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THE RESTORATION HERALD

Merry Christmas

and

Happy New Year!

Editor's Viewpoint

John R. Mitchell

To grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life. — Luke 1:74-75 (NKJV throughout)

The Christmas holidays bring many things. One of my favorite aspects of the holiday season is the plethora of tasty dishes. This time of year, there is no shortage of outstanding recipes, all seemingly designed to entice us to overindulge!

There are many fascinating things recorded in Scripture pertaining to the birth of Jesus. In my opinion, however, the most interesting of all is the prophecy of Zacharias in Luke 1:67-79.

We live in an age where many are groping in the dark, desperately searching for a purpose and meaning to life. The last couple of decades have made it crystal clear the philosophies of man fail miserably to provide a meaningful purpose to life. The apostle Paul's warning in Colossians 2:8 certainly rings true: "Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ."

In Zacharias' prophecy in Luke 1, the simple phrase *might serve Him* provides a clear and succinct recipe for life. The New Testament clearly teaches that we belong to the Lord and are expected to offer ourselves as living sacrifices (Romans 12:1), to glorify God with our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:20), and to present ourselves as instruments of righteousness to God (Romans 6:13). To this end, in the words of Zacharias we find the ingredients for a successful, God-honoring life.

Attitude — without fear. We have been redeemed and delivered from the bondage and perils of sin and are expected to serve the Lord without fear. In today's culture, much energy has been spent by the opponents of Christianity to intimidate and frighten us into silence. Quite frankly, it seems that today, many are simply too scared to say or do anything publicly in the name of Christ. Yet, the prophecy says we can serve without fear.

One of my favorite verses is Proverbs 29:25: "The fear of man brings a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord shall be safe." This is beautifully illustrated by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego in Daniel 3. Even after being threatened to be tossed into the fiery furnace by King Nebuchadnezzar, they still refused to serve his false gods. They served God without fear.

Action — holiness. The Greek word translated *holiness* in Zacharias's prophecy means "a state of proper attitude toward God as exhibited in action; a sacred observance of all duties toward God."

One of the most important teachings in the New Testament is that when we are baptized into Christ, we change masters. Before becoming Christians, we were slaves of sin and Satan, serving the forces of darkness. Upon rising to walk in newness of life from the waters of Christian baptism, we become slaves of God. Now we are expected to zealously serve the Lord's kingdom, bearing fruit to holiness. Yes, Paul refers to us as slaves of God, but that is of no concern since we know that God has our best interests at heart. Therefore, we should joyfully pursue holiness, without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

Accuracy — righteousness. In the Bible, righteousness carries the idea of conformity to the relevant and proper norm, which of course is the Scriptures. As we observe all our duties toward God, we must take care that all is done in conformity to what He has commanded.

We should be accurate in terms of salvation. The New Testament clearly teaches that baptism is for the remission of sins and that the occasion of immersion into Christ is the moment a believing, repentant individual receives the forgiveness of sins.

Accuracy is needed in terms of sanctification. We are to be holy as the Lord is holy (1 Peter 1:15-16) and are expected to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord (2 Peter 3:18). As we learn more of the things of the Lord, we are expected to put this knowledge into practice (Colossians 2:6).

We need to be accurate in terms of speech. One of the strengths of our Restoration Movement heritage is calling Bible things by Bible names. I find this principle in 1 Peter 4:11, where Peter exhorts us, "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God." I have long understood and applied this verse to mean that when we speak, we should use the words the Holy Spirit has provided. Much of the religious confusion of our day would dissipate if we would simply be biblically accurate in our speech.

As we enjoy the many succulent dishes offered this holiday season, let us also partake of the simple recipe for a productive life Zacharias provides: Serve Him—without fear, in holiness, and in righteousness. **~RH**

The Restoration Herald

Editor, John R. Mitchell

Our Platform

The Christ: The only begotten Son of God, man's only Savior and Lord.

The Bible: God's special revelation to man, its authority and finality, man's only rule of faith and practice.

The Gospel: The power of God unto salvation, its proclamation and defense.

The Church: The true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, and not man.

The Unity of Believers: In the "unity of the faith" as prescribed in the New Testament.

The Fellowship: Of brethren of "like precious faith," in the furtherance of the gospel and the building of churches of Christ according to the Bible pattern.

Website: www.thecra.org

Email address: theCRA@thecra.org

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FIRST THINGS FIRST

TONY SULLIVAN

Ready For Christmas

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.

But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which translated means, "God with us."

And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus. — Matthew 1:18-25 NASB

A question you are going to be asked many times over the next few weeks is, "Are you ready for Christmas?"

What is really being asked is, "Have you put up the tree?" "Have you got all your gifts bought and wrapped?" "Have you mailed all your cards?"

Let's face it: Christmas can get hectic. Christmas can get crazy. Christmas can get out of control.

I heard a story about a little girl watching as her parents were getting things ready for Christmas. Her father was preoccupied with burdens and bundles. He was getting in a foul mood as he was working to get the lights on the tree. Her mother was working herself into a nervous breakdown getting all the food ready, planning for the family party, and wrapping presents. She saw her mom fretting over if she had bought everyone the right gift.

The little girl felt left out. She believed she was being forgotten. That night as her parents listened to her say her bedtime prayers, she prayed, "Our Father who art in heaven, please forgive us our Christmases as we forgive those who Christmas against us."

It's easy to slip into the wrong attitude with everything we think we have to do. However, our attitude is what we must watch. Some out there are saying, "I just can't get into the Christmas spirit this year." Maybe it's your attitude.

Let's take some time and examine the attitude Joseph had toward all that was going on in his life. He had a fiancé who was pregnant, and he knew he wasn't the father. He knew the story she was telling him just didn't sound right. He was making plans to break the engagement, hopefully without bringing disgrace to Mary.

As he was trying to figure all of this out, an angel, a messenger sent from God, came and told him:

> *Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins. — Matthew 1:20-21 (NASB)*

Joseph took the angel's words to heart and changed his attitude about this somewhat confusing situation. We should take his attitude and learn from his actions. Look at what Joseph did.

Accept God's Will

First, he accepted God's will no matter what it might be. His heart and life were open to the will of God. Shouldn't we be ready to accept God's will no matter what and follow His teachings and seek His will?

Joseph was shocked by the news of Mary's pregnancy.

He, most likely, was hurt and even embarrassed. The Scripture reports he was going to "put her away secretly." Even though, at this time, he must have been crushed, he did not want to disgrace her.

When he heard what the angel had to say, Joseph willingly did what he was told. He was a man who would live by faith. Sometimes it's hard to live by faith, especially when what God wants us to do isn't what we think is normal.

We find ourselves in much the same position as Joseph. Christmas comes as a time of peace, but there is conflict. Christmas comes as a time of joy, but there is so much sadness around us. Christmas comes as a time of love, but we are surrounded by hate. We ask, "Father, how can this be?" He tells us to put our faith in Him and trust Him and His Word.

Christmas should call us to trust God no matter what the news has to say. Allow your faith to lead you to put more trust in the Father. God knows what is going on and He will help us get through it.

Memorials

Jean Faulconer

Beverly Holden

Care About People

Joseph also proved he cared about people. He did not want to disgrace Mary. He did not want to bring more shame than what was already being thrust upon her. The angel told him that what was happening with Mary was of God and would lead to the people being forgiven of their sins. He willingly said yes to the plan of God. If necessary, he would gladly play "second fiddle." Joseph would love and care for this child. Some might say he was a "bit player" in this story. He showed his faith by caring for Mary, Jesus, and yes, the world. He would stand with Mary and obey God.

Similarly, we should care for those around us. We should care for the souls of those who are lost. We should be concerned for those who are sick and hurting, not just at Christmas but all through the year. Each day we see people who need a smile, need a word of encouragement, need to know they are loved. They need to know of the salvation that comes from Jesus. We must care for the lives of other people. Remember the words of Jesus, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me" (Matthew 25:40 NASB).

Surrender to God's Will

Joseph surrendered his will to God's will. He learned he must give everything he had to God no matter the cost. We too must give our lives and hearts to God. Christmas is about giving. The greatest gift we can give our Savior is our lives and service.

Joseph gave a lot. He didn't know about Egypt; he didn't know about the threat of death to the child that came from King Herod. He had no idea what was ahead, but he surrendered his life to God.

Christmas is about the time God gave His Son to man. It is about the time God became flesh and dwelt among us. It is about the cross and the greatest sacrifice anyone has ever given.

We should follow the example we see and learn to give whatever we have. We must give our hearts and souls to the God who gave Himself for us. Say to Christ, "You may have my life."

I hope you are ready for Christmas. I hope we are all ready to allow God's will to be done in our life.

God bless you and be with you at this time of the year. I hope you and your family have a wonderful Christmas and a great New Year.

Lord willing, I'll see you next year. **~RH**

Tony Sullivan is the Evangelist with the Lester Road Christian Church in Fairburn, GA. He is also an associate evangelist with the CRA. He can be reached by email: Tonycra@att.net.

Revisiting the Shroud

Part 1

Forty years ago, I wrote a lengthy article for the *Restoration Herald* on the Shroud of Turin. Since then, much more research has been done on the Shroud and its history. Therefore, I felt this would be a good time to re-examine the evidence and our conclusions regarding the possible burial cloth used to wrap the body of Jesus.

The year 1898 was to be a memorable year for the citizens of Italy. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the Statuto, the constitution of Sardinia, the forerunner of the Kingdom of Italy. It was also the four hundredth anniversary of the construction of the great cathedral of John the Baptist in Turin. In honor of these events, the Bishop of Turin agreed to display the fabled Shroud of Turin for just nine days, from May 25 to June 2. The Shroud, which many claim is *the* burial Shroud of Jesus, had been the subject of intermittent controversy for hundreds of years since its first public exhibition in 1357. Most critics, including many faithful Catholics, had dismissed the faint brown images and reddish stains on it as a medieval work of art.

One of the pilgrims who came to view the Shroud in 1898 was a lawyer, Secondo Pia. He was also an artist and amateur archaeologist, and an accomplished photographer. Pia received permission to capture the Shroud on film for the first time ever. When he retreated to the darkroom to develop his photographic plate, Pia was shocked to see two clear, positive images of a man emerge on his negative. Even more amazing, he realized that the images of the Shroud must, themselves, be negative to produce such an imprint. How could someone have produced a negative, Pia wondered, five hundred years before the invention of photography?

