38). Baptism, accompanied by the laying on of hands (Acts 19:6), is the way God has established for us to receive this precious gift.

Romans 8 documents several important benefits that come to us because we have God's Holy Spirit. First, this power from God allows us to set aside ungodly activities and live “according to the Spirit” (verse 4). When we allow this Spirit to lead us, we are called the “children of God” (verse 16). Furthermore, having God's Holy Spirit is our guarantee of eternal life (verses 11, 13, 23). To learn more about this baptismal promise, see the articles in the LifeHopeandTruth.com section “[Holy Spirit](#).”

Action required

Following the biblical instruction to be baptized underscores an important biblical principle: What we do is very important to God. The true, timeless religion of the Bible calls for physical action—not just knowledge and understanding. As Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

The author of Psalm 111 made this insightful observation: “A good understanding have all those who do His commandments” (verse 10). Echoing this principle and the teaching of Jesus, James emphasized that “faith without works is dead” (James 2:20). The actions we take before and during baptism set the stage for continued obedience to God afterwards.

Jennifer's baptism

After everyone had gathered around, Jennifer was baptized by being completely immersed in the pool. She entered into a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior. She had hands laid on her with a prayer for the receiving of the Holy Spirit, and she has begun her spiritual journey toward eternal life as a child of God in His Kingdom.

Looking back on her decision, she says it is the best one she has ever made. The decision to respond to God's calling to be baptized was a good one for Jennifer. It can be the same for you! **D**



It started innocently,

like so many things do. Rob* was just having a good time hanging out with friends. But what started off as just having fun turned into something far more serious.

Rob's foray into online gaming started with first-person shooter games. He and his friends would get together, network their laptops and play multiplayer role-playing games for hours.

Then, in 2004, Rob was introduced to a new game: World of Warcraft (WoW). Up to that point, he had played games that had a set number of levels, making it possible to "win" the game. WoW was the first game that Rob played that one could never win.

That was because almost every other month the game makers would come out with new content for players to purchase. Rob had always been a highly motivated, goal-oriented and competitive person; so WoW presented an irresistible challenge.

Hobby, to habit, to addiction

WoW, like other massively multiplayer online games, is set up to create an alternate, fantasy life for the player. The avatar that each player creates has its own identity, profession and skill set. Players select a realm to play in and can join guilds with other players. It can be a very interactive and social game, involving the completion of quests. In fact, success in these games is often dependent on the amount of time a person puts into it. So they are designed to encourage hours of play time.

For Rob, WoW became an escape from his increasingly depressing life. A breakup with his girlfriend, his inability to keep up with the demands of his college classes—all could be pushed out of his mind while playing the game. Rob created a completely different reality for himself through the game. In the game he was powerful and accomplished. It was only when he'd take a break from playing that his feelings of inadequacy, anxiety and depression would creep back in.

Rob found himself playing WoW more and more. The game was so in-depth that, if he didn't have to stop for real-life activities, he could play *all*

The DARK SIDE of GAMING

Video games and online gaming are some of the most popular forms of entertainment, especially for young men. But is there a dangerous dark side to gaming?

By Debbie Pierce and Erik Jones

*Name changed to protect identity.

day. "I'd start playing when I woke up, and before I knew it, it was night time." The game began to consume him; he'd think about it all day long, even when not playing. He'd even dream about it.

Rob played WoW for three years. Twice he attempted to quit playing. "You never want to think of yourself as an addict," he explained. Yet he knew the game was beginning to affect his life in negative ways. He was struggling to make his morning classes. He stopped working on his homework. His *real* social life suffered.

At one point he thought he'd kicked it. He stopped playing, focused on college and was doing better. He even got a summer job and was able to discipline himself throughout the summer in order to keep the job—playing the game only for limited periods of time.

When he returned to college that fall, he felt sure that he had the habit under control. It wasn't going to interfere with his life anymore.

But then, just as in the past, Rob found his way back to the game and started playing later and later, and it got harder to get up in the mornings. He'd wake up and realize he'd missed his classes again. Then, to combat the anxiety and stress of that choice, he'd turn to WoW.

Finally he chose to withdraw from all classes. He'd made a lot of money that summer, so he could still afford rent. He pretended to his family that all was well and played WoW for three months straight. "I thought I'd love it. I got really good at it, but I had this crushing feeling at the same time. It wasn't fulfilling."

What had begun as a hobby developed into a habit and now was a legitimate addiction.

The chemistry of habits

What happened to Rob can happen to any of us. Knowing how habits develop and understanding brain chemistry are keys to unlocking the reasons why.

In his book, *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg writes about the *habit loop*.

According to Duhigg, habits are formed because our brain is constantly looking to save effort, so it converts a sequence of actions into an automatic routine, called chunking. This is at the root of how all habits form. Left to its own devices, the brain will efficiently turn routines into habits (2012, pp. 17-19).

There are three components to the habit loop: the cue, the routine and the reward. The cue is anything that triggers the brain to know what pattern or routine to launch. The routine has been established by doing the same thing over and over. And the reward comes at the end. Over time, as the brain repeats this three-step loop, it becomes more automatic. The cue and the reward then become powerfully linked together, and a *craving* and sense of anticipation develops.

Rob discovered that firsthand after he'd apparently quit for good. By this time he was married, had a job that paid well and hadn't played WoW for years. Then, after an old

friend visited, Rob was enticed back to the game. He played *one time*, and then decided he couldn't go back down that path; he had too much to lose. But to his dismay, the urge to keep playing was so strong that it became an obsession. He thought about the game constantly.

"I've never wanted to do anything else in my life with such intensity. It was an extremely powerful compulsion," he admitted. Rob was a gaming addict.

The social scourge of gaming

Rob is not alone in his struggle with excessive gaming. Anyone who works in a public school system with adolescents will tell you that many young people are affected by this problem—especially boys.

Males are lagging behind females in many areas today (see our blog post "[Why Real Men Are Becoming Extinct](#)" to view some of the statistics).

Though there are many factors that explain these statistics, one obvious factor is the overuse of gaming. According to an insightful *Psychology Today* article, some major problems associated with excessive gaming are:

- Impulsive behavior.
- Greater acceptance of violence.
- Stunted social skills.
- Difficulty paying attention.
- Difficulty dealing with stress and life issues.

One of the most troubling aspects of gaming is the fact that today's most popular games are heavily based on violence. Games like Grand Theft Auto and Call of Duty put the user behind a gun to kill sometimes hundreds of digital images of human beings—often with graphic depictions of blood and gore. Scientific studies confirm that constantly bathing the mind in violent images leads to desensitization to violence. In other words, gamers have a reduced sympathy and sensitivity to real violence.

In 2000 a joint report was released by the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

It said: "The conclusion of the public health community, based on over 30 years of research, is that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children. ... Moreover, prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life. ... Preliminary studies indicate that the negative impact [of violent video games] may be significantly more severe than that wrought by television, movies, or music."

