

# The Baptist Paper

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# Hope & comfort

How to cope with grief, loss during holiday season, see story on pages 6–7

# Contents

**03 GUEST EDITORIAL**  
Christmas hope that puts broken pieces back together

**04 YOUR VOICE**  
Opinion pieces from readers and others related to faith and life

**06 HOPE & COMFORT**  
How to cope with grief, loss during holiday season

**07 WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS**  
Scriptures to comfort those in mourning

**08 INTERNATIONAL & NATIONAL**  
Headline news from across the U.S. and around the world



**MEDIA REVIEWS**  
Christmas children's books and New Year's devotional

**09 'WHAT WE KNOW BEST'**  
First person: The case for familiar Christmas carols

**10 GOD'S MISSION**  
24 ways to end 2024 by giving to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering

**11 'ALL NATIONS TO ALL NATIONS'**  
Missionary connecting, mobilizing churches in Brazil

**12 TRUSTING GOD**  
Ministry helps widows overcome loss, find purpose

**13 HEADLINE NEWS FROM STATES**  
Quick news nuggets from a variety of states across the nation

**15 THEOLOGY 101**  
Biblical theology for people in the pew — Salvation as sanctification

**16 SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS**  
Commentaries for Explore the Bible and Bible Studies for Life

**20 GUARD YOUR HEART AND MIND**  
Avoiding brain rot in a world full of distractions



**GEORGE BULLARD**  
will be back in January with fresh insights on strategies for associations to find success and maintain significance.

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Website: [thebaptistpaper.org](http://thebaptistpaper.org)  
Email: [news@thebaptistpaper.org](mailto:news@thebaptistpaper.org)  
or [subscribe@thebaptistpaper.org](mailto:subscribe@thebaptistpaper.org)

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**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**  
**Jennifer Davis Rash**

CONTENT EDITOR  
Shawn Hendricks

CONTENT PREPARATION  
Daniel Gilliland, Malinda McGill and Holly Smith

DESIGN AND PRODUCTION  
Lauren C. Grim

REGIONAL CONTRIBUTORS  
Gary Long, Mark Snowden  
and Lonnie Wilkey

ADVERTISING  
Susan Stevens and Pam Holt

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The crossword puzzle  
can be found on page 15.

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# GUEST EDITORIAL

*for this week's issue of The Baptist Paper*

*By Shawn Hendricks, Content Editor*

## Christmas hope that puts broken pieces back together

A familiar spotlight returned to the sky near my home in early December. The spotlight sits at the base of the newly rebuilt outdoor nativity scene on the property of First Baptist Church Hendersonville, Tennessee. The glow of the light was a welcomed sight after it suddenly went out a few weeks before Christmas last year, when about a dozen tornadoes hit the central part of the state.

Tornadoes snapped trees, powerlines and damaged homes and businesses — and at least six people lost their lives from the storm. Today, some businesses are still closed, and some homes remain damaged. The church's nativity scene was among many things destroyed. A church member who has since passed away had constructed the nativity out of wood, painted each piece white and decorated them with tinsel that sparkled at night.

While the destroyed nativity scene was a minor loss compared to the deadly destruction that night, it still serves as a reminder of how God restores broken things — and protects.

“A SIMPLE OUTDOOR NATIVITY SCENE MADE OF WOOD IS AMONG THE REMINDERS OF A GOD WHO PROVIDES HOPE AND SHELTER FOR A BROKEN PEOPLE. IT'S A HOPE THAT NO TORNADO OR ANY STORM CAN WIPE AWAY.”

On the night of the storm, 800 people had gathered in the church's auditorium for their annual Christmas program. I was planning to go that night but ended up seeking shelter in my house. While the storm rolled onto the church property, those inside also thankfully remained safe as a tornado narrowly missed the church building. Some in the area weren't as fortunate.

**Trusting when there are 'no answers'**

Pastor Bruce Chesser shared in a video the next day how times of crisis and tragedy don't often seem to make sense, but God has a plan. “There are times in our lives when we just have to trust the Lord,” he said. “It could be a car wreck, it could be disease, it could be the death of a

child. And there are no answers. There's no answer. Sometimes we just have to trust the Lord and say that He knows what He's doing.”

### Restoring broken pieces

A year later, on Dec. 3, Chesser posted a picture of the newly rebuilt nativity scene. He thanked the group of men who took the remnants of the old nativity and restored it. “Their hard work has given us a beautiful reminder of how God takes the broken pieces of our lives and puts them back together.”

Many others still continue to struggle to put the pieces of life together following a year

of more storms and worldwide conflict. Many survivors of the remnants of Hurricane Helene that hit the Southeast in September remain displaced in places like the mountains of North Carolina. Thankfully, Baptist Disaster Relief workers across the country have helped provide food and needed items to those who have lost homes. Churches continue to help distribute needed items to help people in the area stay warm as temperatures drop this month.

A simple outdoor nativity scene made of wood is among the reminders of a God who provides hope and shelter for a broken people. It's a hope that no tornado or any storm can wipe away.



Photo by Shawn Hendricks/The Baptist Paper

OPINION



# your voice

SHARE YOUR COMMENTS, LETTERS TO THE EDITOR, BLOG EXCERPTS, SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

By David L. Chancey  
davidchancey.com

## First person: Maximizing Christmas as a gospel opportunity

**C**hristmastime is here. What are you doing to lead your church or small group/Bible study to maximize the Christmas season? Will we have just another Christmas, or are we intentionally and strategically planning for gospel impact?

We cannot assume everyone knows what Christmas is about. Several years ago a study conducted by Lifeway Research revealed 91% of Americans celebrate Christmas, including atheists, agnostics, individuals claiming other religions and people designating no religious preference. Many celebrate the season but not necessarily the Savior. They have yet to meet Jesus.

Here are some ways to maximize the season as a gospel opportunity:

▶ **People are more open to invitations to worship at Christmas than any other time of year except Easter.** Study after study shows that if we invite, many will attend. Another Lifeway Research study presented respondents with nine “life moments” and asked, “Have you ever been more open to consider

matters of faith during any of the following times in your life?”

Of the nine options, “During the Christmas holiday season” received the highest response. When the gospel is presented and participants have a chance to respond, many will receive Jesus.

▶ **Christmas is a time to celebrate the truth that the Father sent His Son to be the Savior of the world.** Joyfully sing carols, play the music enthusiastically and tell the story of Jesus clearly and simply. Every Sunday is a celebration, but worship rises to a different dynamic during the Christmas season. Prayerfully plan meaningful worship experiences.

▶ **Christmas presents a platform to share good news in a bad news world.** People are fatigued by wars, politics, hurricanes and other tragedies. Let’s remind them the gospel is good news.

▶ **Christmas gives opportunities to share encouragement and comfort.** Not everyone is excited about this season. Some are facing their first Christmas without a loved one; some have had a hard year; some are dealing with serious illness. The first Christmas also was tough for many. Many families lost their child as King Herod ordered the slaying of every male under age 2 when he heard about the newborn King.

▶ **Christmas reminds us of God’s perfect plan and perfect**

**timing.** We need reminding that God’s ways are not our ways and His ways are often mysterious. Joseph did not understand what was happening with Mary, but he obeyed anyway (Matt. 1:20, 24). God’s timing is always perfect (Gal. 4:4–7).

▶ **Christmas can be a time to build corporate unity.** The church needs the spiritual enrichment, focus and unity Christmas worship brings. Focus solely on the Advent season.

▶ **Christmas gives a timely opportunity to teach and reinforce**

**basic theology:** The virgin birth, the incarnation, God’s faithfulness to keep His promises, God’s sovereignty, God’s presence (God with us), man’s condition that necessitated Jesus’ coming, God’s Gift (John 3:16), the cross and the empty tomb, Jesus’ coming again.

*EDITOR’S NOTE — David L. Chancey lives in Georgia and is author of “The Most Wonderful News You Can Hear: Proclaiming Glad Tidings at Christmas.”*



CHANCEY



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# Letters to the Editor

In recent weeks as we experienced lives being put back together in so many ways around Tampa, I was struck by something I took for granted previously — the sand.

Following the recent hurricane, sand could be found everywhere. It was inside homes, on the streets, in cars, inside kitchen cabinets, in and around pools, and the list goes on.

As per city regulations, the sand was collected and not allowed back on the beaches until it went through a cleaning procedure.

I decided to name it the “living sand” because the multiple machines traveling up and down the towns are uncovering people’s lives from the sand: photos, favorite toys and other personal items.

Who would have thought of sand as having so many stories to tell?

And then more stories surface from the people coming to pick up tree limbs and other debris such as furniture once used by families from all parts of life now piled up ready to be hauled off. So many stories stopped in time with nature taking its toll.

