

InTouch

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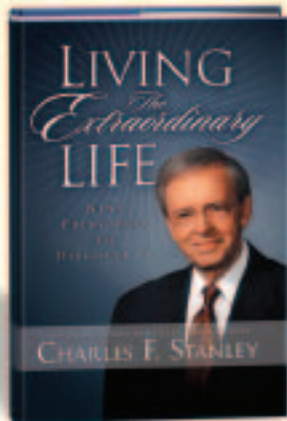


THE CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS

- A Mission Named Desire
- When Less Is More
- Children: The Church of Today

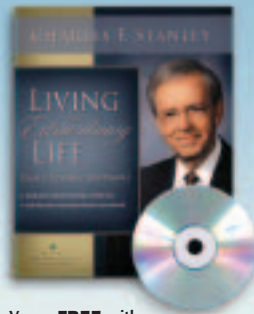
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December 2005

Features

- 6** **The Christ of Christmas**
How much do you really know about Jesus Christ and the reasons that we celebrate His birth?
- 10** **A Mission Named Desire**
Even before Katrina came, NFL quarterback Danny Wuerffel was working to restore lives devastated in New Orleans.
- 24** **Early Light**
These daily devotions from Dr. Stanley's sermons are written to strengthen your daily walk with Jesus Christ.



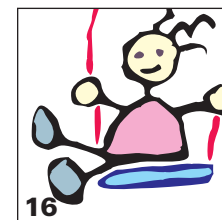
6



10

Departments

- 14** **Mighty in Spirit** When Less Is More
God wants us to be filled with His joy, but are our lives too full for what He longs to give us?
- 16** **Family Room** Children Are the Church of Today
Don't assume children will become mission-minded when they grow up. Spiritual habits are best developed early.
- 18** **By Faith** The Christmas Santa Failed (But Mom Didn't)
The year I unwrapped my most disappointing present proved to yield a gift of long-lasting value.
- 21** **Solving Problems** Advent: Maranatha or Marathon?
Despite our good intentions, December can become overbearing—unless we make changes in activities and attitude.
- 38** **Healthy Living** The Gift That Keeps On Giving
It may be difficult to fit anything extra into your schedule this month, but there is one thing you can't afford to omit.



16

On the cover
Telluride, Colorado
Photo by Dr. Charles Stanley

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Celebrating Jesus

In December, there is an air of celebration everywhere we turn. The malls overflow with shoppers buying presents. Calendars are crammed with events and party reminders. People wear special clothing and jewelry, play seasonal music, and greet each other with “Happy Holidays!”

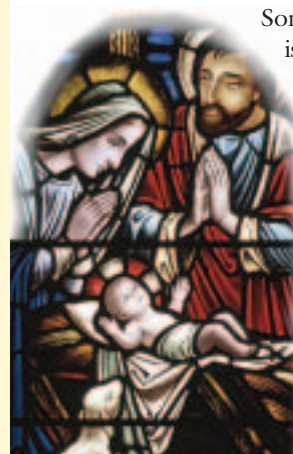
“Happy Holidays”? What ever happened to Christmas? With all the festivity, little seems different on the surface. However, discerning minds can detect a subtle but steady shift in the culture’s attitude. For a number of years, we have been witnessing attempts to remove the Bible, the Ten Commandments, and prayer from courtrooms and classrooms—and to evict God from our Pledge of Allegiance. Now the same protesters are doing away with public manger scenes, eliminating carols from school programs, and hanging ornaments on a “community tree.”

A concerted effort is underway to remove Christ’s name from our midst. We can speak of God without much problem, but the mere mention of Jesus stirs up hostility.

So who is this Jesus the world wants removed from Christmas? Sadly, most people—even some Christians—have only a hazy idea of who He is or why we worship Him. One common opinion is that Christ was a good man, a wonderful teacher, or a great prophet. But what did He Himself claim? When asked, “Are You the Son of God?” Jesus’ answer could not have been more direct or unambiguous: “Yes, I am.” His accusers understood perfectly that He was claiming to be divine (Luke 22:70-71), and today’s reader is likewise left with no other way to interpret His reply.

Jesus did not leave us the option of dismissing Him as simply a virtuous rabbi or prophet. He claimed to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16-17). Either He is everything He said He was, or He is the biggest fraud and liar in history. But He didn’t leave us that option, either. His miracles, His teachings, His character, and His sacrifice all validate His claims. Jesus is God!

So when you hear, “Happy Holidays,” reply confidently with “Merry Christmas!” because Christmas is all about a person, and His name is Jesus.



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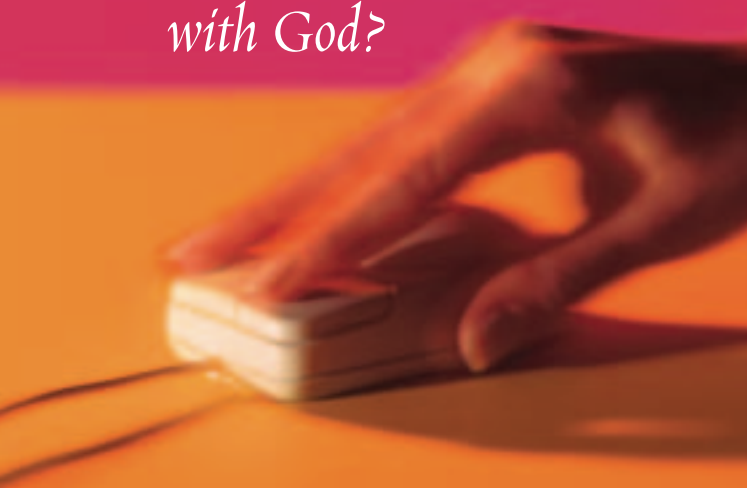
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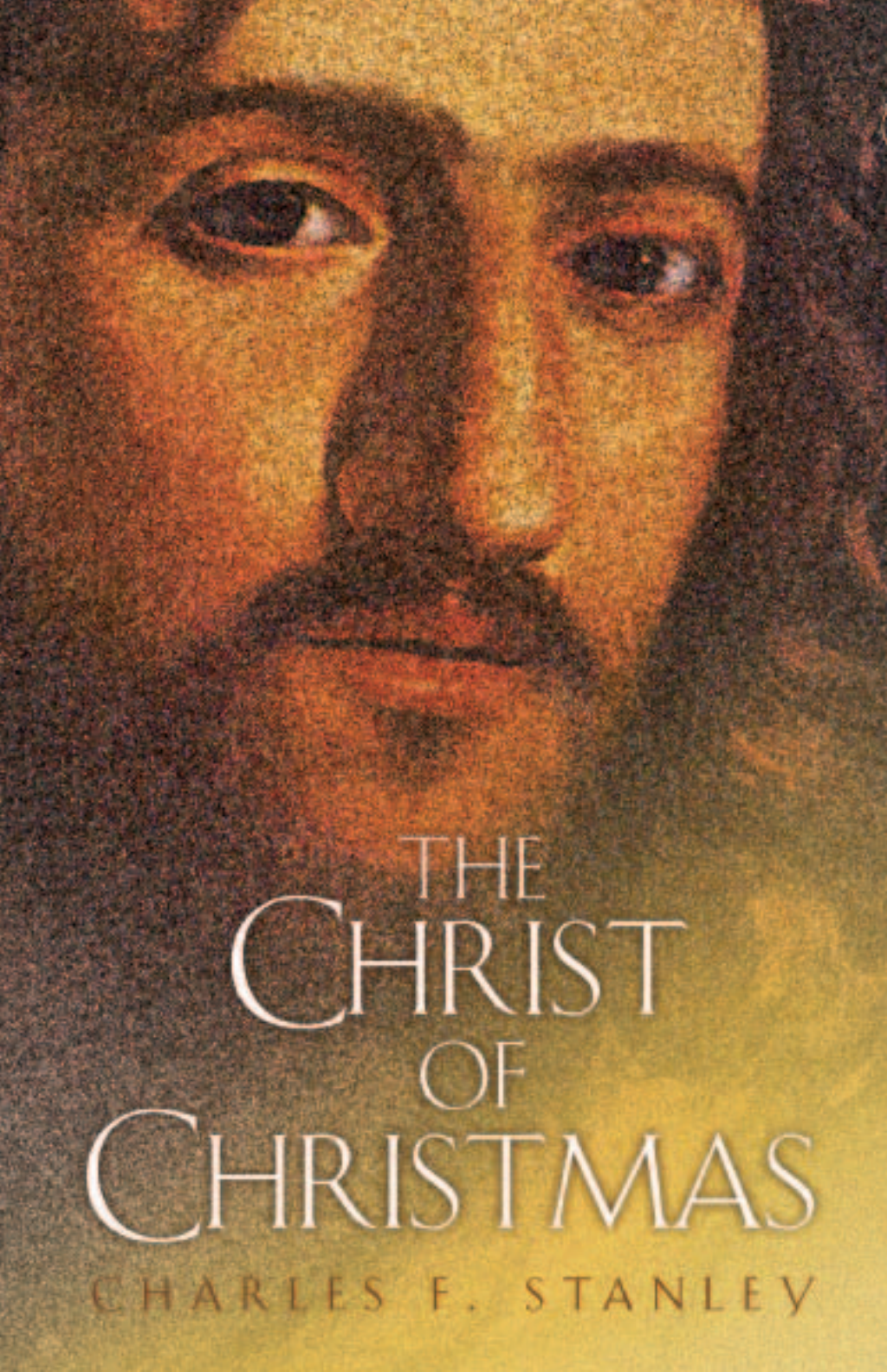
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THE CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS

CHARLES F. STANLEY

Some people wonder, *Does it matter what I believe about Jesus?* The answer is important: “It certainly *does* matter.” In fact, to trust in Him is the most significant decision anyone can make, because it will impact life in four profound ways. First, He will mold your character so that you increasingly resemble Him. Second, He will influence your entire belief system, affecting everything you hold to be true. Third, He will impact your lifestyle. And fourth, placing faith in Jesus Christ will determine your eternal destiny.

Yet, how much do you know about Jesus? If a roomful of Christians were asked to write down every scriptural truth they knew about the Lord, very few would be able to fill even one page. Many people believe in Him, attend church, pray, read the Bible, and give, but have only a murky awareness of who Jesus is. Let’s look at what Scripture teaches about our Savior so that we can have a fresh understanding—and appreciation—of the awesome gift God gave mankind that first Christmas.

HIS BEGINNINGS

John 1:1 reads, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Though most of us can repeat that verse by heart, few are aware of the meaning of the Greek verb tense. “Was” appears in the imperfect tense, which denotes an action already begun beforehand was continuing. The language accurately expresses that Jesus’ beginnings did not start with His birth. Before the foundation of the world, He was with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit as a member of the Godhead.

Micah, writing 700 years before Christ, prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem; at the same time, the

prophet spoke of His existence long before birth—“from long ago, from the days of eternity” (Micah 5:2). Jesus, the eternal Son of God, had no beginning but was with the Father since eternity past and will be Lord throughout eternity future.

With respect to the beginning of His humanity, Jesus had a unique birth announcement. It wasn’t His mother or father, but an angel who told the world of His arrival, just as an angel had informed both Mary and Joseph that this special Son would be born to their family. (Matthew 1:20-21; Luke 1:30-31; 2:10-12)

HIS DIVINITY

John 1:3 teaches Jesus created everything that exists. As the agent of Creation, He has to be God. (Genesis 1:1) It is very important to understand that Jesus did not *become* God, but rather, He has always been God. We know that He became man at the Incarnation (Philippians 2:6-8)—He came to earth and took on human flesh in order to live among us, reveal the Father, and offer His perfect life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Some people find it hard to accept that the Trinity has three members, each one being fully God. However, that is the clear teaching of Scripture. Who was God speaking to in Genesis 1:26: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness”? He could not be addressing any created beings, because they themselves could not do any creating. “Us” can refer only to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who comprise the three-in-one Godhead.

HIS CLAIMS

When Jesus lived on earth, He had certain limitations, not in His divine nature but in His humanity. For example, He

was neither omniscient (Matthew 24:36) nor omnipresent in His physical human body, and He did not appear to be supernatural. (Isaiah 53:2) However, He made many clear statements in the Gospels about His divine identity and origin. (John 8:58; 10:30; 14:7; 17:24; Luke 22:70)

The only possibilities for us to consider are that His statements are either true or false. If they are false, then we must consider Him a deceiver—or else one who is Himself deceived—and we should reject what He says. But if His claims are true, then we should trust every word He ever uttered. Jesus does not expect us to believe blindly; He fulfilled prophecy and performed miracles to authenticate His claims to be God.