In 1978, the Shroud of Turin Research Project (STURP) obtained permission from the Catholic Church to photograph and perform experiments to try to determine the precise age and possible authenticity of the Shroud. In 1988, a sample of the Shroud was divided into three pieces and given to three laboratories to be carbon dated. In 2012 and 2015, more studies were conducted on the samples taken in 1988. Then, in 2017, a team from the Hospital University of Padua, Italy, conducted a forensic study of the Shroud's image to determine how the person died. More recently, in 2022, researchers used a new method, Wide-Angle X-ray Scattering (WAXS) technology, to redate the Shroud.

Is the Shroud the authentic burial cloth used to wrap Jesus's body? Let's look at the evidence on both sides.

The Shroud

The Shroud measures 14.25 feet long by 3.58 feet wide. It is made of linen, woven in a herringbone pattern. The weave is similar to first-century cloth, but later periods produced the same type of pattern. In fact, Troyes, France, just 20.2 kilometers (12.5 miles) from where the Shroud first appeared, was a major fourteenth-century linen producer.

Critics of the Shroud immediately point out it does not appear to harmonize with the scriptural description of Jesus's graveclothes. As early as Reformation times, John Calvin denounced the Shroud as a fake because it is a single piece of cloth, while John 20:6, 7 indicate Jesus was wrapped in linen strips (*othonia*), with an additional burial cloth (*soudarion*) around his head.

Robert Wild has pointed out the same problem, while adding an additional difficulty for Bible students. It is true, Wild says, that John mentions multiple linen strips, but the other Gospels speak of a single large linen cloth (*sindoni*).[1] For example, see Luke 23:53. Does the Shroud of Turin contradict the Gospels, or do the Gospels contradict each other?

Two other critics of the Shroud, Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, ignore the apparent differences in the Gospels, but they do claim each Gospel says Jesus's body was bound (John 19:40, *edesan*) as a mummy would be, not wrapped from head to toe as the Shroud indicates.[2] Matthew 27:59 and Luke 23:53 tell us Joseph wrapped (*entulisso*) the body. Mark 15:45 uses *enileo* (to wrap or confine).

Defenders of the Shroud, such as Edward Wuenschel[3] and Kenneth Stevenson and Gary Habermas,[4] reply first that only a variant reading of John 19:40, based on one late manuscript, yields the idea of "binding." The better translation, they say, is simply "wrap," as the NIV renders it. This would allow for a single sheet wrapped lengthwise, rather than numerous strips encircling the body. I might add Stevenson and Habermas do not document this variant reading, and I have been unable to find it. Every Greek text I have consulted uses *edesan*, which is simply an aorist (past tense) of *deo*, the verb which McDowell and Stewart claim

should be there. The verb clearly means "bind" or "tie" (see Matthew 21:2).

Moreover, Wuenschel, et. al., make much of John's description of the burial customs of the Jews. According to them, the Jews never bound their dead as the Egyptians did. Hands and feet were tied, and the jaw held shut with a chin strap (the *soudarion* of John 11:44), but the body was still loosely wrapped in a single sheet. This would account for Lazarus being able to come out of his tomb, though still bound hand and foot (John 11:44). It would also remove the apparent contradiction between John and the other Gospels. Jesus would have been wrapped in a single cloth, the *sindoni*. John's *othonia* would have been the Shroud plus the cloths which bound the hands and feet.

Wild replies that, yes, the *soudarion* may have been a chin strap, but then why doesn't it show up in the image of the Shroud? Early photos seem to indicate the presence of such a cloth, but more recent pictures reveal either irregularities in the Shroud or merely blank spaces. The problem of the *soudarion* remains a problem.

The History

An even greater mystery surrounds the history of the Shroud. Prior to its appearance in 1357, nothing is known for certain about the Shroud, though some have tried to reconstruct its past, assuming its authenticity.

The Shroud first appeared, with certainty, in the French town of Lirey. It was owned by Geoffrey de Charny, a member of the Knights Templars, a medieval order born after the First Crusade (1096-1099) to protect Christian pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem. In 1349, Geoffrey wrote to Pope Clement VI concerning Geoffrey's intention to build a church in Lirey. He apparently already possessed the Shroud at that time.

Geoffrey died in the Battle of Poitiers, September 19, 1356. A year later, his destitute widow, Jeanne de Vergy, exhibited the Shroud to earn a living, but the bishop of Troyes, Henri of Poitiers, put a stop to the show. Thirty-two years later, in 1389, Jeanne displayed the Shroud again. By this time, she was remarried to the uncle of Antipope Clement VII, who was reigning in Avignon, France.[5] The new bishop of Troyes, Pierre d'Arcis, wrote to Clement claiming the Shroud was a fraud and the previous bishop, Henri, had even found the artist who had painted it. Clement's response was to threaten D'Arcis with excommunication, declare the Shroud to be a man-made religious "icon," not a genuine historic "relic," and to let the exhibition continue. This is still the position of the papacy today.

Eventually, in 1418, during the Hundred Year's War, de Charny's granddaughter, Margaret, and her husband, Humbert de Villersexel, offered to store the Shroud and other valuable objects in their castle of Montfort. They displayed

Shroud of Turin (Italian: *Sindone di Torino*) is protected by bulletproof glass in the Cathedral of Turin, Italy.

the Shroud annually on the banks of the river Doubs. After Humbert died in 1438, Margaret exhibited the Shroud in various places, to raise money for herself.

In 1443, the dean and canons of Lirey petitioned Margaret to return the Shroud to the church, initiating a sixteen-year legal battle for possession of the icon. Ten years later, she gave the Shroud to Louis of Savoy, a powerful nobleman, for safe keeping. In return, Margaret received the castle of Varambon and other revenues as payment. Meanwhile, the church threatened to excommunicate Margaret if she did not return the Shroud to Lirey. In 1459, her half-brother, Charles de Noyers, compensated the Lirey canons for the Shroud, and Margaret's excommunication was lifted.

Louis' family then built a special chapel for the Shroud in Chambery, France. In 1532, the Shroud was nearly destroyed by a fire. The intense flames melted part of the silver-lined reliquary which housed the Shroud. Molten silver burned through the Shroud before it was doused with water. It took two years to repair the damage.

In 1578, the Savoys moved the Shroud to Turin, Italy, to the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist, its present home. In 1983, the Shroud finally became property of the Vatican, with the understanding that it would remain in Turin.

The history of the Shroud presents two serious problems for its defenders. First, there is the absence of any reliable history prior to 1357. Critics charge that such an important product of the resurrection would surely have been common knowledge to the early church. Yet the Shroud is never mentioned after John's Gospel and then only in passing.

The Shroud of Turin

Stevenson and Habermas agree this is the greatest problem confronting the Shroud. Their response is to try to reconstruct those lost years. In AD 525, a cloth bearing the image of Christ was found in the city of Edessa, now located in south central Turkey. This image, eventually called the "Holy Mandylion," was brought to Constantinople in 944. There, the theory goes, it became the model for Byzantine depictions of Christ, though it was seldom seen in public. In 1204, when Crusaders sacked the city, the Mandylion disappeared.

And what became of it? Stevenson and Habermas, following the lead of historian Jan Wilson, suggest the Knights Templars acquired the Mandylion and this is the Shroud that eventually became the property of Geoffrey de Charny.

How did the Shroud get to Edessa? Tradition has it, the Apostle Thaddeus brought it there when he evangelized the city.

Such a story is interesting—and stranger things have happened in history, to be sure. However, even Stevenson and Habermas admit their evidence is "circumstantial, even fragmentary … an argument from historical silence … the weakest of historical arguments." Nevertheless, they consider it to be plausible, even probable. I believe they need much more evidence to make their reconstruction reach the level of plausibility.

The second historical problem is the 1389 letter of Bishop D'Arcis. My first recollection of the Shroud is reading an article about it some years ago which dismissed it as a fraud because of that letter. Critics have relied on this letter since historian Ulysse Chevalier unearthed it in a library and published it in 1900, two years after Pia's startling discovery.

Supporters of the Shroud are quick to point out several weaknesses in this evidence: 1) D'Arcis probably never even saw the Shroud himself. He seemed to rely entirely on some statement of Bishop Henri, who supposedly found the artist responsible for the Shroud. 2) We do not have the actual copy of D'Arcis' letter, only an unsigned updated rough draft. 3) We know of Bishop Henri's investigation only from D'Arcis' letter. All other mentions of it are based on that document. Nothing in Henri's writing has, apparently, survived to our day. Nor has anything from any of Henri's associates, despite the fact that D'Aris claimed that Henri counseled with "wise theologians" on the matter. Why did none of these write of the investigation? 4) The forger is never identified by name or location. This incredible painter, able to duplicate a photographic negative long before anyone conceived of photography, has disappeared from history without a trace, save for the Shroud! Thus, while the historical evidence favoring the Shroud is sketchy at best, key elements in the prosecution's case are also suspect.

Next month, we will examine the scientific evidence concerning the Shroud.

(Endnotes)

1 Robert Wild, "The Shroud of Turin," *Biblical Archaeology Review* (March/April 1984), 31-46.

2 Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Answers to Tough Questions Skeptics Ask About the Christian Faith* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1980), 155-169.

3 Edward Wuenschel, *Self-Portrait of Christ* (Esopus, N.Y.: Holy Shroud Guild, 1957).

4 Kenneth Stevenson and Gary Habermas, *Verdict on the Shroud* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1981).

5 Not to be confused with Pope Clement VII, who reigned as pope in Rome from 1523 to 1534. In 1309, Pope Clement V, a Frenchman, moved the papacy to Avignon, France. It remained there until 1378, when Gregory XI, another Frenchman, returned to Rome. After Gregory died the same year, Urban VI, an Italian, was selected by the Roman people to succeed Gregory. The Cardinals hated Urban and chose Clement VII as their pope. Clement returned to Avignon with the French cardinals and reigned there from 1378-1394. The Vatican considers Clement and his successors to be "antipopes," false claimants to be Bishop of Rome and Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. **~RH**

Richard Koffarnus is retired Emeritus Professor of History and Theology at Central Christian College of the Bible, Moberly, MO. He can be reached by email: koffarnus@sbcglobal.net.

Sanctification


Jason Cole

Sin has a great effect upon us. In fact, it could be said sin has two major impacts on our lives. When we choose sin, it makes us guilty, and it corrupts us. Those two problems, created by sin, require two different courses of action. Dr. Jack Cottrell often talked about "the double cure" of our salvation. The double cure speaks of God's treatment of our guilt and the sickness of our sin. This is where justification and sanctification come in. Our justification speaks of the forgiveness of our sin, the treatment of our legal guilt before God. It is our judicial acceptance by God as not guilty because our sins are not counted against us. Justification deals with our guilt.