As I interacted with the numerous volunteers and power crews working to help our neighborhoods, I noticed how kind everyone was. I tried to help them by taking them water and thanking them.

When I saw the yellow shirts from the Baptist Disaster Relief group from Kentucky, I smiled knowing the DR story all too well thanks to the consistent cov-

erage provided by The Baptist Paper print newspaper and other state Baptist newspapers like The Alabama Baptist and Tennessee’s Baptist and Reflector.

Thank you for what you do to keep us informed and to share how God is working through His people in the everyday moments as well as when nature does its worst.

**Pam Holt**  
Tampa, Florida

The National Day of Prayer theme for 2024 is Lift Up the Word — Light Up the World.

To end the year ahead of Christmas, will you please share this prayer with your prayer team and with the persecuted Church in China, to Light Up China on Christmas Day?

**A prayer for boldness:**

Heavenly Father, we pray that You will stretch out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus, to Light Up China on Christmas Day with the Light of Christ to the 1.3 billion who live in spiritual darkness, and do not know Him. We also pray the news of these notable miracles by You will spread throughout China in every tribe, province, city and municipality — to give the persecuted church in China boldness to preach the gospel with the Christmas Story, for a great China harvest.

In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.  
Acts 4:16; 29–31

**Harry Gibbons**  
Seattle, Washington  
ChinaChristmasHarvest.com

“The memories and history of this building are something we all cherish,” said **Ricky Sowell**, pastor of First Baptist Church Abbeville, near Dothan, Alabama. “But we must remember that this building was not the church. This building was the place the church gathered. The people of God are still here and more importantly Jesus still reigns on His throne. So we are hurt because the place we loved to gather is gone, but we worship because God isn’t done with us yet.”

“In the last few decades, Christians have been obsessed with the what of politics: what candidates, what parties and what policies. Those do matter, but I don’t think there will be Christian agreement on those things,” said **Daryn Henry**, associate professor of Christian studies at the University of Virginia. “But there is a Christian consensus on a way of being in the world that comes out of the shape of the New Testament. Focusing initially on the fruit of the Spirit is a way to reorient

“OUTSTANDING PEOPLE HAVE ONE THING IN COMMON: AN ABSOLUTE SENSE OF MISSION.”

ZIG ZIGLAR, AUTHOR AND MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER

and re-center around a way of being in the American political sphere that should be common to Christians who read Galatians. It’s not about whether certain policies and trends are right or wrong, or whether I need to be related to this party or that candidate. It’s about Christian faithfulness — about having characters of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

“God will always be our wonderful and perfect Counselor, but two things can be true — you can love and follow Jesus and still struggle with mental health. Just as Jesus and the gospel are for everyone, therapy is for everyone,” said **Katherine Smith**, a licensed counselor with Living Well Counseling.

“I am no theologian. I am not a pastor or even a preacher, but I am a forgiven man,” writes **Duane “Dog” Chapman** in his book “Nine Lives and Counting: A Bounty Hunter’s Journey to Faith, Hope and Redemption.” “Once you confess sin and ask God to forgive you, it’s over. Done. Not guilty. This Dog’s been pardoned!”

While the Bible does not teach that we are born again because of good works, it does emphasize that life change is the greatest evidence that a person truly knows God.

Remaining in sin while following Jesus is much like remaining in a tempestuous sea with hopes of not drowning. Thus, the way of the cross is forsaking our old way of life, along with its wicked encumbrances, in order to follow the path of holiness. Just as earthly children inherit the nature and characteristics of their earthly parents, Christians will necessarily become more like our heavenly Father who is holy and righteous.

Those who are outside of Christ are by nature children of wrath who continually indulge in the desires of the flesh (Eph. 2:3). But those who experience salvation by grace

through faith become partakers of a divine nature whereby we escape the corruption of this world (2 Pet. 1:4).

All of this simply means that because God is holy, if we are pursuing Him, we too will become more and more holy. No wonder Jesus admonished us to let our light shine before others so that they will see our good works, dare I say our holy lives, and glorify our Father in heaven who is also holy (Matt. 5:16).

**Pastor Adam B. Dooley**  
Englewood Baptist Church  
Jackson, Tennessee

When trouble comes you need a refuge. A refuge is “a condition of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger or trouble.” Can you honestly say, “God is my refuge?” (Ps. 46:1–11).

**Franklin L. Kirksey**  
Robertsdale, Alabama

There are four primary unhealthy relationships which may exist between churches and pastors:

1. The pastor is the professional and the members are simply amateurs.
2. The pastor is a slave driver and the members are slaves.
3. The pastor is the performer and the members are merely spectators.
4. The pastor is number one and the members are number two — or less.

There are four primary healthy relationships which may exist between churches and pastors:

1. Both churches and pastors hold one another in high regard.
2. Both churches and pastors have mutual expectations of one another — a spiritually developing life, love and compassion for people, determination to have meaningful interpersonal relationships, etc.
3. Mutual support — not to him/them but with and for him/them.
4. Mutual service — the body of Christ respecting each other and working together to accomplish the ministry of Christ in our particular setting and beyond, with supreme allegiance given to the Head.

**Morris Murray Jr.**  
Jasper, Alabama

# Hope & comfort

By Denise George  
The Baptist Paper

## How to cope with grief, loss during holiday season

**T**he deaths of loved ones during the Christmas season can overshadow the holiday with sadness and grief.

When my father died unexpectedly at Christmas, our mailbox contained a confusing mixture of Christmas cards and sympathy cards. My family spent Christmas grieving his death and missing his presence.

### Bittersweet reminders

I felt the same way when my mother died recently at Christmastime, as if the festive spirit was entirely eclipsed by the grief of her absence. I realized that memories of past Christmases can become bittersweet reminders of

those we've loved and lost. Yet in simple and meaningful ways, we can support and minister to others who are grieving during the holiday season.

#### ► Remember the loved one

- As a family, visit the gravesite to honor the loved one.
- Make a donation or perform an act of kindness in the loved one's name.
- Talk about the loved one with family and friends, remembering special times and honoring the person's life.
- Create an ornament or decoration in memory of the loved one, such as a photo ornament or a decoration with their favorite colors or Scripture.

• Celebrate a peaceful, more reflective Christmas season that centers on gratitude for the person's memory and for those still present.

### Grieving differently

- **Come together as a family**
  - Allow space for each family member to grieve differently. Some may want to talk; others may want solitude and silence.
  - Spend time together focusing on Scripture readings that testify to God's love and comfort such as Psalm 34:18: "The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."
  - Worship together with church members or others, spending time in prayer.
- **How the church can minister**

- Offer special grief counseling sessions or grief support groups.
- Encourage church members to pray for grieving families; consider sending notes of encouragement; offer practical help like preparing meals.
- Preach on God's comfort for those in grief.
- Provide a list of comforting Scriptures to families in mourning.
- Organize a "Service of Re-

membrance" where families can share memories of loved ones.

- Stay in contact with the grieving — visit, send letters of love and encouragement or invite them to family gatherings.
- Provide child care for those who may need time alone to grieve and pray.
- Offer a time of special prayer before worship services for those dealing with loss.
- Include moments of quiet reflection and remembrance during Christmas services.
- Provide books written by Christian authors on coping with grief such as C.S. Lewis' "A Grief Observed," John Claypool's "Tracks of a Fellow Struggler" or Bob Terry's "Struggling Toward Hope."

### Coming together

The Christmas season can be a time of overwhelming grief for those who have lost loved ones, but by honoring their memories, coming together as families and receiving support from the church, those who grieve can find a sense of peace even amid their sorrow. Christ's birth brings hope and comfort, even in the darkest moments.

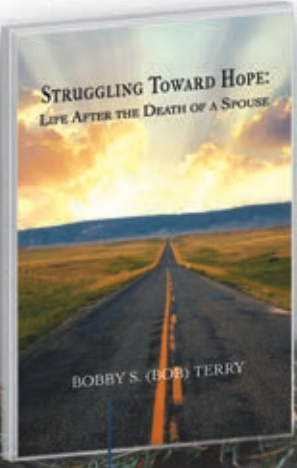
## Facing holiday grief?


### Struggling Toward Hope:

*Life After the Death of a Spouse*  
by Bobby S. (Bob) Terry

As a Christian minister Bob thought he understood grief. But when his first wife died from injuries suffered in an automobile accident, Bob learned the difference between studying grief academically and knowing grief personally. In this book, Bob provides practical tips and relates his own struggles about putting life back together after the death of a spouse.

