

The Alabama Baptist

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Informing. Inspiring. Connecting.



PASTOR BOB LITTLE

Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist



BARBARA LITTLE

Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist



Photo by Debbie Campbell/The Alabama Baptist

‘Ministry out of a match’

Panola’s Galilee Baptist, other rural churches burned in 2006 mark 20 years of God’s blessings

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

More than 100 people from Alabama and Mississippi gathered at Galilee Missionary Baptist Church in Panola the evening of Feb. 7 to mark the 20th anniversary of what Pastor Bob Little calls “a blessing in the blaze.”

Four churches in Pickens County — including Galilee — were burned the night of Feb. 7, 2006, a few days after five churches were torched in Bibb County.

9 churches targeted

Three college-aged students confessed to burning the Bibb County churches, and then two of the three also targeted the Pickens

County churches. All three were convicted and served time in federal prison.

Bibb County Circuit Judge Marvin W. Wiggins, who presided over some of the trials and hearings related to the case, served as guest speaker for the 20th anniversary event.

“It was a remarkable moment
(See ‘God,’ page 2)



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist

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'Church of today'

750 Alabama teens depart Young Lions Conference with Bibles in hand

Described by one church leader as the "best weekend of the year," more than 750 middle school and high school students gathered at Redemption Church in Saraland, Alabama, for a weekend (Jan. 16-17) of "Bible teaching, powerful worship and intentional small group conversation."

And before the weekend was over, each student went home with a Bible donated by Lifeway Christian Resources.

'Heroes of the weekend'

"Words can't really describe how impactful weekends like this are in the lives of teenagers," said Russ Taylor, student pastor at Redemption Church, in an Instagram post.

He noted students from churches and throughout the community "in Mobile and Baldwin County left knowing they're the Church of Today."

"We're praying that what we started here won't stay here. YLC weekend is hard work but good



Photo by Moria Buck

Students at the Young Lions Conference in Saraland hold up their new Bibles, which were donated by Lifeway Christian Resources.

work, and I know God has and is going to use it to do more than we could even imagine."

He added, "It wouldn't happen without an army. Every small group leader, the heroes of the weekend, leading. Every family

opening up their home to teenagers. Every person that served on site at the conference. ... Most of all grateful to God for keeping this vision alive for our city and using it for His glory! Let's do it again next year." (The Alabama Baptist)

'God wanted to see what we were going to do,' Wiggins says

(continued from page 1)

20 years ago when the church burners went around the Black Belt," he said. "Several (of the nine churches) were burned to the ground."

Preaching from the book of Job, Wiggins said, "Sometimes God uses tragedy to transform our lives ... sometimes tragedy builds us up.

"God had us in place to be in a position to talk to pastors, to talk to the families and talk to the kid's parents about what should happen. All I could think about was what if it had been one of our (kids)?"

Grace and forgiveness

In the end, the pastors and church leaders chose grace and forgiveness. The young men were granted concurrent prison sentences instead of the sentences being added up into a lifetime in prison. They were released while still in their 20s with an opportunity to rebuild their lives.



Photo by Jennifer Davis Rash/The Alabama Baptist

JUDGE MARVIN WIGGINS

"God wanted to see what we were going to do," Wiggins noted. "Are y'all going to be like them? Or are y'all going to remember My goodness?"

And He wanted others to see His

goodness too, Wiggins added. "A church once sitting out here in the middle of nowhere is now on the road where people can see it."

The new building has plenty of space with the opportunity to grow and is active with a variety of ministries taking place, including multiple roles being filled by youth and young adults.

Little, who has served as pastor of Galilee for more than 25 years, agreed the way God has moved and worked since the fire has been nothing short of a miracle. "I just praise Him," Little said. "He has brought ministry out of a match, and we are grateful."

For details on the other eight churches and background on the fires, visit tabonline.org and search for "Panola."

The Alabama Baptist

"If ye continue in My word, then ... ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." John 8:31-32

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JENNIFER DAVIS RASH
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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The crossword puzzle can be found on page 15.



Rashional Thoughts

By Jennifer Davis Rash, President and Editor-in-Chief

Email: jrash@thealabamabaptist.org / Social media: @RashionalThts

How would I respond if what I did to another was done to me?

We are moving quickly toward Easter — it's April 5 this year. As we prepare our hearts to observe Resurrection Sunday and the days of Holy Week leading up to Easter, would you be open to a bit of Lenten-type fasting this year?

I'm not thinking fasting from food. Instead, let's all agree to check our hearts and fast from any ugliness we discover related to how we think about or reference other people — no matter who they are or what they've done or not done.

It's simple:

1. Humbly and genuinely pray for the Lord to show you where you are not treating others in the way He has modeled for us.

2. Confess those shortcomings to the Lord and ask Him to help you move toward demonstrating His love and grace even when the other person has differing opinions, life circumstances, decision-making skills and an overall understanding of life and the world.

3. Be intentional between now and Easter to check yourself before using subjective labels, especially when they are meant as an attack or negative description of others.

Then, as you sit in church Easter morning worshipping our Lord, remembering His sacrifice and celebrating His resurrection, reflect on your personal walk with the Lord.

What did He show you about Himself? What did He surface for you about you?

How did removing any potential ugliness toward others change you? Were you able to discover that we can still have differing opinions, disagree at the most extreme levels and even not like someone while still choosing to treat each other respectfully and with grace?

We can still work to protect the values we prefer, help educate those who don't understand and engage the community in powerful and effective ways. And we can do it all with courage, confidence and charisma.

Have you ever wondered why we as believers in and followers of Jesus Christ can sometimes become emotionally reactive and super sensitive to those who disagree with us?

I understand all of us are sinners with only one answer for true life — Jesus — but I often wonder why we allow ourselves to become fearful of the world if we truly belong to the Ultimate answer, defender and guide.

Why would we not want to be the model for all that is right

and good in this world — not only to recapture a spirit of unity but also to move the Kingdom forward? How could we be OK doing to others that which we would be sorely offended if it were done to us?

The Golden Rule

Matthew 7:12 states, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you."

Ephesians 5:11–16 says, "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible — and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it

is said: 'Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.' Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil."

Isaiah 5:20 states, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter."

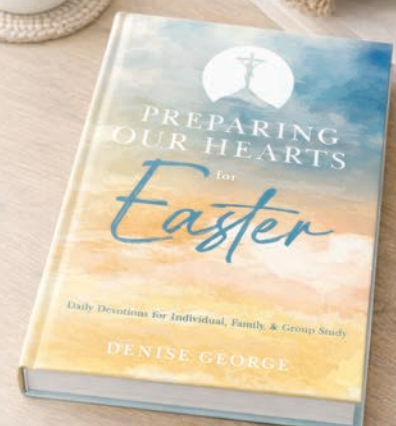
First Corinthians 13 describes what love is and isn't — and it's meant for all aspects of life, not merely for wedding ceremonies. Verses 5 and 6 note, "[Love] does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth."