We need to be declared not guilty. This would take care of our sin problem. However, we are still corrupted and affected by lingering sin in our lives. Despite the fact we have been forgiven of our sins, we are still affected by sin. While our guilt may be dealt with because we have been justified, we still have a sickness problem because of our personal sin. We may be one hundred percent justified in the sight of God, but that does not mean that we are also one hundred percent sanctified.

It is important that we do not confuse justification and sanctification. These are two separate parts of our salvation. Justification is our legal standing. Sanctification is our internal condition. Justification is a one-time event. Sanctification is a lifelong process.

The word *sanctification* is connected to the idea of holiness. The Hebrew word for holy is *qadosh*. It speaks of being set apart, pure, and distinct. God's eternal desire for us is not just that our sins may be forgiven, but that He also may have a family of children who are like Him in holiness. Peter reminds us in 1 Peter 1:15, "as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct."[1]

There is a sense in which we are sanctified when we are immersed into Christ. This is an initial sanctification which is the holiness believers are given as a result of our union with Christ. It speaks of a change in our position as it relates to God. Paul even speaks of our sanctification occurring in the past tense. He says, "you were sanctified" (1 Corinthians 6:11). As Christians, we are even called "saints" or "holy ones." This is a fair description because we have been declared righteous by God and have been set apart for Him.

Even though the Bible teaches we are sanctified by God at the time of our baptism, it also teaches sanctification as a process that continues throughout our entire Christian life. For example, in the New Testament, we see constant calls for Christians to strive for personal holiness and abandon personal sin. We are called to be partakers of His holiness (Hebrews 12:10), to partake of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), to purify ourselves (1 John 3:3), to be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1) and to work out our salvation (Philippians 2:12). These are commandments given to people who have already been justified and who have already experienced an initial, positional sanctification.

Sanctification is initial, but it is also progressive. Hebrews 10:14 says, "For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified." In this sense, we have been sanctified and we are being sanctified. We have been set apart for God, and we are in the process of becoming more like God. Sin takes our heart and bends us inwardly towards ourselves. Sanctification is the undoing of this. It speaks of the cleansing from the pollution and impact of sin. It is a reorientation of our desires following our initial break from sin. Our initial sanctification speaks of a change in our position, but progressive sanctification is seen in a change in our behavior.

Justification and sanctification are distinct but cannot be separated. If we have been justified, we also will be progressively sanctified, but there is a difference between the legal declaration and the process of matching that truth in our lives. Sanctification is the process of bringing our flesh into the same condition as our spirit.

One day, I was driving down the road and got disoriented. I made a wrong turn, and as it turns out, I drove about five miles off course. That meant I had to drive five miles back to get on course. In my pre-Christian life, I had veered off course. My sin had taken me down a wrong path. The further down that path I went, the more it would take for me to get back on the right path. The greater the distance we have traveled away from God, the more it takes to undo the effects of sin.

In the book of Exodus, we remember the Hebrews crying out to God for deliverance. God raised up a deliverer and led the people out of their bondage in Egypt. However, it was easier to get Israel out of Egypt than it was to get Egypt

Progressive sanctification is both active and passive. We could fairly say that sanctification is an act of cooperation between the Holy Spirit and ourselves. As we pursue personal holiness in our lives, the Holy Spirit is working to transform our inner man into the likeness of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:16).

out of Israel. Israel was legally and judiciously declared free from the oppression and enslavement of Egypt. However, the impact of living so long in Egypt changed the Israelites, and it took time for them to regain their distinction as God's people.

As Christians, the desire to sin is lessened, sinful thoughts are weakened, and sinful habits overcome, but, unlike our initial sanctification, this does not happen all at once. It is a continual process throughout our lives. The process of sanctification is the primary work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. When we were baptized into Christ, we received the remission of our sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The remission of sins dealt with the guilt of our sin. The gift of the Holy Spirit is given to help us overcome the power of sin in our lives. In fact, one of the reasons that we refer to the Holy Spirit as "holy" is because His role in our lives is to help us to be more holy. The Holy Spirit in us enables us to live a holy life by strengthening our wills. He works in us to both will and work (Philippians 2:13). However, the Holy Spirit does not sanctify apart from our will.

Hebrews 12:14 says, "pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord." This reminds us holiness is something that is cultivated in our lives. This implies a degree of intentionality. If we were to cultivate soil, we would work hard to make sure to add the right things to the soil and remove other things. In our own cultivation of holiness, we are working to remove sin and add holy practices.

Progressive sanctification is both active and passive. We could fairly say that sanctification is an act of cooperation between the Holy Spirit and ourselves. As we pursue personal holiness in our lives, the Holy Spirit is working to transform our inner man into the likeness of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:16).

One of the primary ways we are sanctified is through the Word of God. In John 17:17, Jesus prayed, "sanctify them by your truth. Your Word is truth." Sanctification is not possible apart from the Word of God. It is through hearing the Word of God that our faith grows (Romans 10:17). It is through the Spirit-inspired Word that the Holy Spirit works in our lives. In 2 Corinthians 3, we are reminded it is through a constant looking into the mirror of the Word of God that we are transformed into the likeness of God (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Second, personal prayer helps us in this process of sanctification. Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:5, "For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer."

We can have a full assurance in Christ because we have been justified. However, since we have been justified, we should be displaying the fruit of the Spirit in an increasing fashion. We may not be lost or saved based on our sanctification, but the Hebrew writer reminds us that "without holiness no one will see the Lord." We should be preparing our lives in such a way that we are daily growing in holiness and being conformed to the likeness of Jesus. God has invited us and equipped us to share with Him in His holy character. While we have been set free from the penalty of sin and are being set free from the power of sin, we wait for the day we will be set free from the presence of sin. Until that day, we strive to pursue holiness every day. **~RH**

(Endnotes)

1 All Scripture references are from the NKJV.

Jason Cole is an evangelist at Lake Mount Church of Christ in Rogers, OH. He and his wife Stephanie have been blessed with seven children. Jason also teaches for Summit Theological Seminary and Louisville Bible College. He can be reached at jason4jc@yahoo.com.

Does the Church Need a Missionary?

A few months ago, I shared with my readers that my brother, Randy, passed away after several years of struggling with complicated health issues. At the time of that writing, however, I did not anticipate my father would pass away two weeks after my brother. In both losses, my brother after a three-month coma, and my father rather unexpectedly, I found in the well of my sorrow such a tremendous sense of gratitude for having had a loving relationship with them. At both funerals, and in an endearing manner, references to some of their inherent shortcomings brought forth some levity as it was presented in a spirit of love, acceptance, and humor. There was too much "good" to celebrate to feel bad about the "bad."

Through the years, I have experienced disagreeable encounters with both of them. Nonetheless, I felt nothing but love for them despite hard or painful times that had come and gone. I learned at one of the funerals a loved one chose not to come because "people always refer to the dead as if they were perfect." It's that effect of rose-colored memory, you might say. In my reflections of them, love had conquered any kind of prickling sensation over failures. It occurred to me this may be similar to how God sees us anew every morning, free of the sins and awash in His grace where we lack understanding in how we've hurt Him or failed Him. "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23).[1]

My thankfulness for these two very important men in my life, my profound love in my thoughts of them, is perhaps the closest understanding I have come to regarding the pure love that God feels for each of us, free of the clutter of anger or unresolved issues, disappointments, or disagreements. It is pure and unpolluted and so very complete.

This perspective is more relevant because the three of us — my brother, my father, and I — had different views about a variety of things. In the family of God, we are going to have differences as well, but what a victory it would be if we could love the good more than feel bad about the bad. I want to be clear: we need to stand on Truth according to God's Holy Word, but He has given us such thorough instruction on how to approach conflict among believers in order to grow the church in wisdom and harmony:

> *Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. (Colossians 3:13-16)*

I offer gently that if we aren't able as individuals to love our church family like God loves us, we are going to be inefficient in transforming the world to love our Lord.

A dear brother in Christ mentioned to me the fellowship of believers often seems to align around righteousness or around grace. Both have important roles in the church. Unfortunately, one's natural identity with either righteousness or with grace has in ways fueled estrangement among believers even though Jesus exhibited both attributes so beautifully. Luke shared in 19:41 that Jesus wept over Jerusalem as He approached the city within days of His crucifixion. He went on to express the destruction that was coming for Jerusalem because of their rebellion. Even so, He made His way into the city to die for them. He knew they would be judged harshly, but His grace bled for them.

Another beautiful example of Jesus wonderfuly balancing grace and righteousness is found in John 8. Here, Jesus

stopped the stoning of a woman caught in adultery and bestowed His grace upon her, "neither do I condemn you" (v 11), and then righteousness, "Go now and leave your life of sin" (v 11).

There are many examples of how we as a church could do better in how we address the world with the words and tone of Jesus, but I would like to use the topic of abortion as a model for this point. There are currently more than 1,600 facilities in the United States that provide abortions. Eighty-seven percent of abortions are performed on unmarried women, and the majority of those women are in their 20's. The CDC is not a reliable source for data on this topic insofar as it only compiles figures that were voluntarily reported. On the other hand, Guttmacher Institute contacts every known abortion provider to gather its data, and they report approximately one million abortions occur annually.[2] I have heard this called America's holocaust.

When the mantra "My body, my choice" is meant to state a clear and basic human right, I balk over the expectation we are supposed to apply that entitlement after the choice was made to engage in activity that produces a child. When the argument becomes about placing the mother's life in danger, it falls flat given that life-threatening events for mothers-to-be by a mass majority of the time occur when the baby is far enough along in development to go ahead and deliver the child. The case for the victim of rape is a non-starter given 1% of a million babies is the result of such an event. I am not dismissive of these real concerns among abortion activists. More to the point, I long for an honest conversation about the 990,000 babies that were aborted in a year's time unrelated to these warring concerns used to defend the practice.

Having presented all these facts, however, I must circle back to the matter of loving others. Quite possibly, I have great unity with my readers on the grave sadness of the topic of abortion. That said, what is the church actually doing to save the mother who contemplates this choice or has even aborted already? I once heard a preacher say we should love those outside of Christ so well, they ask us why, and then we tell them the story. The love of God, first accomplished successfully within the body of believers and then effectively applied to those who have yet to meet Jesus does not attempt to regulate behavior through the ballot box and consider it a success. The ballot box may protect our beliefs, but it does not change the heart of humankind.

