

March 2007

BA

BIBLE ADVOCATE

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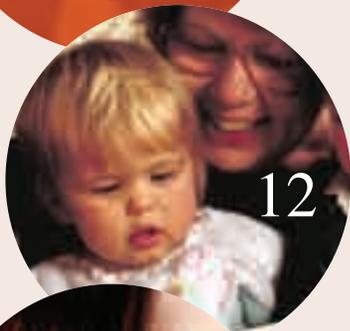
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In the March issue of *Now What?*: freedom from pornography (<http://nowwhat.cog7.org>)

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A publication of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)
 This magazine is published to advocate
 the Bible, represent the Church, and
 glorify the God of grace and truth.

Volume 141 • Number 2

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The BIBLE ADVOCATE (ISSN 0746-0104) is
 published eight times a year January-February,
 March, April-May, June, July-August,
 September, October-November, and December
 by Bible Advocate Press, 330 W. 152nd Ave.,
 Broomfield, CO 80020. Periodicals postage
 is paid at Broomfield, CO, and at additional
 offices. Subscription is free to any who ask.
 POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Bible
 Advocate Press, Box 33677, Denver, CO 80233-
 0677.

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Subscriptions and Orders

Bible Advocate Press
 P.O. Box 33677
 Denver, CO 80233-0677
 tel: 303/452-7973
 fax: 303/452-0657
 e-mail: bibleadvocate@cog7.org
 orders: bap.orders@cog7.org

Notice: Send all address changes and other
 correspondence to the address above.

Publications Agreement No. 40042428

Scripture quotations are from the *New King
 James Version*, unless otherwise noted.

The Bible Advocate Online appears at www.cog7.org/BA.

Cover photo: Ascending © Catalin Pobega—
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Walking in Faith and Grace



The first BA of '07 began a year-long
 journey through the Bible by surveying
 and snap-shooting Genesis 1-11. In one
 magazine, we walked through more than two
 thousand years of human pre-history covering
 Creation, Noah's flood, and other highlights of
 that grand section of Scripture.

In this issue we continue the journey, walking through Genesis 12-50 into early Exodus. Here the landscape is mostly about men called patriarchs, their wives, and their families. We cover about fifty Bible chapters this time around, compared with only eleven the first walk. The history now in your hands spans less than five hundred years, compared with thousands of years in the previous issue.

Picking up speed along Route 66 (that's how many separate books are in the one Bible), let's not be too rushed to take in the text's panorama, to smell pungent plants along the road, or to admire a few ugly bugs by the way. It's all in there, from A to Z.

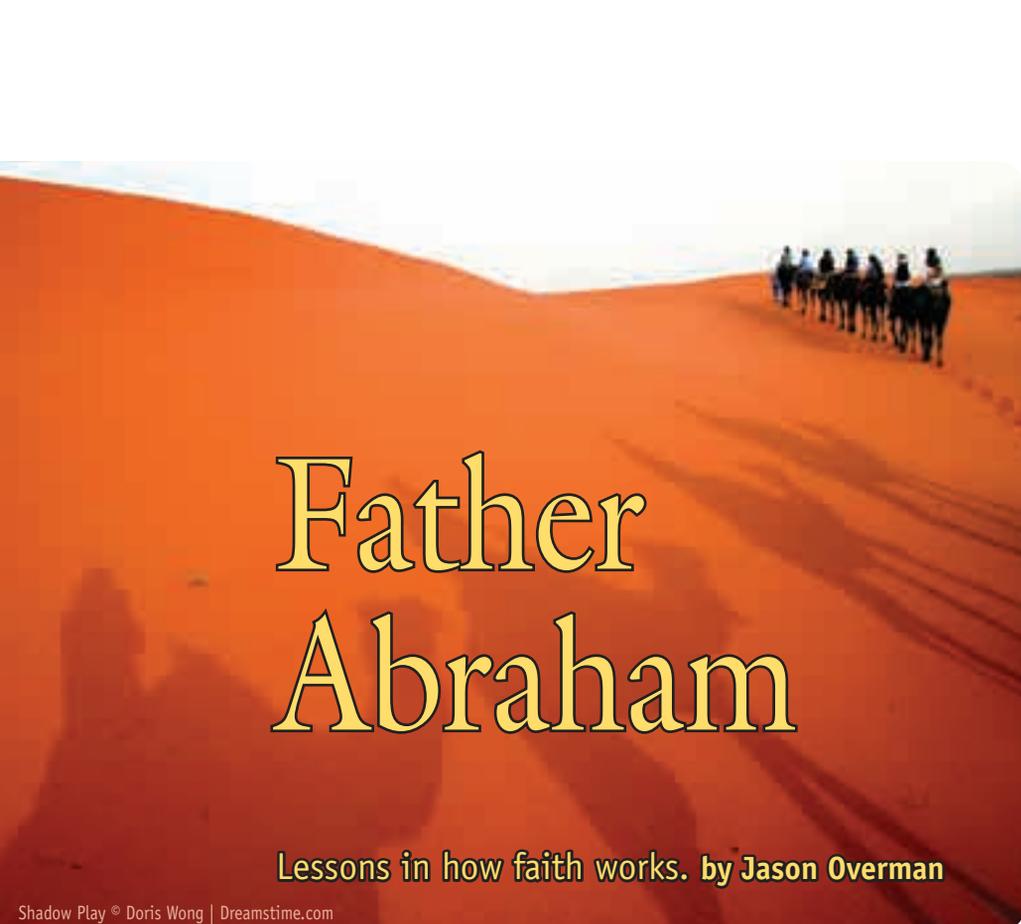
For today, A is for Abraham, and Abraham is for faith. March's articles explain and apply what the Bible everywhere applauds: the trust of our father Abraham. Jason Overman relates faith to living; Jerry McClenagan calls us to faith adventures; Sonya Lopez visits a sobering faith problem; and Richard Wiedenheft draws the big picture. In our walk with God, faith comes first, and Abraham is the faith-man of Scripture.

Abraham leads to Isaac, of course, and Isaac to Jacob and Joseph and his brethren in Egypt. Which leads to Moses, whom God used to lead these children of Israel out of bondage and into Sinai's boot camp on the way to the Promised Land. This exodus event is the centerpiece of the Old Testament.

The central *concept* of the Old Testament, if not the whole Bible, is *covenant*. God made His covenants with Adam, with Noah, and with Abraham more than once. His multi-faceted agreement with the faith-man was first fulfilled when Moses led Abraham's physical family, Israel, out of Egypt under the old covenant. Its greater fulfillment came when Christ died and rose again to lead Abraham's spiritual family — faith-folks from every nation — from their sin to His righteous kingdom through the new covenant.

To all readers, we commend the study of "covenant" — a Bible theme of highest significance. It is a vehicle that can keep us journeying along Route 66 with understanding and grace.

— Calvin Burrell



Father Abraham

Lessons in how faith works. by Jason Overman

Shadow Play © Doris Wong | Dreamstime.com

Ever sing the children's chorus "Father Abraham"? While most songs demand little more of us than to move our lips, "Father Abraham" requires our minds, mouths, arms, legs, hands, and feet, all coordinated to the beat of the music.

"Father Abraham" is a parable for our time. It asks, "What is the nature of this faith that makes Abraham 'the father of us all'" (Romans 4:16)? Is faith a song that rises up from deep within, animating body, soul, and spirit? Or is faith a shallow song to be sung seated and passive?

While the book of James holds that Abraham's justifying faith was a working faith (2:20), Christians today are more often influenced by Paul, who appears to say just the opposite: Abraham's justifying faith is "to him who does not work but believes

on Him who justifies the ungodly . . ." (Romans 4:5). Both apostles appeal to Abraham; both cite Genesis 15:6. Have they reached contradictory conclusions?

Due to misreading Paul's writing, many Christians believe that faith and works are diametrically opposed. If we hear the word *works* in conversation at all, it is often as a term of derision.

Much confusion exists regarding the relationship between faith and works. All of us have probably scratched our heads, wondering how to make sense of it all. How *does* faith work?

Old Testament faith

Since the New Testament writers delight in appealing to the faith of Abraham, let's return to his story to see how faith operates there and elsewhere in the Old Testament.

In *Reverberations of Faith*, Walter Brueggemann explains how faith functions within the larger context of covenant. He calls covenant "The central theological construct of the Old Testament . . . a passionate, interactive relationship between YHWH and YHWH's people."¹ Because covenant is grounded and sustained in that love shared by two committed partners, fidelity is crucial to the covenant.

Brueggemann notes that one of the Hebrew words used to denote covenant fidelity is *'emeth*, or *faithfulness*, the word behind the terms *believed* in Genesis 15:6 and *faith* in Habakkuk 2:4: "the just shall live by his faith."

Brueggemann also says that, as in any marriage, "Faith' concerns attentive engagement in a promissory relationship. . . . Israel is also expected to know and honor its covenantal commitments. . . ." ² With the accent firmly on covenant, "Only rarely does the Old Testament suggest that 'faith' is a body of teaching that Israel is to 'believe.'" ³ It is more "trust in" than "assent to." But this "trust is not to be understood primarily in emotive terms. Trust is a practice that entails obedience . . ." ⁴

This description of faith as a trusting obedience within a divine covenant relationship is in the story of Abraham. It begins with God's gracious initiative. The first words "Now the Lord" (Genesis 12:1a) are simple and suggestive: It is our God who acts; it is our God who finds. This is God's work through and through.

That God is primary in creating and sustaining covenant relations is stressed in the five "I will" promises that follow. God will

do what Abraham cannot dream of asking, much less doing: He will bestow land, nation, name, and blessing for Abraham and for others (vv. 1-3). Here, God offers the lost and barren a future that rises above the limits of life as they know it.

This calling also comes with a command: to make a dangerous departure and relinquish the status quo (v.1b). Like promise, command is an integral aspect of covenant life. Commandment names that road implied by the covenant commitment. It is a loving dynamic in relationship that moves and directs Abram as he journeys *from past to promise*.

What does Abraham do in response to the gracious initiative, promise, and command of God? He departs, as God had said (v. 4a). We can't distinguish the movement between trust and obedience here. They are simply two stanzas of the same hymn. Faithfulness exhibits both stanzas: mind and body, belief and work, confidence and obedience. To separate them is to misunderstand them.

Imperfect faith

As his relationship with God moves through time, Abraham is ready to trust and obey the extraordinary claims of his God. When Abraham contemplates that his servant will end up as his heir, God counters that he and his wife, Sarah, will have their own baby. Aged and barren as they are, Abraham says, "OK" (Genesis 15). When God has him offer up this very miracle named Isaac, again Abraham says, "OK" (Genesis 22). This is *faithfulness*.

But Abraham's faith is not perfect. He doubts God's way of

working and tries to work it out himself. He lies about Sarah to the Egyptians (Genesis 12). He has a child with Hagar, hoping to fulfill the promise (Genesis 16). These defective faith events we call "Ishmaels," and their presence in an exemplary life reveals that repentance (our desire to remain in covenant) and forgiveness (God's desire to preserve covenant) are always cardinal works of covenant faith.