In fact, He left so much solid evidence of His deity that we can and should believe everything He said—statements like: “My sheep hear My voice . . . I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27-28); “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18); “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30); and “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

HIS SELF CHARACTERIZATIONS

The way Jesus portrayed Himself leads to our fuller understanding of who He is. He used images such as “I am the good shepherd” to express a number of concepts in few words. (John 10:11) His audience was familiar with sheep-tending and knew that shepherds cared for their flocks by loving, protecting, and providing for them. Jesus also said, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever” (John 6:51), indicating that He planned to nourish both their soul and spirit. Furthermore, Jesus said, “I am the

way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). In this way, the Lord was saying that He is the only way to eternal life and whatever He thinks and says is absolute truth.

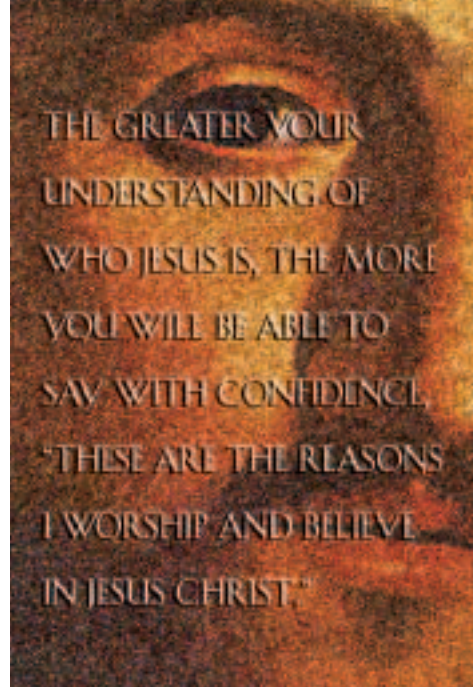
HIS ATTRIBUTES

Jesus is, first of all, God—the eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent Creator. (John 1:1) When He lived on the earth, He was also fully human, born just like any other child, except that He had no earthly father and was sinless.

We see many additional attributes in the Gospel stories. All throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus was merciful toward people facing difficulty, as when He stopped what He was doing to tend to blind Bartimaeus’ need. (Mark 10:46-52) Jesus is also righteous and just, always doing the right thing, no matter what. (1 John 2:1) What’s more, He is a God of love. (Romans 8:39)

WHY PEOPLE DISLIKE HIM

When we look at Jesus’ attributes, it is amazing to realize that many people want to remove Him from Christmas. In fact, they want to eliminate from society the One who gives them every breath they breathe, who keeps their heart beating, who created the world in which they live. Why would they want this wonderful, loving Jesus purged from their midst? Because He represents everything they despise—morality, holiness, decency, and authority that has the right to tell them what to do. They miss the part about the joy and peace that could be theirs even in hardship, and they choose instead to rebel against the God who loves them. Their behavior indicates how totally blind people can be, and how unwise it is not to investigate Scripture to learn who Christ really is.



WHAT IS THE REASON FOR CHRISTMAS

Jesus took on flesh and dwelled among mankind in order to reveal what God is like. He said that He and the Father were one (John 10:30), which meant that to see Him was to see the heavenly Father. He had time for children, for vile beggars, for adulterers, and for tax collectors who routinely betrayed kinsmen for their own benefit. Jesus came so that, through Him, you and I could have an intimate relationship with God the Father.

His primary reason for coming, though, was to redeem mankind by giving His life as a ransom for sinners. (Matthew 20:28) That is, Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came into this world to lay down His life on the cross to fully pay the sin-debt we owed: death. To all who trust Him as Savior, He offers eternal life in place of the penalty

that we deserve. (Romans 6:23)

The problem is that the world refuses to believe what Christ said about Himself. They don’t believe that He is deity or that He is the only way to the Father. They are convinced that they can get to heaven by doing good works and reject the idea that all their efforts won’t count for eternity. But they are absolutely mistaken and unaware of God’s redemptive plan.

So when people want to quarrel about good works earning them eternal life, simply ask them, “If you can get to heaven without the Lord Jesus Christ, then didn’t God make a terrible mistake by sending His only begotten Son to be stripped, brutalized, mocked, and crucified on the Cross?” In truth, the Father made no mistake—Christ’s death was absolutely essential for our salvation. So do not argue; just state the truth intelligently and courageously.

Many today don’t mind you talking about Jesus a little bit if you will just keep Him in the manger—as an infant, He does not seem so threatening to their thinking and lifestyle. However, Christmas is not simply a day to commemorate the baby Jesus; rather, Christmas is the time to celebrate Jesus Christ, the living, returning, reigning Lord. He was in the crib for just a short period of time, but that was God Himself lying there. That was God born unto the Virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit.

The greater your understanding of who Jesus is, the more you will be able to say with confidence, “These are the reasons I worship and believe in Jesus Christ.” Jesus is exactly who He claimed to be, and it is essential for God’s people to proclaim and defend His name. Don’t allow anybody to steal that name from your Christmas, because Jesus is who the celebration is all about. ♣

A MISSION NAMED DESIRE

Danny Wuerffel invests his life wisely.

By Tonya Stoneman

New Orleans has captivated people around the world ever since Hurricane Katrina reached its shores on August 29. Besides the distressing images of an entire metropolis submerged in toxic water, what shocked so many was the violence that accompanied the storm. Looting, killing, and lawlessness seemed to overtake the city in the days that followed. But the grim reality is that thousands of poor, predominately black residents living in New Orleans experience that kind of brutality every day.

When NFL quarterback Danny Wuerffel first visited the city's lower Ninth Ward, he was playing ball for the Saints. He'd read a brochure about Desire Street Ministries, an organization ministering to the poor in Jesus' name, and was moved enough to arrange a meeting with its founder Reverend Mo Leverett. That was in 1997, and his first impression lingers to this day. "I saw dilapidated buildings that should have been condemned," he recalls. "I saw a little girl carrying a doll, walking into one of them, and I realized that people were living there. I was angry. I was sad. I knew I needed to do something to make a difference."

"I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

- Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire

At first, Wuerffel helped the reverend with recreational activities and Bible studies for at-risk youth. Leverett and his wife had moved into the Desire neighborhood and founded DSM in 1990, a time when the Desire housing project was ranked the worst in the entire United States. Leverett had a vision to revitalize the district through spiritual and community development, and he integrated slowly by volunteering his services as a football coach in the local high school.

of development and a coach for their athletic program. "I love what I do. I love the kids. I love our staff," says the 1996 Heisman Trophy winner from Florida. "I love . . . investing my life in something that, from the way I read the Scriptures, is important to God: ministering to poor and needy. I really believe that if you look through the Bible, God has a particular interest in how his people love and serve the poor, and this is a great opportunity for me."



Nine years ago, Danny Wuerffel walked off the Superdome field in New Orleans celebrating a National Championship as a Florida Gator. Today, the tattered dome is a symbol of a devastated city—one that includes both his home and his ministry.

That gave him inroads with many young people, whom he invited to his home for Bible study, fellowship, and food. "It was the food that drew them there at first," Leverett recalls. "But soon hundreds of kids began showing up to learn."

By 1999, his Bible study turned into a major community event. With prayers and support from family and friends, he bought a 36,000-foot building within walking distance of the high school and housing project. Leverett named the facility Desire Street Ministries and claimed a piece of Desire for the Lord. Today his program includes a boys' academy that educates and mentors nearly 200 7th to 12th grade youths.

After seven years of volunteer work with Leverett's ministry, Wuerffel said goodbye to professional football and joined the DSM staff full-time as director

Wuerffel has seen God transform many lives through the ministry. There's Kedrick Levy, a 31-year-old who met "Coach Mo" when he was just 16. At that time, the gun-toting teen had stolen more than 200 cars, and was a bona fide drug dealer. Today Kedrick is an assistant pastor. He's married and has four kids. When he isn't teaching Bible lessons, he coaches football and mentors kids in the neighborhood.

And there's Myron Celestine. "I was born and raised in Desire," he says. "I grew up with only my mother. When I was three and my younger brother was one, our father was shot and killed in our home." Myron met Leverett through the Carver High School football program and immediately connected with him. "Before that point, I had no male figures in my life," he says, "but during my 11th

grade year, I gave my life to Christ at a DSM Bible study.” The road for Myron was rough—including drugs and a stint in jail—but today he lives straight, serving as Recreation Coordinator for the ministry. “Coach Mo gave me a chance to give something back to the community I once took a part in destroying.”

Stories like these abound. Over half the DSM staff are young men and women from the neighborhood, and they have had a major effect in the community. In fact, Leverett had started plans to replicate the ministry nationwide in other pockets of poverty when Katrina devastated New Orleans. The storm scattered DSM’s 192 boys and 50 staff members across America, a situation that some view as providential.

The staff and students at DSM vacated before the storm hit, but losses were still great. “We are doing well, though we are having difficulty finding the time to process what has just occurred in our lives, our family, and our ministry,” Leverett says. “My family has lost everything. My kids only have the clothes on their backs. And my wife lost precious irreplaceable items like pictures, journals, letters to our children and the earrings I’ve given her on anniversaries. We don’t currently have a family vehicle. We’re struggling as we’re trying to help others in their struggles, but the Lord is graciously sustaining us.”

Wuerffel, his wife, and young son left with their dog, family photographs, a few documents, a video camera, three or four

changes of clothes, and two pillows. When he finally visited their home, he found black mold up to the ceilings. The walls were so thin they crumbled when pressed hard enough. “The place smelled like a sewer,” he said. “And there’s nothing left.”

Despite the loss, Wuerffel remains resolutely optimistic. “We just relearned the difference between want and need,” he says. “How much time do we spend saying, ‘We need this, we need this’ and get bent out of shape? Now we’ve got nothing, and yet we have everything we need. I’ve got my wife and son and food and shelter.” Beyond those things, the only thing Wuerffel wants is to find every boy who was displaced by the disaster returned to his “family” at DSM.

The DSM staff is working to recover, relocate, and rebuild. As of October 7, 2005, they had found 135 of their boys. Using a variety of means ranging from school busses to private jets donated by concerned individuals, they have relocated the majority of the teens to a temporary facility in Niceville, Florida.

The young men will board there for the remainder of the school year while DSM is renovating the school in New Orleans. The main facility was submerged beneath six-and-a-half feet of water and needs to be gutted, but there is no structural damage. All of the furniture, computers, and appliances are gone.

But restoring DSM is only half of the battle. The bigger question is, Will



there be a community to come back to? “Most everybody lost their home, either from damage or mold,” says Ben McLeish, DSM’s director. “There are only two people whose homes are okay. One of them was a renter who lived on the second floor. Most of the neighborhood will be bulldozed.” Still, the ministry forges ahead. Prior to Katrina, they had begun work on a dormitory and football field, and will resume those projects as soon as possible. Now it looks as if DSM may become a full-time boarding school, something Desire residents need desperately.

“The public school system in Louisiana is at the bottom,” says Wuerffel. “New Orleans is at the bottom of that, and Desire is at the bottom of that. If a young person in our community dreams of going to college and learning, and they become the valedictorian at the public school in Desire community, they’ll graduate without being able to pass the ACT. You have to have opportunities to succeed in life, and we provide opportunities.” DSM strives daily to overcome the cultural conditioning their boys grow up with. Having no family structure, most live in unsupervised poverty governed only by their basest instincts.

“The ability to recognize opportunity is learned,” says Wuerffel. “A work ethic is taught. The world was shocked to see violence...after the storm. In my opinion, the real shocking thing is that many of our kids lived with that before the storm. The same issues plague inner cities all

Despite the loss, Wuerffel remains resolutely optimistic. “We just relearned the difference between want and need,” he says.

over the country. It’s time for the church and Christians to step up and make a difference.”

Last Christmas, Wuerffel was walking in the DSM gymnasium. He saw a newspaper spread open to an article on Paton Manning, who had broken Dan Morino’s touchdown record. The first thought that went through his mind was, *I wouldn’t trade places with him.*

Although Wuerffel’s career has been a bumpy road, he has played in the NFL with outstanding teams and has won numerous awards, including football’s highest honor. Still, it is his passion for the poor that drives him. “You know, the world just pounds the message into your brain that if you make enough money and if you’re successful in your field, that’s all you need. But you can ask just about anybody who’s been successful—somehow there always seems to be a longing for something more. I believe we were made to find fulfillment in our relationship with God. When we look for it in other places, we come up empty.”