In a 2006 study Iowa State University researchers found that exposure to violent video games "increases aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, physiological arousal and aggressive behaviors, and decreases helpful behaviors."

Those who perform massive acts of violence, such as public shootings, are overwhelmingly young men with a history of playing violent video games. Examples include Eric

5

SIGNS OF GAMING ADDICTION

Are you (or is someone you know) gaming way too much? Here are five warning signs of video game addiction from Dr. Han Doug-hyun of Chung-Ang University Hospital:

01

A disruption in regular life patterns (like playing all night and sleeping during the day).

02

Slacking on responsibilities (such as work and school).

03

Needing a bigger fix (gaming longer to get the same enjoyment).

04

Withdrawal symptoms (such as anxiousness or irritability) when disconnected from the game.

05

Cravings (constant thoughts about the game when doing other things).

Harris and Dylan Klebold (Columbine High School, 1999), Seung-Hui Cho (Virginia Tech, 2007), Jared Loughner (Tucson, Arizona, 2011), James Holmes (Aurora, Colorado, 2012), Adam Lanza (Sandy Hook Elementary School, 2012) and Elliot Rodger (Isla Vista, California, 2014).

Though obviously the majority of those who play violent games do not commit mass murders, yet many of those who have committed mass murders did play violent video games, and that correlation cannot be ignored.

Something to discern

The real question is *not* whether excessive gaming negatively affects young people's lives or whether violent video games turn young men into mass shooters. The real question is, What *positive purpose* does gaming (especially when it's extreme) have? Does spending hours playing electronic games enrich a person's life? Does playing violent video games make you (or your child) a better, more peace-loving person? Does it contribute to school or job success?

It would be hard for anyone to answer *yes* to any of those questions.

First, consider the time. Gamers often spend more than five hours a day gaming! These hours of nonproductive idleness in front of a screen accomplish nothing positive. The Bible teaches that we should strive to be active and productive (Proverbs 10:4; Ecclesiastes 9:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:11) and use our time wisely (Ephesians 5:16). The Bible warns that idleness is destructive (Proverbs 12:11; 19:15; 31:27).

Second, gaming can cause a person to live in a fantasy world and retreat from healthy social interaction with real people. Heavy gamers can even retreat into this antisocial behavior when they are with others by gaming on their phone or laptops instead of interacting with the people surrounding them. This is a telltale sign of gaming addiction.

The Bible teaches that our lives are to be based on love—outgoing concern—for others (Matthew 22:39; 1 Thessalonians 4:9). Love cannot be expressed when we retreat from human contact as a result of any kind of addiction.

Third, violent games are dangerous. God intends that we show love and concern for other people. The Sixth Commandment against murder (Exodus 20:13) teaches us

to *value human life*. Committing acts of violence violates this law, as does thinking murderous and violent thoughts (Matthew 5:21-22; Mark 7:20-23).

If you are serious about living by God's standard of love toward others, violent video games that simulate killing should not be a part of your—or your children's—life.

Game over

This article has only skimmed the surface of a big issue. It seems that people only consider the negative consequences of gaming when a mass shooting occurs at the hands of a gamer. But once a few days pass, the issue fades from public thought.

This is an issue that we hope our readers will think deeply about.

If you are spending hours playing video games and recognize that it is negatively affecting your life, it is time to take action. The Bible teaches that one method of removing negatives from our lives is to cut them off at the source and avoid the temptations (1 Corinthians 6:18; 2 Timothy 2:22). Overcoming the misuse of gaming can require removing a video game console from your home, disabling the software on your computer or canceling your gaming subscription.

If you are a parent, monitor your children closely in this area. If you allow electronic games in your home, closely monitor their usage and whether or not the game is appropriate. Do not let your children waste hours of time being sedentary in front of a computer or TV screen. Also, be aware of smart phone games. If your children are withdrawing in social and family situations to play games, it may be time to take action.

After weeks of struggle, Rob was finally able to let it go, thanks to the help of family and friends and reconnecting with his religious upbringing. He came to see that the game had become a type of idolatry for him, and he believes strongly that he was under spiritual attack. Others may find it necessary to seek professional help to break free from the addiction. Though we naturally resist seeking help, the benefits can be worth it.

We hope Rob's story, and the other information in this article, will help others to avoid or overcome this serious problem. **D**

HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILDREN BUILD A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

As Christian parents, we deeply desire our children to develop a strong, enduring and close relationship with God. What can we do to help them on that path?

By Tom and Mary Clark



I sat in the first row with tears in my eyes. One of my friends sat beside me. I* could just make out my son with his father, standing at the front of the hall.

The minister stepped out, everyone grew quiet, and the ceremony we had waited for all of our son's life began.

"Have you repented of your sins? ... Do you accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, your Lord and master? ... I am now going to baptize you. ..."

As a young adult, our son made a commitment to have and maintain a relationship with God for the rest of his life. What a joyous and pivotal occasion!

As Christians, our relationship with God is the most important relationship we will ever have. As Christian parents, our goal—our hope—for our children is that they learn to build and maintain that relationship as well. But how do we help our children grow to become truly Christian young men and young women? How can we point them in the right direction?

Talk about God

One of the first things we need to do in helping our children build a relationship with God is to begin talking *about* God when they first begin to comprehend. Point out how God created food or the plants in your yard or the sunset and sunrise.

As they mature, explain God's instructions on how to live. In Deuteronomy 6:6-7 (and again in Deuteronomy 11:18-19) we find instructions to talk about God's ways when we sit in our house, when we walk, when we lie down and when we rise up. That pretty much covers all of our activities for the day.

*Mary.

The point is that wherever we are and whatever we are doing, we need to take the opportunity to talk to our children about God and His beneficial laws. This should be a natural part of our conversation, born from a deep and abiding relationship that we ourselves have built with God and are maintaining.

Talk about blessings

Talk about the things that God has given to you. Each family lives in different circumstances and enjoys a different variety of blessings. Explain to your children the many

ings of healings or protection become a part of your family story.

On the other hand, there are also times when we pray about something and do not get the answer we want. At such times, show your children why God may have said “no” or “wait.” Sometimes we as parents have to say “no” or “wait” to something our children have asked for. It is not because we don’t love them or we want to withhold something from them, but because we can see a bigger picture and realize another answer is better. God does the same thing for us (Romans 8:28).

If parents are hypocritical, unethical, immoral or even just simply lazy in their approach to obedience to God, their children will be the first to know!

blessings God has given them and you, and your specific family blessings. Mention some of these blessings when giving thanks before meals.

One way we tried to convey God’s beneficence to our children was to point out things in God’s marvelous creation. Occasionally we woke them up to see an especially beautiful sunrise. There is nothing like that moment of silence as you watch the sky blossom with color as the master artist paints a beautiful picture.

A friend once described some of the amazing things we see in nature as “gratuitous beauty.” God has made so much beauty for us to enjoy. Why not take the time to notice and then share that with your children?