Because faith is characteristic of *both* covenant partners, works and faithfulness are frequently ascribed to God. When Israel sings about faithfulness, the song is not about her but about God (Lamentations 3:23) because God's works of faith are infinitely more true and reliable than hers.

Similarly, the Psalms mention *works* dozens of times, mostly in celebration of the "wonderful works" of God (40:5). For people to live in covenant relation to a faithful and working God is to humbly anticipate that His mighty works of faithfulness will be revealed in them (90:16, 17).

New Testament faith

This is how faith works in the Old Testament, but what about the New Testament? Do we find continuity?

When the faith chapter, He-

brews 11, celebrates faith, it recounts mostly faithfulness. By faith Abel *offered*, Noah *built*, Abraham *went*, Jacob *blessed*, Moses *refused*, and Rahab *received*. Plainly, belief and behavior are inseparable. Further, we are invited to recall how this faith relates to God's faithfulness: "By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed . . . because she judged Him faithful who had promised" (v. 11). Hebrews beautifully conveys the rich textures of biblical faith.

Paul also blends faith with works, even fusing the two in the same sentence: "work of faith" (1 Thessalonians 1:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:11); "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). When Paul warns of those who "profess to know God, but in works they deny Him" (Titus 1:16), he sounds a lot like James.

These positive references to *works* indicate that Paul does not think of them as a theological problem. He regularly calls his congregations to good works (2 Corinthians 9:8; Ephesians 2:10; Colossians 1:10) and in typical Jewish fashion believes that in the last judgment, God "will render to every man according to his works" (Romans 2:6, ASV; Psalm 62:12; Proverbs 24:12; Matthew 16:27; 1 Peter 1:17).

Repentance (our desire to remain in covenant) and forgiveness (God's desire to preserve covenant) are always cardinal works of covenant faith.

Trusting obedience is the very nature of a genuine faith and remains the defining characteristic of God's covenant community.

Paul's understanding of faith agrees with the Hebrew concept of faithfulness. We can see this best in Romans, where Paul brackets his entire letter with references to "the obedience to the faith" (1:5; 16:26). Trusting obedience is the very nature of a genuine faith and remains the defining characteristic of God's covenant community.

In his book *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, Richard B. Hays explains ". . . that our strict distinction between 'faith' and 'faithfulness' is not applicable to the Greek word [*pistis*, faith], which contains both ideas."⁵ Paul illustrates this when he uses both ideas in the very same verse ("they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham," Galatians 3:9, KJV) or as he employs active language in commending faith to his readers ("walk in the steps" of Abraham's faith, Romans 4:12) or when he uses *belief* and *obedience* as if they were interchangeable (Romans 10:16; 11:30; compare Acts 6:7; Hebrews 3:8-19).

But again, faith is part of the larger story of God's covenant acts. Since no flesh is just in God's sight (Psalm 143:2; Romans 3:20), Paul, like David, looks beyond universal human failure to the covenant faithfulness of God and finds it fully revealed in "the faith of Jesus Christ." In Jesus' faithfulness, hu-

man faith/lessness is borne and overcome, and salvation appears for all who believe (Romans 3:26; Galatians 3:22, KJV). Here is our "faithful High Priest" in action (Hebrews 2:17).

In His sacrificial death, Jesus mediates both His Father's perfect loving faithfulness toward man *and* the partial love and faithfulness of man toward God (Romans 5:8, 15). In Christ, covenant fidelity is perfected, and in Him we become faithful participants (19:6). In short, our faith is contingent on His (2:17; 10:17).

In Ephesians 2:8-10 and Titus 3:5-8 Paul offers classic formulas of this covenantal order of faith. God's work of grace and mercy in Christ is the ground of salvation, not human works. It is the "gift of God" from which springs the only true response: faith. But this trusting faith moves naturally as a working faith. Ephesians 2:10 says we are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." We should be careful to maintain them (Titus 3:8). Faith acknowledges that the God who worked in Christ is now at work in us "striving according to His working which works in me mightily" (Colossians 1:29). This is how new covenant faith works.

We may now understand Paul's occasional objection to "the works of the law." It is only

as this covenant order is distorted through boasting (Romans 3:27-4:2; Galatians 6:13, 14) that Paul finds it necessary to attack works. Any belief that would make God indebted to man; any pride in human efforts as the cause, rather than the result, of salvation; or any false confidence in some old work (circumcision, temple) that undermines the centrality of God's new work (Christ) must be refused in full. James and Paul both agree that faith works, but Paul would have us beware of *how faith does not work* – the dangerous deviations.

Song of faith

Like Father Abraham, we cannot forget that our song of faith is totally dependent on God. We are not the authors of this melody; the God made known in Christ wrote the tune and sang it first. It is only by grace that we find – to our own surprise – that we are learning to sing along. As loving partners in covenant with Abraham's God, we are determined to trust *and* obey, because in Jesus Christ we have discovered that faith is not just a song; it's a dance. ■■

Jason Overman serves the congregation in Jasper, AR.



References

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith*, p. 76
2. *Ibid*, pp. 78, 77
3. *Ibid*, p. 78
4. *Ibid*.
5. Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ*, p. 157

Questions & Answers

Q I am not sure of my salvation. I tried to repent of cigarette smoking, but it won't go away. I came as I was, asking Jesus to save me, but nothing makes any difference. Now it seems no hope is left. Will this sin keep me out of heaven?

A Sin is often experienced in the Christian life and less often confessed. You have expressed yours openly, and each of your phrases of confession suggests a biblical response.

"I am not sure. . . ." Self-examination is often helpful, but an honest look at self will always bring some disappointment, even doubt. For each look at the disease, believers should take ten looks at the cure: "looking unto Jesus . . ." (Heb. 12:2). Intimate fellowship with Christ the Savior brings assurance of salvation.

"I tried to repent. . . ." Great phrase! It suggests that repentance is not a one-time event. *Repent* means "turning," and every Christian needs more turning to align with God's perfect will. The tear of repentance is always in the eye of anyone drawing nearer to the Lord.

". . . it won't go away." Cigarette smoking is more than a habit; it is an addiction. Christ can break your addiction now, or He might use others to assist you in finding freedom over time. It is not unspiritual to seek help from professional groups and approved medicines designed for those addicted to nicotine. Paul too was addicted in the pre-tobacco era: "The evil I will not do, that I practice" (Rom. 7:19). His solution is in vv. 24, 25.

"I came as I was. . . ." It is true that we must come to Christ for forgiveness just as we are, and it is also true that He will not leave us just as we are.

When we truly believe, He begins a work in us that will not be complete until it ends in the perfections of His eternal kingdom (Phil. 1:6).

". . . asking Jesus to save me." And He has done just what He promised to do! Jesus came to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15), not those who think they are all cleaned up and going to heaven. Did you confess your sins? Read 1 John 1:9. Take the Bible at its word: Christians are not perfect — just forgiven. Jesus is your Savior too! (4:10b).

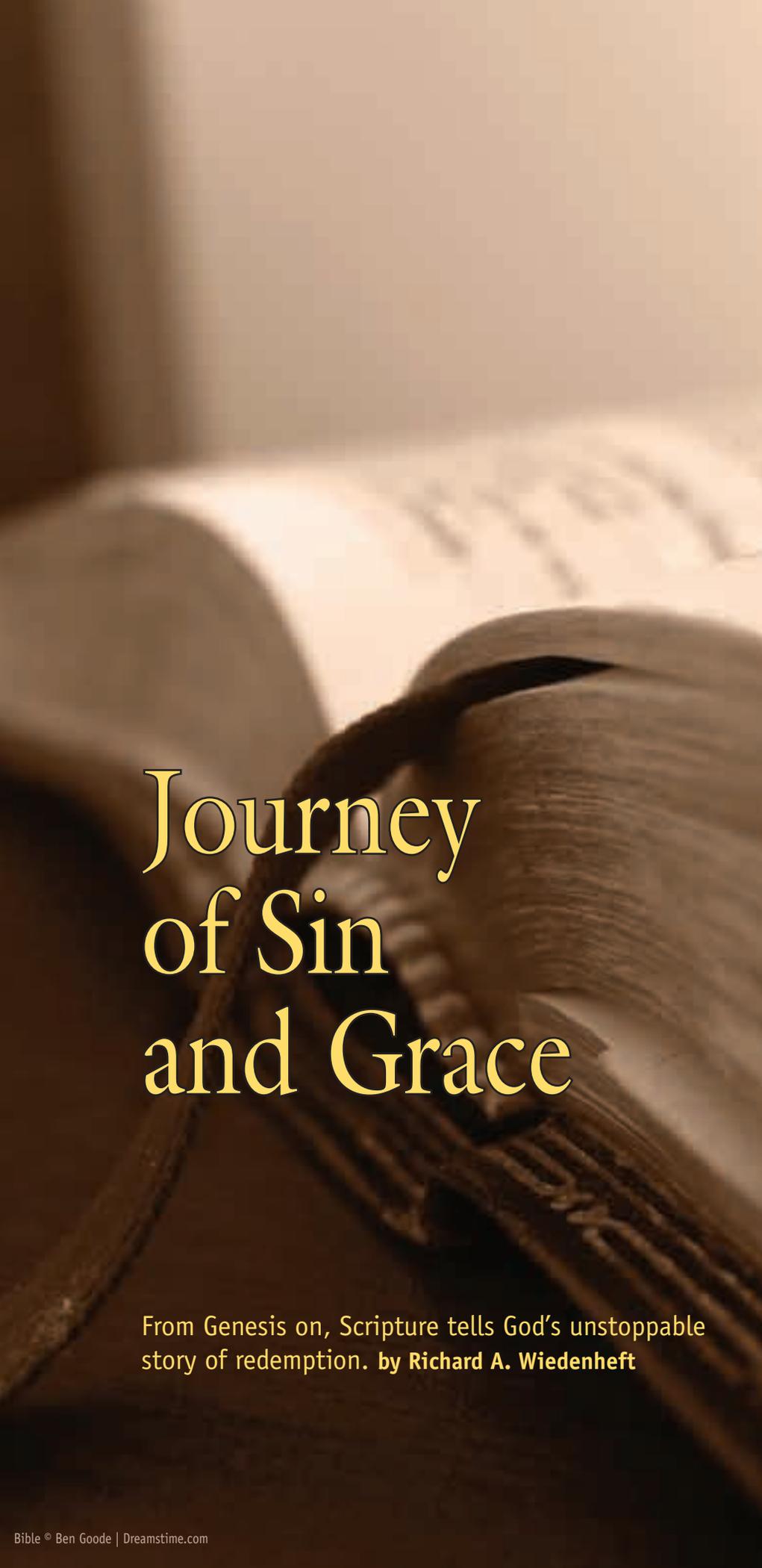
". . . nothing makes any difference" refers, I think, to your efforts at quitting — so far. Surely your faith has made some other differences, giving you evidence that faith works. The difference of sins forgiven takes just a moment of faith and confession, so never doubt it! The difference of cleansing from daily sins, however, may take a lifetime. So never give up!