After he retired from the Washington Redskins, Wuerffel got a lot of offers for work: coaching, advertising, etc. “If I had five lives to live, I’d try them all,” he says. “But when you have only one life to live—one life to give—you have to choose very carefully where you invest it.”

To find out more about Desire Street Ministries, visit www.desirestreet.org.



When less
is more
making room for Jesus

Imagine that you have a full cup of flat soda from yesterday's lunch. But what you're craving is a drink of water. If you didn't empty the cup first, what would happen if you held it under a running faucet? A little water would mix with the brown liquid, but most would run over the sides and into the drain.

Likewise, how can we expect to be filled with God's presence if we haven't made room for Him?

The Christmas season in our culture has become like flat Coke. We may truly want it to be a set-apart time of celebrating Jesus' birth. But good intentions often get buried with more activity, more expectations of ourselves and our families, more clutter, more noise.

More, more, more.

And yet, if celebrating Christmas (as the Story tells us) is really worshipping and encountering Christ in all His humility, glory, and mystery, then what we need is *less*. Simply, less of us to make

{ by Erin Gieschen }

room for more of Him. Living, thirst-quenching water. Without it, there's no true worship. *No room. There was no room at the inn.* It's an unforgettable image to anyone who's heard the Christmas story. Pure irony, both preposterous and fitting at the same time: the night that the Creator of the universe is about to show His face to the world, there's no room for Him to be born indoors.

It seems insulting that no one would make room for an extremely pregnant woman traveling with her weary husband. But perhaps the Lord actually preferred to come into the world this way—being born where there *was* already room for Him. Born with the brisk night wind blowing into the opening of the cave, born under the eyes of the humble animal who had carried Him and His mother from north to south. Born to those waiting under the open sky, who came running when they heard He had arrived. Born to the woman in whom He'd made His

home for nine months; to the man who'd thrown out all prior expectations to make room for this long-expected One, heart echoing the words of his beloved: *May it be to me as you have said.* (Luke 1:38)

So God moved in where there was room for Him. The very first to receive Him was the girl in whose womb He lived. This was no small reason for Mary's spontaneous praise: "From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name" (Luke 1:48-49). In a mysterious, silent movement, the Messiah came into the realm of time as the angel had told the young woman: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35).

No small reason, either, that this strange and great gift was given to her—there was room in Mary's heart. Consider the angel's greetings to her: "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" (Luke 1:28 NKJV) That she was "favored" (literally translated from Greek as "endued with grace") meant God had given or filled her with His grace. Grace that enabled Mary to make her heart His home. A home without a ceiling and with open doors and windows to welcome *Immanuel*.

Like Mary, when we say, "I am the

Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said," we welcome Jesus to be born in our hearts, that He might make Himself known to us and through us. When we "dwell in the shelter of the Most High," we, too, are overshadowed by His presence. (Psalm 91:1)

"Live in me," Jesus tells us over and over. "Dwell in Me, and I will dwell in you" (John 15:4 AMP). *Make room for Me—and I will knock down all*

"PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD; MAKE STRAIGHT IN THE DESERT A HIGHWAY FOR OUR GOD...THE CROOKED PLACES SHALL BE MADE STRAIGHT AND THE ROUGH PLACES SMOOTH...THE GLORY OF THE LORD SHALL BE REVEALED."

(ISAIAH 40:3-4 NKJV)

your walls from the inside out and open up your heart to life and freedom.

In Handel's oratorio, *The Messiah*, the Advent story doesn't begin with: "For unto us a child is born," but rather, "Prepare ye the way of the LORD!" (Isaiah 9:6; 40:3 KJV) Indeed, Advent is a time of preparation—

not for us to clean up, fix ourselves, or do things frantically in hopes of pleasing God (and everyone else). Instead, it's a time to let go of all that clutters our heart, so that we can give it to the bearer of both our sins and our burdens. A time to make room for Jesus to move into our living space, that strangely, as a Servant, He might wash our feet, renewing our spirits—making it possible for us to serve Him.

Let every heart prepare Him room. Let heaven and nature sing. 🌿

Note: All Scripture is taken from the NIV Bible unless otherwise noted.

We live in exciting times as Christians. Within our children's lifetime, the goal of reaching all the world's people groups with the Gospel may be accomplished. Not everyone will necessarily have heard or responded, but every tribe, nation, people, and language will soon have at least one indigenous church as a witness. What role might your children and grandchildren have in this great task?

Most Western Christians think of "missions" as going to people groups that are geographically far from us. But

When they ask Jesus into their hearts, they receive the same Holy Spirit we do. But they can't join God in His mission unless their parents—not just the church—give them both the permission and opportunity to do so. The church may provide an avenue, but we must take responsibility to teach our kids to serve the Lord by the Holy Spirit's power, not by their own strength and abilities.

Did the Holy Spirit come solely for our happiness, comfort, or benefit? No, God sent Him to

Children: The Church of Today



Teaching Your Kids Now to Develop a God-Centered Worldview

Jesus' words paint a much broader picture: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8 NIV). The Great Commission is about reaching out in Jesus' name to everyone He calls us to touch, beginning at home (our "Jerusalem") and then moving out progressively to our larger community, state, country, and the world.

Our children also have a vital role in this calling—they are not the "church of tomorrow"; they are the church of *today!*

empower us to be His witnesses. But the Enemy wants our children to think everything is all about them, and the media (as well as most schools) reinforce that message. Sadly, many parents and churches unintentionally do the same. When we teach kids only how much Jesus loves them, we give the impression that He's primarily there to make them happy, healthy, stress-free, and "safe." Yes, Jesus loves us—so much that He wants us to know everything in life and creation is about Him and for His glory—and He's chosen us to be on mission with Him.

"Missions" is nothing less than God's heart! Reaching out to those He died to save is top priority for Him. Only when we understand that our hearts must become like His can we "train up" our children—whom He's loaned to us—to become His lifelong servants.

Children are great imitators. Do they see us expending energy and time seeking comfort? Is our idea of being involved in missions occasionally praying for "real" missionaries and dropping a few dollars into the special offering? If so, we're teaching our kids to compartmentalize missions as a seasonal activity rather than a lifestyle—and something to which only a few Christians are called.

So what can we do? It's really quite simple—but it also can be life-changing. We must actively give our kids opportunities to be used by God, beginning in our "Jerusalem." Consider the following:

- ★ Spend a holiday like Thanksgiving helping at a shelter or a home for abused women and children.
- ★ Have one light meal a week of soup and bread, saving the money for a mission project agreed upon by everyone.
- ★ Go to a senior citizen home and "adopt" a grandparent with few visitors.
- ★ Brainstorm with your kids about neighborhood needs you can meet in a Saturday morning family effort.
- ★ Come up with "acts of kindness" you and other families can do together locally.

The list can go on and on. Just be sure the ministry chosen allows your kids to be actively involved, especially in building relationships.

Most parents want to see their children learn to trust God, but this can't happen unless they experience circumstances requiring reliance on Him to guide, use, and protect them. Of course, we should be wise in providing age-appropriate ministry opportunities with reasonable safeguards and meaningful preparation and debriefing. But even young children can be progressively trained to minister in circumstances and environments very different from their own.

In 2003, researcher George Barna found that a child's spiritual foundations are generally determined by age nine. He/she then tests out those values and beliefs until about age thirteen. After that, these values can be altered only by a radical experience or a major challenge posed by someone they highly respect. If we wait until kids are adolescents before giving them opportunities to minister in Christ's name, we put their forming worldview at risk of never becoming truly biblical.

Ask God to show you and your children how to join Him on His mission. Start in your "Jerusalem," and then find creative ways to move into "Samaria" and beyond. Your relationship with the Lord will be enriched, and your sons and daughters will be far more likely to become the men and women of God you so want them to be. 🙏

Paul Gieschen works with ACSI's (Association of Christian Schools International) Missions Education program.





The Christmas Santa Failed (But Mom Didn't)

By Tonya Stoneman

Brightly wrapped boxes

On the night before Christmas the year I turned eleven, my two sisters and I stayed up for hours watching the crack of light beneath our parent's bedroom door, waiting for it to grow dark. We carried on a secret tradition of peeking at one gift apiece before the big day arrived.

I was a fairly typical American sixth grader who hadn't yet grown to appreciate real gratuity—like wisdom given from experience or a mother's prayers—and the notion that it is more blessed to give than to receive genuinely confounded me. What mattered most, in my opinion, was time away from school to go sledding, hanging neon lights, and opening presents—lots of presents.

began to mount beneath our tree long before Christmas morning. And each new parcel brought with it a nagging curiosity that intensified with the passing days. When the eve of December 24th finally arrived and we could contain our selfish appetites no longer, my sisters and I crept out of our bedrooms and down the corridor to where the tree stood. It dazzled.

We examined the packages thoroughly. That year, I had carefully written down everything I wanted—name brands and sizes included—and given the list to my mother. I spent hours following her through crowded shopping malls so I could point out specific items. Even when



I felt like a human eggplant in my new robe, a pile of gaudy cloth with a tiny head protruding over the top.

my head and feet ached from the tedium of shopping, I endured silently, anticipating the payoff.

That night, I was elected to open the first gift. I chose the largest of my presents—a grand ruby red box. The package was elaborately decorated with a festival of ribbon. I couldn't imagine what my parents had bought me. Nothing I had requested amounted to the size of that gift. My mind vacillated between visions of a lovely ski jacket and an expensive watch cleverly disguised.

I painstakingly pulled the tape away millimeter by millimeter from each corner of the gift, striving to preserve the wrapping, until the contents finally emerged. The last layer of paper fell away, revealing . . . a large purple velour bathrobe.

The thing was hideous. I stared breathlessly for a moment, frozen in horror, then doubled over in laughter. Upon closer inspection, my sisters found alarmingly similar boxes for them stowed beneath the tree. They insisted I model the new garment so we could work through our disappointment and feign appropriately grateful smiles on Christmas morning. The idea that my hard-working middle-class parents had purchased what they could afford in an earnest attempt to bless their children, and had given from the genuine love of their hearts, never occurred to me. I wanted what I wanted, and that was all I knew.

I felt like a human eggplant in my new robe, a pile of gaudy cloth with a tiny head protruding over the top. I looked so pitiful that my sisters began goading me with

wrapping paper tubes. Running feebly, I stumbled forward into an abyss of green branches, tinsel, and glitter, looking up just in time to see white lights spinning in an upward spiral toward the ceiling. The entire tree crashed down on top of me.

My sisters instantly scurried away, and I heard their bedroom doors closing quietly. I lay pinned beneath the tree, holding my breath as my parents' bedroom door creaked open. I could see two puffy ankles stuffed into satin slippers shuffling past me.

There was silence. Then I heard my mother's disgusted voice scolding our dog (who was nowhere to be seen). She proceeded to the kitchen. I heard the water running and the refrigerator door open. After a pregnant quarter of an hour, she returned to her bedroom. My chest collapsed as I let out two lungs full of constrained air.

The following morning, Christmas arrived with anti-climactic regularity. Opening the heaps of gifts neatly piled beneath the tree (which had been mysteriously uprighted) was no more than a 20-minute endeavor. Like ravenous shoppers at a Macy's sale, we plowed through crumpled paper and abandoned boxes. I didn't receive anything I had asked for.

Not particularly thrilled by any of my presents, I slumped in an overstuffed chair and tossed a few chocolate covered cherries into my mouth. "Oh . . . I have one more gift you," my mom said. She went to the bedroom and returned with three giant Christmas stockings, brimming with candies, cookies, and little



As I approached, the boys around him stopped talking. I held out the stocking and said, "Merry Christmas, Chris."

gadgets that temporarily salved my disappointment. "I want each of you girls to find a person who didn't get what they wanted for Christmas this year and give this to them," she explained. But my mother's kindness was lost on me. I tossed my stocking carelessly onto our kitchen table and meandered through the rest of the holiday like an overfed sloth.

The following Monday, I carried the stocking with me to school. My first inclination was to give it to a popular girl whom I liked very much. But I figured she'd probably gotten everything on her list, so I proceeded to the school cafeteria looking for a suitable recipient. As I gazed across the crowded room my eyes settled on a boy I knew from my Social Studies class—Chris South. He was huddled with a group of boys in a corner near the doorway.

I don't know what Chris' issues were—whether he had a learning disability or the trauma of life in a boy's home had just eaten away at him emotionally—but he had trouble communicating and always smelled "gross" to me. The other kids at school teased him mercilessly. He had smiled at me once in the lunch line, and I always thought fondly of him for it, so I made my way through the crowd toward him. As I approached, the boys around him stopped talking. I held out the stocking and said, "Merry Christmas, Chris."