PREPARING OUR HEARTS FOR EASTER

By Denise George

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Your Voice



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Opinion: War respects worship and America should too

There is a troubling silence surrounding the recent disruption of a Sunday worship service at a church in Minnesota. That silence deserves scrutiny, not because of the personalities involved, but because of the principle at stake.

This was not a protest in a public square. It was not a demonstration outside a building or a challenge to speech offered freely to the public. It was an intentional invasion of a house of worship during active religious services. That distinction matters legally, morally and civically.

First Amendment

The First Amendment protects both free speech and the free exercise of religion. Those protections are not in competition here. The law is clear that free speech does not extend to unlawful conduct, trespass, intimidation or the obstruction of others' constitutional rights. A church sanctuary during worship is not a public forum. It is a protected space, and the people gathered there were engaged in a protected activity.

When worshippers are prevented from praying, singing or hearing Scripture because protesters refuse lawful requests to leave, a line has been crossed. This is not abstract. The videos show a pastor repeatedly asking protesters to exit. Worshipers remained seated and passive, praying quietly. Some were visibly shaken. That is not protest. That is coercion.

I speak to this not only as a citi-

zen, but as someone who served for years as an intelligence officer in the U.S. Army, including in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East. Part of my responsibility was identifying and disrupting insurgent and terrorist networks. In that work, I frequently encountered credible reporting that violent actors used mosques to meet, plan, train or store weapons.

And yet, even in a war zone, we exercised restraint.

We understood that houses of worship carried moral, cultural and strategic weight. We knew that violating sacred space, even when it offered tactical advantage, carried consequences that extended far beyond a single operation. Respect for worship was not weakness. It was legitimacy.

That experience makes this incident at home all the more jarring.

What U.S. forces were careful not to do in combat zones was done deliberately, in peacetime, against unarmed civilians gathered to worship. Worse, it appears the sanctuary was chosen precisely because it would inhibit response, because restraint would be assumed. That is the exploitation of decency, not an appeal to conscience.

'Measured outrage'

There is also a legal concern that cannot be ignored.

When identities are known, evidence is public, and the conduct clearly implicates trespass and interference with religious exercise,

failure to investigate and enforce the law risks becoming something more than oversight. It risks signaling tolerance, and possibly endorsement, of conduct that the Constitution exists to prevent.

Selective silence

Government neutrality toward religion does not mean indifference to its obstruction. The state has an affirmative duty to protect the free exercise of religion, just as it protects free speech. Selective silence erodes confidence in equal protection under the law.

This issue should concern every American, including those who hold no religious belief at all. Once the norm that worship spaces are off limits collapses, no faith community is secure. The boundary that protects churches today protects mosques, synagogues, temples and minority faiths tomorrow.

Civil society depends on restraint, on knowing not just what we can do, but what we should not do. Protest has a long and honorable place in American life. But when it enters a sanctuary uninvited, during worship, and refuses to leave, it ceases to be protest and becomes an act of intimidation.

Measured outrage is appropriate here. Silence is not.

EDITOR'S NOTE — This opinion piece was written by Matt Lovelace of First Baptist Church Enterprise and shared with The Alabama Baptist.

"You don't rebuild trust with one viral video or clever slogan. You do it by telling the truth repeatedly, behaving consistently and refusing to exaggerate results for applause. In a suspicious world, steady faithfulness stands out," said **Phil Cooke**, church media consultant.

"One of the depressing things about YouTube is you can see how many people click away and how quickly. An embarrassing number click away in the first 30 seconds. One of my goals for both my preaching and my YouTube is to be more interesting," said **Josh Hunt**, a pastor and author in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

"The intensity of persecution and discrimination continues to increase, with more than 388 million Christians worldwide, 1 in 7, facing high levels of persecution and discrimination for their faith," the **2026 World Watch List** report stated. "This accounts for 8 million more people than last year."

"The moment we glorify ourselves, we set ourselves up as rivals to the Most High."
Charles Spurgeon

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“Family discipleship doesn’t have to be complicated — just open the Bible and talk about Jesus.”

@THEFOCUSEDHOMEMAKER
on Instagram

“I was lost and would be in hell had it not been for the grace of God and a second chance of life,” recalled 94-year-old **Paul Leftwich** of when he laid trapped under a car at 16, the bumper six inches from his neck.

“An awakening means that not only does the Spirit of God bring people to Christ, but the culture is impacted,” historian and author **David Barton** told a group with the Alabama Citizens Action Program. “I’m afraid our culture is yet to be impacted by a biblical worldview.”

He noted, “Despite revivals in the past 110 years, America has seen the rise of Darwinian socialism, atheistic Marxism and eugenics. ... If you change the heart and don’t change the culture, you lose both.”

“Leadership is not predicated on a title. Everyone is a leader. You have leadership responsibilities in some areas of your life. You have influence with your children, spouse, neighbors, friends, church and others. You may not be in a leadership position at work, but you are in a position of leadership (influence),” said **George Yates**, an organizational health strategist and coach.

“What you do, how you carry yourself, every action is influencing someone. If you are showing disrespect to your leaders or organization, you are influencing others. If you have a habit of talking about others, positively or negatively, you are influencing those around you, maybe not in a positive way.”



LASS WORDS



BY **KEN LASS**
The Alabama Baptist

DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

Volunteering with purpose — even when you sometimes feel useless

Several years ago my church was in the midst of a project to expand the Sunday School space, using volunteers to finish the youth ministry floor to save costs. All the men in our fellowship were invited to take part.

You must understand that I don’t do tools. I never learned how to build things or fix things. My dad could build or fix anything, but I was too busy watching football on TV to observe him and benefit from his knowledge. Yet I wanted to be a contributing member of my church family, so I showed up at the worksite. All the other men were there with their toolbelts, hard-hats and tape measures. I was armed only with good intentions.

Change in perspective

It quickly became evident I was out of my league. I was given a few assignments I could not handle. Even as a “gofer” I would bring people the wrong item. I felt embarrassed and humiliated.

Eventually I was reduced to holding a door frame in place while another worker fastened it. Guess they figured I couldn’t mess that up. Apparently my shame was obvious because my partner asked what was wrong. I shared that I felt useless and out of place. He thought for a

moment, scratched his chin and uttered words I would remember the rest of my life: “Do you realize you are helping build a doorway through which hundreds of unsaved young people will walk, and when they come back out they will have accepted Jesus as Savior? You call that useless?”

Smile and purpose

I was stunned. His words hit me like a two-by-four. It might be the most profound thing I’ve ever heard and completely changed my mood. From then on I determined to be the best door-frame-holder I could be.

I held that thing in place with a smile and a purpose. On this day, that was my role in God’s plan. It wasn’t an important one, but somebody had to do it. God called me, and I was blessed to answer.

Twenty-five years later, that doorway is still there. Every time I go past it I remember that everyone has a place in God’s plan. And none of those is trivial to Him.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Ken Lass, an award-winning columnist for numerous publications and websites, is a retired Birmingham television news and sports anchor.