Our stance as God's army should be a Jesus-like balance between righteousness and grace. We aren't meant to be back on the home front praying for the soldiers who are engaged in the conflict. We are meant to be engaging ourselves as soldiers of the cross, and this is hand-to-hand combat where winning involves a soul and not a principle. Lofty strategies that are political in nature aren't a true engagement because authentic victory only happens when the heart of a person is truly transformed … not ruled into submission.

The apostle Paul spoke plainly about his ministry: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). The prophet Micah exhorted Old Testament Israel: "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Mark described Jesus's encounter with the large crowd saying He had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Then the text says, "So He began teaching them many things" (6:34). While abortion rights are currently hotly debated, my delve into the topic is much more to look at the church's attitude toward the very people we are called to love and serve. We need to get good at this. We are His army and His ambassadors. We are meant to be His missionaries in this world. If we don't know how to love like Jesus, both within the walls of the church and among the sinners, does the Church need a missionary? **~RH**

(Endnotes)

1 All Scripture references are from the NIV.

2 https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/25/what-the-data-says-about-abortion-in-the-us

Jennifer Bullard is a self-employed landscape photographer from Rush County, Indiana. She can be contacted by email at jenniferbullard@weatheredfencepost.com.

A PAGE FROM THE BOOK

JIM BOOK

Advance

I was asked to speak at a men's retreat in the panhandle of Florida a few years ago. I agreed to speak but only if they referenced the event as an opportunity for the areawide men to advance, not retreat. It would seem our movement had done its share of retreating and not nearly enough forward movement.

About four years ago, I met with a group of interested ministers in our state and some well-respected men in our brotherhood to pitch an idea of starting a ministry training institute here in greater Central Florida. At the time, we did not know that our only four-year Christian College would close its doors in the spring of 2024. The idea of a training institute was met with great anticipation and favor. In my humble opinion, if our movement has any hope of training and placing strong, biblically-sound men of vision and passion in our pulpits, we must consider alternative means and ways to educate these future church leaders.

After meeting with key leaders, we came up with the name for this newly formed, hybrid institute for biblical leadership training. In fact, the name came from a verse found in Philippians 1:12. In this letter written by Paul while in jail, he states, "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to *advance* the gospel." There it is. The perfect name for our institute of ministry training: ADVANCE! The key to making this institute different and yet highly productive was built on three major pillars:

Affordability

The training had to be affordable. The cost of training for leadership ministry in many of our schools is staggering. In my opinion, going to a traditional model ministry training school has become so costly that many students who want to go simply cannot afford it. That is not to say that the existing model colleges are not doing everything they can to make it more affordable, but for many the cost of going to college is simply too high.

Practical and Scriptural

The schooling had to be both practical and staunchly scriptural. I don't need to spend a lot of time on this point, but many (certainly not all) of our four-year schools built on the fountain of training preachers have lost sight of that core purpose. In verse 18 of Philippians 1, Paul states the most important thing is that in every way "Christ is preached, and because of that I rejoice."

This might shock some of my readers, but I don't have a problem with our schools expanding their curriculum to include other areas of study. I know one of our schools has a nursing program. There are a lot of nursing students who would love to go to a Christian college for their nursing education, and I am behind that 100%. What gives me pause is that the main focus and purpose in developing the Bible college in America was to equip young men for preaching. Paul states in this text that it is the primary goal. At Advance Center for Ministry Training, as well as other preacher training schools such as Summit Theological Seminary and Midwest Ministry Training, we focus on what we feel are the most important and essential classes a preacher will need to assist a church to advance into the future. These courses include: Preaching and Teaching, Bible and Theology, Practical Ministry courses, Church Leadership Development, and (one of my favorite areas of study) Church and Culture.

All instructors at Advance are successful local church leaders who have graduate school credentials or are known experts in the field in which they teach. In other words, these are teachers who have actually helped grow a church.

Hands-on Internship

Advance requires a hands-on-concurrent internship in an approved (lab ministry) church. Now this is the key. In my humble opinion, it does no good for a student to sit in a classroom or watch online and never engage in firsthand ministry opportunities. Our students are teaching in our Christian school chapel. They are going downtown and ministering with our inner-city evangelism team. They are preaching and leading communion meditations as well as baptizing people. They teach in nursing homes, and yes, even make nursing home visitation calls. They must develop a strategic plan for how to develop and promote highly functioning and biblically sound externally focused ministries. It does no good to teach young men to preach if we haven't instilled within them the ability to reach people, so they have people to preach to.

At 6:00 pm, May 5, 2024, history was made. In the auditorium of Kissimmee Christian Church, we held our first

graduation service. Three students received their Certificate of Endorsement in Ministry, and three students received their Certificate of Completion in General Ministry. I am proud to say that one of our students who received the highest level of certificate endorsement has just been hired as an Associate Minister of a sister church on the Florida coast. Another graduate is working full-time as an Administrative Assistant at Kissimmee Christian Church. Another young man will be starting a new church work in greater Central Florida. Another graduate was just hired as an interim minister in one of our sister churches, and one gentleman works in our outreach to the homeless and hurting here at Kissimmee Christian Church.

Jesus said, "The fields are white unto harvest." Paul asks, "How shall they hear without a preacher?" We are doing everything we can to see to it that we have the number of harvesters trained and ready to hit the fields running.

I so appreciate the work being done by other organizations and yes even the four-year schools that have stayed true to not only the Scriptures but also to their main mission. It has been stated that our movement is one generation from going extinct. Without qualified leaders to guide and direct the church, it won't take that long to go out of existence.

I'm excited about the future and look forward to being a part of a movement whose sole purpose is to train up and educate the next generation of preachers, teachers, and church leaders. **~RH**

James C. Book ministers with the Kissimmee Christian Church of Kissimmee, FL. Contact him at jamescbook@gmail.com.

POWER OF PERSPECTIVE

RICK CHEROK

Slogans of a Movement:

Call Bible Things by Bible Names

Eusebius of Caesarea (c.260-339), widely recognized as the "Father of Church History," records how Constantine I (c.272-337) became the first Christian emperor of the Roman Empire. As Constantine prepared for a battle that would result in control of the western half of the Roman Empire in late 312, he claimed to have received a vision in which he saw a cross and the Greek letters *chi* and *rho* (the first two Greek letters in the word *Christ*) in the sky. In addition, he saw a Greek phrase that was soon translated into the more widely recognized Latin phrase, "In Hoc Signo Vinces," or *In This Sign Conquer*.

Eusebius contends that Jesus came to Constantine in a dream to clarify the meaning of the vision and told him that he would be victorious against his opponents if he would use the symbols he saw in his vision. Constantine went on to defeat Maxentius for control of the Western Roman Empire, and he later defeated Licinius (c.265-325), the leader of the Eastern Roman Empire, to gain control of the entire Roman Empire. After his vision, Constantine claimed to be a Christian for the remainder of his life, though he was not baptized until he was on his deathbed.

In March 313, less than six months after Constantine's victory over Maxentius but well before his execution of Licinius, the emperors of the two halves of the Roman Empire met in Milan, Italy, to issue the Edict of Milan. Constantine was the driving force behind the document, but Licinius agreed to it as well (he even married Constantine's sister during his stay in Milan). The purpose of the edict was to grant toleration to Christians. It did not make Christianity the exclusive religion of Rome, but it ended Christian persecution and gave Christianity a legal standing along with all the other religions in the empire.

Merging of Church and State

Not only did Constantine legalize Christianity in Rome, but the *imperial favor* he bestowed upon the church led to a relationship between the church and the secular authority of Rome (i.e., the state) that had never existed before. Historians often refer to the pre- and post-Constantinian church because of the political ties that developed during the reign of Constantine as emperor. Before Constantine, there were few, if any, intersections between church and state other than periods of state persecution of the followers of Jesus. It's not an implausible exaggeration to suggest that Constantine's long-term influence upon the church is exceeded only by that of Jesus and the Apostles.

When a theological conflict emerged in the eastern region of the Roman Empire (shortly after Constantine killed Licinius and assumed control of the entire Roman empire), Constantine seemed to believe his position of authority over both church and state obliged him to take the lead in confronting the issues. As a result, he convened in Nicaea (modern city of Iznik, Turkey) what has generally been referred to as the First Ecumenical Council of the Church in the summer of 325.

While the bishops at the council discussed several issues, their primary concern was the teachings of Arius (c.256-336), a bishop from North Africa who taught that Jesus was not coeternal with God the Father but was a created being. Under Constantine's approving watch and acceptance, the council condemned Arianism as they concluded that Jesus and the Father are coeternal and *homoousion* (meaning, "of one substance"), and they codified their decision in the Nicene Creed. Although a few of the fourth-century emperors who followed Constantine (including Constantine's own son) accepted Arianism, the Edict of Thessalonica, issued by Emperor Theodosius I (347-395) in 380, made Nicene Christianity the *exclusive* religion of the empire. In addition to outlawing all other religious expressions, Theodosius's edict condemned Arianism and made *homoousion* a measuring rod for Christian orthodoxy.