Available at [Soncoastpublishing.com](http://Soncoastpublishing.com) or Amazon





“

**“THE LORD IS CLOSE TO THE BROKENHEARTED AND SAVES THOSE WHO ARE CRUSHED IN SPIRIT.”**

PSALM 34:18

# Scriptures

## — to comfort those in mourning —

### Lamentations 3:31–33

“For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though He brings grief, He will show compassion, so great is His unfailing love. For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.”

*Reassures us of God’s compassion and unfailing love, reminding us that grief is not the final word — God’s love and comfort will prevail.*

### Matthew 5:4

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

*Jesus reassures that those who grieve will receive comfort.*

### Revelation 21:4

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

*Gives hope that, in the end, God will remove all suffering and sorrow.*

### Psalms 23:4

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.”

*A reminder that God is our comfort, even in the darkest and most difficult times.*

### John 14:1–3

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in Me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you?”

*Jesus offers assurance that there is a place for us in God’s eternal home, bringing hope to those in grief.*

### 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14

“Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him.”

*Reminds believers that death is not the end, offering hope in the resurrection.*



Photo by Freepik

### 2 Corinthians 1:3–4

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.”

*God is a source of compassion and comfort, helping us bring comfort to others.*

### Romans 8:38–39

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

*Nothing, not even death, can separate us from God’s love.*

### Psalms 147:3

“He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.”

*Shows God’s tender care for those who are grieving, offering healing for the heart.*

### Isaiah 41:10

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

*God is with us, providing strength and holding us up during difficult times.*

# International & national headline news

## **Watchdogs cite registrations in report of growing repression in Azerbaijan**

Azerbaijan, host of a recent UN climate summit, faces criticism for human rights and religious freedom violations.

While promoting itself as a model of tolerance, watchdogs report escalating repression, with over 300 political prisoners, including religious activists, held under President Ilham Aliyev's government. Critics highlight mandatory religious group registration, targeting Muslim theologians and restrictions on Jehovah's Witnesses.

The country's actions in Nagorno-Karabakh, labeled "ethnic cleansing" by the EU, include alleged destruction of Armenian heritage sites. (Texas' Baptist Standard)

## **Data: Anxiety, uncertainty could be reason for recent surge in Bible sales**

Bible sales in the U.S. have surged 22% compared to last year, according to Circana BookScan data reported by The Wall Street Journal on Dec. 1. Nearly 14 million Bibles have been sold in 2023, with the total expected to surpass 2019's figure of 9.7 million.

The rise is attributed to heightened anxiety and uncertainty stemming from ongoing global conflicts, economic instability, natural disasters and a contentious presidential election.

Jeff Crosby, president of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, said societal fears — ranging from artificial intelligence to political turmoil — are driving people to seek reassurance and hope. (The Baptist Paper)

## **24 Christians killed, 9 abducted in recent attacks in Nigeria**

Recent attacks in Nigeria have left 24 Christians dead and nine abducted, highlighting the nation's ongoing persecution of believers. According to Christian Daily International and Morning Star News, Nigeria continues to lead globally in faith-based killings and kidnappings.

In Benue State, suspected Fulani herdsmen killed six Christians in Ayilomo village Nov. 1–2 and 15 in Anyiin village Oct. 30. Similar attacks

in Plateau State claimed three lives, including a Nov. 3 ambush in Daika village and an Oct. 27 assault in Hwollaza village, where a mother and her adult son were killed.

In Kaduna State, four Christians were abducted Nov. 1 from Mai-Iddo and Arikon villages, while four women and a child were kidnapped Oct. 17 in Mai-Iddo. (The Baptist Paper)

## **Almost half of Americans plan to attend Christmas church services**

A recent Lifeway Research study reveals that 47% of Americans plan to attend church during the Christmas season, while 48% typically do not and 5% are uncertain.

Faith is the primary motivation for attendees, with 60% honoring Jesus during the holiday. Others cite tradition (16%), family connections (15%) or embracing the holiday spirit (8%).

Frequent churchgoers are most likely to attend, with 95% of those attending multiple times a week joining Christmas services. Protestants (57%) and Catholics (56%) are more likely to attend than the religiously unaffiliated, of whom only 21% typically participate.

However, 56% of non-attendees say they might join a service if invited, especially Catholics (71%) and Protestants (65%). Full details are available at [research.lifeway.com](https://research.lifeway.com). (Lifeway)

## **Christians killed in fire, another suffers after acid attack in Uganda**

In Uganda's Namutumba district, Pastor Weere Mukisa, 30; his wife Annet Namugaya, 25; and their daughters, ages 7 and 4, were killed in October when their home in Kibale village was set on fire. The attack followed Mukisa's evangelism efforts, which led three Muslims to convert to Christianity.



Photo courtesy of Morning Star News

Police are investigating the suspects, according to Morning Star News.

In a separate incident, Hidaaya Nabafa, 27, was hospitalized after her husband assaulted her and poured battery acid on her. Nabafa, a mother of three living in Bugiri district, converted to Christianity the month prior and may require reconstructive surgery. (The Baptist Paper)

## **Oxford University Press picks 'Brain rot' as 2024 Word of the Year**

Oxford University Press has named "brain rot" as its 2024 Word of the Year, marking the first time a two-word phrase won. Selected through a public vote of 37,000 participants, the term reflects growing societal concerns about the mental impact of overconsuming trivial online content, particularly on social media platforms like TikTok. Defined as the deterioration of mental or intellectual health due to low-quality content, "brain rot" saw a 230% rise in usage from 2023 to 2024. (The Baptist Paper)

## **Chinese police detain worshippers, jail church's pastor after baptisms**

Police in China disrupted a baptism service Oct. 15 in Zhenxiong, Yunnan province, detaining all attendees and jailing the church's pastor, according to rights group ChinaAid. The raid occurred as 13 new believers, most over 70 years old, completed their baptisms.



Photo courtesy of ChinaAid

More than 20 officers confiscated phones, searched attendees and took around 30 worshippers to the Zhenxiong County Public Security Bureau.

Elderly attendees were held until midnight, receiving only minimal provisions after repeated requests. (The Baptist Paper)

## **Pakistani teen returned to parents after kidnapping, forced conversion**

A teenage Christian girl who was reportedly kidnapped, raped and forced to convert to Islam and marry her captor has been returned to her parents.

The court decision of Oct. 25 removed custody of a 16-year-old girl from her abductor and gave it to her parents, according to media sources Christian Daily International and Morning Star News. The captor and two accomplices allegedly kidnapped the girl from Chak No. 126-GB Sheroana in Pakistan's Punjab province in September.

Because the abductor lives in the same village as the girl, her family is considering a plan to relocate her, said Asher Sarfraz of Christians True Spirit. (The Baptist Paper)



# ‘What we know best’

By Justin Wainscott  
Tennessee's Baptist and Reflector

## First person: The case for familiar Christmas carols

**W**hy should we prioritize the singing of familiar Christmas carols in our churches?

If your church already prioritizes the singing of familiar carols, then the following reasons can serve as reminders as to why to continue.

If your church doesn't highlight the familiar carols over all other Christmas music, then I hope these reasons will help you see the need to do so.

Prioritize the singing of familiar carols for:

**1. The sake of theology.** Our familiar carols contain some of the best examples of sound theology expressed in beautiful poetry and set to memorable music.

The tradition of English hymnody arguably comes to its Christological climax in our Christmas carols. Why would we not want to put such well-crafted examples of truth on people's lips? Why would we neglect to sing the theology of the incarnation or the theology of the virgin birth or the theology of salvation in ways that are sound to the soul and sweet to the ear?

**2. The sake of unity.** Singing familiar carols that English-speaking Christians have been singing for centuries unites us to our past, and it also unites us to Christians from other Baptist churches and even other denominations.

Granted, the days of all of us singing out of the same hymnal are long gone, but that doesn't mean we can't still have a shared collection of songs to sing together at this significant season of the year.

This becomes all the more important when you consider that church



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Baptist Paper

members' extended families will likely be visiting your church during this season. Why would we not, as much as possible, give people an opportunity to demonstrate their Christian unity by singing from our shared collection of familiar carols?

**3. The sake of quality.** There is a reason why our most beloved Christmas carols have stood the test of time. Their poetic and musical quality are

such that they remain relevant and singable hundreds of years after they were written. And since we only get to sing Advent and Christmas songs at the end of the year, shouldn't we prioritize the best of such songs?

**4. The sake of congregational singing.** When it comes to congregational singing, we sing best what we know best. And there are few songs

congregations know better than the familiar carols they have been singing all their lives. Why wouldn't we want to hear the saints sing out loud and strong about the Savior's birth by giving them opportunity to sing some of those songs they know best?