". . . no hope is left"? God is left, and He is the God of hope. Jesus is the same today as yesterday, and He renews our hope. The Holy Spirit is left, and hope is one of the Spirit's fruits. And you are left, so please be patient: God is not finished with you yet!

Will this sin keep you from the kingdom of heaven? Although smoking is sin (with a small s), it is not unforgivable. Only our willful disobedience and disbelief (sin with a capital S) can break the believer's fellowship with God and raise valid questions about his salvation.

If you believe with all your heart in Jesus Christ and turn from sin toward righteousness as the Spirit gives you grace to do so, you have God's promise that He will not abandon you — not now, not forever (Rom. 8:31-39).

— Elder Calvin Burrell



Journey of Sin and Grace

From Genesis on, Scripture tells God's unstoppable story of redemption. **by Richard A. Wiedenheft**

During the 1996-97 school year at Spring Vale Academy, I taught Old Testament Survey to freshmen and sophomores. As my students and I completed Genesis and reflected on it, they were amazed that this book displayed so much human nature in the raw. It was as if the Devil were thwarting God at every turn, pulling humanity into the cesspool of selfishness and sin, making it impossible for God to be in loving fellowship with the beings He created in His image.

Even among the heroes in Genesis there were minor and major flaws, sins that underscored the fact proclaimed later by the apostle Paul: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

Yet just as Genesis demonstrates the sinfulness of humanity, so it displays the inexorable power of God's grace, before which all human beings must bow in reverence or be crushed in judgment. Nothing thwarts the redemptive plan of God!

Sinfulness of humanity

We don't get through the third chapter of Genesis before we read about the rebellion of our first parents. Tempted by the Devil, they broke the one command God gave them. This is followed in chapter 4 by the murder of Abel by his brother Cain, a heinous crime that must have stuck a knife of disappointment and grief into the hearts of their parents and Creator. The wickedness and corruption of human beings became so terrible that God sent the Flood to destroy them (6:5, 11-13). Then the egotism and pride of the people

in building the tower of Babel (11:1-4) and the homosexuality and wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, cities destroyed by fire from heaven (19:5-10).

Even among those who recognized Yahweh as their God, there was sin: the deceit of Abraham and, later, Isaac about their wives being sisters (12:10-13; 20:1, 2; 26:7); the doubting of Abraham (15:2, 8; 16:1-4; 17:18) and Sarah (16:1-4; 18:12-15); Lot's willingness to give his daughters to the Sodomites (19:5-10) and their subsequent incest (vv. 30-35); the favoritism of Isaac and Rebecca for Esau and Jacob, respectively (25:28); the deceptive, selfish scheming of Jacob (vv. 20-34; 27:5-29); the deceit of Laban (29:23); the rivalry of Jacob's wives (29:31–30:24); the idols and lies of Rachel (31:34, 35); the treachery of Dinah's brothers against the Shechemites (34:14, 25-29); the treachery of Joseph's brothers in selling him into slavery and lying to their father (37:28-35); and the adultery of Judah with Tamar (38:15-18).

In sum, Genesis lays out just about every type of sin that has been part of the human experience down to our day. It also demonstrates that despite sin and all the Devil's efforts to turn people from God, the redemptive plan of God moves forward — because God's grace is at work.

Active grace

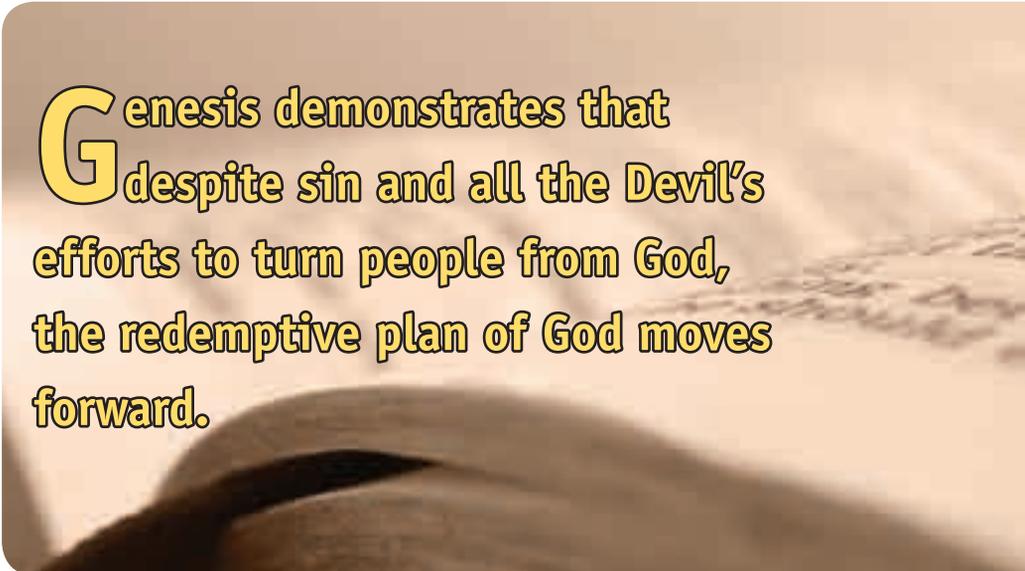
Because of the utter sinfulness of humanity, "The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain" (6:6). He determined to wipe out the human

race, reducing the world to a watery chaos not unlike the one out of which He made the habitable earth in the first place. But God's grace was also at work as He preserved the life and family of Noah, a man who "found favor [grace, KJV] in the eyes of the Lord" (v. 8). Noah was the new Adam, the progenitor of a new race through which the earth would have an obedient, worthy regent and God would redeem fallen humanity.

The vast majority of Noah's descendants rejected God, but God's grace was at work in the life of Abraham — perhaps not the firstborn son of Terah, but the one God chose and called to leave the pagan world of Haran to live in Canaan. With a heart inclined to serve God, Abraham demonstrated willingness to obey Him. And God revealed His promise to make of Abraham a great nation in the new land of promise to be an example to the world of a people whose God is Yahweh. It is said of this man of faith, "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6).

Thus is introduced one of the great themes of the redemptive story of Scripture: that imperfect, sinful humans can be counted as righteous in God's sight because they believe Him. Four times in the New Testament, Paul and James directly refer to this statement about Abram as they flesh out the meaning of God's grace in making the righteousness of faith through God in Christ available to sinful humanity (Romans 4:3, 22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23).

What had Abraham done to deserve all this? Nothing. Although Abraham responded to God with consistent obedience, God's grace was at work from the start in calling and leading him and overlooking his flaws. And it was certainly God's grace that, after twenty-five long years, brought him and Sarah a child of their own — Isaac, a son born of promise to those incapable of having children. He was a miracle baby, a prefigurement of Jesus, who was also born contrary to the laws of nature. And Isaac was called over Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn and natural



Genesis demonstrates that despite sin and all the Devil's efforts to turn people from God, the redemptive plan of God moves forward.

offspring, to play a leading role in God's plan.

God's grace is evident in Isaac serving as a type of the Redeemer by being an obedient son, carrying the wood that was to be the instrument of his death, allowing himself to be placed on the altar to die at the point of his father's knife. And even more grace is evident as God provided a ram as a substitute for Isaac (Genesis 22:13). All this prefigures the great sacrifice of Christ, who would bear the wood of His death instrument to Calvary and willingly give Himself to pay for humanity's sins.

God's grace was at work in sending Joseph to Egypt years in advance so he could preserve his brothers who wanted to kill him (50:20). But far beyond preserving their lives, Joseph was transplanting the descendants of Israel in Egypt, where they would be tried and tested through generations of oppressive slavery without any human hope of escape.

God's grace was at work in Egypt in miraculously preserving a baby boy named Moses. And grace gave him forty years

of the best education the world could offer as an Egyptian prince (Exodus 2:10; Acts 7:22). Grace drove him out of Egypt into Midian for forty years of the best training the wilderness could offer, then called him back to Egypt to lead God's people from slavery to the Promised Land.

In all this history, God's grace worked at choosing whom He wanted to accomplish His purposes, regardless of their sins and flaws and regardless of most human beings' rejection of Him. Nothing thwarts the plan of God!

Continuing story

Despite humans' sinfulness and frailty, God's plan of redemption moves forward. And Satan's best efforts to destroy that plan serve only to further it.

The great themes of Scripture, the elements of God's plan for humankind, can be seen from the very beginning. The preeminence of God's grace, justification by faith, payment for sins by the sacrifice of another, the judgment on evil: These all come alive in the pages of Genesis. They are evident in the lives of the patriarchs, whose faith in

God is commended in Hebrews 11.

As we move through Scripture, the story soon focuses on one nation: Israel. Although the players and circumstances are different, the central themes are the same: God wants a relationship with people who are inclined to serve Him. And through His grace, He will have that relationship. The wicked will be brought to justice, even when those wicked are God's chosen people.

Today we are part of the continuing story of God's plan for humanity. We find ourselves part of the people of God who, like the patriarchs of old, are imperfect, frail, susceptible to temptation. But God's plan moves forward because of His grace in shedding the blood of His dear Son. Through His grace, the righteousness of faith is available to all who believe. And through belief, Christians are counted as righteous before God. They enjoy an intimate, personal relationship with Him and are seated, in Christ, in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6).

His will is being accomplished; His plan marches on! God will have a people who are truly His own, a people who can walk in sweet fellowship with Him for all eternity the way Adam and Eve did before their sin in the garden.



For Parents and Grandparents

Want to share parts of Genesis with your children or grandchildren in a creative way? Visit the *Bible Advocate Online* (www.cog7.org/BA) and read "King Cheddar" and "A Type of Christ," both written by Jeff Endecott for children at grade school level. Through delightful storytelling, Jeff explains some truths about King Chedorlaomer and Abraham and about Melchizedek, from the story in Genesis 14.

Scripture quotations were taken from the *New International Version*.



WWTZ



What did Jesus say about the string of Bible heroes from Abraham to Moses — those who gave birth and faith to the nation of Israel?

Quite a lot, actually, and it's all recorded for our learning in the Gospels and Epistles.

Concerning Abraham, Jesus said that those who claim to be Abraham's children should demonstrate truth, obedience, and good works as their faithful father did. In speaking evil of Christ and seeking to kill Him, they proved that they were not Abraham's seed, but Satan's (John 8:33-44).

Jesus went on to describe His relation to Abraham in terms we don't grasp. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (v. 56). Then followed this theological explosive: "Before Abraham was, I AM" (v. 58).

Concerning Abraham's nephew, Lot, Jesus said those days of eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, and building with little care for God would mirror the days before His return (Luke 17:28-32). Jesus accepted the historicity of Sodom and Gomorrah's destruction, and He warned us to not look back when we leave the evil of this world.

About Isaac and Jacob, Jesus said that Abraham's God was theirs also and that many would come from around the earth to sit down with them in the kingdom of God

(Matt. 8:11; 22:32; Mark 12:24-27).