As the Roman and Orthodox churches (along with other manifestations of the medieval church) gained more authority and formed closer relationships with the secular authorities of their age, additional creedal statements, theological speculations, and philosophical expressions began to supplement the Bible as the standards of belief and orthodoxy that were required (often by church and state) to be accepted as truly Christian. Popes, prelates, scholastics, and other churchmen promulgated their notions of canonized credence until their concepts exceeded those of the Bible. Years later, Alexander Campbell (1788-1866) suggested that "the fiercest disputes about religion are about what the Bible does *not* say, rather than about what it *does* say."[1]

Restoration of Biblical Language

From the very beginning of the Restoration Movement, those who wanted to be known as *Christians Only* and who sought grounding in the *Bible Alone* were also interested in resuming the use of the divinely inspired vocabulary of Scripture in place of the human jargon fashioned over multiple centuries to promote personal or denominational positions. "An attentive reader of our works," Alexander Campbell wrote in 1837, "must doubtless perceive that one of the capital points of the reformation for which we plead in order to the union of all Christians, is the restoration of '*a pure speech.*'" Thus, he contended, "our first canon in the work of reformation is CALL BIBLE THINGS BY BIBLE NAMES" (Campbell's capitalization).[2]

In Thomas Campbell's (1763-1854) seminal work *The Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (1809) he briefly referenced the need to use biblical words and ideas. "We take it for granted," the elder Campbell wrote, "that no man either knows God, or himself, or the way of salvation, but in so far as he has heard and understood [God's] voice upon those subjects, as addressed to him in the Scriptures." "Therefore," Campbell went on to explain, "whatever" a person "has heard and learned of a saving nature, is contained in the express terms of the Bible," so "in the express terms, in and by which, 'he hath heard and learned of the Father,' let him declare it."[3]

As Alexander Campbell, Thomas Campbell's eldest son, assumed leadership in the emerging Restoration Movement, he deemed the need for using biblical words and language as essential to the movement's cause. In the fourth of a series of articles he titled, "A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things," Alexander Campbell addressed this subject amid the pages of his 1825 periodical, *The Christian Baptist*. "There must be," he wrote, "and there shall be an abandonment of the new and corrupt nomenclature, and a restoration of the inspired one."[4]

Moreover, "When men adopt terms to express supernatural truths," Campbell went on to explain, "it is not the truths themselves, but their ideas of them that they communicate. They select such terms as suit their apprehensions of revealed truth, and hence the terms they use are expressive only of their conceptions of divine things and must be as imperfect as their conceptions are." From this created human terminology, Campbell further noted, "spring most of our doctrinal controversies" because "men's opinions, expressed in their own terms, are often called Bible truths." By rejecting the words of the Holy Spirit, Campbell wrote, people "adopt others as more intelligible, less ambiguous, and better adapted to preserve a pure church, but in reality, they convey ideas diverse from those communicated by the Spirit."[5]

In order to gain a full "restoration of the ancient order of

things," Campbell explained, "there must be 'a pure speech' restored." To support his contention, Campbell referred to Ezra the priest's reading of the Law after the Babylonian Captivity (Ezra 8). Following the return of the Jews to Israel, Campbell noted, "the ancient order of things among the Jews, could not be restored … until the law of the Lord, containing the primitive institutions of the Jews' religion, was read and understood by the people, and the dialect of Babylon abandoned as far as it corrupted the primitive simplicity of that religion." The Jewish return from the Old Testament's Babylonian Captivity, Campbell believed, was "precisely similar" to "the return of the people of God from the captivity of Babylon the great, the mother of abominations" (a reference to the true church escaping subjugation to the Roman Catholic Church).[6]

Campbell recognized the majority of people read the Bible in their own language, prompting him to write, "It is one thing to speak *of* divine truths in our own language, and another to adopt a *fixed style of expressing* revealed truths to the exclusion of, or in preference to, that fixed by the Spirit."[7] Therefore, he concluded, "We choose to speak of Bible things by Bible words, because we are always suspicious that if the word is not in the Bible, the idea which it represents is not there; and always confident that the things taught by God are better taught in the words, and under the names which the Holy Spirit has chosen and appropriated, than in the words which man's wisdom teaches."[8] **~RH**

(Endnotes)

1 Alexander Campbell, *The Christian System* (Pittsburg, PA: Forrester and Campbell, 1839), 168.

2 Alexander Campbell, "Letters to England—No. V," The Millennial Harbinger (November 1837), 494-500.

3 Thomas Campbell, *The Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington* (Coraopolis, PA: Record Publishing Co., 1908), 42-43.

4 Alexander Campbell, "The Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things, No. IV," *The Christian Baptist* (June 1825), 221-225.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Campbell, *The Christian System*, 167.

Dr. Rick Cherok serves as the Managing Editor of the Christian Standard and Executive Director of Celtic Christian Mission (www.CelticChristianMission.org). He taught Church History at Cincinnati Christian University and Ozark Christian College for over a quarter of a century. He may be contacted via email: rick.cherok@gmail.com.

If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God. — 1 Peter 4:11 (NKJV)

Old Saint Nick

I confess that I am a fan of Christmas as a cultural holiday. I continue to enjoy Clement Clarke Moore's poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas." It was much later put to music, and I like the song too. Our family has had a lot of good times with the whole "visit from St. Nicholas" idea around Christmas. I am always glad to hear Andy Williams sing "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" one more time.

But I also realize that the celebration of annual holidays has no direct connection to the New Testament presentation of the Christian faith. That is true of many of these annual holidays that are often observed, to some extent, in churches. This includes Easter, Memorial Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and even the "most sacred" of them all: Mother's Day. (I have been to places where that was not much of an exaggeration!)

However, that certainly doesn't mean families, or even congregations, are prohibited from using these for good purposes. It just means we must realize that they are our inventions as far as annual holidays go, and that they can be completely separated by some in our culture from anything connected to the Christian faith. In fact, this often happens. Think of the seemingly unending stream of Hallmark Christmas Movies in which even the mention of anything connected to God is rare at best. That is true of many "Christmas movies" from all sorts of sources.

But our thinking can go very wrong if we allow some of the emphases of holidays to influence our Christian moral view of the world. This brings us back to last month's column. An example of how Christians often get an incorrect view of government is what we might call the Saint Nicholas view of the government. It is far too easy to slip into the idea that it would be nice to deliver gifts to everyone via some version of the Saint Nicholas state. Who could think

that "the spirit of giving" would not be exactly what Christians should promote?

There have been recent, influential people in Christian circles who devoted much of their careers to promoting a Saint Nicholas view of the state. One of these was the late Ronald Sider, who died in 2022. He spent a lot of time and influence promoting the view that the state *should* act like Saint Nicholas. He thought he found in the Bible a broad requirement that the state should be a provider of goods to people, and an enforcer of economic equality by redistributing wealth via the power of the state. His views stemmed from very faulty readings of very selected parts of the Bible. You can examine those for yourself in his book *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. My point here is not to re-examine those claims in detail.

The point here, instead, is to remind Christians of what direction our whole worldview should point us to when thinking about the role of government. As we noted last month, the government we deal with is massive in scope and reach. One aspect of this that tempts Christians to approve of a massive government is often that Saint Nicholas appeal. People want all sorts of things. Some people do need certain things. Would it not be charitable of Christians to vote for and support a government that is devoted to giving people what they want, or at least need?

The answer here, which surprises many people, is "no." One way we can see why this is the correct answer is to think about the difference between the state and Saint Nicholas. Saint Nicholas (and there was a Nicholas who gave gifts long ago, it seems) did give gifts. But the difference between his gifts, and the "gifts" of the state, is that Saint Nicholas (real or fictional) did not get his by taking them from someone else. Gifts given from what is rightfully yours are truly gifts, but the distributions of the state never are. The state does not ask for contributions. It takes what it "gives" by force, or at least the threat of force. In our system, that requires at least the indirect approval of a lot of people, people like voters. This includes some Christian voters.

Ronald Sider was an example of a well-intentioned person who urged Christians to lobby for, vote for, and support a state that takes what it wants from some in order to "give" it to others. To believers, however, this should scream "immoral!"

The eighth command forbids theft. No one, and no entity, is exempt from this as far as we can see. That many of us vote for this sort of thing doesn't change wrong to right. The command that forbids coveting what your neighbor has tells us that even the contemplation of using the state to take what you want to give is wrong. We might claim that the motive is good, but in fact the Saint Nicholas state is not good either in motive or action.

The Apostle Paul makes the point that a gift requires the motive of *you* being willing to give it. That means willing to give from what you rightly own—not what you have taken away from someone else. When talking about giving, Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8:12, "For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have." If you don't own it, or you are not willing to give it, it is not really a gift at all.

By the time this is published, the presidential election of 2024 will be over, but there will soon be other elections. Unfortunately, the sad reality is that no matter who is elected in this or any other election, the approach of most people in office will continue to be the Saint Nicholas view of the state. The even more troubling situation is that many, if not most, Christians will not question the approach.

Instead, they will tend to think that, if only *their* faction could control the Saint Nicholas state, it could be used for good. Some might want to adjust it around the edges. Few will even consider that this whole approach to things is morally wrong. Enlisting the Saint Nicholas state to take from some to "give" to others cannot be good, no matter how much you might adjust it to your preferences.

I realize that this is not going to change soon, if ever. Too many people get what they want from this arrangement. Some even imagine that they get it for free. But nothing is ever free. It always costs someone something. Even God's "free gift" of salvation to sinners was not free. Remember, God had to pay a serious price for that. That is the main reason God became man in the person of Jesus Christ — speaking of Christmas.

A lot of things need to change with all this, but change might begin with how Christian people think about this matter. Change could continue with how Christian people talk about this matter. Finally, change might come with how Christian people vote about this matter.

If, yes Virginia, there is a Santa Claus, perhaps he can deliver this gift for Christmas, or some Christmas in the not-to-distant future. But better, perhaps we should begin asking the real Father of Christmas (our Father in Heaven) about it. As we ask, we need to continue to revisit what His Word really says about gifts, giving, and the state. **~RH**

** Kent B. True is the alter ego of Harold N. Orndorff, Jr., a retired campus minister who has taught college and seminary courses in the fields of apologetics, philosophy, ethics, and logic. Lately he enjoys studying his grandchildren, who are very interesting one and all. Contact him, if you must, at hnoii@hotmail.com.*

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. — Romans 5:8 (NKJV)

An Apostle in Chains

By Chuck Dawes

When I drive by a prison facility, sometimes I wonder about the people behind those bars and wire fences. I wonder if the crime they committed was worth the amount of time they forfeited in paying their debt to society. Could it be possible someone living in those conditions was innocent? That was the case with the Apostle Paul. He was imprisoned for simply preaching the gospel.

Paul wasn't a prisoner in a jail cell in the conventional sense, rather he was under house arrest and chained to a Roman soldier. He was completely under the authority of Rome. He didn't have the ability to go outside the boundaries of the house. He was totally dependent upon the assistance of the guard for his needs. He could not do anything outside the continual influence of the prison, and the guard watched everything he did. If Paul disobeyed, he would be punished harshly.

Yes, in his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul referred to himself as a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Let's examine some similarities this apostle had as a prisoner of Jesus to his Roman imprisonment. He was completely under the authority of Jesus Christ in that the world had no hold on him. He couldn't step outside of the boundaries the Lord had put before him. He was totally dependent upon the Lord for his needs, and the Lord was aware of everything he did. If he disobeyed God, discipline was sure to follow.

There are at least two reasons why Paul uses the term, "prisoner of Jesus." First, he may want the Christians at Ephesus to know if he must be imprisoned for them to hear the gospel, he is willing to pay that price. Second, he might want them to be aware if they live a life for Christ, they too may become a Roman prisoner.