NEWS

Alabama news

OBITUARIES

DALE BARNES

Dale Barnes, a longtime pastor and distinguished Vietnam War veteran, died Jan. 7. He was 76.



BARNES

A native of Maine, Barnes enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps at 17 and was deployed to Vietnam after training. He served as a rifleman and radio operator as a member of the 2nd battalion 4th Marines, Hotel Company, 3rd Marine Division.

Barnes was severely wounded as a result of mortar fire and was honorably discharged from military service in 1969. He received numerous medals and honors, including the Purple Heart.

Barnes later earned a bachelor's degree in biblical studies from Gordon College, Wenham, Massachusetts, and a master's degree in religious education from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Hamilton, Massachusetts.

He served 46 years as pastor of six churches, including four in Alabama — Calvary Baptist, Prattville; Beulah Baptist, Wetumpka; Rock Springs Baptist, Tallassee; and Titus Baptist.

Barnes was preceded in death by his wife of 42 years, Jan. He is survived by his son, Bob; daughter, Christine; and three grandchildren.

ROGER HOUSTON

Roger Houston, pastor of Hook Street Baptist Church, Tuscumbia, died Jan. 28. He was 74.

Houston, who had a long career in education, simultaneously served as pastor of several Alabama Baptist churches for 47 years, including Hook Street Baptist, where he became pastor in 2025.



HOUSTON

He also served at Pocahontas Free Will Baptist Church, Carbon Hill, from 1974 to 1987, New Zion Baptist Church, Russellville, from 1991 to 2009, First Baptist Church Arley from 2009 to 2012 and Central Heights Baptist Church, Florence, from 2012 to 2020.

Houston earned a bachelor's degree from the University of North Alabama in Florence and a master's degree in school administration from the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

He was preceded in death by his wife, Kathy, and son, Jason.

DEKALB ASSOCIATION

► **Ryan Jordan** is the new associate pastor of worship and administration for **First Baptist Church Geraldine**. He previously served as the worship and family minister at Hartford Baptist Church. He and his wife, Jessica, have three children. Will Standridge is pastor.



Submitted photo

WEST CULLMAN ASSOCIATION

► **First Baptist Church Garden City** is having revival Feb. 22–25. Sunday's service begins at 10:30 a.m., and weekdays at 6:30 p.m. Guest preachers are Samuel Tucker, Sunday; Pete Grund, Monday; Parker Allen, Tuesday; and Grant Dykes, Wednesday. Music provided by FBC Garden City praise team. Mike Beck is pastor.

ALABAMA NEWS ITEMS COMPILED BY DIANNA L. CAGLE AND DEBBIE CAMPBELL



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These events are made possible by gifts of Alabama Baptists through the Cooperative Program.

Persecuted church

Protesters block way to service

People shouting anti-Christian comments and a jihadist slogan formed a human chain to prevent Christians from attending a Christmas service in Indonesia. Muslim men and women stood in the way of Huria Kristen Batak Protestant Church members who were going to a prayer post in Jayasampurna village near Jakarta on Dec. 14, Morning Star News reported.

Legal aid, shelter provided to family

The 6-year-old daughter of Christian parents was sexually assaulted Dec. 10 by her tutor's brother, a Muslim man in his 20s, whose relatives subsequently threatened the girl's family if charges are not dropped.

Christian Daily International-Morning Star News reported the suspect was arrested and charged with rape. Conviction carries a life sentence or death penalty, stated Christians' True Spirit, who is providing legal aid and safe shelter for the girl's family.

Extremists attack, kill evangelist

Muslim extremists in Uganda assaulted and killed Konkona Kasimu, a Christian evangelist known for his knowledge of both the Bible and the Quran, who had just participated in an outreach event. Kasimu was attacked, along with others in his group, and later died from his injuries, reported Morning Star News.

In December, Kasimu's church had organized an outdoor dialogue event on Christianity and Islam in Uganda's Busia town. On the last day of

the event, several Muslims converted to Christianity, Morning Star said.

That evening, as Kasimu and other team members traveled through the Nakalama swamp area, four men in Islamic attire stopped the group and attacked, said a female team member who also was assaulted.

Mob attacks believers, burns Bibles

A mob of approximately 80 Hindu extremists assaulted two Christian couples for hours on Nov. 7 in India, making one burn Bibles and accusing them of forcibly converting people, reported Morning Star News. The four were also dragged to a car and locked inside for two hours.



MS photo

Police detained the Christians, and they were pressured to sign a statement that they would neither pursue charges against the assailants nor again enter the village, the attorney said.

Officials address plight of 2 abducted girls

Pakistani judges have ordered police to find and present to the court a kidnapped 13-year-old girl and her 30-year-old Muslim abductor.

In another case, a suspect in the rape of a 14-year-old has been arrested. The girls in both cases are from Christian families, Christian Daily International-Morning Star News reported.

The girl was kidnapped July 29, then forced to convert to Islam and marry the captor. Two courts rejected the family's previous petitions to recover her, Christian Daily-Morning Star reported.

In the other case, a 14-year-old from Sahiwal was accosted at gunpoint Dec. 7, taken to a house and raped. Her brother said her family found her semi-conscious outside the home.

Three individuals were arrested, but two were released, the girl's brother told Christian Daily-Morning Star.

35 Christians slain in Nigeria

At least 35 Christians were slain in January and a teen girl abducted, as persecution of believers in Nigeria continues into another year.

Christian Daily International-Morning Star News reported several recent incidents:

▶ Muslims in Nigeria's Benu State killed nine Christians in three villages Jan. 5–6 and another four in the village Otobi Akpa Jan. 12.

▶ Twelve Christians were slain in Plateau State Jan. 1–9.

▶ In Taraba State, Fulani invaded Iornem, Kyahar, Uhula and Samgambe Jan. 10, killing 10 Christians.

▶ On Dec. 1 Muslim assailants abducted Ummi Tambaya, a 15-year-old Christian girl with mental issues. Reportedly, Kano State Hisbah Board in Rogo has her in custody. That "board" is described as a Muslim police group that enforces Islamic law. Local police have failed to secure her release. Her family is concerned she may be forcibly converted to Islam.

NEWS ITEMS COMPILED BY THE ALABAMA BAPTIST STAFF

Iran in turmoil as 'interest in Christianity has never been higher'

In 1979, millions of Iranians lined the streets to cheer the return of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini after 14 years of exile. What was heralded as a revolution of hope quickly hardened into an Islamic dictatorship under Shia Islamic clerics.

Today, the atmosphere could not be more different.

Millions are now marching against Ayatollah Khamenei's regime, demanding freedom from the very system the revolution built.

Wybo Nicolai, director of field operations

for Frontlines International, noted, "The theocratic government has lost credibility across nearly every generation, but especially among the young."

Communication

The government is coming down hard on protesting mobs with excessive retaliatory violence and has shut down the internet and other forms of communication.

Several uprisings have shaken the Islamic Republic since 1979, but the regime has been able to stay in control, often through violent suppression, imprisonment and intimidation.

