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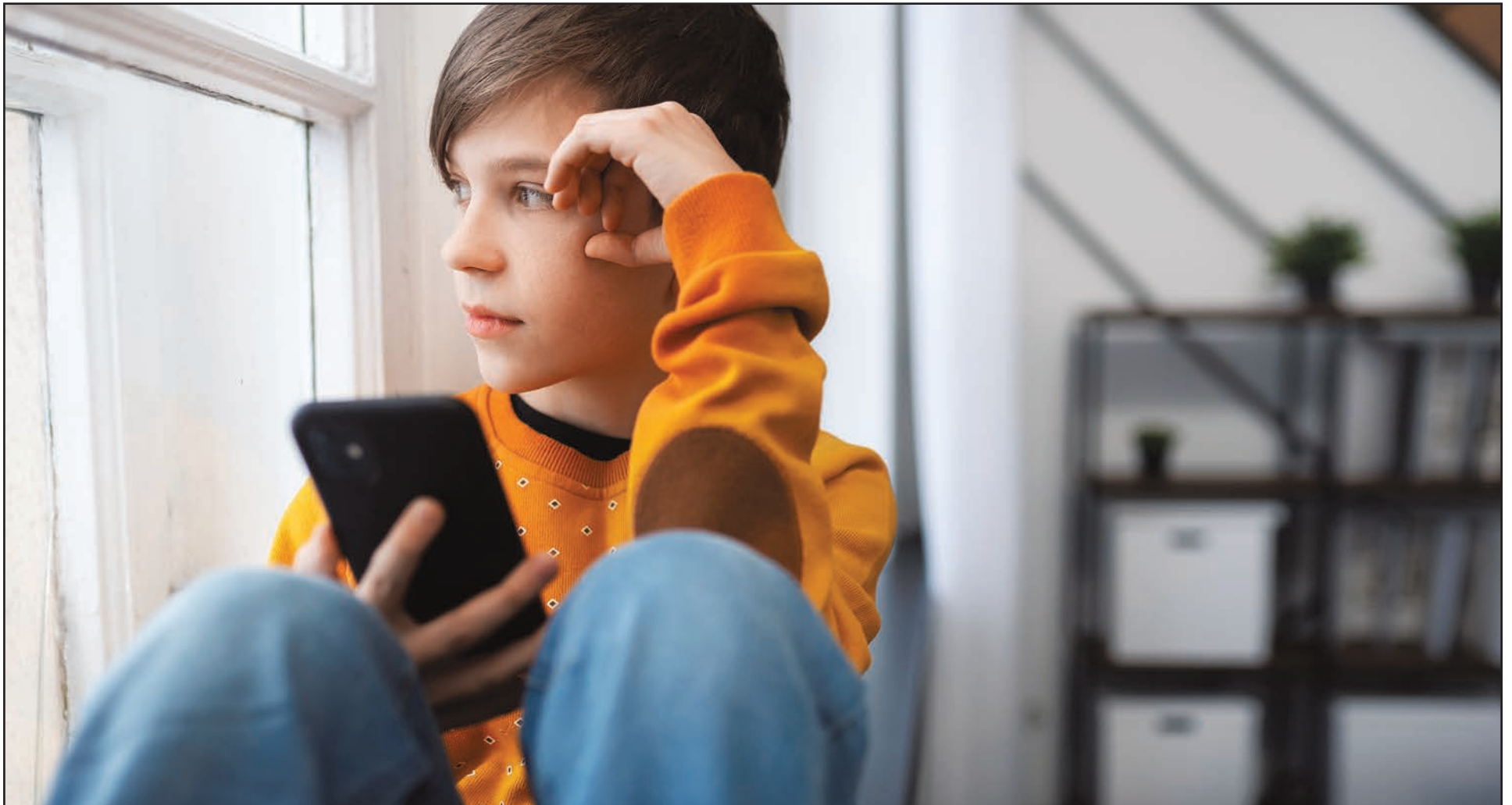


Photo by Freepik

Prevention **focused**

764, sextortion and child exploitation: Protecting children in the digital age

By Rachel Seale
The Alabama Baptist

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month, but how do parents protect their children from online predators in the digital age?