Paul learned that when he was baptized into Christ his old life ended and the new life began. God revealed to him that he was the man selected to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Yet, despite his faithfulness to the Lord, he found himself under Roman imprisonment.

The Devil uses trials and tribulations to cause us to doubt our calling. My father was in the preaching ministry for fifty-three years. Sometimes when his ministry became difficult, he would think his time in that location might be over, and he would doubt his calling to that ministry. On one occasion, a division occurred in the leadership because they could not agree on a major issue that affected the church. One morning at breakfast he told my mother and I that he thought it was time to move on to a new ministry. However, he had always said he believed God called him there for a specific purpose. Thus, even though I was young and still in college, I told him if he thought God wanted him there, we should stay and work out the problem. He said I had a biased opinion because the girl I was dating attended the church (by the way, I did marry her forty-four years ago). However, he stayed at that church, worked through the issue, and God blessed that ministry.

Paul had plenty of reasons for being discouraged and possibly even doubting his calling. After all, he was the apostle to the Gentiles, yet he couldn't get out of the house. It must have been difficult for Paul, knowing he was stuck in prison. Instead of personal visitation, all he could do was write them a letter to encourage them in their Christian walk.

Paul's belief in the power and authority of Almighty God empowered him to get through daily discouragements. After his conversion, he refused to obey the rulers of this world and continued to preach to the very people he once persecuted. He knew that the power that raised Jesus from the dead was in complete control of his life. It may have appeared that Rome had the hold on him but in Paul's mind it was really Christ that held him.

The Apostle Paul also believed in the presence and power of God, and the ability of God to use any circumstance for His glory. He saw the power of God on the Damascus Road. He knew the presence of God was with him everywhere he ministered. Paul knew that God called him, and that God defended his apostleship on multiple occasions. He knew this trial of imprisonment in Rome was not a good situation, but he believed God would use it for good.

Paul also knew of the work of God. Many times, because our circumstances in life are messy, we don't see how God is working in our daily lives. God works in ways we will never understand. Paul certainly believed the Lord was aware of all his needs, and he was totally dependent on Him. We, too, need to follow the example of Paul by trusting God knows what He is doing. We may not know exactly how God is going to work out the problem, but we must place our life in His hands, simply trusting Him.

Some time ago, I met with a young father and mother at the funeral home where I am employed. Tragically, their eighteen-week-old infant son had died, and the doctors could not give them a reason for the baby's death. When they arrived at my office, they could not speak for several

minutes. They sat together with their faces in their hands and just cried. When they got their composure, they couldn't get past the why questions:

"Why did my baby die?"

"Why did God take my baby?"

"Why do we have to go through this?"

At this point, I looked into their eyes and simply said, "I think you are asking the wrong questions." They were perplexed I had made such a statement. We will never fully understand the whys of this world and if we could, it would not change the circumstances in our life anyway. The better question to ask is, "What we will do now?" I told them about a king whose baby died a long time ago. King David made a profound statement of trust and assurance when he said, "But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (2 Samuel 12:23 NKJV). I told those young parents that day that God did not create your little guy for just eighteen weeks. He created him to live in Heaven for all eternity and it should be their desire to reunite with their son someday.

The more we focus our attention on the problem at hand, the bigger the problem becomes. Paul was beaten, shipwrecked, and persecuted for his faith. He understood his circumstances in this world were nothing compared to what God had in store for him. It would have been easy for Paul to gripe and complain and let his problems become larger in his mind than his faith in God. He knew taking his trials and tribulations directly to God would help him focus on God's plan rather than his own circumstances.

Paul did not want to disobey God. His imprisonment wasn't his primary concern. He was more concerned for all the churches than his own personal struggles. It is not necessarily wrong for us to ask God to change our trials if we ask with a heart and mind that is aligned with God's will. Paul asked God to take away the thorn in his flesh three times, but God did not. Jesus asked God to "take this cup from me," and then proceeded to obey the Father's will.

Being imprisoned in Rome must have seemed like a major roadblock in Paul's ministry. Yet, when we look at what was accomplished, the opposite is true. The gospel continued to spread throughout the world. If Paul had not been imprisoned, the letters he wrote may never have enriched their lives, and an unspeakable number of people would not have been encouraged and corrected in their walk with Christ. Some of Paul's greatest labor for the Lord was done while he was in prison, chained to a Roman soldier. Much of Paul's success is undoubtedly because he simply viewed himself as a prisoner of Jesus completely beholden to His will.

Many times, people can't become a prisoner of Jesus because they are chained to their past or they are more interested in what they want to do. They will not give Christ first place in their life. Unfortunately, people walk with one foot in the world and one foot in the church. They lack spiritual maturity and wander from one program to another, looking for something or someone to satisfy their desires.

Paul also knew of the work of God. Many times, because our circumstances in life are messy, we can't see how God is working in our daily lives. God works in ways we will never understand. Paul certainly believed the Lord was aware of all his needs, and he was totally dependent on Him.

We are blessed to have the Scriptures available to us today. Paul wrote the book of Ephesians to remind us of the spiritual blessings we have in Christ. God chose us, adopted us, and redeemed us. We were once outside of the family of God but now have been brought near to Him through the blood of Jesus. We have a glorious inheritance and have been sealed by the Holy Spirit. We are expected to grow and become built up so we can walk worthy of our calling.

Saul of Tarsus was a man full of hostility toward the followers of Jesus. He persecuted the followers of Christ, put many of them in prison, and cast his vote to put others to death. When Saul met the Lord on the Damascus Road, God not only changed his name, He changed his life. Luke wrote of Paul's conversion three times in the book of Acts. In chapter 22, Ananias came to Paul and told him he was a chosen vessel and would be a witness to all men. Paul went from one of the vilest persecutors of the church to one of the most courageous preachers of the gospel. Paul had exchanged all his filthy rags for a beautiful robe of righteous.

Paul was a prisoner of the Lord. His sole purpose in life was preaching the gospel and fulfilling the mission God gave him. He was not going to let Rome, trials, tribulations, or even victories deter him from seeking the lost.

The question we need to ask ourselves is this: "Am I a prisoner of Jesus?" **~RH**

Chuck Dawes is a Funeral Director in Franklin, Ohio. He is married to Jennie, and they have two sons and two granddaughters.

A MILLENNIAL MOMENT

Sharpening Our Focus

Chris Ponchot

We live in a fast-paced society. There are many things grabbing our attention. Digital experts conclude the average American sees somewhere between 4,000 and 10,000 ads per day. Every advertisement is meant to captivate us, creating an "undeniable need," and revealing said product as the solution. There are so many things to focus on we end up zeroing in on nothing, distracted by all the noise.

As Christians, one of our primary duties is to filter out the distractions and stay focused on what is most important. The purpose of Christianity is to grow into the likeness of Jesus. It is pertinent we fix our gaze on Jesus so we can grow to be like Him. Notice what Paul says in Colossians:

> *If then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory. Colossians 3:1-4 (NASB)*

Believers have new realities in Christ: a new life (v 1), a new character (v 3), and a new glory (v 4). This life is no longer about pursuing personal gain; rather, it is about seeking God's desire in Christ. The new life found in Jesus can only be attained after death to sin and self. Now, the all-consuming purpose for Christians is to keep the focal point on Jesus until Christlikeness is achieved in everything.

Pay special attention to Paul's statement in verse 3: "your life is *hidden with Christ* in God" (emphasis added). The word *hidden* in the original language means "to be indistinguishable from." In other words, we are to grow into the likeness of Jesus until we reach the point where people cannot distinguish us from Him. We are growing into oneness with Christ in character and conduct.

It is imperative we keep Jesus as the center of our attention. Otherwise, our purpose will never be realized. This is why Paul made the statements, "keep seeking the things above," and "set your mind on the things above." Our focus determines our journey. If we want our journey to be heavenward, then we must be fixed on Jesus.

Paul goes on to demonstrate what happens when our attention is off Jesus (vv 5-9). Is this the kind of person we want to be? Malicious, greedy, impure, immoral, and evil? It is for these reasons God's wrath is revealed. When we focus on the world, we get the world's result.

Remember, this is the kind of person we were before our renewal in the knowledge of Christ (vv 10-11). Paul beckons us to put off the old self and put on Christ. It does not matter what we have done, where we come from, or our economic status. We are all one in Christ. Therefore, we must take our focus off the world and fixate on Jesus.

What happens when we keep our focus where it ought to be? Paul describes the Christlike believer in verses 12-15: chosen of God, holy, kind, humble, gentle, patient, forgiving, loving, etc. All Christians are united in Christ to exhibit His character in who we are and all we do. For we were called into one body—His body.

We must ask ourselves, "Who do I want to be?" A worldly person full of evil, malice, and immorality? Or a Christlike person full of love, peace, purity, and forgiveness? The difference lies in where we keep our focus. Stay focused on Jesus and growth in Christlikeness will be the outcome.

Paul gives three practical ways to set our minds on things above (vv 16-17). The first is letting the Word of Christ richly dwell within us. How else can our minds be renewed with knowledge of the Son if we are not taking in His Word? Be consistent in reading the Bible and deep diving through study; be diligent in memorization and meditation.

Second, grow together with other believers. Paul explicitly states, "teach and admonish *one another*" (emphasis added). Instruct one another in God's ways and in thankfulness, rejoice together, encourage each other, and challenge one another to keep growing in Christ. God created us to need each other. Form a tight-knit group where maturity in the body of Christ occurs together.

Finally, do everything in the name of Jesus. A good question to ask is, "Will this glorify Jesus?" If the answer is "no" or "I do not know," then don't. On the other hand, if our speech and actions can be done in thankfulness to God through Christ, then we should proceed in confidence.

The purpose of Christianity is to be like Jesus. Keep the right focus and Christlikeness will follow. **~RH**

Christopher Ponchot is the Minister at the Roann Christian Church in Roann, Indiana. He and his wife, Grace, have two daughters, Susan Praise and Jane.

Pause to Ponder

A system of government, which is the admiration of the virtuous and wise; the fear, the scourge, the dread of the tyrant: the very life's blood of which is to be found in these memorable words, already quoted, but which can never be too often repeated in the ears of freemen, viz:

> All men are born free and equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Such are the fundamental principles of our government—a government equally removed from the extremes of anarchy and despotism. Here permit me to remark, that a republican government, which places the supreme power in the hands of the people, can never be sustained long, unless the people are virtuous and intelligent. No people, who are ignorant and corrupt, can long enjoy the blessings of civil and religious liberty; for intelligence and virtue form the soil in which the tender plant of liberty flourishes, while it withers and dies by the rude and unhallowed touch of ignorance and vice, as a plant in an unkindly soil.