**5. The sake of believers.** During familiar occasions and celebrations (such as Advent and Christmas), believers want

to sing songs they know and are accustomed to singing during such occasions. It is part of the way they celebrate and mark the seasons.

And believe me, they are going to sing those carols anyway — whether it's on their own or in the church. Why cause them to lament the fact that they don't get to sing them in church?

**6. The sake of children.** Our children need to be taught these carols — for the sake of their salvation and sanctification, but also so that these carols are preserved and passed on to the coming generations.

Thankfully, many Christian parents are already teaching these carols to their children and singing them at home. Why would the church not want to cooperate with them and partner with them in helping reinforce what these children are hearing at home? Isn't it a beautiful sight to see a child beaming with joy because they get to sing in church what they've been singing at home?

Why would we want to deprive children of that opportunity during this season of the year?

**7. The sake of unbelievers.** Whether we realize it or not, these familiar carols may be the only church songs that unbelievers today already know. It is unlikely they will be familiar with any other song we might sing, but there is a good chance they will be familiar with well-known Christmas carols.

Why not sing songs they know and recognize — songs that proclaim the very truths we want to communicate and celebrate at this season of the year?

Some unbelievers may even show up to our churches hoping to hear and sing those very songs. Why would we want to prevent them from having that opportunity?

For these reasons (and many more), I offer this plea to prioritize the singing of familiar carols in your church during the Christmas season.

*EDITOR'S NOTE — This story was originally published by Baptist and Reflector.*

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# God's mission

By Chuck Lawless  
chucklawless.com

## 24 ways to end 2024 by giving to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering

If you are a Southern Baptist reader, you probably know that we're in the season of giving to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions. Our goal this year is to raise \$205 million dollars, so I'm publishing my 24 ways to consider giving to the offering in 2024. And even if you're not a Southern Baptist, maybe these simple ideas will help you think about gifts you might give to missions this year:

**1. Decide to prayerfully give until your faith is genuinely stretched.** Many of us give only out of our excess. Give this year — perhaps following one of the following ideas — until you're forced to trust Him to meet your remaining needs.

**2. Give to God's mission the equivalent of the dollars** — plus at least one dollar more — that you plan to spend for Christmas presents. Spend some dollars on eternity.

### Give sacrificially

**3. Give 5¢, 10¢, 25¢, 50¢, 75¢, \$1.00 or more per unreached people group (7,000 groups remain unreached).** That would mean \$350, \$700, \$1,750, \$3,500, \$5,250 or \$7,000. The sacrifice might be steep, but billions still need to hear.

**4. Instead of giving gifts, give Lottie Moon Christmas gifts in honor of someone you love.**

**5. Give \$10, \$25, \$50, \$100 or more for every year you've been a Christian.** I've been a believer for 50 years, so \$100 per year would mean \$5,000 for this offering. Even if I gave multiple times that amount, though, I could still never match what God gave for me.

**6. Let the Word motivate you to give.** Read, for example, the story of the cross in the gospels. When we read and hear the Word, we really



IMB photo

A canoe ferries passengers across a river to a remote island in southern Senegal.

have no other option but to give.

**7. Give sacrificially in honor of the one who shared Christ with you.** Give because you have been one of the privileged ones to hear. I'm ever grateful for my 12-year-old friend, Randy Richards, who told me about Jesus.

**8. Remember your largest gift given to ANY need — then add to that amount.** Give more to Lottie Moon than you've ever given.

**9. Give a certain percentage of your church's Lottie Moon goal.** For example, if you give 10% of the goal and nine others join you, your church will have met its goal.

**10. Train your children to give their allowance to missions this season.** The dollars may be few, but the missions DNA you're developing in the next generation will pay long-term dividends.

**11. Give to cover the cost of keeping a missionary on the field for a certain number of days.** The daily cost is approximately \$211;

use that figure, and multiply it times the number of days you will cover.

**12. Give sacrificially in honor of a veteran, retired missionary.** These folks will always be missionaries who want to get the gospel to those who've never heard. Honor them by supporting that work.

**13. Fast for one meal per per day between now and Christmas,** and donate the amount you saved.

### Privileged to support

**14. Read or listen to missionary stories.** We're privileged to support brothers and sisters who are giving their lives for God.

**15. Give 10¢, 25¢, 50¢, \$1 or more per unengaged, unreached people group (3,100 groups remain unengaged and unreached).** The IMB is seeking to send 300 young men and women called Project 3000 "Explorers" to find and research these groups by 2026.

**16. Challenge your church small group to reach a combined goal**

**for Lottie Moon.** Push one another to give, and help each other follow through with the commitment.

**17. Match your monthly gift to your church.** Of course, I'm assuming here that you give well to support your church. If so, do the same for the LMCO. If not, commit to increasing both.

### Sell some 'stuff'

**18. Sell some "stuff," and give the funds to the nations.** Many of us have much more "stuff" than we will ever need.

**19. Set up a recurring monthly gift to the LMCO.** By giving this way, you can spread your giving through the entire year.

**20. Give \$10, \$25, \$50, \$100 or more for every year that Lottie Moon served in China.** She served for 39 years, so multiply the numbers to determine your gift.

**21. Give with a specific need in mind.** For example, giving \$200 will allow for the production of two Bible story videos for deaf persons in Central Asia. You can find more needs at [imb.org/give/projects](http://imb.org/give/projects).

**22. Give \$100 for every copy of the Bible you have in your home.** Most of us have more Bibles than people in our houses — while some of the world is still waiting for the Word in their language.

**23. If your church does not collect the Lottie Moon offering, go ahead and give personally now via this link** — [imb.org/generosity/lottie-moon-christmas-offering](http://imb.org/generosity/lottie-moon-christmas-offering).

**24. Ask the Lord to guide you, and let Him fill in your blank check.** My guess is He'll challenge you toward sacrifice.

*EDITOR'S NOTE — This story was originally published by [chucklawless.com](http://chucklawless.com).*

# 'ALL NATIONS TO ALL NATIONS'

By International Mission Board staff

## Missionary connecting, mobilizing churches in Brazil

**D**anilo Miranda moved hurriedly through the Rio de Janeiro airport. He was on his way across the world to attend a Global Senders Forum.

The conference highlighted the International Mission Board's and other sending organizations' commitment to globalization. It was a fitting conference for the IMB missionary who is originally from Brazil. Danilo's ministry in Brazil has been focused on mobilizing the church in Brazil to fulfill the Revelation 7:9 vision.

The unexpected blessing of hurrying through the airport that day was seeing his friend, a newly commissioned Brazilian missionary headed to Africa.

The new missionary greeted Danilo, and they embraced before praying together.

Danilo reflected with joy, thinking about his friend who is headed to Africa as a global missionary partner on an IMB team, largely because of Danilo's encouragement and training.

### Cross-cultural teams

At the Global Senders Forum, Danilo met with leaders from Africa. He told them about another friend who wanted to take the gospel to the least reached in their region, just as others through Africans on Mission are preparing for ministry on other continents.



IMB photo

Danilo Miranda (left), a Brazilian who serves with the IMB, works to partner Brazilian missionaries with IMB missionary teams around the world.

"That's our role — to connect," Danilo said, sharing multiple stories like the one above, where God orchestrated encounters that developed into productive, mutually beneficial, relationships.

Catherine, Danilo's wife who grew up as an IMB missionary kid in Brazil, explained, "We see how important it is to have these cross-cultural teams working together.

"It reflects the body of Christ to the world," she said.

"And it teaches us so much about working with people who are different from us but have the same

faith and the same goal of reaching the lost and starting healthy churches."

### Passion for globalization

This passion for globalization started in Danilo when he was just a teenager and discipled by IMB missionary Mark Johnson.

After seminary in the U.S., he and Catherine returned to Brazil to work among Indigenous peoples in Brazil.

In his current work, Danilo spends time in churches and with the Brazilian Baptist conventions,

training others to be healthy senders. He knows the work requires partnership and unity to carry out the Great Commission. That means "all nations to all nations."

In Rio, he connects easily with other Brazilians while keeping a focus on the lost in the uttermost parts of the world.

Whether he's talking with students, young pastors or families considering a call to leave Brazil for the sake of the gospel, Danilo leads them to consider how God might use them to spread the gospel.

For many, the time is right to learn a new language, travel to unfamiliar lands and bring the gospel to people who have never heard.

### Ways to pray

► Pray for the Mirandas as they walk alongside potential global missionary partners and prepare them to go.

► Pray for the local churches the Mirandas partner with.

► Pray these churches will grow into healthy sending churches.

► Thank God for the investment Mark Johnson made in Danilo Miranda's life.