About Moses, Jesus defended and supported his laws and teachings, saying that all things written by that greatest Old Testament prophet gave testimony of Him, the Christ (Luke 24:44; John 5:39, 45-47).

And what would Jesus do in view of this?

Like Abraham who left his modern home in Ur for the unknown land of Canaan, **Jesus would leave the ease and comforts of His heavenly home** to walk with Abraham and all other pilgrims of faith (Gen. 12:1-3; Phil. 2:5ff).

Like Isaac who was willing to be sacrificed by a loving father on the wood he carried to Moriah's hill, **Jesus would humble Himself** to serve the least of men and then die on a rugged cross on the same hill of Calvary (Gen. 22:1-18; Phil. 2:7, 8).

Like Jacob who traveled far for a bride and whose family was filled

with trouble and sorrow (Gen. 25—50), **Jesus would come far, face all manner of temptations, be a Man of Sorrows and acquainted with grief** to redeem a people plagued with problems for His eternal bride (Gen. 25—50; Isa. 53).

Like Joseph who was betrayed by his brothers and endured trials and jail before rising to be a deliverer and ruler, **Jesus would be rejected by His own and suffer the humiliation of death** before being resurrected as Savior and king of all who trust and obey Him.

Like Moses who was rescued from Pharaoh's hand as an infant and later faced that evil ruler to free Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's people from their bondage, **Jesus would early escape a king and later win every battle against Satan** — in the wilderness and on the cross — for the souls of all people.

For Reflection

1. What do you think Jesus meant by "Before Abraham was, I AM"? (John 8:58)
2. How are the days of Lot like our own? (Luke 17:28-32) What do you understand to be Christ's main point in this text?
3. In what specific way did Jesus support Moses' teaching? How did Moses testify of Christ? (John 5:39, 46)
4. In the last five paragraphs above, do you think the author overstates similarities between the Old Testament patriarchs and Christ, since the Scripture itself does not identify these "types"?

The Family Blessing

Making something fuzzy clear, and taking it home. by Calvin Burrell

Each of us has this in common: a father and a mother. Even if we never knew him or only dimly loved her, it took those two to give us life. In vain do we try to escape our parents – those who gave us birth initially and raised us to independence. Who they were and how we see them still affect everything – for better or for worse.

The Bible's first book tells a poignant story about a family of four and the relationships among them. The parents were Isaac and Rebekah; Esau and Jacob were the offspring. This family had a lot going for it; all God's promises were in their favor. Still, they faced great tests, as all homes do. The sins of parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, and endemic dishonesty nearly tore them apart.

The domestic dysfunction at Isaac's house reached a crisis in Genesis 27. This chapter features what should have been a most happy event: the passing of the family blessing. It ends with a generational and fraternal rupture that was to last more than twenty years. Here is drama about an aging father with the power to bless, his twin sons who are both desperate for the blessing, and

a mother who opposes her husband and upends the semblance of peace.

The word *blessing* is a nice religious word, most often heard in the traditional "God bless you" or as a familiar prayer word. (Try to say even a short prayer without the words *bless* or *blessing*.) A problem is that this word can become fuzzy, even trite, when it loses specific meaning. Like cotton candy, it may taste good but have little lasting value in the mind and heart. In this writing, I will promote a *blessing* of precise purpose and value for those closest to us, instead of the hazy stuff that conveys little from the blesser and less to the blest, although it be dumbly sprayed around the world.

The true family blessing is something greatly to be desired, even sought. It is something to be given by a real person at a certain time and place and something to be received via the distinct words, actions, and ceremonies of another. In Genesis 27 old, blind Isaac decides to pass the family blessing to his elder son, Esau, according to the tradition of his fathers. Though he means well, the stored-up maladies in every family mem-

ber work their corrosive force to bring division rather than the loving harmony all of them longed for.

Thinking wrongly, plotting badly, trying to correct the fathering failures of her husband, Mother Rebekah connives to have the blessing go, not to Esau but to her favorite: Jacob (vv. 1-25). We will not linger long upon the partiality and deception that doomed what should have been a harmonious event. Perhaps the ancient customs dictated that one child be especially blest. But in 2007 every dad and mom can pass a blessing to every child, if only they will.

How can today's parents bless their children?

Appropriate touch

Despite the dysfunction of this Hebrew family, today's blessings can be passed in much the same way that Isaac attempted to bless his son. He arranges for a special time of family interaction, with favorite foods to be shared. He gives thought to what he will do and say to convey his warmest thoughts and affections for Esau. He wants this time to be climactic for himself and unforgettable for the boy.



After the mealtime (v. 25), Isaac the father calls the son he intends to bless close to him, resulting in moments of fond embrace, no doubt, and a kiss (vv. 26, 27a). All the benefits and blessings that Isaac means to pass to his son are considered by the older man and expressed to the younger in these moments of physical and emotional warmth. We cannot conceive of this as a mere hasty handshake and a mumbled “God bless you.”

Moms and dads, may we neither forget nor omit the incredible power to bless that resides in the affection we display to our

children (not to mention to each other) through meaningful touch. Modern physiology and psychology help us here with confirming studies. Newborns who are not often held and who do not receive the warm, gentle caresses of a mother figure are much more subject to the diseases and ravages of childhood — even death!

Not only Isaac but also Jesus is our example in this: “Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them . . . And He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and *blessed* them” (Mark 10:13,

16). The benefits of appropriate and positive body contact stay with people for a lifetime. A gentle touch, a back rub, holding hands, a kiss or embrace from a significant other: These help protect your children from immoral relationships later. They lower adult blood pressure now, and they add years to everyone’s life.

Affirming words

But the father’s blessing goes beyond the physical, as we read in verses 27b-29:

“Surely, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the LORD has blessed. Therefore may God give you of the dew of heaven, of the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine. Let peoples serve you, and nations bow down to you. Be master over your brethren, and let your mother’s sons bow down to you. Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be those who bless you!”

The second way Isaac relays his blessing and fills it with precise meaning is by the spoken word. Thinking he is honoring Esau, Isaac chooses his speech with specific regard to the interests, gifts, and goals of his

elder son. Esau is a lover of the outdoors, the crops, the animals, and so these words of Isaac will be especially welcome and warmly received by him. The father pictures a bright future for his firstborn son, foreseeing in him one who will excel above others and achieve prominence and value among the people.

Moms and dads, may we remind ourselves often that words fitly spoken have great potential to bless our children. Silence may sometimes be golden, but silence in the family often communicates confusion, not consent. It leaves our loved ones to fill in the blanks about what we are thinking. Dads in particular may struggle with the common tendency to remain silent, letting our actions speak for us at home.

How many times have we been away from home for a few days and thought how much we missed our wife and children, how much we appreciated them. When we return, surely we will tell them how we felt in their absence. But the normalcy of life again overtakes us back home, and we too often fail to express to those we love the most what we felt while away.

Evidence and experience prove that children need several

positive reinforcements for good behavior if negative response to misbehavior is to be effective. Speak the words, parents: encouraging words, hallowed words, lifting words, faithful words, words that picture a bright future for your children and that attach high value to them. Manna from heaven are such words to those who hear them!

Blessed assurance

Returning to the text of Genesis 27, we read that Esau soon follows the tricky Jacob into Isaac's presence, bringing the desired food and hoping for the father's blessing (vv. 30-37). When the old, blind man learns that Jacob has come in disguise and been blest, he tells Esau that the coveted consecration has already been given and cannot be reversed. The story's emotional apex comes when Esau cries bitterly, "Have you only one blessing, my father? Bless me — me also, O my father!" (v. 38).

Here is the cry of every human heart: to be blest by our earthly parents. Lacking that, we go through life feeling less than loved and less than successful, wondering if we have truly

amounted to anything or not. We desperately need our mother and dad's unconditional approval. To Isaac's partial credit and Esau's partial comfort, this dad appends a lesser blessing to his elder son (vv. 39, 40), but the inequity leaves scars that will never fully heal.

As Christians, we may be confident of the eternal blessing — love, acceptance, forgiveness, and reassurance — that comes only from our Father in heaven through Jesus Christ our Lord. For many, the truth of justification and reconciliation in the gospel goes a long way to repair damage left when our earthly families do not pass on specific words and actions that attach high value and a bright future for every child. Each of us might have comprehended the blessing of heaven more easily had it been patterned and verbalized for us on earth more consistently.

Pass it on

Genesis 27 tells some good bad examples for families, which we should not imitate. The need of everyone for a family blessing, passed on by a godly father and mother, however, is just as true today as it ever was. Moms and dads, pass it on by meaningful touch; by spoken words that picture and encourage a bright future; and by lifelong love, acceptance, forgiveness, and reassurance.

Let's pass the family blessing on! **BA**

Author's note: The principles in this article were first communicated to me by Gary Smalley and John Trent in their book The Blessing.





YOUTH REACH

Dating God's Way

by Danny Melgoza

It started with love. For the two years we dated, my heart wrenched when Jacqui went home after a visit (I lived in Texas, she in Oklahoma). I longed to see her every day. But that isn't the love I'm talking about. Our relationship started with devoted, romantic love for the Lord.

The day I first saw Jacqui, I was amazed. She walked to the front of the meeting hall at a youth retreat and began speaking enthusiastically about her mission trip to Mexico. She spoke about the Lord as though she were in love with Him. And she was. We married five years later. Now we've been married two awesome, God-given years.

What makes marriage so good? We believe much of it is our choice in courting — dating with a purpose. Courting is a God-centered way of relating to the opposite sex and of pledging purity to a potential lifetime partner.

Both Jacqui and I read great books for courting: **I Kissed Dating Goodbye** and **Boy Meets Girl**, by Joshua Harris. These helped us commit to purity in our relationship. Our battles against the temptation of physical intimacy were strong, and it took a lot of strength from God to win them in a society that

says it's OK to have sex before marriage.

We shortened our alone time together. We kept to strict curfews and spent more time around family and friends than just with each other. This frustrated us at the time, but now we're glad we did it that way. No

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Don't forget . . .

- **National Youth Week/
Hunger Lock-In**

**Suggested dates:
April 18-21, 2007**

**Contact 541-517-1079 or
nfyf@cog7.org**

- **Gimme Five **

Look for packets and journals in your mail, or download them from <http://home.cog7.org/ministries/nfyf/youthworker/Gimme5/>.

- **Wake-Up Call
Motivational Verse**

"Keep your eyes open, hold tight to your convictions, give it all you've got, be resolute, and love without stopping" (1 Corinthians 16:13, 14, *The Message*).



The Tug of Temptation

What we learn from Joseph about faith, integrity, and purity. by **Sonya Lopez**

The integrity flop in Christian faith may be the greatest threat facing the church today — a failure most obvious in the modern trends of sexual immorality.