As a result of this, Nicolai pointed out, "Ordinary citizens have paid the price. Many have turned away from Islam entirely and have become agnostic, atheist, followers of Bahai or turned to Jesus and have become followers of the Messiah. Khomeini once boasted that Iran would be a nation fully won for Islam, and that the world would follow; the exact opposite has happened. Iran is poised to be one of the most spiritually dynamic countries in the Middle East."

Throughout 2025, many Christian believers were arrested for their faith, and

their current whereabouts remain unknown. Today, once again, as protests surge and the regime is out to crush dissent, the Christian minority may face even harsher treatment.

Charles White, president of Frontlines International, noted that under the circumstances, "The risk of increased arrests, surveillance and targeting of Christians remains high."

Undercover house fellowships have multiplied, Bibles are shared in secret, dreams and visions are reported across the country and testimonies of Christ's grace continue to spread. Pastor

Tat Stewart, a prominent missionary, author and leader in the Persian-speaking Christian world, has reached out to our team in the past few days and requested ongoing prayers.

"It is hard to know what is really going on in Iran. ... Iran is no longer a Muslim country. Interest in Christianity has never been higher. Keep praying," he said.

EDITOR'S NOTE — This story was written and originally published by Frontlines International. Used with permission.

John H. Killian receives ALCAP's Dan Ireland Salt & Light Award

Fayette County Baptist Association director of missions John H. Killian recently received ALCAP's Dan Ireland Salt & Light Award.

The award, named for longtime ALCAP leader Ireland, honors steady faith, service and leadership.

'Service and love'

"John embodies all of it," said ALCAP board member Michael Brooks. "From growing up in Wylam to earning advanced degrees in history and theology, and then going on to serve in decades of Christian ministry, John's life has been marked by scholarship, service and love for Alabama."

An alumnus of both New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and Tennessee Temple, John has served the church and Alabama in countless ways, including as a member of the ALCAP board of directors for 26 years, a former chaplain of the Alabama GOP, former president of the Alabama Baptist Pastors Conference and former president of the Alabama Baptist State Convention.

"ALCAP is grateful for the work and ministry of John Killian, and we couldn't be more pleased to present him with this award," said Brooks. (The Alabama Baptist)



Photo by Joe Godfrey

Fayette County Baptist Association director of missions John H. Killian is the recipient of ALCAP's Dan Ireland Salt & Light Award, which honors steady faith, service and leadership.

"ALCAP is grateful for the work and ministry of John Killian, and we couldn't be more pleased to present him with this award."

Michael Brooks
ALCAP board member

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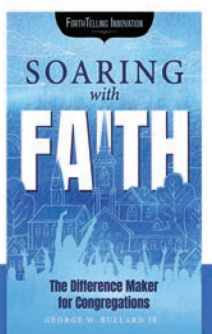
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MINISTRY FOR A LIFETIME

BY CARRIE BROWN McWHORTER • THE ALABAMA BAPTIST

More older students pursuing seminary education for ministry in later life

From the ministry apprenticeships of colonial America to fully remote degree programs today, Christian higher education has evolved in its delivery methods but not in its mission — the intellectual, spiritual and moral development of students.

Historically, many of those students were young people in their early 20s, fresh out of college and answering a call to missions and ministry. But that is changing.

“God is still calling people of all ages to fulfill His mission all over the world,” said Matt James, vice president of enrollment at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and Leavell College.

“At NOBTS, we are called to train the men and women that the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention send to us. Currently, more than 40% of our undergraduate enrollment at Leavell College is over the age of 40.”

Continuing education

Data from the Association of Theological Schools, an organization that accredits more than 270 Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Jewish graduate schools of theology, shows a similar trend.

An ATS analysis found that in fall 2024, the average age of students entering seminary was 40, and almost 15% of degree-seeking students were aged 56 or older.

This trend toward an older student population suggests a growing interest in theological education among mid- and late-career professionals and retirement-age students,



Photo by Freepik

writes Christopher The (tay), ATS director of student research and initiative management.

Kim Hendrix of Ranburne is one of those older students. After retiring as a nurse, Hendrix began taking classes through Samford University’s Ministry Training Institute, first in Cleburne Baptist Association and later in Calhoun Baptist Association.

She enjoyed learning from her instructors and from others in the classes. Then a pivotal encounter

with a visiting missionary planted the thought of pursuing a master’s degree in biblical counseling.

“My last job at the hospital was working with outpatient mental health, everything from schizophrenics to drug addicts to retirees going through depression,” Hendrix said. “That got me interested in counseling.”

Hendrix, who is 69, said she waited three years to make a move mostly because she felt she was too old to return to school. A friend in

ministry encouraged her that “age is just a number,” and then a challenging sermon by her pastor compelled her to follow the Lord’s conviction and submit the application.

Now in her first semester at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Hendrix said she is learning how to navigate online learning, building relationships with classmates from around the globe and getting help from her professors and others when she needs it. Most importantly, she’s taking this next chapter one day at a time.

‘Trust the calling’

“I told my children, ‘If I don’t live to finish, maybe it’ll help me live my life better. And if I live to finish and I can lead one person to the Lord, I’ll be so excited.’ That is my vision — to be able to open a counseling visit with prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to the client what they need to talk about,” Hendrix said.

Chandler Snyder, vice president for institutional relations at Southwestern Seminary, said that whether students come straight from college or arrive after years in non-ministerial careers, seminary faculty and staff are committed to supporting them.

“Whatever their stage life, our message to prospective students is if the Lord has called, trust the calling, confirm it through your local church and start your application today,” Snyder said. “We stand ready to celebrate and equip your journey for a lifetime of faithful ministry.”

**“God is still calling people of all ages
to fulfill His mission all over the world.”**

Matt James
vice president of enrollment
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

FLEXIBLE OPTIONS

BY KATHY DEAN • UNIVERSITY OF MOBILE

UM named in top 10 most affordable online master's in religious studies in the U.S.



UM photo

The University of Mobile's online master of arts in biblical and theological studies has been ranked among the top 10 most affordable online master's in religious studies programs in the United States.

The online master's program in the school of Christian studies at the University of Mobile was ranked nationally for affordability

by OnlineU, a ranking site aimed at helping students make educated decisions when choosing an online degree.

The fully online program is taught by faculty members dedicated to training students to rightly interpret the Word of God and understand theological truth to strengthen the church and her mission.

For more information, visit umobile.edu.

The program offers students flexible options to pursue their online master's degree in two or four years, making it compatible for graduate students working full-time or part-time, said Douglas Wilson, executive director of the Center for Christian Calling and professor of Old Testament and Hebrew in the UM school of Christian studies.

The degree also offers flexibility for graduates working in a variety of settings.

Opportunities

"Our master of arts in biblical and theological studies graduates currently serve as church planters, pastoral staff, international missionaries, military and health care chaplains, Christian school teachers and community ministry

leaders. In addition, some of our graduates have continued their education to pursue doctor of ministry, doctor of theology, Ph.D. and Ed.D. degrees," Wilson said.