Can light really shine in someone's eyes? If it can, it did in Chris' eyes that

day. And I won't ever forget the sight of it. "For me?" he said. And that's as much as I remember. I'm sure he thanked me and we chatted for a few minutes, but I don't recall anything other than feeling the most amazing sense of gratefulness flood over me. I didn't feel proud or pious or humble, just truly grateful.

I don't remember telling my mother about the incident, either, but I must have because she called me one day when I was away at college to tell me of Chris' sudden death. He'd been shot by someone in his garage at home. I don't even know if Chris had a family around to mourn his passing or what they would have thought of it. But the picture of Chris I'll always carry in my mind is him smiling with a huge Christmas stocking in his hand.

So who gave who the gift? I'll never know what my small gesture meant to Chris, and I'm not sure if my mother remembers what she did for me, but the present I got that Christmas was something I still have today. I'm 36 now, with two little boys of my own, and I find myself wondering what to buy them for Christmas. The plastic toys always break, candy rots the teeth, and everything is overpriced. Naturally, I've received requests for the things they want. But, I'm not sure I'll honor those petitions this year—not in the way they expect, anyway. 🍀



Letter to the Reader

Travel fatigue, hunger, and all their other concerns evaporated into the cool evening air as Mary and Joseph marveled at their infant son Jesus. Like most parents, they probably wondered what life would hold for their firstborn. Little did they know that His life would change countless others. Just as the Father had a plan for Jesus, He has one for you also. Celebrating our Savior's birth reminds us of new beginnings and different paths that we will face. Be encouraged that the Creator of the universe holds your life in His hand and will always love you along the way. We trust that these products will strengthen you to fulfill God's plan for your life.

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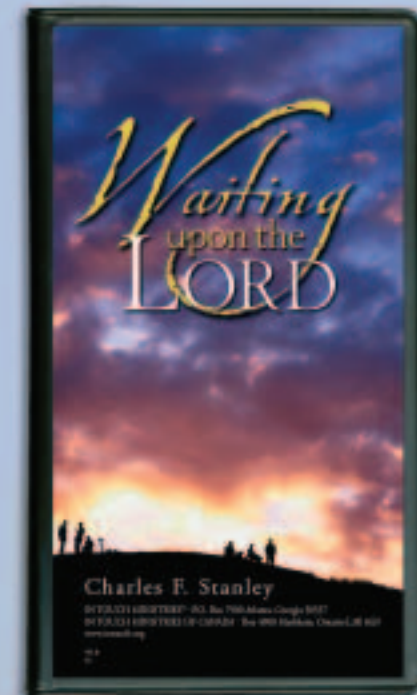
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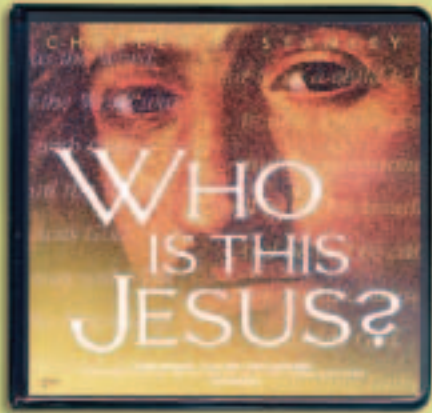
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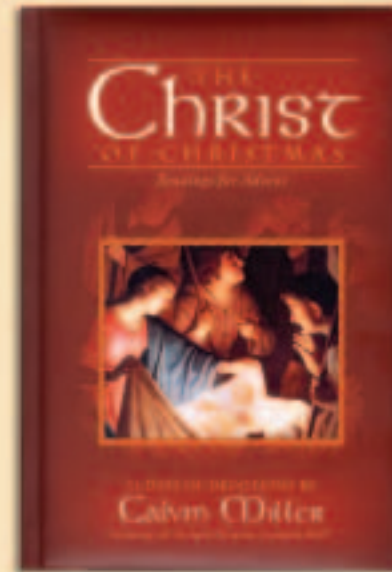
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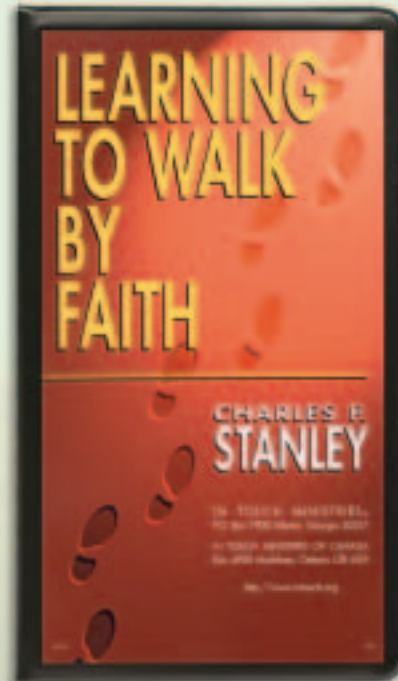
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Just like Joseph, you can move from the pit to the palace when your faith remains focused upon God. Even Christians have a tendency to rely on their own strength and ability in the midst of difficult circumstances. Dr. Stanley teaches that opportunity for blessing often comes hidden in the form of challenges which demand complete dependence upon the Lord's faithful provision.

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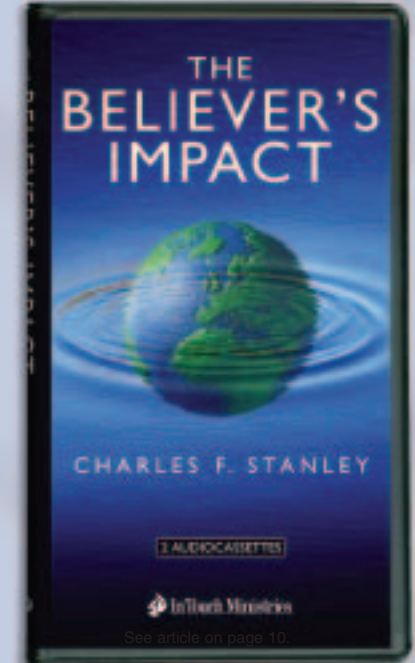
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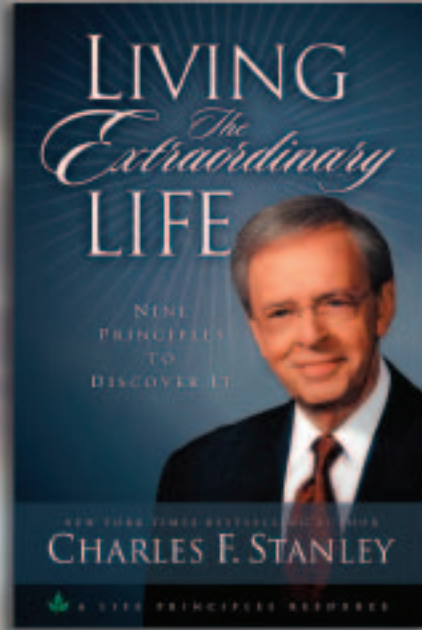
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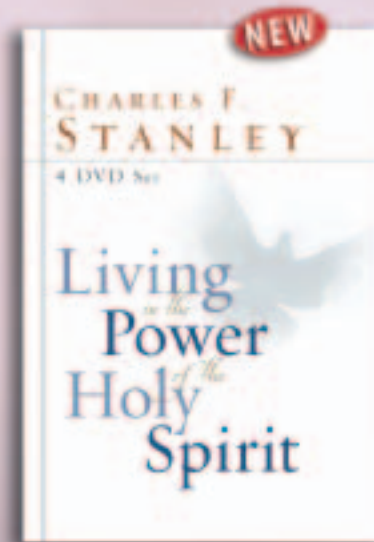
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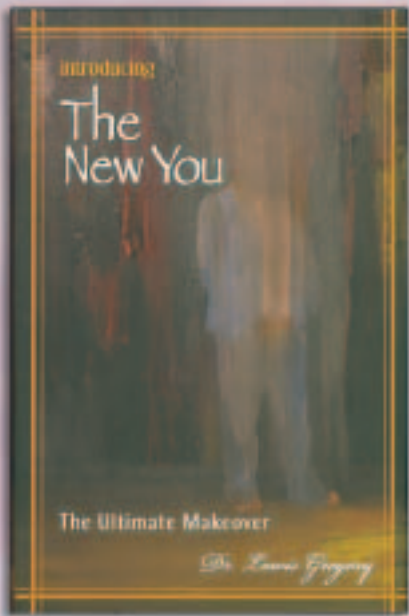
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LESSONS IN FAITH

From the Charles Stanley Institute for Christian Living

The Lord's Supper

What are we as Christians to think about the command to observe the Lord's Supper?

The purpose of Communion, as explained in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, is to recognize and celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; it also testifies to our own involvement in that wonderful act. Why did Jesus say that we should observe this meal? "This is My body, which is for you. . . This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (vv. 24-25). We actively remember Jesus Christ by symbolically partaking of His sacrifice.

Verse 26 takes the idea a step further by indicating that this act of worship is not simply a personal matter between the worshipper and God, but it also involves the watching world. When we receive Communion, we "proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (v. 26). Every time we take the cup and the bread, we are, in effect, preaching a sermon. By this act of worship, we announce to the world that Jesus lived, died, and rose again, and that His redemptive act had life-changing consequences for all of us.

Remember, Jesus' sacrifice is not simply some old, stale, historical event.

Instead, every believer who has received Jesus as Lord can claim participation in the victory won at Calvary. When Jesus died to sin and rose in glory, we who are in Christ did the same thing—we have new life.

Celebrating the Lord's Supper is both a privilege and a responsibility. As members of God's family, we have the right to participate in this holy activity. At the same time, we are obligated to follow the Lord in this act of worship, since it is a dynamic way of remembering our position in Jesus Christ and proclaiming Him to those around us. If we come to the table with hatred and bitterness in our hearts, then we have lost the spirit of worship and reverence. Rather, we must honor the Lord by observing this ordinance as one body, unified in purpose and love for each other. (1 Corinthians 11:33)

The Charles Stanley Institute for Christian Living is an Internet only discipleship environment that allows students worldwide to work their way through the basics of successful Christian living. Lessons here are taken directly from the Institute's Faith Foundations Core Curriculum. For more information, visit www.charlesstanleyinstitute.com.



FACING CHALLENGES IN OUR PRAYER LIFE

Scripture Passage: Matthew 6:5-6

Would you say that prayer is a vital, integral part of your daily schedule? Or do you struggle to pray consistently?

Nowhere does the Bible say that prayer is easy. At times, while you are still on your knees, Satan will attack, harassing you with doubt and sending distracting thoughts into your mind. One of the Enemy's most effective weapons is to cause believers to feel worthless before God. This sense of insignificance does not refer to proper humility, but to an unhealthy feeling that one has no value in God's eyes.

Scripture shatters this fear by boldly proclaiming that you and I have freedom in Christ to approach the very throne of God in prayer. When you go to the Lord, do not be shy and embarrassed; instead, bow before Him and rejoice! Exclaim, "Lord Jesus, I thank You that I can come to You in confidence. I praise You, and I accept ahead of time the answers for my prayer. Praise God. Amen!"