Current statistics report a decrease in sexual activity among teens, but the numbers remain alarming. The U.S. has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the world. Every hour, one hundred teen girls get pregnant. Nearly 47 percent of high school students admit to having had sex.¹ A 2003 survey says that more than half of 15-17-year-olds have had sex long before graduating high school. Boys face more pressure to participate in pre-marital sex than girls. Alcohol and drugs play a big role in teens' sexual activity.²

Invitations to participate in all types of sexual sin are promoted constantly through movies, television, music, and even cartoons. The entertainment industry makes millions through the sale of illicit sex. Sexual perversion has led to sexually transmitted diseases (STD's), AIDS, rape, and even murder. A 2006 survey reported that 50 percent of Christian men and 20 percent of Christian women are addicted to pornography.³

Even if close to correct, these statistics imply that the serious sexual problems in society have also invaded the church. The integrity of our faith is at stake in what we do now. Moral impurity is a sure sign of those who "profess to know God, but in works they deny Him, being abomina-

ble, disobedient . . ." (Titus 1:16).

The Bible is clear about the standard for people of faith: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3). Sex is God's gift for procreation and mutual enjoyment — between husbands and wives. Jesus raised the standard of purity to the mind and heart (Matthew 5:27, 28), and Paul wrote often for believers to remain free from all forms of sexual sin (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 7; Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:7; Romans 13:13).

The tug of temptation to compromise purity and integrity isn't just a current problem. Joseph faced it — and overcame. Genesis 37ff gives the details.

Young Joseph

The saga begins when Joseph was seventeen — the age most teens experience strong hormonal change. Although he lived before the laws, Joseph knew his father's God and understood right from wrong in sexual matters. It was written on his heart.

Joseph was hated by his brothers, who sold him into slavery in Egypt, into different culture and faith. Egyptian art and literature were excessively explicit and suggestive — much like today. Maybe Joseph felt like many teenagers who move away from home after high school to live on their own.

The Bible says, "The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man . . . Joseph was handsome in form and appearance" (Genesis 39:2, 6b). In other words, Joseph had it going on! This handsome young bach-

elor succeeded in all he did. His secret didn't lie in his charm or looks but in the Lord's presence and word.

Joseph's status and looks opened the door for various temptations: greed, lust, and pride of life. Such temptations come with double force to actors, athletes, and others in the public eye who may easily indulge in sin. But not Joseph. He resisted evil and maintained his integrity. To him, God's will and presence mattered most.

Sex on the sly?

Joseph faced temptation in the house of Potiphar, captain of the Egyptian guard. Serving as head of the household, this young dude caught the eye of Potiphar's wife. "And it came to pass . . . that his master's wife cast longing eyes on Joseph, and she said, 'Lie with me'" (39:7). Here is a straight-up approach; she wasn't holding back!

Place yourself in Joseph's position for a moment. If someone at work or school came with the proposition "Have sex with me; no one will ever know," how would you respond?

Joseph refused and said to his master's wife, "How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (v. 9).

Why would a red-blooded young man in his early twenties refuse a beautiful woman? First, she was married to another man, not to Joseph. Second, the proposition was impure — a sin against God. Giving in would have greatly compromised the integrity of Joseph's faith.

Potiphar's wife continued to pursue Joseph, perhaps for weeks or months (v. 10). Maybe

she did more than just talk, trying to provoke or seduce him. Just because you win the battle over temptation once doesn't mean you've won the war.

Tired of rejection, Potiphar's wife grabbed Joseph by the coat and said, "Lie with me" (v. 12). His manly response: *run!*

In a vindictive spirit, the woman falsely accused Joseph and sent him to jail.

Reward for integrity

Joseph must have often thought life was unfair and wanted to give up. But God was with him in the darkest hours and prospered all he did. After years in prison, Joseph was divinely helped to interpret Pharaoh's dream and was promoted to second in command over Egypt. At age thirty, he was given a wife and great honor and was greatly used to save the lives of many.

Joseph's integrity, purity, and loyalty to God did not come easily. But after seventeen years, it paid off big time. God rewarded him with wealth, influence, and posterity more than he could

have imagined, and even his birth family was reunited. Jacob's last words to his beloved son are recorded in Genesis 49:26: "The blessings of your father . . . shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him who was separate from his brothers."

Our beloved Father in heaven has many indescribable blessings ready for those who refuse the world's sexual standards to walk in faith, purity, and integrity toward Him, and His Word. Try Him! **EA**

Sonya Lopez

lives in Houston, TX, where she attends the Pasadena CoG7.



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Lessons at a Glance

1. Recognize the great honor of knowing God. The key to success in your life is not your power but His presence, so watch and pray (Matthew 26:41).
2. Stop some temptations before they begin. Avoid television, movies, music, and reading material with impure or highly suggestive content (Romans 13:14).
3. When faced with the opportunity to sin, run as fast as you can (2 Timothy 2:22). Joseph didn't fool around; he refused — period.
4. If you have been sexually impure, confess your sin and repent before God (1 John 1:9). He will forgive and embrace you, and you can stop.

— Sonya Lopez



Mission-Minded

Teens in the Denver (English) church are raising funds for their first youth mission trip this summer when they will do yard work and simple home repair for California seniors, disabled persons, and families hit by hard times. Their goal is to reach souls for Christ, put faith into action, expand their circle of Christian friends, and fulfill the Great Commission. Sponsors of the group, Allan and Jamie Stroupe, are pictured above, far left, with son Benjamin at a youth-sponsored "50's Dinner" in Denver.

'Blind Spot'

Every year I look forward to winter retreat in Texas. I've been going since I turned twelve. The friends I've made, the amazing praise, the fun games, and the beautiful location all make for a spectacular camp. Each year it seems to get better, and this year was no exception. Although rain soaked some socks and made a muddy mess, the spirit of the camp remained warm as always.

The theme for this retreat, "Blind Spot," could not have been more appropriate. Led by Luis and Emmanuel Chavez, the worship team from San Antonio set the mood for each service in a God-blessed way. Jael Hamilton challenged us to unclutter our lives and spend time studying the words of Christ. Rafi Paez gave his down-to-earth teachings on bringing God back into our lives. And camp pastor Jason Overman helped open our eyes to the true meaning of spiritual blindness.

After Jason poured his heart out in the final message and many people came down front to pray, I

realized again why winter retreat is so important to so many people. I believe we were all praying for the same thing: to be "twice-touched" by Jesus, as Jason put it, like the blind man at Bethsaida (Mark 8).

Some youth come to camps for the fun and games. Some come for the friendship and leave with a few new phone numbers. Some come for the worship and fellowship in Christ. Regardless of why they came to Midlothian, Texas, however (see photo below), every youth left with a better understanding of their personal "blind spots" and the opportunity to meet the Lord and see clearly once again.

— Brian Smith
National Youth Officer

[.org](http://nfyc.org)



Dating God's Way

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matter how strong we thought we were, Jacqui and I still didn't fully trust ourselves. We had to remind ourselves not to give in to sex before marriage. We desired love-making like any young couple in love, but we had to think of it as something to look forward to. We stored up those desires, as it says in the Bible: "Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires" (Song of Solomon 2:7, NIV).

Jacqui and I love to share about courtship — the love of God that began it all and a commitment to God's plan that keeps it getting better and better.

We can tell you from experience, God's way of dating is the most blessed and satisfying way to a sizzling marriage!

For more events and pictures, visit <http://nfyc.cog7.org>

We Ask

Does God have a plan that offers good news for the many who died without hearing of Christ, like Jews who died at the hands of professed Christians in the Holocaust? (For a fuller version of this question and our tentative reply, see “Questions & Answers,” pp. 8-9, in our December '06 issue.)

Is this the only day of salvation? The Bible says God is not willing for any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). He hardened Pharaoh's heart (Rom. 9:17, 18), so Pharaoh's chance for salvation comes after the first resurrection. How can people believe if they have not heard (10:14)? For God's attitude toward those who are blinded, see Luke 23:34; John 9:41a; Acts 17:30a; Rom. 11:2a, 7, 25; 1 Cor. 2:8; 2 Cor. 3:14, 15; 4:4, etc.). It is clear that all will get a chance.

A. G.
Blue Springs, MO

There are two resurrections to come. The first is for only those born of water and the Spirit to enter the kingdom of God (John 3:5). As spiritual as John the Baptist was (Matt. 11:11-13), he or any other [faithful] Jew cannot be in the first resurrection (Rev. 20:6). The second resurrection is for all others. Many of them will also be found in the Book of Life (v. 15). Jesus came for sinners, including Jews; not all have rejected Him (Rom. 11:25-31). Some were broken off. But are they disobedient to what they were given as Jews? They keep the faith as their prophet Moses gave it and ask forgiveness as David did (Psa. 51). They may be saved according to the teachings of Matthew 25:31-46; Romans 2:12-16; and Revelation 20:12.

S. J.
*Death row inmate
Florence, AZ*

The righteous will be raised with bodies that do not die (1 Cor. 15:52-54). The unrepentant evil will

be destroyed in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:12-15). What happens to people in the middle who never heard of Jesus Christ, the only name under heaven whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:10-12)?

If there is a first resurrection, there must also be a second — after the one thousand-year reign (Rev. 20:5, 6). If there is a second death, there must first be a second life. What will those raised in the second resurrection do? One thing is to get to know Christ, ruling on earth (5:8-10). Forty-one times the Bible says, “His mercy endures forever.”