For information about the master of arts in biblical and theological studies, visit umobile.edu/um-info, contact Doug Wilson at dwilson@umobile.edu or call enrollment services at 251-442-2222.



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SPOTLIGHT ON CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

ASSISTING STUDENTS

BY NEAL EMBRY • BEESON DIVINITY SCHOOL

Beeson renews full tuition ‘Our Risen Lord’ scholarships for 2026

Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School will once again offer full tuition scholarships for students beginning their studies in 2026, following the renewal of a major gift to the school by an anonymous donor.

The “Our Risen Lord” scholarships, which are merit-based, are available to full-time graduate students with priority given to master of divinity students who complete the scholarship essay along with their application.

The money covers the full cost of tuition and fees for the recipients over three years of study at Beeson, the average amount of time needed to complete the MDiv program.

“We couldn’t be more grateful for these anonymous donors,” said Beeson Dean Douglas A. Sweeney. “Their gifts have already had a transformative impact on Beeson and the churches and students we serve. What a marvelous opportunity this

affords us to attract and form the next generation of God-called servants of the church of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.”

The scholarships aid students in committing to Beeson’s model of in-person theological education, Sweeney said

earlier this year, when the scholarships were first announced.

Applications are due by June 1 for fall enrollment. Learn more about requirements and apply online.

For more information, visit beesondivinity.com.



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First person: Why and how I pray for 23 people daily

By **Craig Carlisle**
Etowah Baptist Association

In 2014, while engaged in a phone conversation about prayer with a friend, I was impressed to develop a prayer calendar. The purpose of the calendar was to help me develop a greater commitment to the discipline of prayer in my daily walk. I also desired to be more intentional in praying when people requested me to pray for them.

I began to populate my calendar. I started with 10 people, and for each one I assigned a day of the month on which I would pray for them. Every month on their day, I began to text them saying, “Good morning! How can I pray for you today?”

Prayer calendar

What has happened over the last 11 years of having my prayer calendar has been remarkable.

The original 10 have grown to 690 people for whom I pray every month. That is an average of 23 people per day. I added

Chuck Lawless to my calendar in January 2015. For the past 10 years on the 28th of the month, I have texted him and then prayed for him.

We have both been amazed at how consistently the prayer text has come at just the right time.

How do I do it — and how might you do it?

Maybe the way I tackle this prayer commitment will help you do something similar.

1. Use the calendar app on your phone. I created a calendar called “Pastor Prayer Calendar.” Every entry is set for “all day” to repeat every month. Creating a specific calendar enables you to keep your prayer calendar separate from your ministry and personal calendar.

2. Prioritize praying. It now takes me about three hours over the course of a day to respond to all the requests I get, but you won’t need that much time to get started with a shorter list.



Photo by Travis Frontz/The Alabama Baptist
Craig Carlisle presides during the 2025 Alabama Baptist State Convention annual meeting in Huntsville. Carlisle served as ABSC president from 2023 to 2025.

You just need to make intercessory prayer a priority in your schedule.

Building trust

3. Be consistent. A prayer calendar is not something you want to start and not follow through. When I first started, the requests were often vague and superficial. After 11 years, the prayer requests are deeper and more personal. Consistency builds

trust, and trust allows you to pray for deep things in the prayer partner’s life.

4. Respect confidentiality.

As the people on your prayer calendar begin to share more with you, the issue of confidentiality becomes vital. Confidentiality is always important when you are praying for people, but it is even more so when people begin to let you into the innermost parts of their lives. My prayer partners must know that I would not share their requests with anyone without their permission.

5. Always respond to the prayer requests with a prayer. We live in a day and time where we seem to always be looking for shortcuts in our communication. We would prefer to reply with emoticons, acronyms and short phrases like, “You’ve got it!” or “Got you covered!” Those are inadequate and impersonal responses to someone who

has asked for your prayers. Every request I receive receives the response of a specific prayer for the requests others have made.

6. Keep the texts from the previous months.

It may seem crazy, but I have never deleted one text thread from anyone I’ve prayed for in the past 11 years. One of the benefits of my prayer calendar is being able to look back at all the ways God has answered prayers. The answers have not always been what we asked for, but God has always answered.

7. Always watch for new names to add to the list.

The original 10 were local pastors and deacons in my church. Over the years, my list has grown as I began to build relationships with young pastors and serve a local association, our state convention and the Southern Baptist Convention in leadership roles. I simply asked friends if I could add them to my prayer calendar. No one’s ever turned me down (in fact, I’ve now had ministers contact me and ask to be added).

A great blessing

My calendar has proven to be one of the greatest blessings in my life and ministry, and I encourage you to start developing a similar calendar.

EDITOR’S NOTE — Craig Carlisle is director of missions for Etowah Baptist Association. This story was originally published by chucklawless.com.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

sponsored by the State Board of Missions

Stanley Williams named new Baptist campus minister at Alabama A&M University

Stanley Williams is the new Baptist campus minister at Alabama A&M University in Huntsville, and state leaders say he's bringing with him a wealth of ministry experience.

"Stanley has demonstrated a unique capacity to reach, disciple and send students while maintaining a critical relationship with the universities he served at," said Ben Edfeldt, director of the office of collegiate and student ministries at the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions. "He develops excellent leaders. His experience will bless the students at Alabama A&M and the churches of the Madison Baptist Association. I am thrilled to welcome him to our state Baptist Campus Ministries team."



WILLIAMS

Before coming to Alabama A&M, Williams led strategic efforts to reach students across Philadelphia and south New Jersey.

He served on the campuses of the University of Pennsylvania and Temple University, both in Philadelphia, and Rutgers

University-Camden in New Jersey.

He also directed the collegiate efforts of the Baptist Convention of Pennsylvania/South Jersey and has served as a resource across the Southern Baptist Convention for reaching and mobilizing underreached ethnic student populations.

Rick Lance, SBOM executive director, said he is "delighted" to have Williams serving as a fellow state missionary.

"He is well qualified in terms of experience and educational background," Lance said. "He has a keen grasp of how campus ministry functions as a force for good in Kingdom enterprises. Please pray for Stanley as he embarks upon this new ministry journey among us."

ABDR volunteers needed; upcoming training sessions available

When disaster strikes, the yellow shirt army of Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief volunteers is ready to go help in whatever way is needed — and they need more volunteers to join them.

To prepare to help next time a crisis happens, register for one of ABDR's upcoming training sessions at the Disaster Relief Center in Prattville:

► **March 14**, training for admin volunteers

► **March 21**, training for shower and laundry volunteers and Disaster Relief communications

► **April 10**, training for cleanup and recovery volunteers

► **April 10–11**, training for chainsaw volunteers

► **April 16–18**, training for Disaster Relief chaplaincy

► **April 25**, training for mass feeding volunteers.

For more information or to register, visit sbd.org/events.

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"The Jews had light and gladness, joy and honor. And in every province and city, wherever the king's command and decree came, the Jews had joy and gladness, a feast and a holiday."