Tell your children about the wonderful blessing He has given them and you by placing you together in a family. Let them know how thankful you are to have them as a part of your family and how you feel they are a gift God has given you personally. There are many people in this world who have tragically lost their families. Help your children see the blessing that God has given them to be a part of a family.

Another way to talk to your children about God’s blessings is to point out situations where God has intervened in your life or the lives of others. He cares very deeply about each one of us, and He does intervene in our lives.

One lady related an incident from her childhood. She had gone to bed one evening when a brick came flying through the window and landed on her pillow—right in the indentation where her head had been just moments before! You see, she had suddenly remembered something she had to go tell her mom and had gotten up to tell her. She had no doubt that God had protected her!

At times, we pray and ask God for healing or something specific, and He provides it for us. Help your children recognize these answered prayers when they occur. These bless-

Talk to God

Involve your children in worshipping God. Teach your children how to pray and pray with them. Teach your children how to study the Bible and study it with them. Take your children to church and talk about the message with them afterwards.

One of my* memories as a child is sitting beside my mom as she did her Bible study. She would talk to me about what she was studying and explain from the Scriptures what she was learning. My dad would read Bible stories to us before we went to sleep. It was always exciting to listen to the stories. As we got older, our family would play Bible games like 20 questions or “catch me if you can” and had family Bible studies.

Now, when our little grandson comes to visit, his nightly routine includes prayers with Grandpa and Bible reading with Grandma. He looks forward to that time snuggling and learning. Almost without fail, he wants to keep reading when we get to the end of our story for that night.

Daily prayer is a foundational part of a Christian’s life, so our children must learn its importance and how to do it. Make praying a normal part of the daily routine of life. A prayer of thanksgiving before every meal is a good place to start. Dad or Mom can start out giving the prayer, but as the kids grow, help them take a turn saying the prayer. Prayer becomes a natural part of family life.

The same thing applies with Bible study. Tailor your Bible study to the attention span and understanding level of the child you are working with. A young child can generally relate to a story—and there are so many great stories in the Bible. After you have read a story, help your child draw lessons that he or she can understand. As your children get older, make sure they have their own Bibles.

Parents need to show their children how to walk through



the steps to build their relationship with God, and walk through those steps with them.

We see in Psalm 78:4-7 that we as parents are to make God's law known to our children. It is a kind of heritage that is to be passed from generation to generation. What better heritage can we give our children than a healthy pattern of worship?

Demonstrate godly characteristics

There is an adage that says, "Don't judge a book by its cover." But the truth is, we as humans *do* judge a book—or a person, organization or way of life—by what we see. Our children will do the same thing.

If parents are hypocritical, unethical, immoral or even just simply lazy in their approach to obedience to God, their children will be the first to know! And not only will they know, but it will taint their approach to God.

On the other hand, if children see their parents praying and studying and upholding God's standards, they are much more likely to do the same.

In 2 Corinthians 5:20 Paul talks about how he and Timothy were Christ's ambassadors—His representatives urging people to be reconciled to God. Christians are likewise to be ambassadors of God's way of life to others. Nowhere is that role of ambassador more important than with our children. God wants to use parents

as a conduit to teach their children both what to do and how to live.

Your children hear the words that come out of your mouth when you hit your thumb with a hammer. They know whether you turn a movie off because of the bad language or other inappropriate content. They know how much you drink. They know whether you break the speed limit. They know how you apply what you learn at church. They see whether you are ethical in your dealings with other people. They see whether you are respectful to your spouse and parents. Actions really do speak louder than words.

A joyous day!

On the day of our son's baptism, he formalized his journey as a Christian. It was a joyous day for us.

Teaching our children is one of the most amazing and important tasks in all of creation. None of us is perfect at the task, but neither can we afford to neglect it. Of course, it is God who calls each person, and it will be each of our children's personal decision whether to accept that calling. But that does not diminish the responsibility and privilege we have to help our children build a relationship with God that can last for eternity!

For more about Christian parenting, see the "[Parenting](#)" section of the Life, Hope & Truth website. **D**

I HAVE BEEN INTRIGUED BY THE MARATHON MOST OF MY LIFE. I remember hearing about the barefoot runner from Ethiopia who won the 1960 Olympic marathon in Rome. Then in Tokyo, 40 days after having acute appendicitis, Abebe Bikila also won the 1964 Olympic marathon with another record time!

Stories of tenacity like his have made an impression on me, so when my daughter Erica wanted to run a marathon this past May, I decided to run it too. I wanted to cross the marathon off my bucket list!

So why am I writing about this? Because the Bible describes our spiritual life as a race. In essence we are all running a spiritual marathon! And I hope some of the things I experienced while preparing for and running the marathon—and especially the biblical principles they brought to mind—can help us all as we run our races with endurance.

Training and preparation

In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 the apostle Paul compares our Christian life with a race. Athletes make a tremendous commitment to give it their all. They train hard and avoid eating or drinking too much. They push themselves and discipline themselves to beat everyone else—since only one is the winner.

Paul is not saying that only one Christian will “win” salvation—just that we should put in as much, if not more, commitment, training, temperance, endurance and self-discipline as these athletes. The ancient Greek athletes received a crown of olive wreaths, but we are promised the most incredible eternal crown—to be kings and priests in the Kingdom of God (Revelation 1:6)!

My first step in preparing for the 26.2-mile race was making a commitment to a 17-week training program.

For our spiritual race, we also have to count the cost and commit to God’s training program. This training takes self-discipline. It takes moderation. Prayer, Bible study, meditation, fasting and fellowship are spiritual disciplines that help us grow.