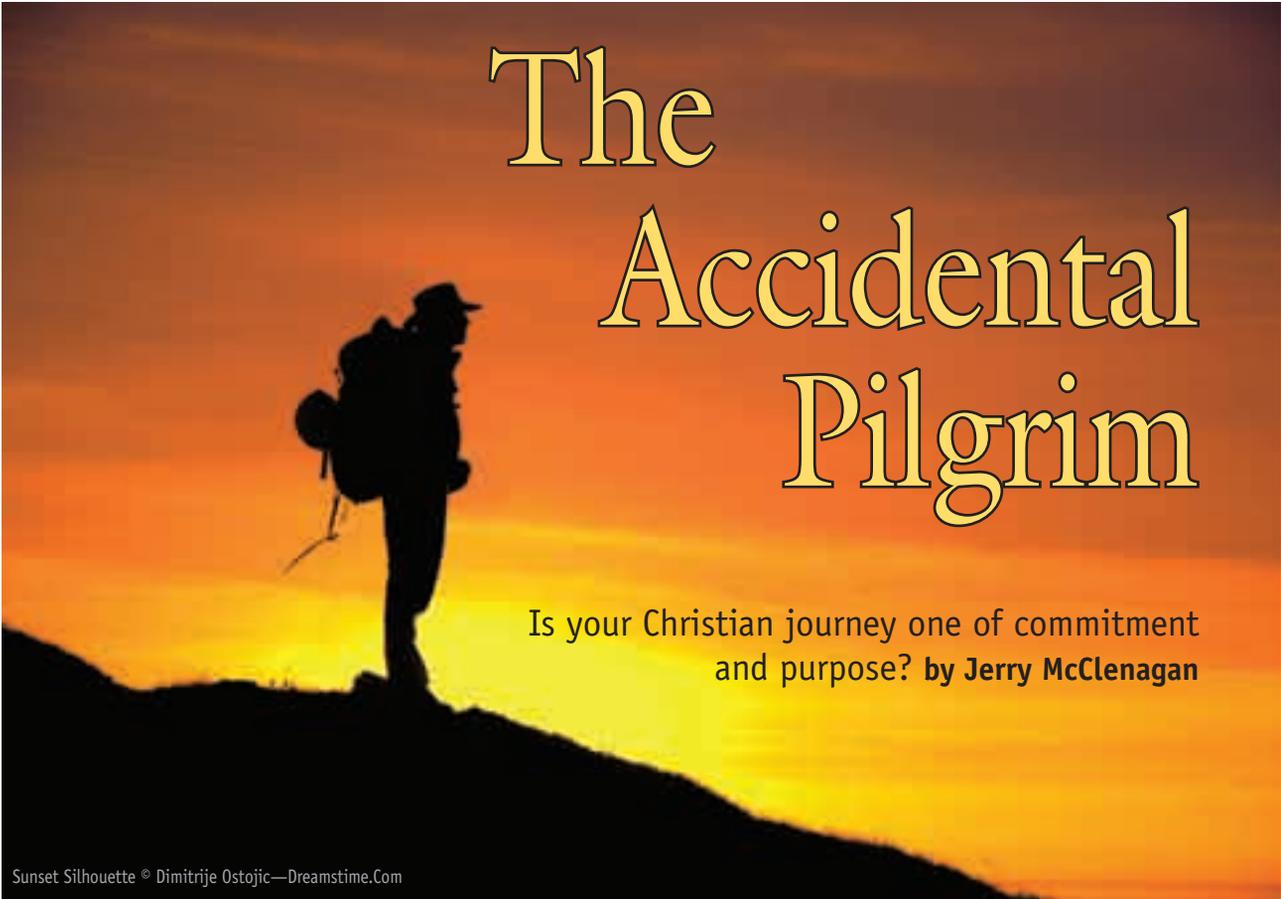
Christians have long enjoyed threatening each other with “You're going to hell.” It has a certain zing to it. There is no truth to it, of course, unless you consider the lake of fire (where the wicked will be destroyed) to be hell. In the KJV Bible, *hell* is substituted for *gehenna* (the Jerusalem trash pit) and for *hades* (the grave or place of the dead).

W. E.
North Miami, FL

Can one receive the grace of God to be saved without knowing Christ or His role as Savior? Was that not the case with those in Hebrews 11? The answer to both questions is a resounding *no!* Jesus made it abundantly clear that He alone holds the key to salvation (Matt. 7:13, 14; John 14:6; 10:9). If there is one issue upon which every Christian ought to stand dogmatically, it is this: Jesus is the only way. He is not a door but *the* door. If there was anyone who could be saved without the knowledge of Jesus or His atonement, then Jesus did not have to die. This is Basic Christianity 101.

R. L.
West Valley City, UT

Note: Views expressed on this page do not necessarily reflect those of the magazine and Church. Readers are invited to continue the dialogue through letters to the editor, which may appear on a future “Mail Bag” page.



The Accidental Pilgrim

Is your Christian journey one of commitment
and purpose? by Jerry McClenagan

Sunset Silhouette © Dimitrije Ostojic—Dreamstime.Com

Remember a movie called *The Accidental Tourist*, based on Anne Tyler's 1985 book by the same title? It's about a travel writer who hates not only travel but also anything unusual he happens upon. He's plagued by loneliness and isn't willing to give up his creature comforts. Just when he thinks nothing could shatter his narrow world, the man meets a young lady who shows him how to embrace life.

This movie scenario causes me to reflect on the larger Christian community. Observing the aimlessness of many believers, I am compelled to ask, "Are we accidental pilgrims?" The word *accidental* suggests that our life of faith happens mostly by chance. If an opportunity comes along

for us to serve in some way, we may do it. But we certainly wouldn't look for an opportunity on purpose. We wouldn't go out of our way to seek a new level of abundant living.

Is this the way the life of faith should be lived? I don't think so. How we think and live for Christ should be intentional and purposeful, not random. As Christians, we can know who we are, why we're here, and where we're going. We should not be accidental pilgrims!

If you need your lonely, narrow world upended; if you resist anything out of the ordinary; or if you are unwilling to give up some creature comforts to more fully engage in life — you may be an accidental pilgrim. But you don't have to stay that way. You

can live with commitment and purpose — just as Abraham did.

Pilgrimage with purpose

A pilgrim is one who journeys in foreign lands — a traveler, a wayfarer. *Pilgrimage* often means a journey to a sacred place. Perhaps no one illustrates a purposeful pilgrimage better than Abraham.

By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:9, 10).

Facing a mammoth midlife challenge, Abraham pledged

himself to pursue the divine purpose — a defining moment. No longer would his world be insulated by creature comforts. God thrust Abraham headlong into what would become a remarkable engagement with life. He would become anything but an accidental pilgrim.

Committing to God's purpose for our lives is deciding for adventure. It's deciding to explore the wide, wide world of faith, obedience, and service.

Radical commitment

The outstanding people of faith in the Bible had one common characteristic: each was God-centered, not self-centered. Jesus referred to the living sacrifice of self as a personal cross each of us should take up to follow Him (Matthew 16:24, 25).

This isn't easy. Like the accidental tourist, we enjoy the comforts of routine and indulgence. "It's all about me" is a popular adage today, but it goes against the radical commitment to the cross of Christ. While it's natural to cave in to a selfish mentality, we must resist it, allowing our minds to be transformed: "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within . . ." (Romans 12:2, J. B. Phillips).

In addition to a mental shift that welcomes the unknown future by faith, we must take action to break free of our narrow world and embrace the adventure God has for us. A bumper sticker speaks of "random acts of kindness." But why random? Wouldn't it be better to be kind on purpose?

The church always has places

to show kindness. A few: helping with outreach programs, volunteering in the nursery, greeting people as they arrive, volunteering to help with youth programs. I am acquainted with a number of people who practice purposeful kindness outside the fellowship of the church, such as serving Thanksgiving meals through the Salvation Army, volunteering to help the food bank and Friends of the Library, helping with a Sunday church service at the VA hospital, offering aid to handicapped children, singing at nursing homes.

As George Washington Carver said, "No individual has any right to come into this world and go out of it without leaving behind him distinct and legitimate reasons for having passed through it."

Setting your sights

Why is this radical commitment to Christ so important? Because, like Abraham and others of faith, we are "aliens and strangers on earth" who have our sights on a heavenly land designed and built by God (Hebrews 11:13-16).

God liked this in His people! He wasn't "ashamed to be called their God." And God likes it today when we don't get too enamored with our "old" country and instead fall in love with His. After all, "He has [already] prepared a city for [us]." He's banking on us wanting His country more than ours. If we do, we won't be accidental but purposeful pilgrims.

What is out of the ordinary for you? What would broaden your narrow life? What would help you embrace the life God has for you? Ask Him. See what other on-fire believers are doing and how your interests and skills could be plugged in. Then do it through Christ, the strength of your life. **✠**

Jerry McClenagan serves as an associate pastor of the Christian Church of God in Amarillo, TX. Scripture quotations were taken from the *New International Version*, unless otherwise noted.



Committing to God's purpose for our lives is deciding for adventure. It's deciding to explore the wide, wide world of faith, obedience, and service.

Epiphany

Every life journey needs at least one lucid moment.

by Joe Corrales

Have you ever had an epiphany? It happens in a moment of clarity when everything about who you are and why you are here is undeniably clear.

When that one shining moment illuminates your soul, you drop everything of insignificance and proceed to make use of every waking moment in the pursuit of what really matters in life. When the apostles saw Jesus, they dropped their fishing poles and followed Him without question.

While in the military years ago, I often sat on my bunk reading fiction for entertainment. I was pretty good at killing time back then, with no remorse. It never occurred to me that wasting my life was a bad thing. I didn't know what to do with it anyway, so I just waited for whatever life brought next.

Once out of the military, I took whatever job I could to get me by, content to live on a whim. I got promoted into a technical field, and a career seemed to form around me, mostly by someone else's prodding. I was chosen to serve at church and in other areas, but always by

someone else's design. I was more of a passenger in my own life, regularly taking a back seat in planning and deciding.

Slowly, I began to realize that living life by default was not effective. The best I could do was succeed, when I could have been victorious. It dawned on me that I was wallowing in my own mediocrity. It is easy to look good when compared to the worst people around you. My goals were small and irrelevant because I was content to just get by. "My work seems so useless! I have spent my strength for nothing and to no purpose" (Isaiah 49:4a, NLT).

One day I knelt and prayed like never before. I wanted clarity about anything that could make sense of my life. That way, I could get out of the slow gear my life had been in for so long.

Then I got my one moment of lucidity when everything suddenly made sense. I didn't hear anything, but I felt God was telling me that the time I had on this earth was fleeting and that the moment He had given me was the only one I had. There was no second chance; this was no dress rehearsal! I wouldn't be able to

die and come back as someone else and start all over again.

I saw my life as a small, insignificant blip on the radar screen with thousands of years before and eternity beyond. With only this precious opportunity to accomplish whatever good I could do and secure my place in eternity, I had been squandering every moment as if I had a million years.

I wept for the wasted years as an unwilling contributor, for life passing me by. I vowed to actively participate in what mattered and stop spending my time as if I had unlimited tomorrows. I stopped being a passenger and decided to get behind the wheel and let God be my navigator.

I don't know how God will speak to you so you understand these things. Ask Him with all your heart; He will not deny your heart's desire. But don't ask unless you are ready to act on His will for your life. Once you see and hear your purpose, you may not be able to spend countless hours on video games, soap operas, or irrelevant distractions. When your epiphany comes, you will never be the same again!

May the Lord magnify Himself on the road to your Damascus so that you too may begin living with a greater purpose. **✠**

Joe Corrales, a bi-vocational pastor of Heart of Worship congregation in San Antonio, TX, also teaches and serves as head of the Computer Science Department at Palo Alto College.



Mail Bag



Remembering Emogene

I was disappointed that a more comprehensive obituary of Emogene Coulter didn't appear in the BA [December '06, p. 28]. Emogene was a devoted wife, mother, and grandmother, and her love for God and His church was paramount. She inspired countless others all over the world by her humility and compassion. She and Robert had the rare gift of meeting and remembering people everywhere, with no racial or ethnic barriers.

By her years of service as NAWM president, women were empowered to serve in ways they never had and to believe they really could make a difference. Women's retreats blossomed, and those who faced challenges at home, work, or church were encouraged to step out in ministry to others.

Emogene served on committees that brought real change to the Church. When some suggested more radical change, she always brought us back to earth by her knowledge of the Church's culture and its past efforts. She wanted progress, yet appreciated the sensibilities of congregations,

pastors, and members who resisted. She understood the times and knew how to effect positive change. She was honest and forthright but always kind — a very wise woman!