Elder John Rogers, *A Discourse on the Subject of Civil and Religious Liberty*.
Delivered on July 4th, 1828, at the Courthouse in Carlisle, KY.

About Our Lesson Write

Mike Hawkins is the preacher at "one of the friendliest churches in our brotherhood," Southwest Church of Christ in Barberton, Ohio. Mike is a native of Northeastern, Ohio, having been born in Akron and raised in Cuyahoga Falls. Prior to moving back to Ohio, Mike served in ministry in Kentucky and Virginia. For the past ten summers, Mike has worked with the GAP Youth Preaching Camps in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.

Mike and his wife Sarah have three children: Austin, Caitlin, and Sydney and just this past June they welcomed a new addition to their family, their daughter-in-law, Skylar.

Aside from preaching and teaching, Mike enjoys science fiction, the Peanuts Gang, card games, and trail mix. Apparently, he also enjoys heartache, having been a fan of Cleveland sports his entire life. A perfect day for him involves spending time with family and friends, laughing until his sides hurt.

A glad heart makes a cheerful face, but by sorrow of heart the spirit is crushed. — Proverbs 15:13 (ESV)

A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones. — Proverbs 17:22 (ESV)

Ruth 4:1-22 ESV

December 1, 2024

A Noble Family Tree

Background of Text — Years ago, I was bit by the ancestry bug. I had long heard the stories of how our family had migrated to America and the different paths our ancestors took that led us to Northeastern Ohio. I wanted to document and preserve the things I had heard my whole life. I wanted a record that could be passed on.

Through my research, I was able to trace my side of our family tree back to Europe. As for my wife, we hit a dead end a few generations back. For a couple of years, my study lay dormant until my son chose to do a DNA assessment. I was relieved to find my research lined up with the DNA assessment. What was even more surprising was the missing ancestry of my wife's family. Our son got married last June, and I am now so excited to pass on the story of our past to the future of our family.

God, in His wisdom, led both Matthew and Luke to record the family tree of our Savior. Wow are there some great names in that family line! Yet in researching Jesus's family tree, and specifically the branch of King David's, we encounter an unlikely union between a generous farmer and a poor immigrant. Our text explores the marriage between the Boaz and Ruth, which is a testimony to the extent of God's grace to affect His divine purpose.

The book of Ruth is a touching story of familial bond. The three ladies of the story: Naomi the mother-in-law, Obed and Ruth the daughters-in-law, were each left widowed. In the wake of these events, Ruth expressed her lifelong commitment to Naomi, which would lead them both to Bethlehem, and Ruth to the farmer Boaz's grain field. Ruth's initial encounter with Boaz would ultimately lead her from being a widow to again being a bride and this time a mother.

Verse 10 — In the secular culture that surrounded Naomi and Ruth, the death of all males in a household was an opportunity for a wealthy man to increase his own property and legacy by acquiring that family's land. We learn, though, from Numbers 27:1-11, that God instituted certain laws to protect the Israelites from losing their family's inheritance. The actions of Boaz, here in verse 10, show compassion by giving Naomi's family a future. Above that, it shows Boaz's respect for God's laws. Without question, Boaz is a man of selfless character.

Verse 12 — Here the reference to Tamar serves as a lens to view the story of Ruth. Both Tamar and Ruth were widowed, but they were given a legacy in Israel through a levirate marriage (see Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Although there is a familial connection here, as we will see in verses 18-22, the real focus should be placed on the grace of God. God provided these women with children to carry on a legacy, which was a critical cultural role for women in ancient times.

Verse 14 — A widow without sons, past the age of bearing children, faced a bleak future. That is the situation Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, faced. She found herself in a situation where she had no standing in the community, no legal representation, and no respectable source of income. She was entirely dependent on the kindness of others if she were to survive, but the birth of Obed changed all of that. Again, we might notice the grace of God!

Verse 15 — Here Ruth is described as, "your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons." What high praise for Ruth! Let's consider Ruth's ethnic heritage—she was a Moabite. Moabites were excluded from the Jewish community (Deuteronomy 23:3). To receive such praise from the Israelite women must be entirely due to her selfless love for Naomi—that and her unrelenting loyalty to God (Ruth 1:16-17).

Verses 21, 22 — Here's where we get to tie everything together. These verses show the line from Boaz (and thus Ruth) to King David. The New Testament writer Luke established clearly that Jesus was a descendant of David (Luke 1:27, 32, 69; Luke 3:31). Thus, making the connection from Jesus, the Son of God, to a wealthy farmer and a poor, widowed immigrant. What's also noteworthy is Luke traced Jesus's line back to Adam (Luke 3:38). Taking all of this into consideration, we can see the lineage of Jesus is one of humanity; a lineage that is comprised of Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, men and women, citizen and stranger. Perhaps the greatest takeaway from the family tree of Jesus is the lineage from Creator to the created. God chose to live among us as a human being with a human family.

The fourth chapter of Ruth demonstrates the nature of God's love in a wonderful contrast. Boaz's actions reflect God's nature in His saving love for the marginalized and disenfranchised. Ruth's actions reflect God's sacrificial and loyal love for His people. I believe we can find solace in the examples of both Boaz and Ruth. We were once disenfranchised and in need of saving, but now as believers we are His people.

When I consider it all, I can't help but remember the familiar chorus, "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God!"

2 Samuel 7:4-17 ESV

December 8, 2024

A Very Fine House

Background of Text — It's been a little over twenty years since my beloved and I bought our first house. We felt so "grown up" buying our little ranch-style home. It was a repo, and it was ugly, but it had "good bones" as they say. In the minds of those two young kids, it was a hidden treasure that could stand to be our home for many years to come.

Since we lived in the snowbelt, one of the first projects we wanted to do was to put some tile down in the area around the front door. One weekend after my wife had taken the kids for an outing, I gleefully began to cut the carpet away from the front door. When I pulled the pad up, low and behold, there was a nice hardwood floor underneath. By the time my family returned from their adventure every bit of that old worn-out carpet was out on the street.

People value permanence. That's why people, if able, seek to buy a home instead of rent. That's why people desire to build, or in our case rehab, structures that will outlast themselves. That's why we often see people trade old worn-out carpet for hardwood floors. David wanted to build a house of permanence for God. In turn, God promised to build a "house" for David—a never-ending kingdom!

Having reached the throne of Israel, David had a longing to build a house for God. Here David sat in a luxurious mansion, and the Ark of the Covenant rested in a tent. God was the reason for David's success, and in his eyes, and in the eyes of the prophet Nathan, God should get a permanent home.

Verse 6 — ***I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt…*** Here, God says that He has lived among His people since the exodus. However, there is a bigger idea here if we consider the whole of Scripture. In the Garden of Eden, God walked among Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8). The apostle John tells us, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as the only Son from the Father" (John 1:14). John also tells us what the future holds for believers, "He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God" (Revelation 21:3-4). Scripture is clear that from the very beginning God has desired to be with His people. Nothing has changed that desire, and nothing will.

Verse 7 — In the ancient Near East, cedar was the highest quality wood one could find. It grows tall and straight and the oil in cedar repels insects, which means it's a very durable wood. Thus, it became a symbol of wealth, stability, and power—certainly something that would be used in building for royalty. Yet God had never asked that such a place be built for Him.

Verse 8 — Second Samuel 7 is one of the great milestones of the Old Testament. Having established David as King, God made a covenant with him. God's covenants (Genesis 15; Deuteronomy 27; Hebrews 8) are all gifts initiated by God, not as a reward for work, but as a firm commitment establishing a relationship in which God has sought out. We could think of it much like a marriage—there is the security and the stability of commitment that fosters true trust and intimacy. Here in verse 8, God instructs the prophet Nathan to share the gift of His covenant with David.

Verse 14 — ***I will be to him a father, and he shall be to Me a son.*** In the Lord's covenant with David, He promised an inheritance, namely a never-ending kingdom, yet the paternal relationships of the Old Testament assumed more than inheritance. They were a commitment to raise a child in the right way, to teach them to make wise choices, and to develop good character in him or her. That commitment, at times, required the child to be disciplined by the parent (see Proverbs 13:1, 24; 22:6), yet God's promise to discipline with human consequence rather than divine punishment demonstrates His grace. God has in view a discipline that leads to teaching and maturing His covenant people.

Verse 16 — God assures David throughout our text the cycle of sin-judgment-rescue that was prevalent throughout the period of Judges, and human history for that matter, would finally be brought to an end through David and his family line (compare Judges 2:11-19 with 2 Samuel 7:10-16). However, this promise goes beyond David—and beyond his son Solomon—who would go on to build God's Temple. This promise points to "Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1).

The fulfillment of God's promise to David came when the angel spoke to Mary, "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to 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).

Hallelujah! He is Christ, the LORD!

Luke 1:67-80 ESV

Get Ready!

December 15, 2024

Background of Text — I'll never forget the day our son was born. After 48 hours of labor, my wife was offered the option of forgoing a natural birth in lieu of a cesarean section. She jumped at the opportunity.

A short while later, we were alone in our hospital room, looking upon one of God's greatest blessings. I was a father for the first time, and I was beaming. He was so little, swaddled in his bassinet. So peaceful. But, out of that peace, the reality of parenthood rang loudly.

As I beamed, his little body began to squirm. His head turned from one side to the other. His lip curled and he cried out. So, I did what any husband would do in that situation—I looked to my wife. Sadly, she was out cold.

I was a later-in-life child. I didn't grow up with babies—I *was* the baby! I was lost with what to do, so in an act of desperation, I stepped out into the hallway to look for a nurse. As I stood outside of the door to our room, his cry grew louder and the only thing I knew to do was to cry out myself, "Help!"

In times of trouble, people require rescue. Throughout the history of Israel, the cry of the nation was, "Who can save us in such times?" At the opening of Luke's gospel, the prophet Zechariah proclaimed that his son, John, would prepare the way for the coming Savior — Jesus, the Son of God, who would redeem Israel.

In chapter one of Luke's gospel, we are introduced to a priest named Zechariah. On a day in which he was called upon to burn incense in the temple, Zechariah was met by Gabriel, an angel of the Lord. After having scared Zechariah, Gabriel comforts him with a long-desired conformation, "Your prayer has been heard" (1:13). Zechariahs' wife Elizabeth, who had been barren for years, would bear him a son and he would be called great! As the events of Luke 1 unfold, we learn this promised son was John the Baptizer, the one who would "make ready for the Lord a people prepared" (1:17).