ESTHER 8:16-17

NEW CHAPTER OF MINISTRY

Lance announces upcoming retirement plans from Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions

By Jennifer Davis Rash
The Alabama Baptist

After nearly three decades of leadership by Rick Lance, Alabama Baptists are preparing for a time of transition.

Lance, executive director of the Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions, announced retirement plans for Jan. 31, 2027, during the Feb. 3 meeting of the SBOM board of trustees.

“Life is lived in chapters,” Lance said. “Some chapters are longer than others, and some are more brief. Sensing the direction of the Lord, I have come to believe that a new chapter of ministry is needed in my life. I also believe the State Board of Missions and the Alabama Baptist family need a new chapter of ministry as well.

“For 28 years, I have had the privilege to serve alongside Alabama Baptists as a state missionary in the role of executive director,” Lance shared. “This has been the most meaningful time in my more than 55 years of gospel ministry. I am humbled that the Lord has chosen to use me in this capacity and grateful for the trust that Alabama Baptists have placed in me.”

‘Seamless transition’

“I plan to conclude my time of service on Jan. 31, 2027. During this next almost 12 months I will work with our leadership to ensure a smooth and seamless transition to new executive director leadership. This is my commitment to the State Board of Missions and the Alabama Baptist family.



Photo by Doug Rogers/Alabama Baptist State Board of Missions
Rick Lance shares his decision to begin the transition process toward retirement during the Feb. 3 State Board of Missions board of trustees meeting in Prattville.

“I am sincerely thankful for the opportunity to serve the Lord with Alabama Baptists throughout all these years. I embrace the words of the Apostle Paul speaking to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:24, ‘I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of

testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.’”

Next steps

Lance outlined a possible process timeline and explained the SBOM’s executive director is elected by the SBOM board of trustees. The goal is for a candidate to be presented before the board

in August and, if elected, then he could work alongside the staff and Lance for the remainder of 2026.

Shadowing opportunity

It would be a shadowing opportunity with the state convention annual meeting in November as well. By nature of the office of the SBOM executive director, that person becomes treasurer of the state convention.

Jim Graham, chair of the SBOM board of trustees, also announced the transition search team members he appointed. The team will be chaired by Buddy Champion, pastor of First Baptist Church Trussville and a past president of the state convention.

Transition search team members serving along with Champion are Jim Cooley of FBC Birmingham, Ben Hayes of FBC Dadeville, Chad Hess of Woodmont Baptist in Florence, Neal Hughes of Montgomery Baptist Association, Allen Singley of Pilgrim Home Baptist in Newton, Ben Stubblefield of Spring Hill Baptist in Mobile, Derek Staples of FBC Jacksonville and James Watkins of West End Baptist in Clanton.

Serving as voting ex-officio members of the team are Graham; Jarman Leatherwood, president of the state convention; Craig Carlisle, immediate past president of the state convention; and Jamie McGlaughn, president of Alabama WMU.



LANCE

“I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me — the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.”

Acts 20:24

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CHURCH POSITIONS

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SENIOR PASTOR

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BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Paden Baptist Church is prayerfully seeking a bivocational pastor. Currently meeting Sunday morning and Wednesday evening. Located within one mile of Gadsden State Community College. Send resumé to: bruceragland67@gmail.com.

BIVOCATIONAL PREACHER

Riverview Baptist Church, Millers Ferry, Alabama, is seeking a part-time bivocational preacher. We are a small church located in a retirement, recreational community. Send resumé to: monica.rice60@yahoo.com.

BIVOCATIONAL MUSIC MINISTER

New Center Baptist, Hartselle, Alabama, (newcenterbaptist.org) seeking bivocational music minister for blended services, leading choir and coordinating volunteer musicians. Email re-

sumé to: raykballew@gmail.com or contact pastor at 256-221-6880 for more information.

STUDENT PASTOR

Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Alexandria, Alabama, is seeking a full-time student pastor to lead our student ministry of 80–100 students (grades 6–12). Email your resumé to: pastorsearch@mzbcflife.net. Subject line: Student Pastor

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Introducing our new column on congregational vitality ...

Soaring congregations ask God to pull them forward into the future

Merlin the magician, as depicted in T.H. White's 1958 book "The Once and Future King," is an enchanting wizard. He experiences time in a unique way. Born in the future, he views the present from the perspective of what has already materialized.

Merlin is aware of how the story concludes because for him, the ending is already assured. He is not uncertain about what happens next.

This serves as a metaphor for the journey of Christian congregations. It leads us to see the third pivot for congregations to truly soar with faith. Soaring congregations are embraced by God's miraculous pull rather than relying on human efforts.

When congregations feel the need to push and strive to make God's will happen, they overwork and burnout. They should instead consider embracing the miraculous pull of God's guidance toward the future — a future only our triune God fully understands.

Here are three differences between congregations who are pushing and those who are empowered by the pull of God.

First, the key difference between congregations that push and those that pull lies in the contrast between human-driven effort and Holy Spirit-led surrender. This is a wonderful difference.

Second, congregational life sometimes feels like an overwhelming challenge, especially when efforts are aimed at being more spiritual, increasing program success and welcoming people into the congregation's life and ministry. When things do not go as planned, it is common to assume the congregation was not committed enough or did not put in courageous effort.

Third, an organizational architect has a vision and invites others to join in bringing it to life. The spiritual adventure pathfinder senses where God is leading and shares the inspiring beauty of that divine journey.

A pulling vision

In a pushing congregation, leaders propose a vision aimed at cultivating a sense of mission and purpose. In contrast, a pulling congregation is one where vision comes as leaders are deeply inspired by God's empowering Spirit. This approach encourages the congregation not to feel burdened, but to eagerly behold and be inspired by the glorious presence of God.

Adopting a Christ-centered perspective

rather than a purely congregational one truly transforms how we see our story and our ministry actions. Rather than thinking of God as someone who pushes us from darkness into light, it is more heartening to realize God is ahead of us, gently drawing us toward His holy light.

Instead of leaders encouraging congregations to grow through their own efforts, future-focused disciples remind everyone of the promising future ahead, filled with hope and assurance.

The leadership of congregations is not about giving leaders free rein. It is about being guided and inspired by God. It is not about dwelling on past mistakes or current struggles, but about looking forward to the future and the glory that awaits.

Future-focused disciples

Future-focused disciples possess a calm assurance and unwavering confidence. Even when the world around them seems chaotic, their Christlike nature helps leaders stay steady because they know the ending is already secured.

They relate to the Creator of the eternal story as the gathered and scattered community of believers led by our loving God. He has already walked the path, lived the life and achieved victory. These congregations do not strive for victory; they live from the victory, inspired by His journey.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Bullard spent five decades in Baptist congregational and denominational ministry. His ministry roles included three churches, three associations, three state conventions and one national entity. He began as a columnist for TAB Media Group's publication *The Baptist Paper* in 2022. Bullard now serves as a strategic thinking mentor for Christian leaders through his *ForthTelling Innovation* ministry. TAB Media Group published his new book "Soaring with Faith: The Difference Maker for Congregations" — available on Amazon.