► Ask God to send more mentors who will invest in new missionaries.

*EDITOR'S NOTE — This story was originally published by the International Mission Board.*

# Trusting God

By Tamela Turbeville

Texas' Baptist Standard and WMU's Missions Mosaic

## Ministry helps widows overcome loss, find purpose

**W**hen the casseroles are gone and friends and family wave goodbye, the woman who has lost her husband now faces the unknown. From that moment forward, a widow must tread through each day alone, facing unfamiliar emotions and situations.

Becoming a widow can be a time filled with grief, fear and anxiety, and it often feels as though no one can understand or help.

Widows find themselves asking so many questions. What is my purpose? What does the future hold? What does being a widow mean?

Beth Campbell, Texas Woman's Missionary Union communications consultant and the Mary Hill Davis Offering for Texas Missions project manager, found herself asking similar questions during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Her husband Rex developed COVID-19 and had to be hospitalized. Due to regulations at the time, when Rex took his last breath, his wife could not be with him.

Snow fell as she sat in her car while their daughter-in-law, an occupational therapist at the hospital, held the phone to her husband's ear as he slipped away.

### Leaning on God's plan

Stunned by the swiftness of what had happened over the prior 10 days, Beth Campbell said aloud to God: "I don't understand, but I know you have a purpose and a plan. You are present and faithful."

Through her grief, she clung to the promise of Psalm 119:50, "My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life." Since her life as a wife suddenly was over, she began to ask God to point her



Photo courtesy of Baptist Standard/WMU

Beth Campbell (left) and her friends Phyllis Brower (center) and Connie Hamilton launched Overcomers at First Baptist Church Grand Prairie, Texas, a ministry that encourages widows to overcome fear, anxiety, loneliness, doubt, adversity and worries about how to provide for themselves.

toward a new goal, and she patiently waited for directions.

"I have learned to be patient ... waiting for God to reveal His purpose and plan, waiting to be ready to receive it," she said.

She knew God intended her to work somehow with widows.

Widowed friends joined her in prayer to discover God's plan. In October 2021, they sensed it taking shape and becoming clear.

Seven months later, Campbell and her friends Phyllis Brower and Connie Hamilton began Overcomers.

Living with their grief but filled with excitement, the three women unveiled a ministry that would focus on encouraging widows to overcome fear, anxiety, loneliness, doubt, ad-

versity and worries about how to provide for themselves — all concerns widows face every day. Overcomers would be a community of women facing widowhood with confidence and grace.

Eighteen women came to the first meeting. Today, Campbell said, the ministry has grown beyond her church, First Baptist Church Grand Prairie.

"It is from and of the Lord. It is an affirmation of His presence and faithfulness while being patient in affliction," she said.

One member named Lisa, who was widowed at 40, said, "It is really nice to be in a room full of women who 'get it,' who understand the heartbreak, the loneliness, the trials

and the challenges that come from this journey we are on."

Another woman, Martha, said: "I have come to realize that no matter how long your spouse has been gone, God can use grief in ways that I never thought possible."

A typical two-hour Overcomers meeting includes games and activities, lunch, work on a missions project, a devotion and prayer. The members also enjoy excursions like a trip through the bluebonnet trails and a visit to a local museum.

Education and awareness are also part of the meetings, with members receiving information from experts about topics such as personal safety and making and updating a will.

Overcomers helps other ministries through projects and donations. It partners with Isaiah 117 House, a foster care support ministry, by donating gift cards and hygiene products and making blankets for the children. The group also participates in Samaritan's Purse's Operation Christmas Child by assisting the church with shoeboxes.

### Consistent ministry

Beth's pastor, Bill Skaar, said: "The Overcomers ministry helps our church to minister far more effectively to our widows with a consistent ministry focused exclusively on them."

*EDITOR'S NOTE — This story was previously published by Baptist Standard (Texas). Tamela Turbeville is a freelance writer, author and director of a Christ-focused pro-life pregnancy center in Arkansas. An expanded version of this article originally appeared in the November 2024 issue of Missions Mosaic. It is republished with permission. Visit [wmu.com](http://wmu.com) for more information.*

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# Headline news

## from the states

### Arkansas

Hillcrest Community Church in Little Rock celebrated Nations Sunday on Oct. 27, highlighting God's global work and the church's diverse congregation.

The service aimed to celebrate what God has done and to pray for continued outreach. Sarah Bowen, communications/ministry coordinator, shared that the church's multicultural environment offers a glimpse of what heaven will be like, with members representing Indian, African, Arabic, Hispanic and other communities.

Bowen emphasized the church's unique position to connect with these communities, build relationships and share the gospel.

The service also included prayers for the church's international missions partnerships, with a focus on their impact and the continued spread of the gospel. (Arkansas Baptist News)

### Georgia

Hillcrest Ministry Resource Center in Columbus exemplifies faith in action, providing essential services to those in need while sharing the gospel of Christ. The ministry offers food,



Photo courtesy of The Christian Index

clothing and limited assistance for rent, lodging and utilities to the disadvantaged, guided by the mission of Psalm 82:3-5 to serve the oppressed and rescue the poor.

Since David Lix became the full-time ministry resource director in May 2023, the center has seen thousands of individuals benefit from its services, with 273 people coming to faith through its outreach efforts.

Volunteers play a crucial role in sorting and presenting donations from 47 local Baptist churches.

Lix's mobile ministry also reaches the underserved, resulting in 73 additional conversions. Last year, the center provided Christmas gifts and saw 44 adults and children saved. (Georgia's The Christian Index)

### Illinois

Jeff Iorg, president and CEO of the SBC Executive Committee, spoke at the Illinois Baptist State Association annual meeting on Nov. 13, addressing challenges facing Southern Baptists. He cautioned that the spirit of cooperation is



Photo courtesy of Illinois Baptist

a prominent role in the Southern Baptist Convention, highlighting the denomination's commitment to the Great Commission and the Great Commandment. (Illinois Baptist)

### Kentucky

When a Sunday School class at Kuttawa First Baptist Church learned of a need for Christmas stockings at a local nonprofit, they sprang into action. Led by Vickie Gray, the class quickly organized a sewing party, producing over 200 stockings in just two workdays.

Seven women, including five church members, participated by sewing, cutting patterns and ironing. When the group found the original destination didn't need assistance at the time, they redirected their efforts to ensure the stockings were delivered to another organization in need.

Pastor Kyle Franklin praised the congregation's missions-driven spirit and their broader passion for helping others. (Kentucky Today)

### Missouri

Pat's Saturday Sew Day, a quilt ministry at Grover Park Baptist Church in Warrensburg, has created and donated 277 quilts in less than two years, touching the lives of many at the Missouri Baptist Children's Home.

The ministry started as a quilting club in 2015 and later evolved into a mission in 2022 when leaders Pat Breon and Shirley Moore felt called to help children in need. The group now provides quilts to MBCH facilities, including maternity and baby quilts, for children and unwed mothers. (Missouri's The Pathway)

### New Mexico

Eleven volunteers from nine different churches, alongside five Baptist Convention of New Mexico staff members, gathered to prepare church resource packets for the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions.

The packets, containing prayer guides, donation envelopes and posters, will be distributed to churches across New Mexico. When Melissa

under threat, both from external critics and internal divisiveness, fueled by selfishness and self-promotion.

Iorg reflected on his journey, from a teenager in an unsaved family to

Lamb, executive director of New Mexico WMU, reached out to women passionate about missions, 11 volunteers responded, including several members of the New Mexico WMU executive board and an International Mission Board missionary.

The group, the largest Lamb has ever seen for any of the BCNM's major offerings, also assists in preparing materials for the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering and the State Missions Offering. (Baptist New Mexican)

### Tennessee

Six Greene County families displaced by Hurricane Helene are back in their homes thanks to a rapid rebuilding effort led by First Baptist Church Greeneville, Aidnet, the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board and Grace Baptist Church of Springfield.

The project, originally planned to rebuild five homes in five days, expanded to six homes in under four days.

More than 100 volunteers, including skilled contractors, tackled tasks from plumbing to dry-wall. Aidnet, a nonprofit aiding disaster victims, selected the homes, with costs shared by the participating organizations.

Families like the Tompkins, who lost everything to flooding, expressed deep gratitude. "The community came together to take care of us," said Dennis Tompkins.

This effort is part of TBMB's larger "Arise and Build" initiative addressing over 950 storm-damaged homes in northeast Tennessee. (Tennessee's Baptist and Reflector)

### Texas

Joy Fenner, a trailblazing Baptist missionary and leader, died Nov. 29 in Dallas at age 89. Fenner made history as the first woman elected president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and served two decades as executive director-treasurer of the Woman's Missionary Union of Texas.