We do not always like the answers that God gives. He does not say that He will give you anything you request; instead, He promises in Matthew 7:11 that everything He gives is good for us. Surely you would

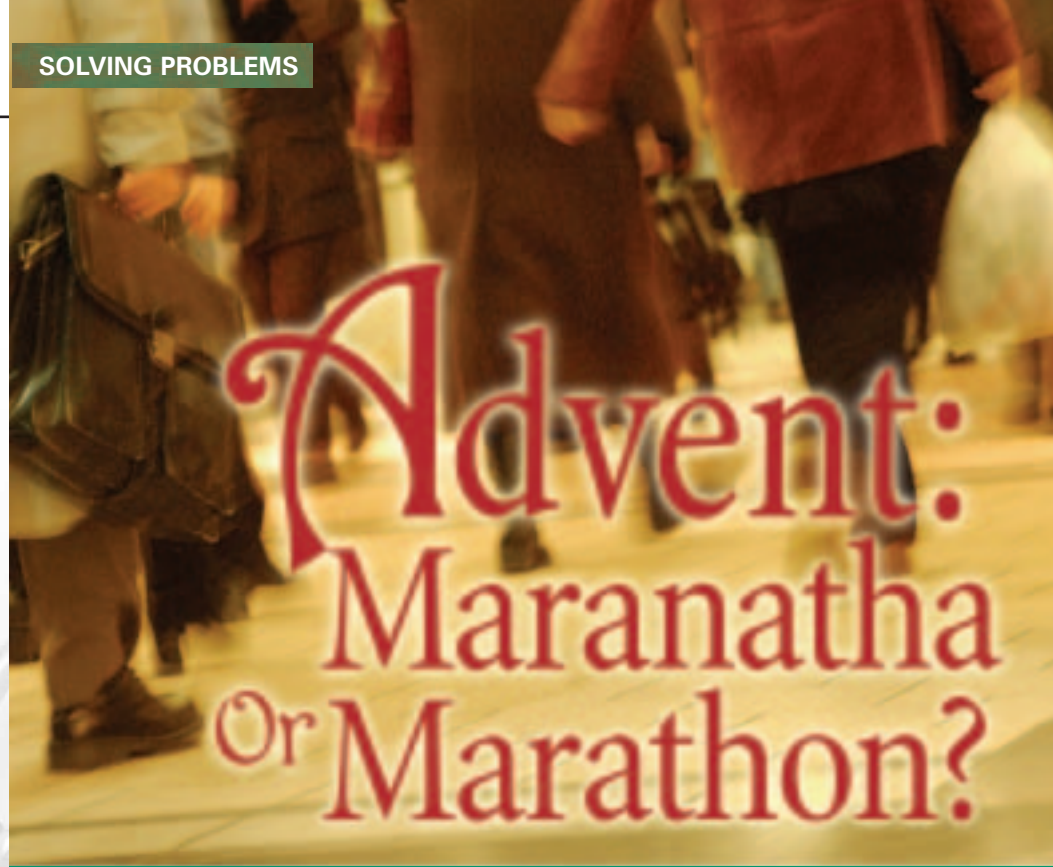
not want God to give you something that would harm you or ultimately destroy your life, would you? For that reason, Jesus says that He will give His children only what is beneficial.

Do not worry about praying for something "too large." If God deems the desire to be good, there is nothing too big for Him to accomplish. Our loving Father is honored by our great, difficult, and even "impossible" requests when we bring them to Him, trusting that He will always answer for our good.

If you actively apply this simple truth, the Lord will transform your prayer life, which will in turn bring about change in your relationships, effectiveness, family, business, and all other aspects of life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:

- Has God asked you to trust Him with something that seems "too big"? Ask Him to help you turn that part of your life over to Him.
- Meditate on Matthew 6:6. How can you apply this verse to your life?



Advent: Maranatha Or Marathon?

by Sandy Feit

As he makes his way to the starting position, the Olympic runner is stern-faced, fully aware of his imminent challenge. He knows that the race will be grueling, testing his endurance and stretching him beyond all previous efforts. He takes a deep breath, places his feet in the starting blocks, and listens for the sound of the gun . . .

Does the month of December ever strike you that way?

How many years have I started Advent determined to "do it right this time"? With naïve optimism—similar to that needed for New Year's resolutions—I would decide that this season, I'd avoid the common traps of overdoing, overindulging, overspending, and, most

of all, overlooking Jesus. But year after year, it seems, I'd somehow fall into the same old pattern.

It wasn't always this way. Christmas was not part of my upbringing, so when my husband and I became believers, we were starting traditions with a clean slate. We didn't have battles of conscience over fond memories of Santa; nor did we have yearly rituals of gift exchanges, indoor trees, or seasonal treats. The closest we came was the ribbon candy a neighbor gave us each December, but truth be told, it was prettier than it was tasty.

At first, we made a concerted effort not to get mired in the involvements that seemed to divert friends' attention from Christ. We didn't give gifts since, after

all, it wasn't *our* birthday. Instead, we chose to commemorate the Savior's birth in our family's typical way—with cake, candles, and a rousing rendition of "Happy Birthday." Some people thought we were sticks in the mud, but I imagined Jesus rather enjoying our celebration of Him. In fact, there was one year when He actually ate the cake. At least that's how the kids interpreted the situation. Loading our station wagon to visit friends, we had set the cake on top of the car "for a minute" and didn't discover it missing until hours later, when everyone wanted dessert.

Our low-key observance worked when the children were very young, but as they started experiencing their friends' celebrations, it became obvious they were missing out on a lot of fun. My preference was to maintain our "pure" tradition; I might have prevailed, too, had my husband not agreed with the kids—and had our pastor not taken up their cause: "Yes, Christmas is about Jesus," he explained, "but make it something your children will want to come home for."

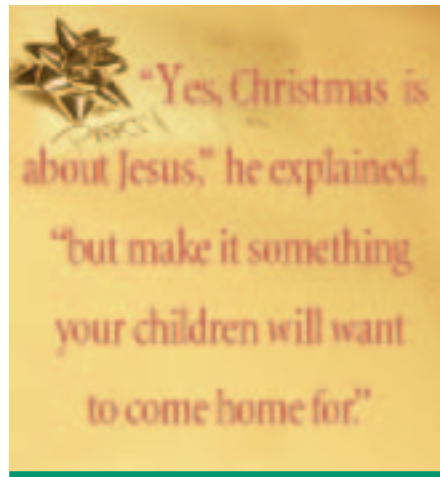
Becoming typical

We took his advice, but started small. That Christmas, we exchanged simple gifts and decorated our first "tree," a houseplant we already owned. We used a handful of ornaments from church friends who wanted to help us adapt. And I researched activities that would be fun—and meaningful!—so that Christ would remain our focus.

Within a couple of years, however, our celebration was barely distinguishable from anyone else's. I say *barely* because I had managed to hold onto a few spiritually significant activities: we lit Advent candles daily, to accompanying scriptures and carols. I would also make a paper chain

"calendar," with each link containing an appropriate verse, puzzle, or challenge for that day. Then on Christmas Eve, before heading to church, we'd have an all-white dinner by the light of a "Christ candle."

Meanwhile, the number of gifts grew, along with the expense. The calendar filled up. We baked (and ate) too much. And decorations became much more elaborate—thanks to a garage sale "bargain," my son, a.k.a. "Mr. Christmas," turned



his room into a blinking tangle of lights, garlands, and used icicles. Our ornament collection grew; we kept needing taller trees to display them all. The kids somehow got the idea that artificial would not do, so we bought a stand and learned the hard way that evergreens can fall over at midnight, lose all their needles before December 15, and be infested (no kidding) with carpenter ants.

Did it sometimes feel out of hand? Maybe. Were the children focused on Jesus? Not always. But did they want to come home for Christmas? They sure did. Our celebrations, imperfect though they had become, were full of love—which is what Jesus is all about.

So what's the solution?

If you want to rein in the chaos, simplify where you can. In particular, let go of traditions that are based on the expectations of others. Here are a few suggestions that have worked for us:

1) Don't send Christmas cards to anyone you can greet in person during December.

Seasonal correspondence is a way to keep up certain long-distance relationships, but try dropping those notes by Thanksgiving . . . or well into the New Year. I appreciate my overburdened acquaintances who send a family newsletter in January (or later), because then I have time to read it with interest—and perhaps even reply!

2) Watch the extravagance.

Gifts needn't be lavish or plentiful to be appreciated. In fact, too much can be overwhelming for recipients and givers alike. We had a family pow-wow last summer to discuss this year's gift exchange—our children seemed very relieved at the idea of picking a name and giving just one present (with a maximum dollar amount).

3) It is Jesus' birthday—why not give Him a gift?

The Lord equated serving others with serving Him. (Matthew 25:40) So one Christmas, we stopped at a nursing home and just chatted with some of the residents who didn't have visitors. Another thought: do our acquaintances really need the little remembrance we feel obligated to give simply because it's "the thing to do"? Instead, why not make a donation to a Christian ministry and mail a note saying, "In honor of our

friendship, a gift has been given to the One whose birthday it is"?

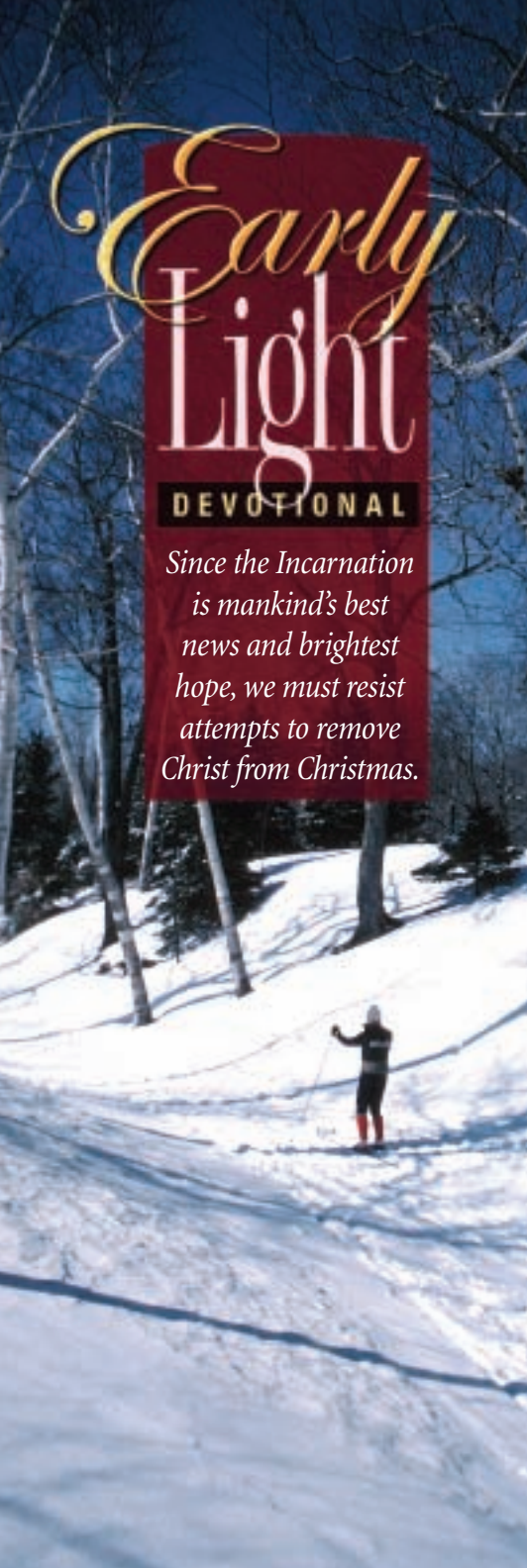
4) Plan together times, but don't overdo.

A family craft, a jigsaw puzzle set out on the coffee table December 1st, or an outing to a Christmas movie can be a simple way to enjoy each other's company. We'd have our kids vote on Advent plans ahead of time, and it was always interesting to discover which ideas from previous years had been particularly meaningful to them.

5) Don't forget to have fun.

We hang stockings immediately after Thanksgiving, and periodically throughout Advent, surprises show up in them. Some Christmas morning merriment is also a good idea. After gifts are unwrapped, our family hunts for the pickle ornament—a tradition in Germany. No one knows whether success will yield a coffee gift card or last year's ugliest decoration, a green plastic angel with the seam down his face.

We may not always have done a perfect job of centering the Christmas season on Jesus, but the real question is not, "How well did you do December?" It's "Does your life reflect Christ all 12 months?" If He is central to your daily thoughts, speech, and deeds (Deuteronomy 6:7), there's less pressure to turn the final weeks of the year into a marathon object lesson the kids will never forget. By giving Christ His proper place, we can make our entire life an Advent season, because don't forget, He's coming back. Like the early Christians whose lives displayed that expectation, we can live with an attitude of "Maranatha!"—"Our Lord, come!" 🌸



Early Light

DEVOTIONAL

Since the Incarnation is mankind's best news and brightest hope, we must resist attempts to remove Christ from Christmas.

1 Thursday

Requirements of Walking by Faith GENESIS 12:1-9

We all know people who live according to their own desires and natural abilities. Sometimes we do it too. But, as children of God, believers are called to walk by faith. (2 Corinthians 5:7) That means we are to live based on a confident assurance that the Lord is true to His character and keeps every promise.

In the “school of faith-walking,” the first skill to master is **listening**. Because God’s Word is essential to our hearing from Him, we must cultivate the habit of biblical meditation. Through it, we will hear God’s Spirit speak to ours, illuminating the meaning of Scripture and showing us how to apply its truths to our situations. But recognizing the inner voice of the Holy Spirit does not come automatically; it takes practice.

A second skill to acquire is **obedience**—carrying out what the Lord asks and then doing it His way, in His time. Abraham left his homeland just as God commanded, but he “adjusted” the divine plan by bringing Lot along. The life of faith is one of submission to God’s requests, methods, and timeframes. As our “listening” skills improve, our faith in the Lord will deepen, our commitment to Him will grow, and complete obedience will become easier.