I believe Emogene was a "minister" in every sense — one of the most effective. I miss her smile, humor, counsel, and love. Tears come to my eyes as I write this. Her death has been devastating.

B. F.
Sacramento, CA

Sabbath and salvation

My husband and I, a CoG7 member for years, enjoy the BA very much, [but] my heart aches when I hear about brethren in Christ who keep thinking the Sabbath will save them, and judge others ["Mail Bag," December '06, p. 21]. Come on. We need to wake up. The Ten Commandments are for us to live better on earth, to help keep us out of trouble. Many scriptures, and the recent Sabbath School lessons on Romans, tell us how the law will not save us. J. L. is doing the Lord's work. See Luke 6:9.

T. S.
e-mail

The controversy in Matthew 12:11, 12 was not about *whether* to keep the Sabbath but *how*. Regarding this and all God's Word, we should learn from King Josiah who, after the scribe read a new-found portion of the Torah, wept and tore his clothes in repentance because he knew then that they had been sinning. There was no other king like Josiah who turned

to Yahweh with all his heart. God fill our church with Josiahs!

L. R.
e-mail

Spiritual kingdom

Daniel 2 has been misinterpreted by many ["Daniel's Revelation, David's Throne," December '06, p. 23]. The little stone (kingdom of God) smote the metal image during the kings of the last empire — Rome. Christ came to earth then and set up a spiritual kingdom that has filled every corner of earth. What other kingdom has ever had such an effect on the whole known world as the gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Matt. 12:28; Luke 17:20, 21)?

J. B.
Huntsville, TX

Poems and pictures

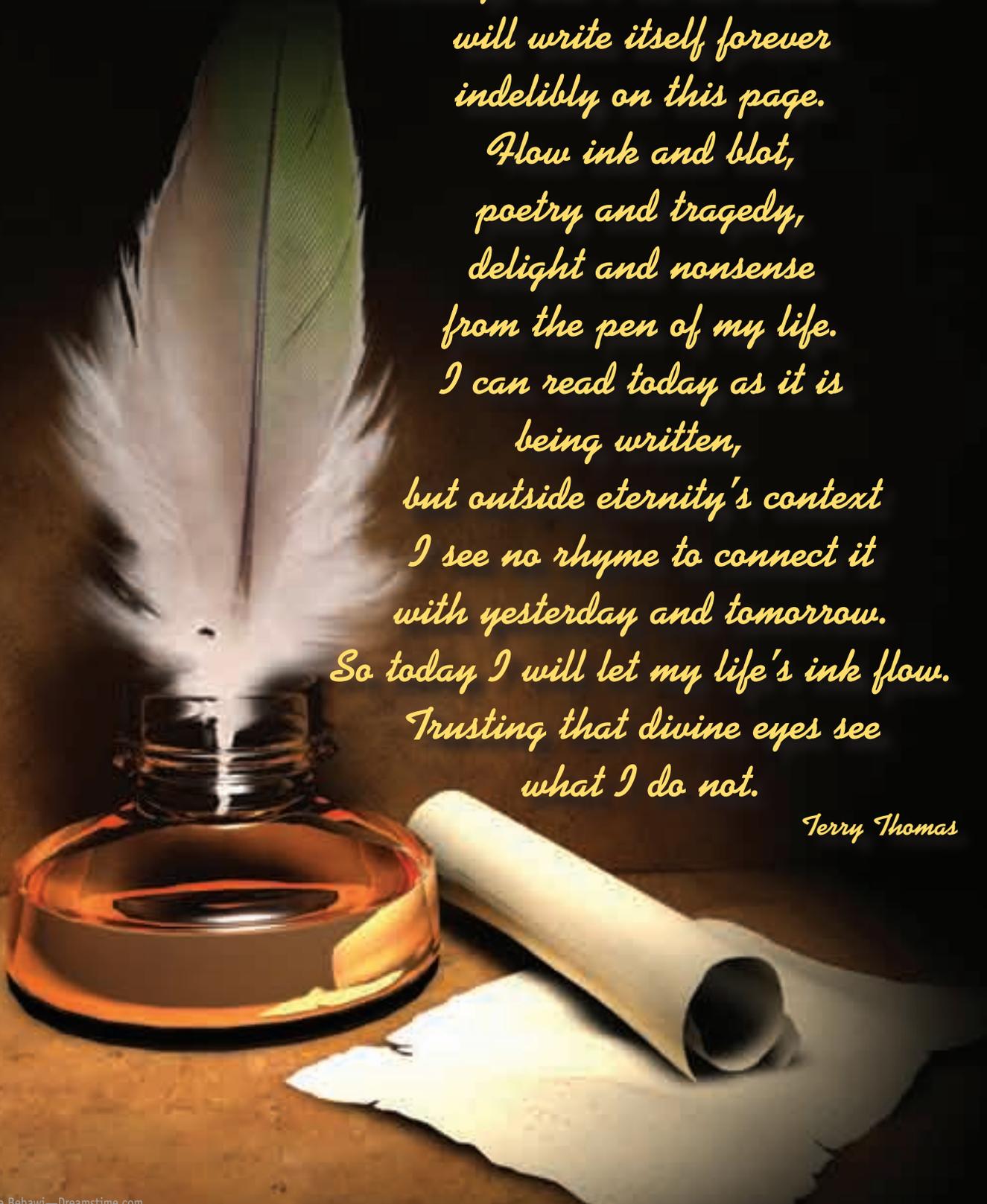
Thank you for sending the BA for years. The articles have been growing on me, but I am almost every time awed anew by each issue's poem/pic page. I don't know where you get the poems or the pictures, but both are stunningly superb.

P. F. L., inmate
Delano, CA

Spiritual growth

Ever since I was introduced to BA some years ago, there has been a tremendous transformation of my spiritual values, [and] I have been recording huge successes. . . . Please keep supplying this magazine to me, as it's always shared with friends at the university.

M. U.
Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

A quill pen with a white and green feather is positioned vertically in a glass inkwell filled with brown ink. To the right of the inkwell lies a rolled-up scroll of parchment paper. The scene is set against a dark, textured background with warm, golden lighting.

*Again today is handed to me,
white and clean like
a new sheet of paper.
Morning, and I do not know what
will write itself forever
indelibly on this page.*

*Flow ink and blot,
poetry and tragedy,
delight and nonsense
from the pen of my life.
I can read today as it is
being written,
but outside eternity's context
I see no rhyme to connect it
with yesterday and tomorrow.
So today I will let my life's ink flow.
Trusting that divine eyes see
what I do not.*

Terry Thomas



What's new with . . .

Publications

- **New Bible Studies for Adults** starts in April:
Let's Talk About Jesus

Spring Vale Academy

- **Alumni Weekend**
March 23-25

National FYC

- **Conroe Youth Conference**
April 7-8; jrande@houston.rr.com

Ministries Training System

- **Christian Ethics course online, beginning**
March 4; training@cog7.org

North American

Women's Ministries

- **Medical Mission to Guatemala** April 2-10;
maryling@comcast.net

Publications

Keith Michalak, Director



Through the *Bible Advocate*, *Now What?* quarterlies, tracts, and other material, Publications endeavors to meet the literature needs of individuals and of the Church.

Each year we publish and distribute about 200,000 tracts and 36,000 quarterlies. We also prepare the BA to be printed and mailed to 120,000 English and Spanish language readers. We never know how far each piece of literature will travel or whom it will impact, but we trust the Holy Spirit will touch the heart of each one who reads it.

We're doing something different in 2007: incorporating *Youth Reach* into the BA, hoping to involve youth more with the magazine. This will strengthen their link to the Church, in view of the steady decline in participation of college-age youth.

Also, starting with the first quarter of 2007, the adult quarterly has been rewritten for senior youth. This way, parents and teens can learn together as they study the same topic. We hope to rewrite lessons for the junior high level soon.

Our staff works for the love of the Lord and His kingdom, reaching out through the printed word. In the photo, we are (left to right):

- Sherry Langton - associate editor
- Linda Michalak - data entry, mail room
- Allan Stroupe - pressman
- Calvin Burrell - BA editor
- Sylvia Corral - translation
- Keith Michalak - director
- Hope Dais - proofreading
- LeRoy Dais - curriculum and literature editor
- Richard Wiedenheft - staff writer (not pictured)

Our heartfelt thanks to all who contribute articles, translation, proofreading, and all who donate so we can keep on producing quality material.



Warming Up Denver

General Conference district superintendents and ministry directors came to cold Colorado in January. Here's a summary of their meetings:

- "Cultivating a Culture of Excellence" was the theme for this session. We want to break out from any mediocrity!
- Before the meetings, attendees read *Breakout Churches*, by Thom S. Rainer, and it stimulated good discussion.
- Martin Nussbaum, from a law firm representing the interests of churches, presented several hours on church polity as part of the superintendents' orientation.
- MTS board of regents met with the MTS staff to continue developing vision for the Church's Ministries Training System.
- An Endowment Fund Committee works alongside leaders to provide long-term financial stability for General Conference ministries.
- "Sabbath Experience" was a topic discovered along the way and will be further developed for evangelistic and teaching purposes. Let's pray, go, and give our best until the whole world knows "the rest of God in Christ."

These annual leaders' meetings were blest by the return of Elder Robert Coulter to Colorado from Alabama. He serves again in the G. C. offices where he was once Conference chairman. Although officially retired, Elder Coulter was recently elected president of the Ministerial Council. He hopes to research and write on Church topics while residing in Denver.

SWORD Rally

Countless young adults gathered in Grand Prairie, Texas, last November 3-4 for an "I Owe You" SWORD rally with a worship theme. Tim Steinhauer (Missouri), Larry Marrs (LITES), and Ruben Marquez, Sr. (Oklahoma) gave messages, and music was led by the Shawnee (Oklahoma) and the Heart of Worship (San Antonio, Texas) teams. The hospitality and generosity of the host church was breathtaking, including Cecy Godoy and Betzy Arteaga, who led games and gave prizes — crazy and fun. Sabbath evening worship was indescribable.

By Sunday, most attendees did not want to leave but lingered after morning worship and teaching. God extended His Spirit to us in a powerful way through the passionate hearts of CoG7 young people.



Mario DeLeon, pastor of the Stamford, CT, church, is presented with a lay pastor certificate (renewed) by NED Superintendent Richard Wiedenheft, while other local leaders look on.

ISSACHAR Forum

“The sons of Issachar . . . had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do . . .” (1 Chronicles 12:32).

The Issachar Forum Vision Community is a team of committed individuals with a passion for the Church to become all God intends it to be, and a willingness to do what it takes to make that happen. Working together to provide the resources and input needed to achieve the vision, they will, with God’s help, empower the Church to be not just good at what it does, but great.



*Media Development, front row: Victor Huerta, Dan Toltecatl, Whaid Rose, Jody McCoy. Back row: Keith Michalak, Dan Melgoza, Abraham Endecott, Bryan Cleeton, Eddie Villalba, Steve Caswell.
Not pictured: Keith Nienhuis.*

Christian Education, front row: Kathy O’Banion, Jenny Stephens, Daisna Gibson, Jeff Endecott. Back row: LeRoy Dais, Gina Tolbert, Jody McCoy, Bryan Cleeton.