Fenner grew up in East Texas, studied at Paris Junior College and East Texas Baptist College, and began her career as secretary at First Baptist Church Marshall. She later became state director of the Girl's Auxiliary (now Girls in Action) for Texas WMU.

Fenner and her husband, Charlie, served as Southern Baptist missionaries in Fukuoka, Japan, from 1966 to 1980. (Texas' Baptist Standard)



FENNER



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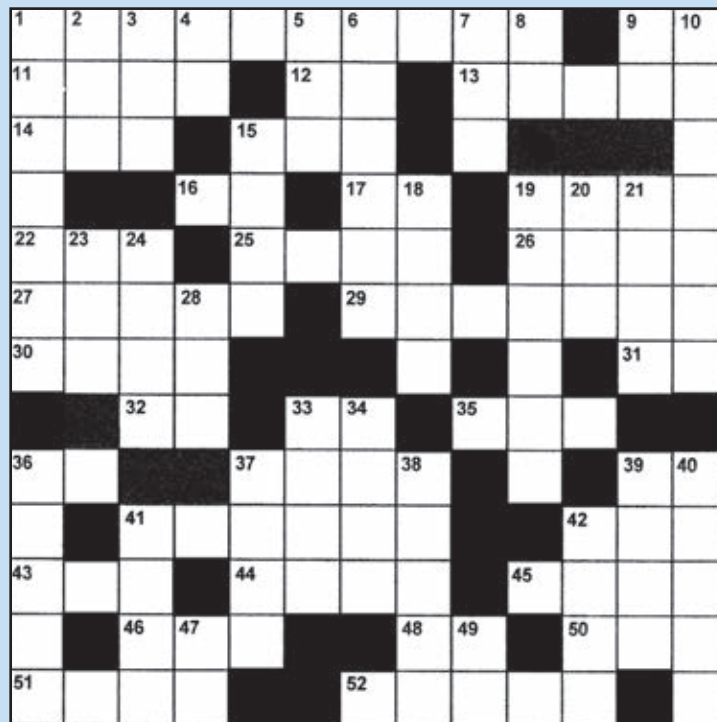
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# CHRISTIAN CROSSWORD

## ACROSS

1. Having to do with the Bible.
9. There \_\_\_ none good but one. (Mark 10:18)
11. The \_\_\_ of March.
12. \_\_\_ the money.
13. To utilize. (2 words.)
14. 1,400 in Roman numerals.
15. To drift off to sleep.
16. Your children ... received \_\_\_ correction. (Jer. 2:30)
17. Old Testament. (abbr.)
19. Whom the Father will \_\_\_ in my name. (John 14:26)
22. They \_\_\_ go the man. (Judg. 1:25)
25. Art not thou a \_\_\_? (2 Sam. 15:27)
26. One of the Great Lakes.
27. They came to him from \_\_\_ quarter. (Mark 1:45)
29. Paul, a \_\_\_ of Jesus Christ. (Rom. 1:1)
30. To raise a child.
31. Sound of satisfaction.
32. Manuscript. (abbr.)
33. Dad.
35. The harvest is the \_\_\_ of the world. (Matt. 13:39)
36. \_\_\_ Abram departed. (Gen. 12:4)
37. The one who gets to the finish line first \_\_\_ the prize.
39. Alternating Current. (abbr.)
41. Israel assembled together at \_\_\_ . (Josh. 18:1)
42. Policeman's Benevolent Association (abbr.)
43. A tall, flightless bird.
44. Former talk-show host.
45. I will come down and \_\_\_ with thee. (Num. 11:17)
46. Hear my \_\_\_, O God. (Ps. 61:1)
48. They filled them \_\_\_



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18. "Star \_\_\_."
  19. Fives, sixes and \_\_\_.
  20. Equal Rights Amendment. (abbr.)
  21. \_\_\_, Pinta and Santa Maria.
  23. Adam's wife.
  24. Go, \_\_\_, go!
  28. Railroads. (abbr.)
  33. I will even make the \_\_\_ for fire great. (Ezek. 24:9)
  34. Most-quoted author in the world. (abbr.)
  36. He made the pure incense of \_\_\_ spices. (Ex. 37:29)
  37. Skilled at gaining an advantage.
  38. All the people shall \_\_\_. (Josh. 6:5)
  39. For God is \_\_\_ to make him stand. (Rom. 14:4)
  40. They bake unleavened \_\_\_ of the dough. (Ex. 12:39)
  41. He made him to \_\_\_ honey out of the rock. (Deut. 32:13)
  42. As the flower of the grass he shall \_\_\_ away. (James 1:10)
  47. About. (abbr.)
  49. Dad.
- to the brim. (John 2:7)
50. Ye shall not \_\_\_ me henceforth. (Matt. 23:39)
51. To \_\_\_ away our sins. (1 John 3:5)
52. A crown of twelve \_\_\_ (Rev. 12:1)

## DOWN

1. Less complex.
2. Centers for Disease Control. (abbr.)
3. God led ... through the way of the ... \_\_\_ sea. (Ex. 13:18)
4. God \_\_\_ a Spirit. (John 4:24)
5. Also.
6. Does, then \_\_\_.
7. I took the little book ... and \_\_\_ it up. (Rev. 10:10)
8. And, \_\_\_, the heavens were opened. (Matt. 3:16)
9. God \_\_\_ my strength and power. (2 Sam. 22:33)
10. And \_\_\_ rain on the just and on the unjust. (Matt. 5:45)
15. Someone who can't mind his or her own business is \_\_\_.

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

# Theology 101: Salvation as sanctification

## BIBLICAL THEOLOGY FOR PEOPLE IN THE PEW

By Jerry Batson, Th.D.  
The Alabama Baptist

For the past few weeks Theology 101 has given attention to various ways by which we might understand the biblical teaching about salvation. Drawing from a variety of common analogies, we have seen the onset of one's Christian experience in terms of spiritual birth, adoption, redemption, conversion, justification, reconciliation and forgiveness. These truths all primarily address the beginning point of salvation.

These are instantaneous actions of God on our behalf as we trust Christ as Savior. However, we are keenly aware that there is more to being a Christian than the starting point, as blessed as that occasion is. This week we move on to think of salvation.

The theological term for the progression of the Christian life is "sanctification."

### Continual cleansing

Just as the beginning of the Christian life involves the forgiveness of sins, so its progress involves continual or repeated confession and cleansing of our sins. Thus, the reality of forgiveness of sins is a necessary link between the onset of and our progress in salvation. From the beginning of a Christian conversion experience we have been delivered from the eternal consequences of sin, we need to be repeatedly or continually cleansed and delivered from sin's power.

First John 1:9 says, "If we (Christians all) confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." While our eternal relationship with God has

been settled since conversion, our ongoing fellowship with Him requires regular confession of sins.

### Sanctification

The goal of sanctification might be viewed as living a life of meaningful fellowship within a secure relationship.

In light of this, we could also say that sanctification is the process of our cooperation with God's ongoing or progressive work in freeing us from the practice of sin, which enables us to become increasingly more like Christ.

We might also think of sanctification as the process of spiritual growth in which accredited righteousness becomes actual righteousness. Said yet another way, we could speak of sanctification as the

process by which imputed righteousness that has been credited to us at conversion gradually becomes imparted righteousness that shows up in conduct, outlook, actions and attitudes.

The growth in likeness to Christ does not happen as a smooth upward progression.

Rather, we find that it occurs in "starts and fits" in which we deal with struggles, lapses, regressions, omissions, inconsistencies and other assorted failures that are interspersed with seasons of revival, renewal, cleansing and rededication.

*EDITOR'S NOTE — Jerry Batson is a retired Alabama Baptist pastor who also has served as associate dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University and professor of several schools of religion during his career.*



# Explore the Bible

## LESSONS



By Mark Rathel

Rathel is pastor of Friendship Baptist Church in Defuniak Springs, Florida.

FOR DECEMBER 22

### DELIVERED FROM SIN Luke 1:26–38

We are approaching the time of the 2024 celebration of the birth of our Lord Jesus. We need this reminder because many societal pressures entice us to neglect the true message of Christmas — that God sent Jesus to deliver people from sin by defeating Satan and restoring the relationship between sinful humans and a holy God.

During this season of the year the greatest gift we can give someone is the message of Jesus as the only Savior of the world.

#### Favor (26–30)

God sent an angel named Gabriel to Nazareth with an important message for all the world and human history. The name Gabriel means “strong man of God.”

By application, any believer can be a strong person of God during our upcoming Christmas celebration by communicating the good news of the birth of the only Savior.