Verse 67 — The prophets of the Old Testament served as God's audible voice to His people. These messengers usually addressed the failure of God's people to follow Him. They also served at times to encourage Israel to be faithful despite difficult circumstances. The prophets would give them a glimpse of the promises and/or consequences of their actions and it was one way that God motivated His people to be resolute (see Numbers 11:25-26; 1 Samuel 10:10-11; Ezekiel 37). It's important to note this prophecy was the first in 400 years. The last came by way of the prophet Malachi.

When the Holy Spirit filled Zechariah, several Old Testament prophecies were brought to the surface. Mark Moore, in his first volume of the series, *The Chronological Life of Christ*, has this to say about the text in which we are studying:

"It sketches several prophecies which were fulfilled by the coming of Jesus and John: a. Redemption of Israel, v. 68. b. Horn of Salvation from the house of David, v. 69. c. Salvation from our enemies, v. 71. d. Completion of the promises made to the fathers, vv. 72-74. e. We would be able to serve God without fear, vv. 74-75. f. The forerunner of the Messiah, v. 76. g. Bring forgiveness of sins, v. 77. h. The light of God will shine on those in darkness, v. 78-79" (Moore, Mark E. *The Chronological Life of Christ Volume 1, From Glory to Galilee*. College Press Publishing Company, 1996).

Verse 69 — The phrase "horn of salvation" was used in the Old Testament as a reference to strength and specifically military force (see Psalm 75:4-5; 10; 2 Samuel 22:3). In our text, Zechariah is describing an influential figure whose purpose is to rescue and defend God's people rather than attack them.

Verses 71, 74 — We might notice how these verses echo the theme from the previous lesson from 2 Samuel 7:4-17.

Verse 76 — *for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.* Here we see a call back to Isaiah 40:3-5 (prepare the way). This preparation was a call to repentance (see Luke 3:1-6). Repentance is how God's people clear the obstacles and make a straight path for God to be present in and among them.

Verse 79 — *to guide our feet into the way of peace.* We've read the words "the way" several times in this lesson. It's interesting to note that "Followers of the Way" was the earliest term Christians used to describe themselves (see Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). Jesus showed them how to live obedient and pleasing lives to God, so those early Christians simply followed the Way (John 14:6).

Zechariah's son John would prepare the way for the Savior of all mankind. What a responsibility and a privilege! That charge was passed from John the Baptizer to the disciples, and ultimately to us. Jesus instructed His disciples to, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15-16). To this day, God's people are preparing the way. What a responsibility, and what a privilege!

Luke 2:1-16 ESV

Breaking News!

December 22, 2024

Background of Text — There is a story of legend in our household. A wild tale of sorts and depending on who you ask, some say it's a fable, others a fact. I suppose it's up to you the reader to decide.

One evening, two children begged their parents to sleep on the couches in the living room. Their parents knew better being that it was a school night, but it was the day before a holiday break and a spirit of generosity was in the air. A deal was struck that the children could do so, but if they didn't wake up at their alarm, they would have to pay the piper. The children did not wake up at their alarm.

After several attempts to wake them, the man of the house decided a louder alarm might do the trick. He queued up the stereo, climbed atop the coffee table, hit play on the remote, and proceeded to play air guitar in a fashion never seen before or since. The good news of another day was ushered in with the blissful sounds of an 80's guitar anthem!

In our text, God wakes the world with the good news of Jesus's birth, but in a way that only He would. Not to a group of dignitaries. Not with a month's long parade. Not with a trumpet that could be heard in all four corners of the globe. No, Luke tells us the message was given to some lowly shepherds just outside of a sleepy village that was literally a few miles away from the center of the ancient world. It's a type of prequel to His lowly entrance into Jerusalem some thirty-three years later.

Verse 1 — By an imperial order, all citizens of Rome were required to stand and be counted. This was for the sole purpose of assessing the revenue the state would have from tax monies. Each citizen was required to report to their hometown.

Verse 7 — Because the census was based on ancestry, it was likely that Mary and Joseph were staying with relatives in Bethlehem (verse 4). Unfortunate as it seems, their family's abode must have been filled as Luke records that they stayed in the only remaining space—their animal holdings.

***Verse 8* —** There is much debate as to when the Christ child was born. Proponents of the argument that His birth happened early in the calendar year, point to this verse. Typically, shepherds stayed out with their sheep during the lambing season, which would be early spring.

Verse 9 — Many times throughout the Old Testament, and here in the Nativity story, fear is the response of one seeing an angel (1:12, 29). The consistent reaction of fear throughout Scripture would have us believe that angels are intimidating. One can easily conclude these supernatural beings have a very powerful presence. Perhaps seeing an angel would remind us of how sinful and how finite we really are? That would be a cause for fear.

Verse 11 — ***For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior.*** From the start of his gospel, Luke does well to touch on all the messianic high points. He records, "Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David," (1:32). Later we read, "a Savior who is Christ the Lord" (2:11). This should serve to remind us that God is a God of promise. He always keeps His promises and in ways that we can't even request or comprehend. Paul writes, "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think…" (Ephesians 3:20).

Verses 17, 18 — A reoccurring theme throughout Luke, and Acts as well, is the principle of being a witness. It's the natural response to seeing or experiencing God at work, and it is our commission to do so as well. The act of witnessing to others the goodness of God, extends to disciple making, who themselves will serve as witnesses. Jesus was clear in His command to His disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

Verse 19 — Mary's response to her child's birth reminds us that God works above and below the surface of our lives. His work always has deeper levels of meaning and it often takes time and pondering for us to truly grasp what exactly He has done (see Psalm 119:15, 27, 148). Are we disciplined to meditate regularly about the wonderful works of God?

God has a long history of using shepherds in significant roles: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and Amos to name a few. Also, we might notice how frequently Scripture compares God to a shepherd (see Zechariah 11 for example). Using shepherds as witnesses here in the Nativity account shows the connection between Israel's past and how God choses to lift the lowly (Luke 1:52). Our God is notorious for using the little to make a big statement. In what ways can we make ourselves more available for God to use us to testify of His grace?

Luke 18:35-43 ESV

A Miracle in Jericho

December 29, 2024

Background of Text — Each summer when I was a child, my family would take a trip to Port St. Lucie, Florida, where my grandparents lived. One hot summer's day we went out on my grandfather's boat to enjoy the sights and sounds. After a while I had to visit the head, so I went below deck and shut the door behind me. Unbeknownst to me when I did that, the handle on the opposite side of the door fell off.

When I tried to leave, I was unsuccessful. So, I did what any other ten-year-old would do, trapped in an area the size of a closet on a sweltering July day—I panicked! I began to pound on the door and cry for help, which was to no avail. I proceeded to twist the doorknob every way I could, and again to no avail. Finally, I was able to get the porthole open, which was only about the size of a grapefruit, and began to yell. Thankfully someone finally heard my cries and freed me from my cell.

It's a sad but accepted truth that people who ask for help are sometimes silenced. I believe that's why the earthly ministry of Jesus was so powerful; He was a voice for the voiceless. In our text, when the crowds tried to silence the cries of a blind man, Jesus stopped to ask the man what He could do for him. What proceeded was another remarkable example of Jesus's love for humanity.

It is believed that the placement of this account in Luke's gospel is deliberate and strategic. Just prior to our text, we read where the disciples are "blind" to Jesus's real purpose on earth (Luke 18:31-34). This has led many to believe the verses that follow (verses 35-43) are not as much about the blind man being *physically* healed, as it is about our *seeing* how we are *spiritually* healed.

Verse 35 — Luke 17 and 18 record Jesus's last journey to Jerusalem. He travelled along the border between Samaria and Galilee, and our text begins with Jesus nearing Jericho. The road from Jericho is a winding uphill walk, about fifteen miles from Jerusalem.

Verses 38 — *And he cried out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"* The blind beggar rightly names Jesus "Son of David." In doing so he places himself under the authority of Jesus, in that Jesus is a Davidic heir. This serves as a fantastic example of what James writes:

> *Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded." (James 4:7-8)*

Verse 39 — *And those who were in front rebuked him, telling him to be silent.* In the first century, blindness was considered a judgment from God because of sin (see John 9:2). Given this perception, perhaps instinctively, the zealous crowd attempted to silence the man.

Verse 41 — *What do you want me to do for you?* The blind beggar could have taken Jesus's inquiry as a question of finance (see Acts 3:4-6). But instead, the question was asked to bring to light the man's true need. He was helpless, he was vulnerable, in need of rescue. What kind of questions can we ask of others to help them see their true need?

Verse 42 — It is important for us to understand, when Jesus says, "your faith has made you well" (see also Luke 8:48), He is referring to someone's belief in His ability, and not their belief that Jesus will do as they ask. Our faith is in God's strength, in His grace to save us, all the while accepting His sovereignty. We know that God can do whatever it is that we ask, but we ask that His will be done.

Verse 43 — As mentioned earlier, many believed blindness was a judgment handed down from God. So, this man receiving his sight would have been the equivalent of being rescued from God's judgment.

Verse 43 — *And all the people when they saw it, gave praise to God.* Here we see the contagiousness of witness. We who have experienced the goodness of God can't help but give praise to God. We can't help but tell everyone about His healing and His rescue. We testify to what we have witnessed and in doing so, those of the family of faith who hear, bear witness themselves. Telling of the goodness of our Lord gives honor upon honor to the one true God of the universe.

Church, I believe it's evident to most that we are living in a time where the world is crying out for help. Will we hear the cry, or will we try to silence it? I'm reminded of a passage written by the prophet Isaiah:

> *How beautiful upon the mountain are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Isaiah 52:7)*

We have the good news of peace, happiness, and salvation — that's the gospel! We live in the day where the Savior has come, and we are anxiously awaiting His return. As the new year approaches, let's be resolute to proclaim from the mountains that our God reigns!

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2025

Church Leaders Seminar .....January 9-10
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Contact: p2pm_office@yahoo.com

Florida Bible Conference ..... January 20-22
Kissimmee, FL
Contact: theCRA@thecra.org

Winter Worship & Workshop....February 10-13
Pigeon Forge, TN
Contact: barnabasohio@att.net

CRA Seminar..... May 1
Mason, OH
Contact: theCRA@thecra.org

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