An online Nihilistic Violent Extremist network group known as 764 has been discovered as one that targets children and teens on popular gaming sites, like Roblox, to begin

grooming them. Predators often lie about their identity and age to form a relationship with potential victims. Then, they coerce children and teens into making explicit sexual content or violent videos where they harm themselves for the enjoyment of the 764 network.

Children are often threatened to continue making content for the group if they do not want the videos leaked or their family hurt.

The name 764 comes from the first three digits in a Texas zipcode, where the group originated. Even though one of the group's leaders pleaded guilty in 2025 to child exploitation charges, 764 and other NVE groups are still targeting vulnerable people, like children, teens and the elderly.

What is sextortion?

In an email interview with The

Alabama Baptist, Shane Plyler, executive director of COMPACT and a lieutenant with the Shelby County Sheriff's Office, defined sextortion as "the act of collecting explicit photos or videos of a victim, and then exploiting the victim for money, more explicit material or other heinous acts."

Plyler shared that COMPACT is a law enforcement-based task force
(See 'Open line,' page 8)

THE KIDS EDITION

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Writers conference

SCWC to offer 'unique experience,' set for June 19-20

By Cheryl Sloan Wray
The Alabama Baptist

This year's Southern Christian Writers Conference is set for June 19-20 at The Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham, Alabama, and will feature keynote speakers Charles Ghigna and Cindy Sproles, along with numerous workshops on a myriad of writing topics.

The annual conference is the flagship event for the SCWC, which was founded in 1991 and today welcomes around 175 participants to the June workshop while also holding other activities and events throughout the years for writers of faith. It works in ministry partnership with TAB Media Group.

"We love the opportunity to provide Christian writers with such a unique experience, and we're excited about the leaders and activities we are providing this year," SCWC coordinator Cheryl Wray said. "It's always such a blessing to meet Christian writers from across the South at the conference each summer."

Learning opportunities

Keynote presentations at this year's conference will be delivered by Ghigna, a poet and children's author of more than 100 books who is affectionately known as "Father Goose" and Sproles, a prolific author of inspirational novels published by Kregel and Revell and founder of the Christian Devotions ministry.

A total of 26 workshops will be



Photo by Tracy Riggs Frontz/The Alabama Baptist
Participants at the 2025 Southern Christian Writers Conference meet with award-winning author T.I. Lowe (second from right) during one of the meals.

offered throughout the weekend, including topics such as working with a Christian book publisher, travel writing, devotional writing, creative marketing, writing for children, writing for magazines and much more.

Other features of the conference include the announcement of the winners of the SCWC Writing Awards, a share and critique party, a book room where attendees can sell their books, prayer room, worship experiences, three meals, the opportunity to have 1-on-1 consultations with publishers and editors, and others.

"The conference is a wonderful

weekend with many opportunities for both successful and aspiring writers," Wray said. "We want to give writers of all levels a variety of activities that will meet them where they are on the writing journey."

Doors open for the conference on Friday, June 19 at 11:30 a.m., and the conference concludes Saturday, June 20 at 4 p.m. Registration is officially open and will close June 13 or whenever the conference reaches its capacity at 160 attendees. Registration costs \$140 for both days or \$75 for one day (Friday or Saturday).

Virtual access to the Southern Christian Writers Conference is also available. It includes all keynote presentations, 15-20 select workshops and other activities. The online conference is available via the SCWC YouTube channel.

Email Wray at scwritersconference@gmail.com for more information.

Wray also encourages interested writers to join the SCWC's Facebook group, which is a thriving online community of like-minded Christians. Learn more about the group at facebook.com/groups/81752677629.

To register, visit tabonline.org/SCWC-2026.

Southern Christian Writers Conference coordinator Cheryl Wray leads a breakout session during last year's event.