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EXPLORE THE BIBLE

Sunday School Lessons

By Douglas K. Wilson, Ph.D.

Professor of Biblical Studies, University of Mobile



For March 1

COURAGE Matthew 14:22–33

Few activities in the life and ministry of Jesus are recorded in all four Gospel accounts. One that is, however, is the feeding of the 5,000. Our focal passage records the events immediately after the multiplication of the loaves and fish. In this brief encounter on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples went from worry to worship, from fear to faith and from concern to courage.

Jesus' Presence (22–27)

Jesus sent the disciples ahead of Him across the Sea of Galilee toward Gennesaret. Meanwhile, He stayed behind to dismiss the crowds of men, women and children that had gathered in this previously deserted area.

Once they left, Jesus ascended the mountain to spend time alone in prayer. During the night, winds began to blow, waves beat against the disciples' boat and these men — even the seasoned fishermen — began to fear for their safety.

Something was moving on the sea. Was it a phantom? They didn't know what they were seeing. Jesus calmed their fears by telling them that He was there with them.

These are words of comfort that every Christian needs to hear when we face the terrifying unknown: "It is I! Don't be afraid!"

Jesus' Invitation (28–30)

Was Peter an adrenaline junkie, or did he just have greater faith than the other disciples? He asked Jesus for permission to join Him for a walk on the water!

Which is more astounding — that Peter asked or that Jesus allowed him to step out of the boat? Jesus had no reason to fear the winds or the waves, but Peter

feared. He went from stepping out to sinking down to saying, "Lord, save me!" I'm so grateful for testimonies of these very human disciples with all their faults and failures.

Peter cried out for the Master to rescue him. Only Jesus could save him, and only Jesus can save us! In fact, Peter would one day stand before the Sanhedrin declaring that Jesus is the only One who saves. (See Acts 4:12.)

Jesus' Response (31–33)

Why did you doubt? Where is your faith? Haven't you been paying attention? As I write these words, my eyes fill with tears. How many times has the Master asked such questions of me? How often does He have to ask, and how many ways does He have to show us before we are no longer distracted by the winds and the waves?

And just like that, the winds died down. They were safely in the boat and making their way across the water. Before long, they would be at the water's edge ministering to others who needed the Master's healing touch.

The men in the boat went from worrying to worshipping. They began to acknowledge Jesus to be the Son of God. Such words would be grounds for indictments — for Jesus as a blasphemer and for them as idolaters. If Jesus was not who they recognized Him to be, they would all be in grave danger.

Jesus is greater than anything we fear. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38–39).

**"[Jesus] said,
'Come.' So Peter
got out of the
boat and walked
on the water and
came to Jesus."**

Matthew 14:29

For March 8

REAL DEVOTION Matthew 15:1–11, 16–20

During the time of Jesus' physical life and ministry, various religious groups represented different approaches to practicing their faith. There were Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Essenes, Zealots and others. Sadducees, for example, were Jewish practitioners who followed the religious rituals of Second Temple Judaism, but they denied bodily resurrection, angels and miracles. (See Acts 23:8.)

By contrast, Pharisees were theologically conservative, holding to 613 laws written in the Torah to be kept, along with the traditions of the oral law. These were kept as the outward measure of real devotion to God.

Broken Rules (1–6)

The scribes were men whose life work was to read and write copies of the Scriptures, and the Pharisees were men whose life work was to live according to those Scriptures. Together, they went to Jesus to ask why His disciples did not observe the traditions that came from outside the Scriptures.

Of course, they did not verbalize their concern in those words, but Jesus saw the weakness in their inquiry. Rather than adhering to the authority of the Word of God, they focused on the traditions of the elders. Jesus pointed out their error.

Jesus answered their question with a question. Then He presented evidence from the Torah, and He concluded by quoting from their own traditions. Jesus answered them as a lawyer, arguing His case by laying out the evidence before them.

Consider our traditions. How many of our practices — at home and when congregations gather — are based on traditions rather than the Scriptures?

As Baptists, we pride ourselves on the fact that we don't hold to High Church liturgies, empty rituals or prescribed prayers. In reality, though, we follow our own traditions: "That's not how Brother So-and-So did it," or "We've never

done it that way before" or "I don't remember having a business meeting vote to move the piano."

Lip Service (7–11)

Throughout Isaiah's prophecies, he warned Israel and Judah of impending judgment for practicing their covenant rituals without living in covenant relationship.

Jesus picked up on this theme, quoting from Isaiah 29 and indicting them as hypocrites — actors playing a role before an audience. Matthew recorded Jesus warning against hypocrisy elsewhere when He affirmed spiritual disciplines — giving, praying and fasting — while warning that these practices must not be done to be seen by others (6:1–18).

Real Problem (16–20)

In the intervening verses, the reader discovers that Jesus' hearers took offense at His warning. This is the normal response to prophecy — the regenerate receive the rebuke and repent and the unrepentant reject it. They take offense, being ignorant that it is God who is the offended party.

After Peter requested an explanation of the teaching, Jesus introduced the principle that defilement comes from expressing rather than from ingesting, from coming out of the body rather than going into the body.

Ritual hand-washing does not cleanse a person from defilement. The attitudes and actions of an unrepentant heart defile the person, breaking the written commandments revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai concerning "evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual immoralities, thefts, false testimonies, slander." The Apostle Paul offered a similar list, referring to them as works of the flesh. (See Gal. 5:19–21.)

Every believer needs to learn from Jesus' teaching here. The real problems we face are religion without regeneration, information without transformation and ritual without relationship. May the Lord teach us to know the difference.

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

Sunday School Lessons

By Rony Kozman, Ph.D.

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For March 1

GOD IS HOLY Psalm 99:1–9

God is set apart in His greatness. (1–3)

In Psalm 99, God is presented as the Great King who rules the universe: “The Lord reigns,” and “He is enthroned between the cherubim.”

He is the “Mighty King” (v. 4) who rules the earth from His “holy mountain” (v. 9). And as great kings do, He gives “decrees” and “statutes” (v. 7).

Because He is the Great King who rules the world, God is to be worshipped and revered by all peoples (vv. 5, 9).

As we recite this psalm, we not only join all nations in worshipping the Lord, but we also join the angels.

This picture of God as the exalted and enthroned King who rules from

Israel’s temple is similar to Isaiah 6 where Isaiah sees “the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne” (Isa. 6:1). Isaiah also describes God as King in verse 5.

Another theme shared between Isaiah 6 and Psalm 99 is that in both places, we have a threefold use of the word “holy.” In Isaiah 6 the seraphim repeat this word three times — “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of armies” (6:3).

Three times in Psalm 99, God is described as holy (vv. 3, 5, 9). What does it mean to say that God is a holy king?

God is set apart in His justice. (4–5)

That God the Great King is holy means He is devoted to ensuring that justice prevails and wins in the world He rules.