The recipient of the heavenly message was a lowly virgin named Mary. The angel declared God’s favor in Mary’s life due to the presence of God in her life. The Lord was with her, and the presence of God also resides within each believer today.

The Christmas message proclaims that people may have favor with God because of the reason Jesus came to earth — to deal with our sin problem.

God is always with us as God was with Mary.

#### Announcement (31–33)

Gabriel communicated to Mary the name she was to give her son — Jesus. The name “Jesus” comes from the Hebrew name “Joshua.”

It means “savior,” “deliverer” or “God saves.” The very name of Jesus communicates that God sent His Son to earth on a mission.

Jesus would be recognized as great and known as the Son of the Most High — a title of deity. Although the title “Messiah” does not occur in this passage, Jesus will occupy the throne of David. He will reign over God’s people forever, and His Kingdom will have no end.

#### Virgin Birth (34–38)

Many liberal New Testament scholars question the virginal conception of Jesus. Mary, however, was actually the first person to question it. “How can this be, since I have not had sexual relations with a man?”

Gabriel answered her question. “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.” In other words, what is impossible from a human perspective is made possible by the Holy Spirit.

The term “overshadow” occurs in the Old Testament referring to the Shekinah glory (or tented presence of God) in the tabernacle (Ex. 40:35).

Notice the twofold description of Mary’s Son. Mary’s Son will be holy and will be called the Son of God.

The angel reminded Mary of her relative Elizabeth who experienced a miracle different from virginal conception but a conception foretold by God’s servants. Elizabeth conceived in her old age.

Our focal passage concludes with the encouraging words of the angel. “Nothing will be impossible for God.” Mary willingly submitted her life to God’s plan.

When have you seen God do more than you thought possible?

FOR DECEMBER 29

### POWER REVEALED Exodus 14:19–31

I have read this passage many times in my Christian experience. I confess that when I read it, the image I have in my mind is Charlton Heston in the movie “The Ten Commandments.” Yet I believe that the mighty miracles of God leading His people out of bondage cannot be adequately portrayed in film. The actual Exodus account is more dramatic than the movie.

#### The Escape (19–22)

It will help to set the background of our passage. Earlier in the chapter, God communicated a series of commands through Moses to prepare the people for passing through the sea, telling them to “stand firm and see the Lord’s salvation.”

When God doesn’t act on our behalf immediately, do not perceive it as His lack of ability or willingness to guide His people. God led the people through rugged terrain. No doubt the Hebrews were afraid. The Lord rebuked Moses. “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to break camp” (v. 16).

God parted the waters of the sea so that His people could cross on dry ground, but He hardened the hearts of the Egyptians so they would pursue the Hebrews. God did this so the Egyptians would know that Jehovah God was mightier than the gods of the Egyptians. The Exodus, therefore, was a contest between Yahweh and the gods of the Egyptians. God would receive glory through the defeat of the Egyptians (v. 18).

The angel of God went before the Hebrews and then moved behind the people to protect their rear flank. God used a powerful east wind as a means of drying the sea in order for the Hebrews to escape on dry land.

When have you seen God unexpectedly open doors?

### The Defeat (23–28)

The Egyptian pursuers were a large, well-trained army of horses, chariots and horsemen. As slaves, the Hebrews lacked military training and equipment. They were no match for perhaps the mightiest army in the Mediterranean area.

God is described many times in the Bible as a warrior. For example, Exodus 15:3 states, “The Lord is a warrior.” God’s battle plan included confusing the Egyptian forces as well as causing the Egyptian chariots to swerve and become difficult to handle.

The Egyptians realized their battle was not against the fleeing Hebrews but against the God of the Hebrews, and they recognized that they would not be able to defeat Him. “‘Let’s get away from Israel,’ the Egyptians said, ‘because the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt’” (v. 25).

With the Egyptians temporarily discontinuing their pursuit of the Hebrews, God commanded Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea so the water would drown the Egyptians. There is no mention of any Hebrews drowning, but not one member of Pharaoh’s army survived.

How does it influence our faith to know that God is always in control?

#### The Powerful One (29–31)

While the Egyptians drowned, the Israelites had walked through the sea on dry land. “From the standpoint of what happened to Egypt, we see what happens to a people who resist and reject God. They abandon both wisdom and morality,” writes Duane A. Garrett in “A Commentary on Exodus” (p. 387).

When has your faith been strengthened as a result of seeing God’s power?

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



# Bible Studies for Life

## LESSONS



By Bobby McKay

McKay is pastor of New Liberty Baptist Church in Morton, Mississippi.

FOR DECEMBER 22

### LOOKING FORWARD TO LOVE John 1:14–18; 3:14–18

Where would any of us be without love? Love is not only good; Scripture says it is the greatest thing. Genuine love is sustaining and filled with hope. Love is essential to the gospel narrative. Without God's remarkable love, we would never know Him or His offer of salvation. The mercy and grace we experience extend and express His redeeming love.

It is because of Christ's great love for sinful mankind that He willfully came and dwelt among us. The word "love" seems too small to encapsulate the full measure of its meaning. As users of the English language, we employ the word "love" to describe how we feel about both a favorite menu item and our spouses. The love Christ bestows upon us is beyond anything we can describe.

### The glory of God is seen in Jesus' presence among us. (1:14–15)

It is customary when a new family moves into your neighborhood to welcome them with a brief visit and perhaps a gift of some kind. With the arrival of Jesus on that first Christmas Day, God was announcing that He was now moving into our neighborhoods to dwell with us. The reason? To reveal His glory for all humanity to see and receive.

It is a challenge to fully appreciate what others experienced in the days when Jesus walked the earth. The people had Jesus at their fingertips, but many did not fully receive Him. He could be seen in the temples and marketplaces and anywhere people were located. As Emmanuel, He fulfilled the name "God with us."

### The grace of God is extended to us through Jesus. (16–18)

These verses indicate a powerful truth and reminder for the Church to consider. Our world does not currently have Christ's physical presence among us, but we have something that can change the world: His grace through us! The love of Jesus and His ministry did not end when He ascended to the Father.

While we may be tempted to become discouraged or even pessimistic about the darkness in our world, let us not forget that Jesus tells us to be the light in our society. If our communities are having difficulty seeing the love of Jesus, it isn't the fault of Jesus; it's the Church.

### The love of God is evident in the gift of His Son Jesus. (3:14–18)

Often called "the gospel in a nutshell," these verses are near and dear to the hearts of all believers everywhere. The thrust of these verses can be debated but one thing is clear. By sending His Son, God the Father is declaring His remarkable love for each of us. There is simply no better gift He could offer than that of a Savior and sacrifice for our sins. It is the greatest need for all of humanity.

Why would He give His only Son to a world that is broken, wicked and sinful? It brings Him glory, it gives us hope and it is an everlasting gift of His love for us.

If you ever wonder if God loves you, go back to the cross and to the manger, and you will be reminded what true love looks like.

I sincerely pray that each of you reading these words knows that you are loved with an everlasting love. Merry Christmas!

FOR DECEMBER 29

### LOOKING FORWARD IN WORSHIP Matthew 2:1–11, 16–18

If you are a college football fan, you know the many changes the game has experienced in the last few years. Players are free to transfer from school to school with less regulations and now, players are even compensated in the millions of dollars for their decision to play for their desired university or college. I hate to sound like a killjoy, but the college game has immersed itself in the money side of sports.

With all the changes, there is one exciting change: the college football playoff format that includes the 12 best teams in the country all competing for the opportunity to be national champions. This new system gives many teams the anticipation to look forward to more football to enjoy.

On a much more eternal note, how much time and energy do we use looking forward to worshipping God? The great thing about worship is that we don't have to wait until Sunday.

As a pastor, I have often been told that people can worship at the deer stand or while fishing on the lake, and even the baseball diamond. I agree, but have you ever taken the time to worship in any of those places or others? If we only worship under the roof of a church building, we are missing out.

### Jesus, the King of kings, is worthy of our worship. (1–6)

While it is unclear how many wise men visited Jesus that day, one thing is evident: Jesus is worthy of our best and intentional worship and sacrifice. Men of great wealth or power commonly offered gifts to other important figures as a sign of respect.

No other King deserves our best sacrifices and worship like Christ.

In this same passage, we see Herod. A man of great power and wealth but also filled with ignorance, hate and paranoia.

There will always be obstacles attempting to keep us from genuinely worshipping God. Worship should be a priority in our lives, not a fleeting option.

### Some do not worship the rightful King and even oppose Him. (7–8, 16–18)

What are your motives when you worship? Is it to be seen by others? Do you see it as gaining an advantage with God? Do your ever-changing emotions draw you to feel something?