Photo by Travis Frontz/The Alabama Baptist

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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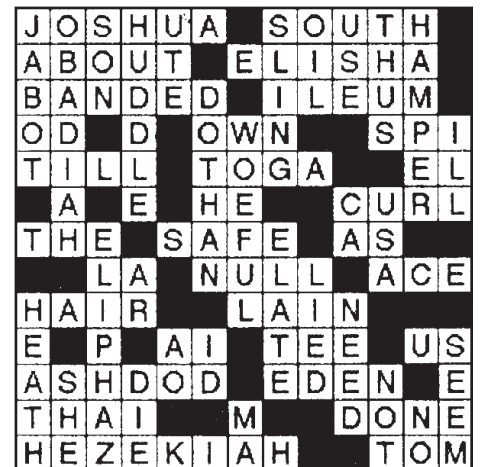
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The crossword puzzle can be found on page 11.



Rashional Thoughts

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

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

Zoomers may resist guidance, but let's stay ready in case they change their mind

My young friend sits right at the halfway point of the Gen Z age range (13 to 29), but she's a self-proclaimed "old soul."

Her preferences of spending time outside, working with her hands and shutting off her phone for hours at a time make her somewhat unique to the general descriptions of other Gen Zers.

As digital natives, they typically stay attached to the internet in some form around the clock and use technology for all aspects of life.

Where my friend matches the characteristics of her generation is in an appreciation of financial stability.

She's almost ready to fully support herself and has outlined a manageable plan for how she and her soon-to-be husband can save money to purchase their first home in a few years.

Authentic, independent, realistic and adaptable are other terms used to describe Gen Zers (also known as Zoomers).

I watch my friend interact with others with ease — smiling, laughing and looking them in the eyes. She's bold in sharing her faith and doesn't mind a heated discussion on occasion, but she's also already learned at a young age how to be kind and gracious in her approach.

She mentions her parents, her grandparents, her pastor and others who have poured into her.

Another Gen Z friend, at the upper end of those born between

1997 and 2012, is nowhere near as mature, responsible, prepared or organized as her younger counterpart.

Facing struggles

She struggles in social interactions, stays glued to her phone and gets overwhelmed easily. She desperately desires to be independent but can't quite find her way related to growing her skills in the workforce, taking on serious responsibilities and developing a consistent pattern of moving forward in a positive direction.

Relationships are difficult for her, especially when conflict surfaces. Emotional melt downs

are common, and with each one, those who love her find themselves slowly pulling away.

The young woman professes to be a believer, and some topics of the faith are of interest to her, but she resists growing deeper in her personal relationship with Christ.

As I study both stories, I try to understand the differences between the two.

Sure, life situations played a major part in how they were or weren't nurtured, who influenced them during their early years and the opportunities set before them along the way, but that's not what made the ultimate difference.

Even entering the young adult years with bad decisions and difficult consequences to overcome can be turned around with the right attitude, motivation and support system (and mental health assistance if needed).

Along with seeking and developing a flourishing relationship with Jesus Christ, it takes a teachable spirit and willingness to do the hard work.

And for those of us several decades ahead of the Zoomers, what if we looked with anticipation for opportunities to provide the guidance and discipline needed when God drops one of those young lives in our path?

TAB Media Group's digital editor shifts roles, joins church ministry team

For most of her 12 years at TAB Media Group, Hannah Muñoz Pruitt was the youngest, or almost the youngest, member on our team.

We had the privilege of walking with her through her sophomore, junior and senior years at Samford University. We grew along with her as she graduated, settled into her work full-time, married Andrew and took on the responsibility of a sweet puppy named Lilo.

Hannah is a voracious reader and loves to learn, travel and spend time with family and friends.

To help her continue expanding her capabilities while also main-

taining a dedication to cross training for our team members, we provided vast opportunities for Hannah to stretch her communications and media muscles. She always explored the opportunities with curiosity and interest.