Faith-walking also involves **remembering** what happened when we obeyed God in the past—He communicates with us not only for today but also to teach us for the future. Can you recall what He said to you last week? Have you put it into practice? Commit to being a better listener and a more obedient follower in the coming year.

READ THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

1 Corinthians 12-14

2 Friday

Skills Needed to Walk by Faith GENESIS 12:10-20

Learning to walk by faith requires time. As we have seen, Abraham listened to God and obeyed Him. Then over the years, he learned to master additional skills.

Dependence. The Christian life is one of reliance upon God. From the very start, Abraham recognized that his own physical sight was limited; he didn’t know the way. But he understood whom he could trust to meet his needs: God knew the plan perfectly and had all the necessary resources.

Waiting on God. This can be one of the hardest disciplines to master. Scripture shows that even Abraham, the great man of faith, had trouble in this area. While human nature wants action, God often says, “Be still.” (2 Chronicles 20:17) He wants us to let Him act first. Our part is to meditate on the Word, listen for God’s voice, and hold off until He instructs us to act. The Lord, meanwhile, promises to bless those who wait. (Isaiah 64:4)

Confession. Abraham was not perfect. When famine threatened, he headed toward Egypt, not toward God. Then he lied, which made trouble for others. Later, Sarah found it too hard to wait for the promised child, so she took matters into her own hands. (Genesis 16:1-3) We also will stumble; but when we return to the Lord in repentance and acknowledge our failure, we will receive forgiveness and can resume walking by faith.

God knows we are imperfect people. He will patiently teach us faith-walking lessons over and over until we master them. Success will come if we maintain responsive hearts and teachable spirits.

1 Corinthians 15-16

The Weekend

Finding Favor With God GENESIS 6:7-9

People work hard to earn the favor of employers, parents, or friends—unequivocal support and approval is a balm to the human heart. As believers, we strive after God’s favor, which He freely offers. “How great is Your goodness, which You have stored up for those who fear You, which You have wrought for those who take refuge in You” (Psalm 31:19).

Unfortunately, in our cynical culture, we often overlook the most basic examples of the Lord’s kindness. He provides for needs, puts a limit on seasons of suffering, listens to and answers prayers, and bestows desires of the heart. Support, encouragement, and provision are blessings of the Almighty. Every good thing that comes our way is from His hand. (James 1:17)

God’s favor isn’t capricious, as some suspect; He does not show kindness to some and withhold from others based on His whim. A believer’s actions stemming from faith make the difference. Consider Noah, who “walked with God,” according to Genesis 6:9. Noah’s willingness to keep a right relationship with the Lord through daily trust and worship resulted in his entire family being saved from the world-cleansing flood. That is a truly remarkable example of divine favor.

Another way we find favor is by keeping God’s commandments. (Proverbs 3:1-4) Believers are to feast on the Word in order to learn the Lord’s ways and practice His principles. As our hearts are bent toward our heavenly Father, we become more like Him. Consequently, His favor flows into every corner of the believer’s life.

2 Corinthians 1-9

NOTE: Because of schedule changes, certain Early Lights may not correspond with the radio broadcast.

5 Monday

The Gift of Service

1 PETER 4:8-11

As Christians, we all are commanded to serve. However, God gives some the *gift* of service. The lifestyle of such believers is geared to meeting needs and acting as role models in the body of Christ. Several identifying marks accompany this gift of helps.

Discernment of practical needs along with a strong desire to meet them are two distinguishing characteristics of believers gifted in this way. They will often be the first to respond—the Spirit will prompt them to disregard personal weariness, urge them to continue on when others take a break, and make them reluctant to say no. Spiritually wired to serve, they find it hard to let needs go unmet. It brings them joy to assume many small responsibilities so that they can free someone else to achieve his or her goal.

If we have this gift, we will actively look for ways to assist others. Being hospitable is one way; making others feel cared about is another. Remembering favorite foods or special dates can communicate that we consider people important. Since we are the Lord's representatives, our concern likewise conveys that God values them.

Making a difference matters to believers endowed in this way, so they tend to ask for feedback and prefer short-term plans that show progress is being made. Even when they feel inadequate for a God-given assignment, their gift often motivates them past their weaknesses to success.

A service opportunity identified by the Spirit is one to be met. For those who love to serve, such "work" is deeply satisfying. Is this characteristic of you?

6 Tuesday

The Holy Spirit's Gift of Service

GALATIANS 5:13-16

Walking in the Spirit is the key to using our spiritual gifts properly. This "walk" is a lifestyle of dependence on the Lord for purpose, direction, and strength. Having the gift of service means:

- We are alert to others' feelings and needs. Interacting with people and serving them brings us satisfaction. If we live in the flesh and focus on our own desires, though, we will lose that sensitivity, ignore needs around us, and prefer to be alone.
- Our work will reveal generosity and flexibility. But if our attention drifts from God, we will think about ourselves first; inflexibility and minimal effort follow.
- Joy usually characterizes our work. Yet if we veer off course, we will feel put upon and unappreciated.
- Our steady reliance on God brings us endurance. If we depend on ourselves, we will lack the divine strength needed for godly service.

Spirit-led Christians who have the gift of "helps" can be misunderstood. Some people may mistake 1) their eagerness to help as pushiness or an attempt at self-advancement, 2) their quick decisions and action as a way to leave others out of the process, or 3) their practical nature as a lack of interest in spiritual matters. None of these perceptions are true, however. It is out of love, not self-promotion, that they do this. The gift of helps includes discernment and motivation to identify both needs and ways to meet them quickly.

Let's be sure to appreciate those with this gift. (1 Thessalonians 5:11) To whom could you say, "Thank you"?

7 Wednesday

Strengthening God's Church

1 CORINTHIANS 16:10-14

The church seems to grow weaker each year. False doctrine, apathy, and a lack of discipline work together to diminish the local congregation's influence in the community and the world. Paul reveals three simple ways to strengthen the church.

Be alert to false doctrine. There is no more effective church-killer than wrong spiritual beliefs. We are living in a cesspool of immorality and iniquity, but some philosophies mix a bit of truth with falsehood. Believers not firmly planted in God's Word are susceptible to those lies. Standing firm requires that pure Scripture must be preached from the pulpit and studied by individual parishioners.

Appreciate God's servants. Too often church members criticize their leaders more than encourage them. Certainly ministers and others in authority can make mistakes or fall into sin—they are human. But these Christians have devoted themselves to ensuring that people hear and understand Scripture. The congregation is responsible to show support and love; those who know the Lord most deeply will appreciate the pastor. God will not reveal Himself to those who can't be bothered with caring for His chosen servant.

Accept one another. Since we are a fellowship of believers, we are to develop a spirit of oneness. Everyone is acceptable. This truth is based not on performance, but on the fact that each of us is God's child with a unique role in this life.

The church's great potential lies in its members. Begin today to practice these strength-building exercises.

8 Thursday

The Stages of Faith

MATTHEW 8:23-26

The blessings we receive from God will always be in proportion to our faith. Our greatest desire, therefore, should be to increase our faith so that we can live successfully in this world. As Christians, we can potentially mature through three stages in a lifetime; we can also experience the same three levels in relation to a single issue. Today, we'll study the first stage, which is common to all believers.

As new believers, our faith is often **restless**. In times of trial, unfocused eyes look at the problem rather than God. People are influenced by their negative feelings, past guilt, and lack of understanding about the Lord. Consequently, the motto of restless faith is, "I know He *can*, but I'm not sure He *will*." This constant uncertainty leaves the believer with no peace.

Since all of God's children begin at the restless faith stage, struggling with trust is not a sin in His eyes. The gospels report that the disciples experienced periods of doubt, but though Jesus chided them, He never condemned them for their little faith. Like the disciples, our spiritual life should mature as we gain experience and spend more time studying God's Word. Even mature believers occasionally find themselves in situations where fear hinders focusing on the Lord, but it is important not to stay at this level.

Unfortunately, far too many Christians remain stuck in the restless stage because failure to meditate on Scripture or learn God's ways stunts spiritual growth. Only by growing in Christ can we reach the more confident stages of faith.

READ THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

2 Corinthians 10-13

Galatians 1-3

Galatians 4-6

Ephesians 1-3

Mature Faith

ROMANS 4:18-21

Yesterday, we studied the first of three faith stages. Believers should mature past restlessness as their usual response to trials; however, we may find ourselves going through one or all of these levels when faced with a new or particularly difficult challenge. Still, consistent spiritual growth should lead us to the next two faith stages.

Reaching faith is characterized by focus upon the Lord rather than upon obstacles or feelings. Instead of battling through nagging doubts, this Christian asserts, “I know He can, and I know He will.” Reaching faith is evident in a life that revolves around God: waiting for a prayer answer is okay because the believer trusts that His Father is faithful to do what He says. In the midst of frailties, failures, and sin, a heavenward heart is cultivated by means of Scripture meditation and prayer. And God honors a heart tuned to Him.

The Christian life is exciting when we reach this stage. It becomes an adventure—a chance to see what God will do next and how He will work out a situation. If you take this lesson to heart, you will look at what has been weighing on your mind and start to pray differently: “God, here’s my problem, but I’m focusing on Your sovereignty and Your promises from now on.” That kind of thinking, practiced consistently, can lead to what I call perfect faith, or resting faith.

Resting faith does not bother with “can” and “will”; a believer who is resting confidently in the Lord says, “It’s done.” With mature faith, a believer can move mountains. (Matthew 17:20)

Favor in Work

COLOSSIANS 3:23-24

A popular misunderstanding of Scripture regards work as part of our universal punishment for Adam’s original sin. In truth, God’s plan includes work of various kinds. Not only are we expected to help others and perform mission-related work; we also are to serve our employers.

Regardless of a human boss’s actions or temperament, God is always our ultimate job authority. He expects that our work, whether driving a truck, sweeping floors, or managing investments, will be carried out with excellence. Performing well is one way that we honor the Lord.

Laziness is an obvious dishonor to God. A lazy employee might arrive late, leave early, execute duties poorly, or play on company time. Far more subtle is the choice to focus exclusively on a paycheck instead of investing oneself in the company’s good performance and reputation. Far too many people do only what is required. Believers are called to go farther and enthusiastically give their best effort.

Work is not simply about receiving a wage; our performance on the job also impacts our eternal rewards. Simply stated, God shows favor to those who choose diligence over laziness. Wherever the Father places us, that is where we are to work for His eternal “payoff.” Believers who do sloppy work cannot expect the Lord to rain down blessings, though in His goodness, He will still give such people a home in heaven and some comforts on earth. But if we desire God’s favor—the best of everything He has to offer—we must offer our finest efforts in all we do.

The Gift of Teaching

TITUS 2:1-6

God has given each believer at least one spiritual gift to build up the body of Christ and to minister in our hurting world. If our gift is prophecy, we’ll proclaim God’s view of right and wrong. If it is service, we will desire to meet others’ needs. The gift of teaching has these characteristics:

Organized. Whether in conversation or in a more formal setting, we will seek to communicate information clearly so the listener can follow. God has wired us to analyze material and present it logically.

Thorough. We want others to understand not simply the conclusion but the steps leading up to it. We also desire to help them think matters through.

Accurate. Our priority is to know the truth, so we ask questions in an attempt to validate the accuracy of what we learn. We will also inquire about the trustworthiness of our source of information.

Studious. We derive great delight from studying and researching and are strongly motivated to share what we learn. Truth is presented not simply to share knowledge but with the goal that God will transform the hearer’s life.

Bible-oriented. With this gift comes a strong desire to know what the Lord has to say. While we may recognize the value of others’ experiences, reading about them is not our main concern. Nor are we especially motivated by personal illustrations.

All of the spiritual gifts can be used in the workplace, in our communities, and in our homes. Allow the Spirit to direct your teaching ability for God’s glory and others’ gain.

Manifestations of the Teaching Gift

TITUS 2:7-8

We make effective use of our spiritual gift when we are filled with the Spirit, but relying on ourselves will get us off track. Let’s look at both godly and fleshly manifestations of the teaching gift.

A Christian gifted in teaching reaps the fruit of self-control by faithfully absorbing and applying Scripture (Galatians 5:23), whereas shifting to human reasoning leads to self-indulgence. Through one’s desire to learn, the Spirit develops dependability and diligence, but unless the believer abides in Christ, he or she can become careless and inconsistent. The fruit of peace and patience grows as studies lead to deeper faith, but anxiety and impatience result if the focus shifts to “self.”