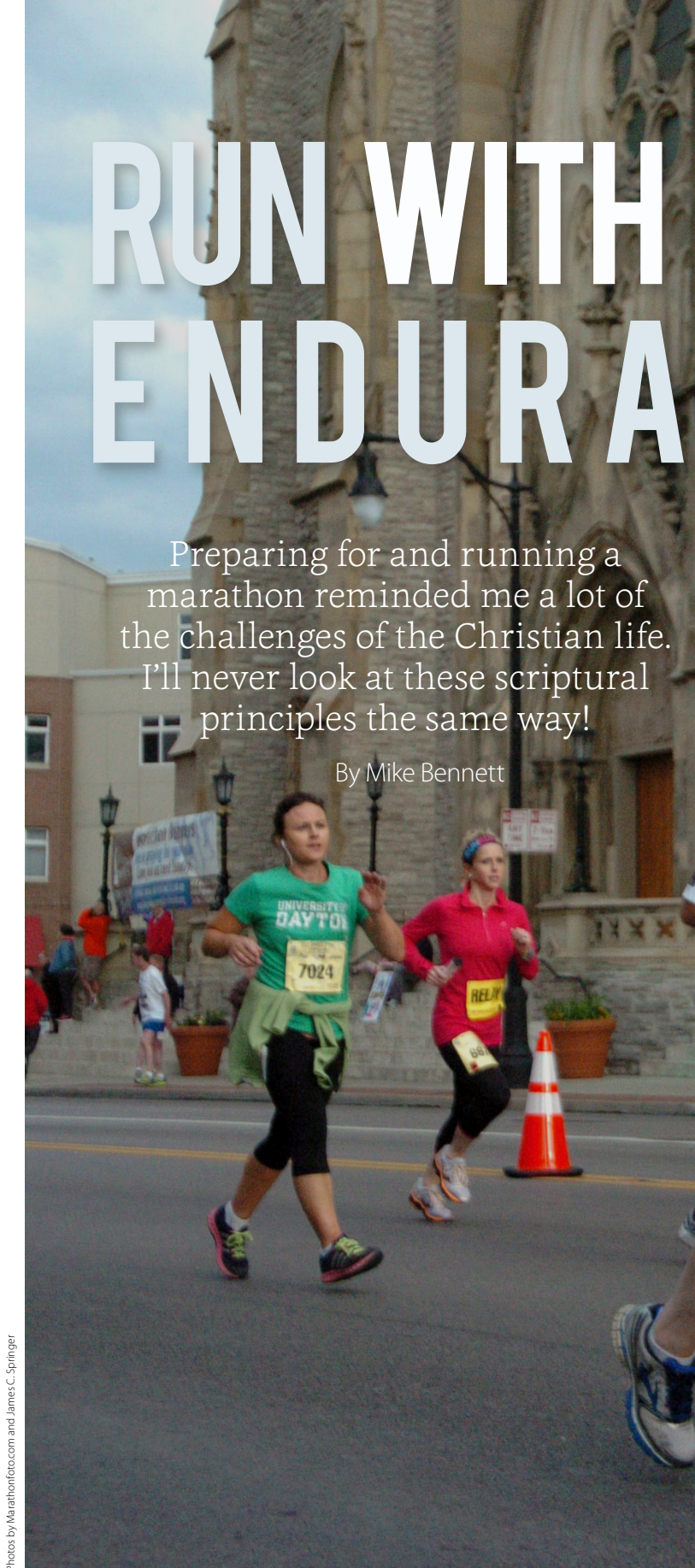
Lay aside every weight

It was also important to me to figure out how to avoid carrying any extra weight. I bought lightweight shoes and socks and chose not to take a

RUN WITH ENDURANCE

Preparing for and running a marathon reminded me a lot of the challenges of the Christian life. I’ll never look at these scriptural principles the same way!

By Mike Bennett



Photos by MarathonPhoto.com and James C. Springer



The author runs the Flying Pig Marathon in Cincinnati, Ohio, on May 4, 2014

water bottle (they have water stations every mile) or even my glasses.

The spiritual analogy is found in Hebrews 12:1: “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us.”

What are the spiritual weights that make it hard to run? Jesus talked about several of these dangers in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:22.

The deceitfulness of riches can really distract us. The cares of this life can be even harder to control, because we all do have cares and worries and things we have to do. But Jesus showed where our focus should be—on the Kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33).

What about the sins that ensnare us?

There are many different kinds of traps, and we should study the Bible to be aware of all the devices the devil uses against us. Obeying God keeps us from being entangled in the traps of sin (2 Timothy 2:4-5). Repentance is also necessary for us to escape Satan’s clutches.

Running with endurance

Hebrews 10:35-39 is another key passage to me. God knows we need endurance! It is not easy or fun to develop it, but it has a sure reward. Jesus Christ is coming back, and He will not tarry (even though it can seem like He has delayed). We must not draw back or quit! We must endure and finish the race and receive the incredible gift of salvation!

The Bible also tells us the motivation for endurance. Love suffers long—it’s patient (1 Corinthians 13:4). Love endures all things and never fails (verses 7-8). God, who is love personified, has certainly suffered long with us and endured all that we have done against Him. He wants us to become like Him. He wants us to endure all things out of love.

What must we do to endure? In a marathon it is important to set the right

pace. There’s a tendency to let the adrenaline that is released at the beginning of the race get you into sprinting and darting around other people. But I know that if I get winded in the first half mile, already struggling for oxygen and fighting muscle cramps, I will have a much harder time enduring to the end.

Keeping a constant pace throughout the race becomes a rhythm, a habit, and you don’t have to fight with yourself at every step. Having a regular, daily habit of prayer and Bible study is vital to enduring in our spiritual race.

We need to encourage and be encouraged through regularly attending church and through fellowship with God’s people (Hebrews 10:24-25). The Church and godly fellowship are major gifts from God in helping us to run the race with endurance.

To run the marathon with endurance, I also had to mentally prepare for the hills. The hills of the Christian race are our trials (1 Peter 1:6-9). Peter describes the mind-set we need to face the fiery trials of life. We have to recognize that these tests are necessary and that God will help us through them, and that there is an amazingly wonderful finish line ahead—one we can look forward to with “joy inexpressible”!

Hitting the wall

An article on Runner’sWorld.com describes “hitting the wall” this way: “You’re in the middle of a run when things start to fall apart. Your legs feel like concrete, your breathing grows labored, your strides turn into a shuffle. Negative thoughts flood your mind, and the urge to quit becomes overwhelming.”

I hit the wall at mile 20, and the last 6.2 miles were agonizing.

So, what should we do when we “hit the wall” spiritually?

“Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus” (Hebrews 12:1-2). Jesus Christ is the real key to dealing with the weariness and



Mike's daughters, Erica and Heather, join him to finish the last mile; Erica and Mike prepare for an early-morning start; Mike pushes through the wall

Jesus Christ is the real key to dealing with the weariness and discouragement. He is our Leader, setting the pace. He has endured everything we have and more.

discouragement. He is our Leader, setting the pace. He has endured everything we have and more.

Consider His example in Luke 22:39-46. After 3½ years of constant preaching and serving and hardships, marred by verbal attacks, death threats and mocking, Jesus knew that His time of trial was at hand. He knew the vile insults, the vicious beatings and scourgings and the terrible crucifixion He was about to face.

So “He knelt down and prayed, saying, ‘Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done’” (Luke 22:41-42).

We also can talk to God in our times of severe trial. He will hear and He cares deeply! Jesus Christ has been through such trials and understands! We must not let “hitting the wall” cause us to avoid talking to God, for in our trials we need the lifeline to Him more than ever.

We must also follow Christ’s example of recommitting to do God’s will—to stick to His plan. We might wish that there were an easier way, but we must look to Jesus, who set the perfect example by fully submitting to the Father’s perfect will.

God is the One who can and will help us up when we fall. He is also the One who will help us when we are weak and weary (Isaiah 40:28-31).

God is the One who will never forsake us (Hebrews 13:5-6).

And God is the One who remembers our commitment and service (Hebrews 6:9-12).

God does not forget our labor of love. He does not give up on us. God is ready and willing to help us when we hit the wall.