The current focus of the Issachar Forum is on Christian education and media development. Concerning the former, efforts to create and improve Sabbath school curriculum and materials are well underway, especially for children and youth. Regarding the latter focus, significant work on Web site design and new avenues of outreach through media are in progress as well. Education and media committees consisting of talented and experienced Church members (see photos) are making these a reality.

By God’s grace, this can be a breakout year for the Church. The vision is great, and help is needed. Please consider supporting the Issachar Forum. For more information, please contact Bryan Cleeton at IssacharForum@cog7.org or 303-452-7973. Or visit us online at www.cog7.org.

MTS Training Goes East

Ministries Training System will conduct a four-day intensive session June 6-10 at a YMCA camp near Wernersville, Pennsylvania. Lay pastors from Southeast, Northeast, and Eastern Canada districts are invited to attend, along with MTS students and others who aspire to pastoral or vocational service. For further information, contact Richard.Wiedenheft@cog7.org or training@cog7.org.

SWORD Retreat

May 17-20, 2007
YMCA Camp Carter, Ft. Worth, Texas
For more info: Dan and Jacqui at 210-723-5950 or swdsword@yahoo.com

Lord’s Supper Date for 2007

The Lord’s Supper date for 2007 is Sunday evening, April 1. (April 2 corresponds with Nisan 14.)



Keep the new year going right!
Let God use you in . . .

Missions Ministries

Our heavenly Father, working through His children, reaches worldwide to share the good news of humanity's only hope, Jesus Christ. Today we ask you to reflect on God's goodness and plan your investment in the Great Commission. Your special offerings make these missions possible.

Church Planting seeks to establish new churches through missionaries to America.

Home Missions encourages local growth.

Missions Abroad supports the gospel on every inhabited continent.

Disaster Relief responds to many catastrophes, like the drought in Kenya and Zambia.

"Christ is Coming!" provides gospel workers in many countries with salary or subsidy. We now have 500 donors giving \$20 per month to support 70+ workers, and we need many more to send evangelists around the world.

Change for Your World helps the International Ministerial Congress change your world with pocket change. Place your daily change in a jug, box, or drawer and send it every summer to support our growing church.

Medical Missions supports our health care professionals to relieve needs of the world's suffering. Help us accomplish our next mission to Guatemala. Earmark your love offering "Medical Missions."

G. C. Missions Ministries: Working for you around the corner and around the world, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ! Contact Bill Hicks, director: carlyehix@aol.com.

Celebrate in Kansas?

Yes, we will "Celebrate the Journey" of the world Church of God (Seventh Day) in Overland Park, Kansas, July 2-7. To register for this biennial convention online, visit <http://home.cog7.org/>. To reserve sleeping rooms at the Sheraton Hotel and Convention Center, call 800-262-7275 and ask for Heather Gambrell.

Business sessions of the CoG7 International Ministerial Congress will follow a great Sabbath together in Overland Park, July 7-10.

Pioneer Missionary Training

Thirteen folks answered the call to serve abroad through the Pioneer Missionary Training (PMT) program December 20-31. The team met first in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico for evangelism training and service opportunities and ended up at the biennial Mexican Youth Congress in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon. This year's team consisted of Eric Garcia, Rachel Ramirez, and Esther Salgado of Conroe, Texas; Mary McClendon of San Antonio, Texas; Walter Umana of Gaithersburg, Maryland; Serina Roye of Toronto, Ontario; Mary Wallace of Eugene, Oregon; Dean, Danelle, Jon, and Kim Stucker, Stephen Perez, and Monico Muffley – all of Meridian and Nampa, Idaho.

This was the eighth consecutive year for PMT trips, sponsored by NFYC, SWORD, Missions Abroad, and the Church in Mexico. To read more about this ministry as reported by the participants, visit http://home.cog7.org/ministries/missions_abroad/pmt.





These ministers and Church leaders attended the Florida Super Sabbath in Orlando on December 16, where Henry Harley of Jamaica was the guest preacher.

Fiftieth Anniversary Congratulations!

Roy and Barbara Taffner of Strafford, Missouri, August 30, 2006
 James and Leone Reneau of Willis, Texas, June 5, 2006
 Please report all CoG7 golden wedding anniversaries in 2007 to the editor for publication.



Winter Warmth

Crossing into Alberta not far from Montana's Glacier National Park, you will find Island Lake Conference Center high in the Canadian Rockies at Crowsnest Pass. Youth from Oregon and Washington joined with Western Canada District youth for fellowship, study, and praise in an awesome winter wonderland December 29 - January 1. A mixture of teens and young adults learned the importance of building relationships by deepening ours with God. With ice skating, basketball, snowball fights, wonderful worship, and cozy fireside services fresh in our memory, we are already looking forward to next year!

– Elder Brian Larson



Houston-area pastors and leaders met with SWD Superintendent Chip Hinds on property they acquired as a potential camp facility near Somerville, TX, between Houston and Austin.

Still Time to Pray

The Church's annual Prayer Initiative, through March 10, will help us make the most of our '07 journey. Thanks for your prayers for the BA staff and others.



Nearly 800 brethren attended part or all of the Hispanic convocation in the Dallas, TX, area December 1-3. Isaias Molina of Mexico City was the guest preacher on the theme of "Integrated in the Body."



International Tour

El Salvador

On this special page given to the International Ministerial Congress, we feature a different nation around the world each issue, sharing some of its background and focusing on the work of God there. In this report, Alfredo Castellon, president of the Church of God (Seventh Day) conference in El Salvador, tells how the Church in that small country turned to radio for outreach and growth:

“In the eighties and early nineties, the Church of God in the Republic of El Salvador, Central America, suffered some divisions such that the number of members was reduced to approximately 2,500 during that period. In more recent years, we have enjoyed many blessings from Almighty God in the unity of our ministry and in our good relationship with Missions Abroad to help us. The director of Missions Abroad, Elder Bill Hicks, has visited us on several occasions, accompanied by IMC President Ramón Ruíz.

“In 2002 we had the privilege of inaugurating our first radio transmitter, 1260 AM, based in San Salvador. The transmitter operates at 10,000 watts and is heard in the central region of our country. In 2006 we inaugurated a second radio transmitter, 880 AM, based in San Miguel. It also operates at 10,000 watts for El Salvador’s eastern region. These



*Alfredo Castellon
on the air*

transmitters, the main components for the two stations, were provided by Missions Abroad. Our programming consists of evangelistic preaching, Christian music, and doctrinal teaching.

“These two radio stations have served us well, and we have experienced significant growth in the number of members in the Church. We receive many telephone calls from friends and brothers who express their gratitude for our programming. Also, we receive calls from the adjoining countries of Honduras and Guatemala.

“Today the membership of the Church of God (Seventh Day) in El Salvador is 5,067 adults and

1,600 youth, making a total of 6,667 baptized members. About 700 visitors and friends also attend our 130 houses of prayer (churches) on a regular basis. All the honor and the glory of this is offered to our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.”



*El Salvador church
leaders, with Bill
Hicks (fourth from
left) and Ramon
Ruiz (second from
right)*

Jesus in the Bible

Twenty-nine years ago, with the Holy Spirit as my Guide, I entered the portico of Genesis, walked down the corridor of the Old Testament art-galleries, where pictures of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Isaac, Jacob, and Daniel hang on the walls. I passed into the music room of the Psalms where the spirit sweeps the keyboard of nature until . . . every reed and pipe in God's great organ responds to the harp of David the sweet singer of Israel.

I entered the chamber of Ecclesiastes, where the voice of the preacher is heard, and into the conservatory of Sharon and the lily of the valley where sweet spices perfumed my life.

I entered the business office of Proverbs and on into the observatory of the prophets where I saw telescopes of various sizes pointing to far-off events, concentrating on the bright and morning Star which was to rise above the moonlit hills of Judea for our salvation and redemption.

I entered the audience room of the King of kings, catching a vision written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Thence into the correspondence room with Paul, Peter, James, and John writing their Epistles.

I stepped into the throne room of Revelation where tower the glittering peaks, where sits the King of kings upon His throne of glory with the healing of the nations in His hand, and I cried out: "All hail the power of Jesus' name!/Let angels prostrate fall;/Bring forth the royal diadem/And crown him Lord of all."¹

Behold, the matchless melody and unequalled symphony of the Bible! With forty authors from every walk of life, writing more than fifteen hundred years, its sixty-six books fit as one volume, its two testaments flow harmoniously together, and the crimson thread that unifies it all is Jesus.

Some mistakenly assign Christian relevance and application only to the New Testament. The covenants, promises, stories, and poetry of the Old are a necessary prelude to the New, as all Scripture moves toward the grand climax of the Cross. A conclusion makes little sense without an introduction, and the Old commences what the New completes.

Others live at the opposite extreme, majoring on the Old and giving little attention to the New. Both testaments make up the Bible, and it takes both to tell the big picture: the drama of redemption.

Jesus is center stage in this drama and can be seen throughout. In Genesis, He is the Seed of the woman. In Exodus, the Passover Lamb. In Leviticus, the atoning Sacrifice. In Numbers, the bronze Serpent. In Deuteronomy, the promised Prophet. In Joshua, the unseen Captain. In Judges, my Deliverer. In Ruth, my heavenly Kinsman. In Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, the promised King. In Ezra and Nehemiah, the Restorer of the nation. In Esther, my Advocate. In Job, my Redeemer. In Psalms, my All in All. In Proverbs, my Pattern. In Ecclesiastes, my Goal. In Song of Solomon, my Beloved. In the prophets, the coming Prince of Peace. In Matthew, the King. In Mark, the Servant. In Luke, the Son of Man. In John, the Son of God. In Acts, He is "risen, seated, and sending." In the Epistles, He is "indwelling and filling." In Revelation, He is "returning and reigning."²

Our church places great emphasis on the Bible. Our flagship magazine is the *Bible Advocate*, and the first item in our statement of faith is "The Holy Bible." In all our stress on Scripture, may we remember these words of Christ: "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life" (John 5:39, 40).

May we see Jesus throughout the Bible and find the way, the truth, and the life — only in Him.

— *Whaid Guscott Rose*
General Conference President



1. Billy Sunday, quoted in *A Look at the Book*, by Charles R. Swindoll, pp. 11-12

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19

CoG7 Office Hits 35!



Thirty-five years ago, in March 1972, these General Conference offices and Bible Advocate Press building were completed and opened for business on thirty-three acres of Church property along Interstate 25, seventeen miles north of downtown Denver, Colorado. To celebrate this anniversary, we held a snowstorm. Here's how the place looked after our winter blizzard.

Thanks to all our members and friends for your faithful support of the gospel of Christ these thirty-five years, on our way to eternity together in God's kingdom. If you're in Denver this spring or summer, stop by and visit. We'll shovel the front walk for you!

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