The song of the seraphim that Isaiah hears comes after the first five chapters of Isaiah where Israel’s leaders are repeatedly

charged with corrupting justice.

By contrast, God is “exalted by His justice ... and demonstrates His holiness through His righteousness” (Isa. 5:16). This means God will see to it that justice prevails.

In fact, Isaiah 11 tells us that when the Son of David comes He will restore justice (11:1–5) and fill the earth with faithfulness — knowledge of the Lord (11:9).

Although God’s justice is not fully here right now, we join the seraphim of Isaiah 6 as we pray

**“Exalt the Lord
our God, and
worship at His
holy mountain;
for the Lord our
God is holy!”**

Psalm 99:9

Psalm 99 and recite God’s holiness three times, anticipating that God will bring justice to pass.

We have confidence in God’s power and commitment to do this, so we worship Him as though He has already done it: “You have established fairness; you have administered justice and righteousness in Jacob” (v. 4).

God is set apart in His actions toward us. (6–9)

We cannot take for granted that we will land on the right side of God’s justice.

Just as we remember that Moses, Aaron and Samuel cried to the Lord and God rescued them in His justice, we remember that they kept God’s statutes and decrees (v. 7).

We also seek to be keeping God’s just decrees so that we are found on the right side of God’s coming justice.

We know that God avenges the wrongdoer and forgives those who repent of injustice and turn to the Father and the Son, who give the Holy Spirit to cleanse us of all injustice and transform us into a people who are holy and committed to seeking God’s Kingdom and its justice (Matt. 6:33).

For March 8

GOD IS LOVE 1 John 4:7–19

Love comes from God because God is love. (7–10)

“God is love” (v. 8). God is the source of love, and He has revealed His love to us.

God has shown us His love in a number of ways. The Father has shown us His love by sending His Son to rescue us from sin and to give us life, and the Son showed us love when He “laid down His life for us” (3:16).

We humans did not showcase love (4:10). But now that we are God’s children who know God, we know love, because we know God who is love and who has shown us His love.

As God’s children we love God and we love one another.

When we remain in God’s love, His love is made complete in us. (11–15)

God is not flesh and blood like us. God is spirit. He is invisible. Thus, no one has ever seen God.

However, God made himself known to us by giving us His Spirit so that He lives in us and we live in Him.

This mutual indwelling of God living in us and we in Him is the way by which God and God’s love is made visible to the world.

Since God is love and God lives in us, people can see God’s love when we love one another.

When we love, the invisible God shows Himself and love to the world through our love. Our acts of love reveal God, who is love.

Jesus taught that this love would be the distinguishing mark of His followers. “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if

you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

We love because God first loved us. (16–19)

How does God live in us and we in God? This happens by confessing that Jesus is the Son of God (v. 15) and by loving God and our brothers and sisters.

Because God first loved us, we now respond by loving God and our neighbors. God’s initial action of love toward us while we were yet sinners demonstrated the depth of His love, and His work in us allows us to extend grace toward those who are difficult to love.

In the gospels, Jesus summarized the law and the prophets as hanging on these two great commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37, 39; Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18).

First John’s repeated insistence on loving God and brother and sister is a recollection of these two great commandments and connects these two commandments together.

Those who do not fulfill the second commandment also transgress the first. Those who do not love their brothers and sisters, whom they see, cannot love God, who is invisible to them (1 John 4:20).

We must love both God and our brothers and sisters, and if we live in love we have no reason to be afraid on the day of judgment.

Only those who do not love should be afraid of God’s punishment. As we love God and neighbor, God’s love is completed in us.

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

“Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him.”

1 John 4:8–9

More than a building

Blanket Fort Hope's state-of-the-art home ready yet needing house parents

By Tracy Riggs Frontz
The Alabama Baptist

It started with a little girl in second grade who had possibly already been trafficked asking if she could go home with the reading volunteer. It progressed to fundraising with a handmade lemonade stand, and finally a decade-plus-long dream was fulfilled — a home specifically designed for young girls who had been trafficked.

Alexa James, whose name means “defender of mankind,” tried to ignore for years what she had learned about children being trafficked. She was working a regular job, paying bills and raising her own kids.

“I’ve always known I would help children in some form or fashion,” said James, who is now CEO and founder of Blanket Fort Hope. “I didn’t know how. I just kind of ignored it until that little girl came along, and I said that I can’t ignore this any longer.”

Confirmation

Starting this ministry meant James couldn’t help her son with college expenses. When he got a full scholarship, it was the confirmation she needed.

Then the lemonade stand her stepfather built came into play. She took it anywhere she might be able to raise even a little money for this new nonprofit, thinking it would only take a few years to realize her dream.

It took much, much longer.

The many years of raising money were spent learning — and teaching. James met all the state directors of



Photos by Tracy Riggs Frontz/The Alabama Baptist

the Department of Human Resources. She helped start the Alabama Mandated Human Trafficking Task Force. She began working with police departments, emergency room workers, school counselors, paralegals, parents and staff in churches — “anybody who would let me do a training (session),” she said.

While waiting, James learned what it would take to make a state-of-the-art home for this underserved group of girls.

On Nov. 20, 2025, the dream was realized when an open house was held for Restoration Home, a trauma-informed group home for female child trafficking survivors.

“There’s no house like this. Everybody who comes in can’t even believe it. DHR, police departments, FBI — they’re blown away. We even have policemen who come in and call me on the telephone in tears.

safety, dignity and stability during the early stages of healing, James said. Trained professionals — medical and mental health professionals, therapists, social workers, house parents — will work with the girls as they are ready. Over time, the hope is that their brains will overcome the trauma and find true peace.

Kim Mashego, executive director of programs for Blanket Fort Hope, said the ministry is now prayerfully seeking house parents.

“We need adults who are deeply called to walk alongside girls healing from trauma,” Mashego said. “This is our commitment to ensure the safety, stability and spiritual care of each girl who walks through the doors of our Restoration Home.”



JAMES

New film portrays the harsh reality of trafficking and healing that’s possible

Still Hope,” a faith-based film from Pixels of Hope Studios and Studio 523, “highlights the bravery of women and men who have endured sex trafficking and the courageous work of recovery,” said Kathrine Lee, co-founder and CEO of Pure Hope Foundation, a nonprofit organization mobilizing action against the sex trafficking industry.

The film follows a fictional teenager named Hope who is lured into a trap, kidnapped and forced into prostitution. It is based on true stories.

“The powerful story of these women portrayed through the character of Hope shows that healing and forgiveness are possible,” said Richie Johns, director of “Still Hope.”

“Our prayer is that ‘Still Hope’ will give a voice and platform to the courageous individuals who have personally walked this journey and become a rallying cry for those who are boldly standing with them,” Johns said.

Learn more about the film at stillhopemovie.com. (Tracy Riggs Frontz)

To learn more about Blanket Fort Hope and its upcoming gala, go to blanketforhope.org.

If interested in discussing the role of house parents, call 205-840-9411.