The finish line

Hebrews 12:2 also says that Jesus “for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross.” We also must refocus on the goal, on the finish line.

As I got perhaps a half mile from the end, Erica, who had already finished the marathon, actually came to run that last bit again with me! I didn’t have my glasses on, so I kept asking, “Can you see the finish line yet?”

We also don’t know how soon we will see the finish line, but we must have the vision of that joy firmly in mind to motivate us, as it motivated Jesus Christ (Hebrews 11:13-16; Revelation 21:1-7).

Fellow runners, let’s train and prepare well. Let’s endure to the end. And let’s keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and the finisher of our race and our faith.

Then when we cross the finish line, we can hear these wonderful words: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord” (Matthew 25:21).

Read more about the steps in the Christian race in our free booklet [Change Your Life! D](#)

The Nobel Peace Prize brings prestige, but has it contributed to harmony between peoples? Do the peacemakers of this age understand the source of true peace?

Prizing Peace

By Neal Hogberg

T

he annual recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize is immediately bestowed with global recognition as a champion of peace. Although the choices are often controversial—and though the prize is one of more than 300 miscellaneous peace prizes handed out each year—the Nobel Peace Prize is considered by many to be the ultimate earthly honor.

Praised as sages, moral guides and symbols of goodwill and purity of heart, winners suddenly realize unrivaled fame for their causes. As the winner of the 1984 prize, Bishop Desmond Tutu, later reflected, “No sooner had I got the Nobel Peace Prize than I became an instant oracle. Virtually everything I had said before was now received with something like awe.”

Established to encourage “fraternity between nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses,” the first Nobel Peace Prize was presented in 1901. In 2014, a record 231 individuals and 47 organizations were nominated for the prize for their contributions to humanity.

At Nobel announcement time, people like to recite the Beatitude, “Blessed are the peacemakers,” but has the Nobel

Peace Prize led to real peace? Or has it been an expensive bauble illustrating mankind’s elusive quest?

Who was the man who prized peace?

Alfred Nobel, born in Stockholm, Sweden, on Oct. 21, 1833, was the fourth son of an entrepreneurial and engineering genius, Immanuel Nobel. At the age of 9, the frail, sickly Alfred moved across the Baltic Sea to the international metropolis of Saint Petersburg, Russia, to join his father, who rebounded from business bankruptcy to fortune by manufacturing munitions—primarily underwater mines—during the Crimean War.

He was given a top-tier education where he excelled in both the humanities and the sciences. Alfred Nobel spoke five languages fluently, and he developed into an outstanding chemical engineer. He went to work for his father at the Nobel & Sons Iron Foundry and Mechanical Workshop designing explosive mines. His torrent of ideas eventually earned him 355 patents.

Nitroglycerin, which had been created and abandoned earlier due to its inherent instability, became Nobel’s passion. Despite the death of his brother Emil in a nitroglycerin explosion, he carried on. By 1866 he tamed and harnessed

nitroglycerin by discovering the process whereby it could be formed into sticks that were safer to handle. He called the new product *dynamite*, borrowing from the Greek word for power—*dynamis*.

The middle of the 19th century brought an unparalleled boom in the building of massive public works projects on both sides of the Atlantic: harbors, bridges, tunnels, dams, great canals and transcontinental railroads. The power of dynamite to dislodge and pulverize rock—to literally move mountains—made such building projects possible.

Dynamite became one of the great constructive inventions of the century, but also the chief component of some of the most destructive weapons of the time. As militaries rapidly found uses for it, the so-called dynamite king made a handsome profit selling his sometimes murderous creation in major European conflicts—often to both sides.

The reclusive Nobel detested celebrity and was ambivalent toward affluence, but his business empire grew to 93 factories in nearly two dozen countries. Nobel, “Europe’s richest vagabond,” never married, seemingly preferring workshops to friendships.

Reading his own obituary

A bizarre incident occurred in 1888, when his brother Ludwig’s death was erroneously reported as his own. Nobel had the unique perspective of seeing his legacy as he read the piercing headline, “The Merchant of Death Is Dead.” His premature obituary scathingly depicted him as a war profiteer “who became rich finding more ways to kill more people faster than ever before.”

Following his actual death in 1896, the opening of Nobel’s will attracted worldwide attention as it revealed that the bulk of his enormous fortune would be used to endow “prizes to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind.” Prizes were to be awarded in the fields of chemistry, physics, physiology or medicine, literature—and peace.

“Sometimes the committee seems to say, ‘We admire you, we support you, you are our flavor of the month. Therefore, we will reward you. And we’ll call it peace.’”

Peace through the weaponry of war

Many feel that Nobel established his peace prize out of guilt—a reparation or posthumous repentance. Even Albert Einstein, in a speech following the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, weighed the dilemma of scientific discovery in relation to peace and concluded that Nobel’s situation mirrored his own.

“Alfred Nobel,” he said, “invented an explosive more powerful than any then known—an exceedingly effective means of destruction. To atone for this ‘accomplishment’ and to relieve his conscience, he instituted his award for the promotion of peace.”

In reality, Nobel was proud of his inventions, focusing on their great constructive utility. While Nobel had a visceral opposition to conflict, as Jay Nordlinger, author of *Peace, They Say*, explained, “he often cast a jaundiced eye toward peace associations, peace congresses and peace-makery in general” (2012, p. 17).

A steely realist, the complex Nobel ironically proclaimed that “good wishes alone will not ensure peace,” and he mocked “the absurd and futile efforts of windbags who are capable of thwarting the best of aims.” He instead believed in the deterrence value of horrible weapons and overwhelming force, writing, “Perhaps my factories will put an end to war sooner than your congresses: on the day that two army corps can mutually annihilate each other in a second, all civilized nations will surely recoil with horror and disband their troops.”

He considered himself a pacifist; and conflicts of any type, whether between individuals or nations, had always been repulsive to Nobel. Advocating conciliation even when it entailed personal loss, he once wrote, “I avoid disputes like the plague, even with people who give me every reason” to quarrel. He also loathed armed hostilities between nations, calling war “the horror of horrors and the greatest of all crimes.”

What type of peace is being championed?

The Nobel Peace Prize has a checkered history, but there have been examples of “fraternity between nations.” The 1978 award shared by the formerly sworn enemies Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Menachem Begin of Israel and the 1953 prize conferred on George Marshall—who had both confronted evil and then bolstered the peace in Europe through the European Recovery Act (or Marshall Plan)—stand out as highlights.

Other Nobel Peace Prizes, in retrospect, sometimes seem silly or downright fraudulent. The 1929 award to former Secretary of State Frank Kellogg, whose name was on the famous Kellogg-Briand Pact, which claimed peace by “outlawing war” but did pitifully little to stop the century’s bloodshed, looks awfully naive.

Nobel’s original vision was tarnished early on, as nominees for the prize have included a laundry list of the world’s most violent despots, such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Robert Mugabe.