God knows your heart and your reasons for your actions. Herod was an evil man and hated the Messiah. Herod was threatened and desired for people to fear him. Under his rule, a countless number of small boys were slaughtered due to his jealousy and depraved heart. Under a covering of lies, Herod sought to destroy the young Jesus.

Of course, we know better. Our world seeks to hinder the message of Jesus and oppose the church in many ways. Our motives to worship must remain pure and focused on Him.

### Jesus' role should lead us to worship Him. (9–11)

The wise men minimize Herod's evilness in this narrative at the sight of the young Jesus. God's will shall always be accomplished. His people's worship endures in spite of others' wicked deeds. Our worship must persevere in the face of opposition.

No one can keep us from worshipping God. The rule and reign of Christ should compel us to live in a spirit of adoration and worship. Let's look forward to worship that is much more significant than any football game or activity.

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# MEDIA REVIEWS

By Tracy Riggs Frontz and Leann Callaway

The Baptist Paper

## Christmas children's books and New Year's devotional

### Laugh and Grow Bible for Kids Family Advent Devotional

By Jess Wolstenholm

Minno Press, 2024

We are thrilled to introduce the 'Laugh and Grow Bible for Kids Family Advent Devotional' as a tool to help families prepare their hearts to celebrate the arrival of Jesus," said Jess Wolstenholm, vice president of education and research for Minno, an online subscription-based streaming media provider that produces Christian programming for children.

"This new devotional book embodies Minno's commitment to bring God's goodness and love to life for children and families, offering a simple rhythm they can fit into their busy holiday season."

Taking families from Isaiah's prophecy to the visit of the wise men, the devotional contains five 5- to 15-minute devotionals each week



corresponding to the four Advent themes.

Along with the bright, eye-catching artwork, each devotional contains a one-page account of part of the Christmas story and a "Family Connection" time including discussion questions, a short prayer to pray together and a game to play.

The "Laugh and Grow Bible for Kids Family Advent Devotional" also includes a child-friendly explanation of the meaning of Advent and the liturgical calendar as well as a journal with seven lined pages to record Christmas memories.

For more information about Minno's work, app, animated Christian shows and books, go to GoMinno.com. (Frontz)

### Revive: Declarations of God's Truth to Renew Your Spirit

By Cleere Cherry Reaves

Thomas Nelson, 2024

Instead of trusting our heavenly Father's authority over our day, sometimes it's easier to complain and focus on the circumstances of our daily life," writes author and podcast host Cleere Cherry Reaves.

"Maybe the goals we're seeking are genuinely good. We'd like a new car to make sure we have a reliable way to commute to work every day, or we're looking for an opportunity to move closer to family. In times like these, we must remind ourselves of the One who has authority over where we've been, where we currently stand and the place where we're going."

Reaves' 52-week devotional serves as a tool to find peace through any of life's circumstances.

An ideal way to start the New Year, each chapter consists of a Scripture, a two-page devotional and five declarations. One way to utilize

the devotional is to read the devotion on Mondays, meditate on the Scripture on Tuesdays and focus on one of the declarations each day for the rest of the week. Examples of

declarations include:

"I will surrender my plans and let the Spirit reprioritize according to His order and design."

"I will trust God with the timing of the

harvest. Waiting on God is always worth it."

Cleere said, "I genuinely believe that if you are intentional with this book and practice these declarations, God will use it to work miracles inside you, through you and around you."

Learn more at CleerelyStated.com. (Frontz)

### My Mission in the Sky: The First Christmas As Told by the Star of Bethlehem

By Sally Blass Murray

Soncoast Publishing, 2024

In this delightful new book, children are guided through a narrative of the Christmas story from the perspective of a star shining brightly over the stable in Bethlehem as the Savior was born.

"Christmas is my favorite time of year, so I knew I wanted to write a Christmas book at some point," Murray said. "As I thought through ideas, I was trying to think of a way to tell the biblical Christmas story in maybe a different way — through an animated character that actually

played a big role in the unfolding of this miraculous event," she said.

"Since I also love stars and the way they point us to our amazing Creator and Lord, I decided that the Star of Bethlehem would be the perfect character to bring to life to tell us all that he experienced that night and in the years leading up to that first Christmas."

With vivid illustrations by Abigail Banks Brandenburg, the artwork is designed to engage young readers as they follow the Star's journey.

Throughout the Christmas season, Murray hopes children and their families will be reminded of the true meaning of the season as they read "My Mission in the Sky" together.

"I hope that families will ... be reminded of the perfect plan of salvation that God ordained from the beginning of time," Murray said.

"I hope they enjoy the beauty of the true, biblical story of Christ's coming to earth. I hope parents will want to use the Scripture guide ... to point out things in the text that are explained in God's Word."

"On the last page, I added a ... simple explanation of the gospel. While the book is called 'My Mission in the Sky,' which refers to the star's mission, I ... explain the rescue mission that brought Jesus to earth that night. I hope boys and girls hear and understand the love that Jesus has for them and that they understand that He came to save us all. I pray that they will respond by giving their hearts to Him. That is the ultimate goal of this book." (Callaway)



### EDITOR'S NOTE

Reviews of films, books, music or other media that appear in The Baptist Paper are intended to help readers evaluate current media for themselves, their children and grandchildren in order to decide whether to watch, read or listen. Reviews are not an endorsement by the writer or TAB Media Group.

# Guard your heart and mind

By Tony Martin

Mississippi's The Baptist Record

## Avoiding brain rot in a world full of distractions

**H**ey, y'all! Have you ever scrolled through social media so long that you forgot why you even picked up your phone in the first place? Well, it turns out there's a name for that foggy, unproductive feeling: "brain rot." Yep, Oxford Languages has declared it the Word of the Year for 2024. Or rather, the Words of the Year — a little less catchy, but accurate.

When I first heard "brain rot," I had to laugh. It sounds like the kind of thing my grandma would've accused me of catching if I spent too much time watching reruns of "Gilligan's Island." But Oxford defines it as "the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state," mostly thanks to bingeing low-quality content online. Sound familiar?

The term has skyrocketed in popularity, especially among Gen Z and Gen Alpha — the same people creating the content it's said to describe. There's something ironic about that — like eating a tub of Little Debbie's Christmas tree ice cream while watching documentaries about healthy living. Oxford's experts say the phrase is up 230% in usage this year, and I'd bet most of those mentions came from TikTok, the holy grail of quick-hit distractions.

### We've all been there

But before you diss those of younger generations, let's be honest with ourselves: brain rot isn't just their problem. Who among us hasn't fallen into the endless scroll,



Unsplash.com

losing an hour to cat videos, click-bait articles or watching someone deep-fry a peanut butter sandwich? We've all been there.

Here's the thing, though — and this is where my Christian faith enters the conversation — the Bible reminds us of the importance of protecting our minds. Philippians 4:8 encourages us to focus on "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable." Now, I'm not saying TikTok can't have moments of nobility (there are some great videos out there), but let's be real: much of what we consume online doesn't fit this description.

We live in a world overflowing with distractions, where "brain rot" lurks just a click away.

But God designed our minds for so much more than passive consumption. He calls us to use our intellects for creativity, problem-solving and loving others well.

When we spend too much time scrolling, it's like letting spiritual junk food take over our diet. Our minds need nourishment, too, and that means feeding them with things that uplift, inspire and draw us closer to Him.

How do we combat brain rot in our own lives?

Here are a few ideas:

**1. Set boundaries.** Schedule screen-free time each day to focus on activities that recharge your soul, like prayer, reading Scripture or going for a walk.

**2. Choose wisely.** Before you dive into an app, ask yourself,

"Will this add value to my day, or am I just filling time?"

**3. Create instead of consume.** God made us in His image, which means we're designed to create, not just spectate. Whether it's journaling, baking or building something with your hands, find ways to engage your mind.

**4. Stay connected.** Social media can't replace real relationships. Make time to be present with loved ones — face to face, if possible.

**5. Pray for discernment.** Ask God to help you steward your time and attention well. Psalm 90:12 says, "Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

There's no need to throw our devices into the sea or delete all our apps (unless that's what God's calling you to do — in which case, I fully support it). Technology, like most things, isn't inherently bad. It's how we use it that matters. Let's aim to use it wisely, in ways that build us up instead of breaking us down.

### Funny reminder

Congrats to "brain rot" for its Word of the Year victory.

Let's hope it serves as a funny reminder to stay intentional about what we let into our minds. Because when we guard our hearts and focus our thoughts on things above, we'll find the peace and purpose we're all scrolling for.

That's the kind of victory worth celebrating.

*EDITOR'S NOTE — This story was originally published by The Baptist Record.*



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