If we don’t have this gift, how might we perceive those who do? We may suspect they are overemphasizing their studies or being prideful because of their knowledge. However, the characteristics of the gift of teaching show that the opposite is true. These believers desire accurate, thorough understanding so that they can share it with us for our benefit. At times, we might regard people with this ability as boring because of the quantity of information they present. We might even assume that they rely more on knowledge than on God’s Spirit. And yet it is the Holy Spirit who helps them to learn and to speak. We should realize teachers want us to have enough truth so that we can live God’s way and please Him.

As you exercise your God-given gift, pray for the Spirit’s lead—that is how to have the greatest impact for the kingdom.

READ THE BIBLE IN A YEAR

Ephesians 4-6

Philippians 1-4, Colossians 1-4

1 Thessalonians 1-5

2 Thessalonians 1-3

The Key to Financial Blessing

MALACHI 3:7-12

All of us struggle when there is a discrepancy between what our minds know is true and what we feel in our emotions. One area believers typically find difficult is personal finances. Understanding what the Bible says about money, do we choose truth or allow our ever-changing feelings to dictate our actions? Believers find it easy to give God one penny out of a dime or one dollar out of ten, but when the numbers grow bigger—one hundred out of a thousand or a thousand from ten thousand—they often balk. However, we cannot expect the Lord to bless us financially if we are not supporting His work.

Scripture speaks about giving a whole tithe, which is one-tenth of our earnings or ten percent of whatever we produce, according to Deuteronomy 14:22 (NIV). We should also note that we give God the *first* portion of our income, not what is left over at the end of the month.

God's tithe goes into His storehouse, which is the church. From there, what is offered can be channeled into the Lord's work throughout the world. Imagine how many great ministries and outreaches would close if money dried up. Sharing the Gospel is not only a spiritual responsibility but a financial one as well.

When we refuse to give our portion, we block the flow of God's blessing in our own life. Often we decide to offer less than a tithe because we do not trust His provision. Our Father has promised us protection and plenty if we follow His mandates. Give the Lord His due and see what great blessings He provides.

Passing Down Faith to Others

2 TIMOTHY 1:3-7

People go to great lengths in order to ensure that property and wealth are bequeathed to favored family members or charities. Some people tragically spend so much time preparing for material possessions to be passed down after death that they overlook what their *life* could impart now.

The Christian's most vital asset is faith. While belief involves personal choices, our children and friends can receive from us an inheritance of righteous principles and a model for godly living.

A faith worth passing down is based on biblical truth and the confident conviction that God is who He says and will do all He promises. That is to say, we ourselves must experience a growing personal relationship with Jesus Christ in order to share it with others. We cannot hand down principles we have only read or heard about from someone else—it simply will not work.

A question we should ask ourselves is, *Am I comfortable dying with the faith I have lived by?* Many people pick and choose religious philosophies to guide their life but discover in their final hours the fallacy of a self-centered perspective. A faith worth passing down can face the end of life with the knowledge that we are eternally secure in the living God, whose Son died at Calvary for our sins.

A faith legacy is the greatest wealth we can bequeath to those who come after us. Unlike money, a good example cannot be squandered. We can begin now to touch future generations by passing our faith on to those around us.

How to Pass Down Our Faith

1 TIMOTHY 1:2-5

We cannot believe for our children or doubting friends, though at times we may wish we could. What we *can* do, though, is model righteous living and faith principles.

Share basic principles—Explain and demonstrate spiritual lessons to ingrain them in a child's concept of God. Tithing and good stewardship, for instance, teach that everything we have belongs to God. Our words and actions should also convey the following truths: The Lord provides for our needs (Philippians 4:19); He gives direction for our life (Proverbs 3:5-6); and His Holy Spirit enables us to do all that we are called to accomplish.

I learned these four principles from my grandfather, who related a number of incidents that demonstrated how the Lord works. I remember thinking that if God could care for and bless my grandfather, He could probably take care of me too. Indeed, He does!

Live righteously—The lifestyle we choose is another way we pass along our faith. We can hand down fear, doubt, and frustration or trust, security, and patience by the way we live. Every day, decisions we make in front of family and neighbors express either fear or faith. No matter what we tell our children, unless they notice us living out what we say, they won't explore faith for themselves. Notice the result of such modeling in 1 and 2 Kings: there is a tendency for men to walk in the ways of their fathers, whether for evil or good.

A consistent lifestyle of adhering to godly principles is the greatest inheritance we can give anyone watching our life.

The True Meaning of Christmas

GALATIANS 4:4-5

Christmas' true meaning is waning in many hearts and minds. The evidence is a growing use of "Season's Greetings!" or "Happy Holidays!" rather than "Merry Christmas!" Businesses and individuals who prefer not to mention Christmas claim they don't want to offend anyone. I say that if the traditional words containing Christ's name offend, then so be it. People who understand the authentic meaning of Christmas will not worry about displeasing others; they will simply be thankful that they have a Savior to share.

Christmas is a celebration of the historic moment when God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ for the purpose of redeeming sinful man. This story begins not in a manger, but rather in Adam and Eve's garden. There, the Lord initiated a genealogical line that would remain unbroken throughout centuries of slavery, famine, and turbulence, ultimately leading to the Messiah.

Meanwhile, God prepared the world for Christ's arrival and impact. Roman conquests placed men like Caesar Augustus in charge—his call for a census served God's purposes by leading Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, where the prophesied Messiah was to be born. (Micah 5:2) And Rome's influence also led to a network of roads, which would eventually enable Paul and others to spread the Good News.

God arranged all of this so that at just the right time, Jesus Christ could arrive on earth as a baby who would grow up to be our Savior, dying for mankind's sins. We should be truly thankful for Christmas!

The Gift of Exhortation

COLOSSIANS 3:12-17

God's plan is to equip believers with spiritual gifts so that kingdom work can be carried out according to His plan. The gift of exhortation has these characteristics:

A goal of spiritual maturity in others. Exhorters will urge us with earnestness and strong words to choose godliness and grow our faith to maturity. They can visualize how God might work in us to achieve our potential in Christ.

Discernment of root causes. Acting as an advisor, the exhorter is able to identify the foundational problem in our situation as pride, selfishness, insecurity, control, fear, or other hindrances to growth.

Skill in solving problems. Having analyzed the crux of the problem, a person with this gift will want to prescribe corrective steps based on biblical principles. He'll insist that careful consideration be given to God's truth, and he will explain potential results of obedience and disobedience.

Our response to them can vary. We may feel they have oversimplified our situation or are trying to "help" God out. Their authoritative way of speaking can strike us as overconfident. Yet an examination of their lives will likely show that they've lived out the biblical truths they are giving us. In contemplating their advice, we may question their application of Scripture or the genuineness of their concern about our pain. An admonisher tells the truth as the Spirit reveals it, even if it means being misunderstood or rejected.

As Christians, we need to hear the truth about ourselves and how we are living. Are you willing to listen?

Exhortation—A Spiritual Gift

COLOSSIANS 1:21-29

A believer with the motivational gift of exhortation will be focused on discovering the root cause of someone else's difficulty, identifying God-honoring responses, and finding ways to maximize spiritual growth in the process. They will also . . .

- **See God's presence in difficulties.** In their advisory capacity, they will view trials as opportunities for spiritual pruning, growth, and discovery. The Spirit enables them to discern God at work in people's struggles and express what they observe.

- **Become personally involved.** These brothers in the Lord prefer to give their message in face-to-face meetings. Seeing another person's response helps them to identify the heart issues involved and the biblical principles that apply.

- **Be teachable.** Because their focus is on spiritual maturity, they are willing to make changes in their own lives. The insights gained through their personal experiences will allow them to help others.

When believers with this gift follow the Spirit's lead, the Lord bestows wisdom about motives and solutions; otherwise, they speak only from personal opinion. Staying in step with God sharpens their awareness of spiritual growth in others and leads to discovery of creative answers to problems, whereas on their own, they tend to be apathetic and uninspired. What's more, drifting from God can dampen their enthusiasm and reduce a loving attitude to a judgmental one.

Do you feel energized in your Christian service? If not, examine whether you are using your spiritual gift.

The Celebration of Christmas

JOHN 1:14-18

If personal faith plays a major role in a family's life, their observance of Jesus' birthday will reflect their beliefs. But all too often, we see people drifting away from celebrating Christmas for its true meaning. Whether through indifference, ignorance, or deception, culture is heading down the path of least resistance—away from God and all that is sacred.

The prevailing attitude today, even in some churches, is that Christmas is secular rather than religious. There is frequently more interest in exchanging gifts than in sharing the Good News of this special day. Many people prefer the more "tolerant" word *holiday* as a substitute for *Christmas*. But believers should not think this way. As Christ-followers who realize that our eternal future is in the Savior's hand, we need to know and demonstrate the difference between a holiday and a holy day.

Christmas is a commemoration of the historic moment when God became man in order to live among us. The creator and sustainer of life died on a cross so that we could live sinless before the Father. If we have experienced the amazing grace of Jesus Christ, we certainly have cause to celebrate. And we have reason to share our faith with as many people as possible—in that way, their joy on this day can be as full and rich as our own.

We cannot allow ourselves to drift into a materialistic view of Christmas along with the rest of the world. In a month of colored lights and glowing candles, we should be burning brighter than ever as His lights to the world.

Christmas, the Wisdom of God

LUKE 1:26-35

What a comfort to know God is all-wise, choosing the absolute best in every single decision. This attribute is particularly evident in His careful execution of the details surrounding Jesus' birth. Even during Creation, the Father was already preparing to send His Son into the world at exactly the right moment and under the perfect circumstances.

An Angelic Announcement—The declaration of the Messiah's arrival came from the lips of an angel rather than a common man. Therefore, the shepherds who heard had no reason to disbelieve the truth or to keep it to themselves. They did not stand around, philosophizing about the news; they spread the word among friends and family, as God knew they would.

The Virgin Birth—In order to be perfectly sinless so that He could die for our wrongdoing, the Savior could not be the product of a human union. Instead, the Father used a miracle to wrap the Son in flesh but still preserve His divinity.

His Manger Bed—A palace is a fitting birthplace for a king, but a stable is the perfect spot for the arrival of the sacrificial Lamb of God. Jesus' humble beginnings make Him more accessible to every man, rich or poor.

A Perfect Name—The name Jesus was frequently used in those days, which fit the Lord's desire to be associated with the common man. Even more fitting is the name's meaning: *Jehovah's deliverer*. Jesus' name stated the reason for His coming—His purpose was to deliver mankind from the penalty of sin.

The Christ of Christmas

MATTHEW 16:13-17

Most people are comfortable talking about God, but the name *Jesus Christ* stirs up considerable animosity. In the last decade, we have seen a concerted effort to remove any mention of Him from society, particularly at this time of year. In many districts, children are not allowed to sing religious carols in school, and manger scenes are disappearing from public arenas. As believers, we cannot allow the name of Christ to be stolen from our Christmas. When we understand who He is, we can defend His place in our lives.

Jesus made some amazing claims about Himself, including that He is the Son of God. Many people will concede that He was a great prophet or teacher but refuse to acknowledge His real identity. Either Jesus is everything He claims, or He is a liar. A prophet who professes to be divine when he is not, is a false prophet.

Christ goes one step further and tells His followers that He is the only way to the Father. (John 14:6) He promises eternal life if we place our trust in Him. No amount of good works will get a person into heaven; only a relationship with God through His Son can accomplish that.

Jesus tells us that the Father is greater than He is, but that does not negate His importance. (John 14:28) Only through His sacrifice can we enter the presence of a holy God. We tend to think of Easter as the time of year when we celebrate Jesus' redemptive death and resurrection. But Christmas is an equally important time to remember why He came. Without Christ, there is no Christmas.

A Time for Giving

LUKE 2:1-20

As shop owners realize, Christmastime is typically marked by increased generosity. We often hear messages about halting the commercialization of Christ's birth, but we should not totally do away with the spirit of giving that pervades the season. After all, this day symbolizes the moment when God gave mankind His greatest gift.

Before Christ was born, God had given humanity an abundance of blessings. He created a world with varied environments to be enjoyed and a universe intended to reflect His glory. In addition to giving us life, He designed our minds for creative thought and practical reasoning. But though man could live in the Lord's creation and think upon His majesty, he could not enter into His presence. And though God loved people, He could not tolerate their sin.

The Father's love made a way to bridge the gap between mankind and Himself. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16)—no other words could express God's gift better. In addition, the Lord sent His Spirit as our Helper, and He also gave us the promise of His constant care and protection.

Divine gifts aren't meant to be hoarded. Believers should be generous with the wonderful news of God's saving grace. Let the season of giving inspire you to share your faith. As you open gifts and enjoy Christmas traditions with your family and friends, ask God, "With whom do You want me to share the gift of Jesus Christ?"