Peace has become so subjective in recent years that the awards have increasingly gone toward aspirational, liberal causes (Al Gore for environmental awareness), celebrities (Barack Obama, nominated just 12 days into office) or politicized institutions (the United Nations in 2001 and the European Union in 2012), rather than to those with tangible accomplishments toward an elusive peace.

Nominees for 2014 range from Russian President Vladimir Putin to Pope Francis I, from document leakers Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning (the imprisoned transgender veteran) to Malala Yousafzai (the 17-year-old Pakistani campaigner for women's education reform).

As for where the prize is headed, "many have worried, or despaired," according to Jay Nordlinger, "that the committee has made the definition of peace far too elastic. They will stretch it, some fear, to fit basically anything. Sometimes the committee seems to say, 'We admire you, we support you, you are our flavor of the month. Therefore, we will reward you. And we'll call it peace.'

"How might the committee expand its definition of peace in the future? What will the next frontiers be? It would not be shocking to see the committee award animal-rights activists, or campaigners for gay marriage. Whatever they are, there will be new frontiers" (*Peace, They Say*, p. 103).

A future with true peace

The Nobel Peace Prize is being handed out even as one of the world's leading measures of global peacefulness shows that, of the 162 countries covered, just 11 were not caught up in war or internal conflict in 2014 (Institute for Economics and Peace:

2014 NOBEL PEACE PRIZE NOMINATIONS

278

TOTAL CANDIDATES

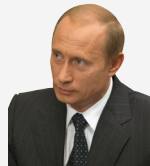
47

CANDIDATES ARE
ORGANIZATIONS

NOTABLE NOMINEES



EDWARD SNOWDEN



VLADIMIR PUTIN



MALALA YOUSAFZAI



POPE FRANCIS

NOBEL PRIZE.ORG
AND GLOBAL POST

Global Peace Index 2014). Worse yet, the study concluded that the state of peace in our time is "slowly but steadily decreasing."

The prophet Jeremiah addressed just such a time of confusion when national leaders would be proclaiming, "Peace, peace! When there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11). The apostle Paul also predicted that people would say, "Peace and safety!" prior to sudden destruction climaxing in the coming [Day of the Lord](#) (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

Peace, while a glorious concept, has become one of the most abused words today, repeated so often that it has become a trite and vapid term with no concrete meaning.

The Bible contains some 400 references to peace, often stressing mankind's failure to admit, or even recognize, the impossibility of true peace without knowledge of our Creator: "The way of peace they have not known, and there is no justice in their ways; they have made themselves crooked paths; whoever takes that way shall not know peace" (Isaiah:59:8).

U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt, the 1906 winner for mediating the end of the Russo-Japanese War, but also called "the most warlike citizen of these United States," caught a glimpse of truth when he eloquently said in his acceptance speech, "Peace is generally good in itself, but it is never the highest good unless it comes as the handmaid of righteousness."

Jesus Christ promised a peace different from what mankind can offer (John 14:27) because it will be a peace brought about through righteousness. He will bring it when He returns to the earth as the "Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this" (Isaiah 9:6-7).

The good news

While the remarkable efforts of some to bring peace have been noteworthy, sadly, in retrospect, the prizes that Nobel established have accomplished little in the quest.

The good news is that through Jesus Christ, the author and creator of peace (Isaiah 45:7), a foundation of peace will be established during a 1,000-year peaceful reign (Revelation 20:4-6). In it, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the returned Jesus Christ, will wield unchallengeable power and authority. Only then will the nations be able to craft the instruments of war into the implements of peace (Isaiah 2:2-4).

As the world awaits the peace that Jesus will bring, we are given His command to "repent, and believe in the gospel" of His coming Kingdom (Mark 1:15). Those who choose this way of life will live by the mandate to "depart from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:14). To learn more about how you can respond to God's desire for you, see the Life, Hope & Truth article "[The Way of Peace.](#)" **D**

WORLDWATCH

Jesus told us to “watch” (Luke 21:36), and this section is designed to touch on an array of interesting and important factors that may have prophetic significance. For more background on what to watch, see our article [“Five Prophetic Trends to Watch”](#) and our [“Insights Into News and Prophecy”](#) blog.

Invasive Species Adding to **Water Woes**

Lake Erie’s toxic algae made Toledo, Ohio’s, water unfit for human consumption in early August. Some experts say the invasive “zebra and quagga mussels have altered the mix of cyanobacteria in Lake Erie, favoring toxic types” (*The Christian Science Monitor Weekly*, Aug. 18 and 25, 2014, p. 11).

This is a major cause for concern since the invasive species are rapidly spreading, and because nutrients used by the cyanobacteria—phosphorus and nitrogen from urban and agricultural runoff—are also increasing.

“You fix it, it lasts a few more years, but you still don’t have a new pipe.”

—**HARVEY GOBAS**, coauthor of a report on California’s water system, decrying “the Band-Aid approach” to America’s failing infrastructure.

The Week listed these examples: “In late July, a 93-year-old water main burst beneath Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, sending up to 10 million gallons of drinking water gushing into the streets. Residents of Baltimore contend with roughly 1,000 bursting pipes every year. In Houston, more than a quarter of the city’s water supply is either lost or unaccounted for because of underground leaks. Every year, there are 240,000 water main breaks in the U.S., and inadequate sewage systems let up to 850 billion gallons of untreated waste water flow into rivers and lakes” (Aug. 29, 2014, p. 11).

Chinese Invest in **U.S. Houses and Higher Education**

There were 235,597 Chinese students enrolled in U.S. universities in the 2012-13 academic year, up 21.4 percent from the previous year. And foreign purchases of U.S. residential real estate skyrocketed 35 percent last year, with China leading the way with nearly a quarter of all foreign sales. Chinese buyers’ median sale price is more than \$523,000—much higher than the international sales median of \$268,284 (Politico).

4.2 billion

Africans in 2100 if population growth continues at the current rates (which it may not). UNICEF estimates that half of the world’s children would be African then, up from a quarter now. Currently about 1.1 billion people live in Africa.

Nigeria is predicted to increase from 180 million to 910 million (*The Economist*, Aug. 23, 2014, p. 40).

1 million

Estimated number of Chinese people working in Africa, according to Howard French's book *China's Second Continent: How a Million Migrants Are Building a New Empire in Africa*. According to a review by *The Economist* (Aug. 23, 2014, p. 76), "Chinese people and money have flooded into Africa in the past decade, chiefly to buy raw materials to fuel China's roaring economy."

The book points out that "China's Export-Import Bank extended \$62.7 billion in loans to African countries between 2001-2010, or \$12.5 billion more than the World Bank."

"I am the wali [leader] who presides over you. Obey me as long as I obey God in you."

—**ABU BAKR AL-BAGHDADI**, leader of the group calling itself the Islamic State, who has named himself caliph, or successor, to the Prophet Muhammad. By doing this, he has "declared himself the chief imam and political and military leader of all Muslims" (*The Week*, Sept. 19, 2014, p. 11).

"These guys know the terrorism business inside and out, and they are the ones who survived aggressive counterterrorism campaigns during the surge."

—**U.S. INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL**, speaking of the leadership of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (also called ISIS or ISIL). Many of them were former military leaders under Saddam Hussein, who then led the insurgency against the U.S. before and during the U.S. surge of troops in 2007.

"They didn't survive by being incompetent." Their skills have made the Islamic State a hybrid of terrorists and an army (Ben Hubbard and Eric Schmitt, "Military Skill and Terrorist Technique Fuel Success of ISIS," *New York Times*, Aug. 27, 2014).

1.5 million

Australian women have experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

The Australian Institute of Criminology found that of the 541 homicide victims between 2008 and 2010, 89 were women killed by a partner or former partner. That means somewhere in Australia a woman is murdered by the person she was closest to every eight days (Yahoo News).

Domestic violence affects women and families around the world.

In the United States, rates of domestic violence have declined in recent years, but one study showed that 66,581 people were served by domestic violence programs in a single 24-hour period, and that 9,641 other requests for shelter, transportation, legal services or other help went unfilled because of limited resources (2013 National Network to End Domestic Violence survey, reported in *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly*, Aug. 18 and 25, 2014, p. 18).

Jesus Christ vs. Christmas

Is Jesus Christ for or against His followers' celebrating Christmas? If you think that is a strange question, what He taught may surprise you!

By Erik Jones

One of the most prominent days on the Christian calendar is Dec. 25—Christmas. At this season of the year, mainstream Christians around the world celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Even though the holiday is named after Christ (the Mass of Christ) and supposedly honors His birth, over time the day has been commercialized and is now widely celebrated by many who don't even profess Christianity.

But doesn't Jesus Christ appreciate the Christmas celebration and feel honored by it?

You may assume the answer is obvious—how could Christ not love Christmas? It's His birthday, right? It's a celebration to His glory, right?

Well, before you close this magazine and go on with your life, please consider some facts about Christmas.

Three important facts about Christmas

1. Nobody in the Bible ever kept Christmas.

Think about it. Why does the New Testament have not one mention of any Christians celebrating Christmas? How could such a prominent observance on the modern Christian calendar have no backing in the Bible? In fact, if you go on any website that has a reputable English translation of the Bible in a searchable format (for instance, biblegateway.com) and type in "Christmas," you will get a result like this:

"0 Bible results for 'Christmas.' Sorry, we didn't find any results for your search."

2. Jesus Christ's birthday is unknown.

Not only is any hint of a celebration of Christ's birth absent from the New Testament, but the Bible is also strikingly silent when it comes to the actual date of His birth. The most detailed account of Christ's birth is found in Luke 2. Here we find that at the time of Jesus' birth a cen-

sus was taking place and shepherds were "living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:1-8).

Because of the rainy and cold weather in Judea during the winter months, this would not have been a good time to take a census. Furthermore, shepherds typically sheltered their flocks at night during the cold winter months. Though Luke 2:1-8 doesn't give us specifics, it does establish that Jesus' birth was not in winter.

The fact is that God purposefully did not record the exact time of Christ's birth. Nowhere in the Gospel accounts does Jesus reveal His birthday or ask people to celebrate it! Neither do we get any hint that the original apostles celebrated it after His death, resurrection and ascension.

3. The Roman church allowed new converts to retain elements of their pagan festivals in the new celebration they called Christmas.

The celebration of Christmas did not enter Christianity until many years after the end of the biblical record (the Bible closes in the last years of the first century). Historians trace the beginning of Christmas to the fourth century—about 250 years after the close of the New Testament era. *The World Book Encyclopedia* tells us, "In 354 AD, Bishop Liberius of Rome ordered the people to celebrate [Christ's birth] on December 25" (1966, Vol. 3, p. 416). This is one of the earliest records of Dec. 25 being connected with Jesus' birth.

It is a well-known historical fact that Dec. 25 had nothing to do with the actual birthday of Jesus Christ. Instead, it was chosen to coincide with a popular festival season in ancient Rome. Three popular pagan festivals were celebrated in late December in the pagan Roman Empire:

- **Saturnalia** was an annual seven-day festival to the god Saturn, celebrated from Dec. 17-23.
- **Dies Natalis Solis Invicti** (the birthday of the unconquered sun god) was celebrated on Dec. 25.
- **The birthday of Mithra**, a Persian god who was primarily worshipped by Roman soldiers throughout the Roman Empire, was also celebrated Dec. 25.

All of these observances were connected to the astronomical winter solstice, which takes place in late December in the northern hemisphere. This is the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere, and it is when the length

Christmas

VERSUS

THE BIBLE

Jesus Christ was born on Dec. 25.

JESUS' BIRTHDAY

Jesus Christ's birth date is not recorded, but the Bible indicates it was during a warm season (Luke 2:1-8).

Jesus was visited by three wise men the night of His birth.

THE NUMBER OF WISE MEN

An unidentified number of wise men visited Jesus perhaps months after His birth when He was a young child and living in a house (Matthew 2:7, 11).

The wise men presented Jesus with birthday gifts.

THE GIFTS OF THE WISE MEN

The wise men presented Jesus with gifts commonly given to royalty—because He was born to be a king (Matthew 2:1, 11; 1 Kings 10:2).

It is okay that Christmas isn't in the Bible because "Jesus is the reason for the season."

WORSHIP

The Bible is very adamant that God is to determine how humans worship Him, not the other way around (Deuteronomy 12:32).

It is okay that Christmas came from paganism because it is now used to glorify Christ's birth.

ORIGIN

God strictly forbids the blending of true religion with false religion (Deuteronomy 12:31; Jeremiah 10:2; 2 Corinthians 6:17).

of daylight begins to increase again. Pagans who worshipped nature saw this as the *birth* of the sun god.

When Rome appropriated Christianity and began spreading it throughout the empire, leaders found it convenient to try to Christianize previously pagan traditions in order to make it easier for the people to accept Roman Christianity.

Notice this insightful quote from historian Rodney Stark: "Paganism never fully died out in Europe; it was assimilated by Christianity. For example, many pagan festivals continued to be celebrated and many of the gods lingered under very thin Christian overlays" (*The Triumph of Christianity*, 2011, p. 185).

Christianity, 2011, p. 185).

This helps explain why nearly all of the traditions that surround Christmas have some connection to pagan worship of nonexistent gods. Historical research shows that this includes customs such as Christmas trees, mistletoe, gift giving, caroling, wreaths and Santa Claus.

Christmas is a worship tradition added to the Bible, disconnected from God's pattern of worship.

Christ's stand on Christmas

Since Christmas in its present form did not exist in Christ's time, He never directly addressed it. But He did address it in principle.