The Gift of Giving

LUKE 12:22-35

God faithfully provides the local church with spiritually gifted people who are to minister and serve. Every single one of us falls in that category. When we operate out of our God-given ability, we will be highly motivated to help others. What qualities accompany the gift of giving?

First, we believe that the Lord decides whose needs we are to meet, and we find pleasure in discovering where He wants to use us to answer prayers. Recognition isn't necessary; giving in secret satisfies us too.

Secondly, we will be good at identifying resources, even ones that were previously overlooked. We long for wise handling of finances to maximize contributions to the Lord's work. We are cautious givers, who try to make sure our plan matches God's. Appeals for resources are considered, but we will not be pressured regarding donations—God directs what we do. We want the gifts we buy to make the recipient feel appreciated. We also practice thriftiness and share what we can no longer use.

Finally, since we recognize that all our resources—great or little—belong to God, we are content to obey Him and give them away. That attitude protects us from the corrupting mindset of selfishness and from resentment over how much the Lord asks us to share. It leads us to tithe faithfully and avoid unnecessary debt. In order to obey God, we rarely hesitate to make sacrifices.

Perhaps generosity is not your bent. God planned that gifted givers would be visible role models for the church. Who do you know that exemplifies these qualities?

Giving—A Gift of the Spirit

LUKE 6:27-38

Incorrect assumptions about attitudes and motives can cause misunderstandings in the body of Christ. If we have the gift of giving, some may mistakenly see us as:

1. Materialistic. Some people consider us preoccupied with financial matters. Because our nature is to be careful with resources—few or many—we can spend a lot of time thinking about their best use.

2. Controlling. Our sizable donations can be misinterpreted as a quest for power. Yet our genuine desire is to increase effectiveness in ministry, not run it.

3. High-pressure. Some believers cite a lack of funds as their reason for not tithing or giving generously. With this kind of focus, they misunderstand our attempts to have them join us in giving. We want them to learn the principle of giving and receiving (Luke 6:38) so they can share in our delight as God multiplies our gifts.

4. Selfish. When we resist forceful appeals, some people will misconstrue our reluctance as selfishness. If we are blessed with wealth, our frugality can also appear miserly. The Lord directs our giving, and we don't want to waste any assets.

As with the other gifts, heart attitude impacts behavior. If we are walking closely with the Lord, we will be resourceful, thrifty, and contented people. However, living according to natural desires will lead to extravagance, wastefulness, and dissatisfaction; hasty actions replace caution.

Whether or not we have the actual *gift* of giving, let's commit to keeping in step with the Spirit and becoming cheerful givers. (2 Corinthians 9:7)

When Things Seem Impossible

JOHN 6:5-14

Years ago, our church was preparing to purchase some costly property, and our desire was to accomplish the transaction without going into debt. One week away from the deadline, we had accumulated less than half the money—raising the rest seemed impossible. I mentioned our need to the congregation, and after the first service, a young couple came up and gave me the husband's wedding ring to use toward the payment. They insisted I take the band in spite of the fact that they were barely getting by and had a baby on the way. During the second service, I pulled out the ring and told about this couple's sacrifice. Then the most amazing thing happened. People started streaming down the aisle and giving all kinds of things—boats, houses, jewelry, cars, etc. At the end of that service, we had exactly the amount we needed.

Nothing is impossible for our heavenly Father. He used an inexpensive ring to raise over 2 million dollars in one day, just as He once borrowed a sack lunch to feed 5,000 people. We often make the same mistake as the disciples in today's passage. We ask the wrong question: "What am I going to do?" Instead, we should ask the right one: "Lord, what are *You* going to do?" God has a plan to guide us safely through every seemingly impossible situation, if we but trust Him instead of our own resources.

Look to your Father for whatever you need, whether it is 2 million dollars or next month's rent. He has promised to provide for His children.

The Challenge to End Well

EPHESIANS 2:8-10

What is true in track and field is equally true in life: how we end the race is more important than how we begin. God does not take new believers straight to heaven upon salvation. Instead, He leaves us here on earth and gives each of us a ministry to carry out with Christ's all-sufficient power.

God has specifically designed a place of service to fit our personality, gifts, and abilities. He also equips and strengthens us to be able to meet the challenges of that call. The believer's responsibility is to obey with joy.

Too many Christians approach ministry with stingy hearts, investing as few hours as possible so that they can return to work or personal pursuits. Corporations do not own us; neither do we belong to ourselves. We are adopted sons and daughters of the Father God, and as such, we honor Him first.

Show me a man who works ten hours a day and thinks he doesn't have time to assist the Lord's work, and I'll show you a man who is wasting ten good hours he could be using to serve clients and coworkers for Jesus. Service does not have to be "religious" or take place in the church. Don't try to separate spirituality from day-to-day reality—truly satisfying ministry can happen anywhere, when we first take the time to be alone with God.

If people were here only to work a job, pay bills, and have a few laughs, no one would ever enjoy long-term fulfillment. But believers find peace and joy in serving God every day according to His call. That is the only way to end well.

No Unimportant Work

COLOSSIANS 4:7-18

The final verses of Colossians seem to have little theological impact. Most of the people listed here, with the exception of Luke and Mark, are unfamiliar. We could easily dismiss these verses, skipping them to delve into 1 Thessalonians. But these verses carry the subtle message that no ministry is unimportant.

Christians easily recognize the apostle Paul's amazing contributions to the faith. Much of the New Testament is made up of his God-inspired letters. The people mentioned in his Colossian missive seem to pale in comparison, but all of them were important. For instance, Tychicus, the first mentioned, played an incredible role—wherever he appears in Scripture, he is running errands for Paul. (Acts 20:4, Ephesians 6:21, 2 Timothy 4:12) Thanks to this man, the Colossian letter traveled over 800 miles to its destination, then moved from church to church to be read repeatedly and copied. Without Paul's errand boy, modern believers might not have this valuable letter.

We tend to judge types of service as important or unimportant. Too often pride inhibits our approval of a particular ministry. We want a big, impressive job to prove to everyone how much we love God. However, what the Lord desires is the exact opposite: He wants our love to motivate us to do anything He asks, no matter how insignificant or unnoticeable.

What is God asking you to do that you are resisting? Repent of your pride, and humble yourself to do all that He desires. None of God's work is unimportant.

Facing Life's Unknowns

HEBREWS 11:23-29

The New Testament writers would often refer to the lives of Old Testament men and women. In this way, they could encourage believers and remind them how the Lord worked in previous generations. Spiritual principles that guided the faithful in earlier times remained practical for early Christians and are still applicable today.

When we face a worrisome situation, we can look to Moses' example. His life was unpredictable and full of unknowns, yet he "endured, as seeing Him who is unseen" (v. 27). In Greek, the root word for *endurance* alludes to the capacity to bear up under difficulty. The Israelite leader successfully resisted pressure by keeping his focus on God rather than the events surrounding him. Endurance is the mark of a mature Christian.

If someone asked, "Have you seen God?" most likely you would say no. Physically speaking, you'd be right, but in a spiritual sense, everyone who receives Jesus Christ has the capacity to discern Him at work in the world. We do this by reading the Bible, where we learn about who God is, how He functions, and what He expects from us. Apart from Scripture, people can imagine all sorts of wrong concepts, so we must turn there first.

Next, we can identify the Lord's work in other's lives. Examining the experiences of modern-day saints yields knowledge of God and encourages us. Finally, we recall His hand in our own past. In addition to daily prayer and Bible meditation, take time to praise God for His intervention, mercy, and guidance in your life.



“Exercise? But it’s December! “ If you think being health-conscious can wait till the first of the year, think again . . .



Jordan Rubin

Author of the best-selling book *The Maker’s Diet*

Exercise:

The Gift That Keeps on Giving

You’re busy this month, right? Of course you are. The kids will be out of school, you’ve got a calendar that’s speckled with Christmas and New Year’s parties, and you’re planning for family and company throughout the month of December. With so much going on, how can you afford to squeeze in some exercise?

Actually, you can’t afford not to exercise, although I sympathize—December is probably the toughest time of year to get to the gym or do something physically beneficial for the body. Short days, long commutes, holiday shopping, and a busy social life have a way of crowding out intentional exercise during this season.

However, you don’t have to pump away on a futuristic-looking elliptical trainer to get your exercise. There’s another route to fitness, and it’s a low-impact one that just about anyone, at any age, in any physical shape, can do. I’m talking about good old-fashioned walking, which can be done as part of a “mall crawl” or on a treadmill if you live in a cold-weather

climate. Should you be fortunate enough to live in the southern or southwestern part of the country, you can walk outside all year long.

Walking, probably the most perfect exercise you can do, is a surprisingly effective strategy for long-term health. Walking is a load-bearing exercise that places a gentle strain on the hips and the rest of the body; it imposes mild stress on the heart, which makes that organ work harder and build up muscle. What I like about walking is that you can do it for any length of time, and the intensity can be adjusted according to age, health status, and fitness goals. It’s an exercise that you can do at your own pace and as frequently as you like—your muscles don’t need to recoup for 24 or 48 hours, as they would after a strenuous workout of lifting weights.

You can walk whenever your schedule allows: at the crack of dawn before work, during your morning break, over lunch hour, before dinner,

Did You Know?
According to the American Heart Association, vigorous activities that include well-paced walking can help reduce the following risk factors for heart disease:

- high blood pressure
- diabetes
- obesity and overweight
- high levels of triglycerides
- low levels of HDL (“good” cholesterol)

or in the twilight hours. You can even walk after eating a meal, and walking is a superb social activity since it’s well suited for conversation. This form of exercise can be done with someone of the opposite sex since strength and size don’t count for much. I enjoy taking weekend walks with my wife Nicki and our one-year-old son Joshua and find the activity to be a great time of family fellowship.

Let me make one more point about exercise this time of year. Americans own more gym memberships and exercise equipment than all other nations combined, but never have people gotten less use out of either. Over the next month, you’ll see friends and acquaintances who overindulge between Thanksgiving and Christmas and then on New Year’s Eve declare their resolve to “get into shape this year.”

You know as well as I do that their New Year’s resolution won’t last until

Martin Luther King’s birthday. They’ll have an excuse: “I’m too busy”; “I don’t have the energy”; or “It’s too cold.” However, we are never excused from the need to exercise. Our bodies were designed to move—to haul, stride, step, boost, drag, march, tread, run, kick, and heave with our limbs. Unfortunately, we just don’t get the opportunity to make physical movements a part of our daily lives as much as we’d like.

Unless you’re a UPS deliveryman, you’ll probably have to be intentional about finding time to exercise, even if that means scheduling an appointment with yourself. Start now—not on January 2.

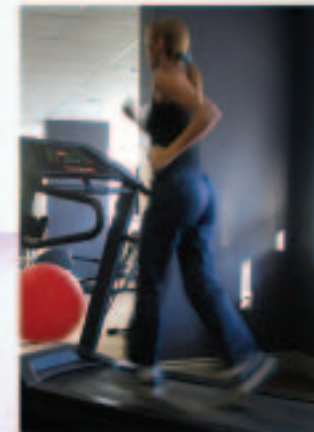
For more information on biblical health, please visit www.jordanrubin.com

Winter Weather Walking

If you’ve already had to dig your car out of three feet of snow or navigate ice-covered sidewalks, you know that walking outside could actually prove hazardous to your health during this time of year! Not to mention that many of us don’t have free daylight hours—with the sun setting so early, we don’t feel safe walking outside after sunset.

In this case, you might benefit from investing in a treadmill. There are many makes and styles to choose from, with a number of them built for easy storage when not in use. Another advantage is that, as soon as preschoolers go down for a nap, young moms can get some exercise without having to leave the house.

But of course, whenever possible, walking outdoors in the sunlight and fresh air is always preferred—even if it is a bit brisk!



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Mankind has always struggled with obeying the Lord's commands. Sadly, many people today fall into the trap of viewing obedience to God as many did in Christ's day: the Pharisees were precise in their efforts to follow countless guidelines for conduct and diet. Yet their glaring weakness was to focus on the letter of the Law while disregarding its spirit. The outward behavior of these religious leaders may have appeared pious, but their hearts were actually far from the kingdom of God. True allegiance begins with your thoughts and continues all the way through to your actions and attitudes.

Decide today that, regardless of your circumstances, you will obey God and leave the consequences to Him. Just as obedience brings the Father's rewards, disobedience results in difficulty. Whether 5 or 65, God's children will be blessed by learning to "trust and obey."

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