In Mark 7 Jesus Christ had to deal with false religious ideas of the Pharisees (a sect of Judaism). The Pharisees were guilty of adding burdensome religious requirements above and beyond what was found written in the Bible. Over the centuries they had developed their own unbiblical traditions and presented those traditions as proper worship of God. To make matters worse, they were also neglecting to teach and do things that actually were commanded in the Scriptures!

Jesus Christ's response to this was very powerful and direct. The principles Christ laid out also apply to the Christmas holiday.

Vain worship

"Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: 'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men'" (Mark 7:6-7).

Jesus Christ was reinforcing the principle found in Deuteronomy 12:32: "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it."

In other words, God is only interested in worship that is *clearly based on what He instructs in His Word*—the Bible. In the Pharisees' case, they added extra regulations above and beyond the commandments of the Bible.

Christmas is also added. It's a worship tradition added to the Bible, disconnected from God's pattern of worship. Christmas even goes one step further! Instead of just being made up, it was taken straight from pagan sun worship.

Tradition vs. commandments

Christ continued in verse 9:

"All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition."

Again, the Pharisees neglected some of what God said *to do* and instead made up their own traditions. The Christmas holiday does essentially the same thing.

Consider: millions around the world faithfully celebrate Christmas every December. Some focus on the scriptures about Jesus' birth, while others just celebrate it as a secular holiday. But how many of these same people keep the actual holy days that God commands in the Bible? These include:

- The weekly Sabbath day, which God specifically commanded to be observed on the seventh day of the week—from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday (Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 20:8-11; Mark 2:27-28; Luke 4:16).
- The annual holy days that God declared were *His feasts* (Leviticus 23; Matthew 26:17; John 7:2, 10-14; 1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

If you celebrate Christmas, think about this deeply: Are you observing unbiblical, pagan traditions while neglecting some of the actual commandments of God?

To learn more about the holy days found in the Bible, download our free booklet [From Holidays to Holy Days: God's Plan for You](#).

Christ or Rome?

The question really comes down to this: Whom and what will we follow?

On one side, we have the traditions and practices added by the Roman church to make their version of Christianity more acceptable to the pagan masses. On the other side, we have the teachings of Jesus Christ, who explicitly taught fidelity to worship and beliefs grounded in the Bible (Matthew 4:4; Mark 7:7-13).

So, it truly is *Jesus Christ vs. Christmas*.

Which side will you choose?

For more insight into this topic, read "[Christmas: Should Christians Celebrate It?](#)" **D**

A Monumental Undertaking

■ I LOVE TO VISIT HISTORICAL MONUMENTS. These landmarks that bring to mind a person, civilization or significant event are windows to the past.

My wife and I once watched the sunrise while sitting on the Great Pyramid of Giza, contemplating the glories of ancient Egypt. Our family has admired the Parthenon in Athens, a monument to the cultural brilliance of classical Greece. We were struck by the military monuments on the D-Day beaches in Normandy, where an Allied victory opened the door to the liberation of Western Europe during World War II. These remarkable moments brought the past to life.

Our English word *monument* comes from the Latin *monumentum*, which itself comes from *monere*, meaning *to remind*. Monuments are to remind us of something or someone worthy of note from the past. Influential people have sometimes erected monuments to themselves: obelisks, statues, buildings and charitable foundations bearing their names. We hope to be remembered at least fondly, if not with awe, when we're gone.

Monuments in the Bible?

There are several biblical examples of men setting up monuments. Saul and Absalom erected monuments to themselves (1 Samuel 15:12; 2 Samuel 18:18). Jacob was a great monument maker. He set up a stone pillar as a boundary reminder of a covenant with his father-in-law (Genesis 31:45-49). He placed another stone monument on Rachel's grave (Genesis 35:19-20).

Jacob also created a special type of monument to commemorate his relationship with God (Genesis 28:18). Moses set up a 12-pillar monument to mark the Sinai Covenant between God and Israel (Exodus 24:4), and he ordered the construction of another such monument to remind Israel of the law of God after they crossed into the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 27:2-4).

A book monument

In Jerusalem today there is a fascinating monument, called the Shrine of the Book. This structure, which houses the Dead Sea Scrolls, is composed of a white dome, shaped like one of the lids of the jars in which the scrolls were found. Set in a fountain opposite a black wall, the dome serves as the roof of the

museum that stores the scrolls, the oldest surviving manuscripts of several books from the Old Testament.

This is a place of wonder, where one reflects on the history of the Bible, its inspiration and its miraculous preservation. It is unforgettable.

A monumental book

There is a singularly monumental book mentioned in the Bible—a book of names God will not forget. The Creator calls the people whose names are written in it His “jewels” or “special treasure” and promises special care for them. It’s a book in which you and I can have a part!

Malachi 3:16 explains the book and how to be included: “Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name.”

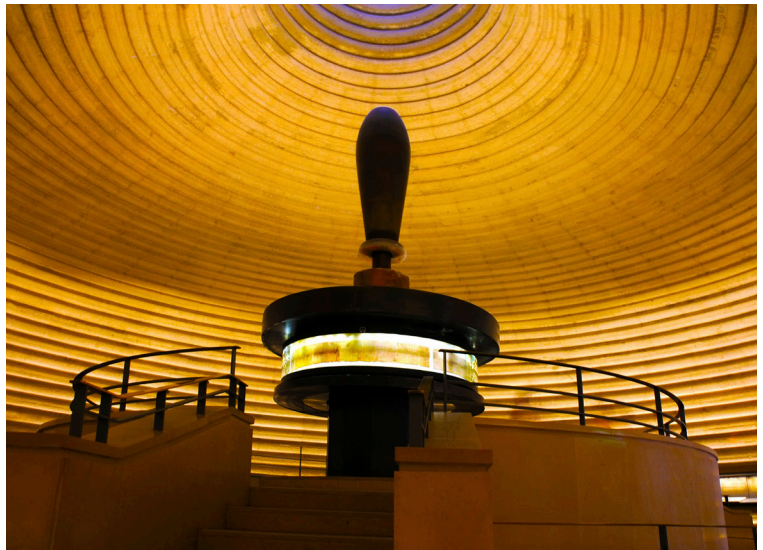
Our Father listens in on conversations about Him and His way, between those who have responded to His call. When we respect and obey Him and keep Him foremost in our minds, He graciously inscribes our names in this monument of a book. He will not forget.

That’s worth remembering!

—Joel Meeker
@JoelMeeker

Inspiration preserved

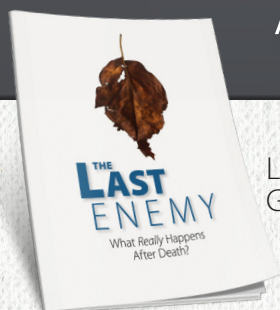
The Dead Sea Scrolls on display in the Shrine of the Book in Jerusalem



This life is all too fleeting, and we naturally want there to be something more. But how can we really know what happens beyond the great gulf of death? Is death just a terrifying reality to be feared, or are there hopeful, satisfying answers?

THE LAST ENEMY

What *Really* Happens
After Death?



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