Her most recent title was digital editor, where she produced The Weekly podcast; recorded and edited the audio and video interviews we did for our youtube.com/tabmediagroup channel; and managed the content for our weekly radio show spot on WXJC (101.1 FM) in Birmingham.

Hannah also took great care of

our visually impaired audience, outlining, assigning and organizing the content to be uploaded to the audio cartridges and making sure those were mailed out each week.

We are proud to call Hannah a dear friend and appreciate her care, love and loyalty to each of us individually as well as to the overall work of TAB Media Group.

Our team wishes her well in her new role on the communications ministry team at The Church at Brook Hills in Birmingham.

—Jennifer Davis Rash



PRUITT

Your Voice



Share your comments, letters to the editor, blog excerpts, social media posts

Excessive devotion to anything other than God 'wreaks havoc'

By Leann Callaway
The Alabama Baptist

During the last chapel service for the spring semester at the University of Mobile on April 1, students heard from one of their own, Tim Adams, who serves as the vice president of student development and collegiate athletics.

In a message based on Joshua 24, Adams illustrated the importance of using the Old Testament to emphasize the gospel, reminding students they were made to be in relationship with God and in need of a Savior.

"It is incredible to me the ways that God displays Himself throughout the Old Testament, the way He loves His people, the ways He is committed to His people and His redemptive heart for His people," Adams said. "We are familiar with a lot of the amazing stories of the Old Testament ... [and] probably confused by a lot of the harder stories of the Old Testament.

"People fall short, and people are evil. People misuse God's provisions. It's kind of like, 'What do we do with this?' What I love about the Old Testament is that God is constantly showing Himself as a redeemer by raising up a leader and restoring His people and His commitment to the Israelite nation.

"In a lot of ways, I see our story within the Old Testament. There's a lot of places that we can relate to what's going on in our world today to things that happened back then."

Adams reminded those present that Joshua became the leader after Moses and brought the Israelites into the promised land. Recognizing that his reign was nearing an end, Joshua gathered all the people of



TIM ADAMS

UM photo

Israel, charged them with some concerns and called them to bring those issues to the Lord.

'Remember'

"Joshua challenges the Israelites and tells them if they're going to be a people who remain faithful to God after his death, they have to remember the acts of salvation and what He's already done for them," Adams said. "The same is true for you and I today. We cannot remain faithful to the Lord for long if we forget what He's done to save us from our sins. These final two chapters in Joshua are a commissioning of God's people to remember what He's done and to live accordingly."

Adams reminded students that the Israelites' problem of idolatry is our problem too.

"Idolatry can take the form of a lot of things," Adams said. "Certainly, it's the worship of anything other than God, reverence or focus on some other person. Excessive devotion in our lives wreaks havoc for us, and it impacts our motives and priorities."

Adams asked, "What are the chief desires of your eyes and your hearts today? ... We live in a world where we either crave the things we don't have, such as money, material things, possessions, power or status," Adams said. "If we don't have these things, we desire or crave them. We will do almost anything to get those things. On the other hand, if we do have those things, we can be really prideful about displaying it to everyone.

"Tim Keller warned that idolatry

is essentially turning a good thing into the ultimate thing. It can be anything that stands in the way of our worship of God. It can be a good thing that distracts us from the main thing. The simple truth is that we were made for relationships and made to worship God. Idolatry stands in the way of a meaningful relationship with Him."

Adams noted an illustration from the New Testament and asked students if they have ever been so desperate to get close to Jesus as when Peter jumped out of the boat to swim to Jesus following the Resurrection in John 21.

"Joshua was begging the Israelites to remember to fear the Lord and worship Him in sincerity in truth," Adams said. "Joshua was reminding them that the only thing that matters is to be as close as possible to the Lord as you can. Then, and only then, will we worship in sincerity and truth."

'No room for idols'

"Sincerity and truth are descriptions of devotion. It's describing the way that we fear the Lord and come to Him in worship. Fearing the Lord is the only way we can get to an utter dependence on the Lord and sit at His feet. In that space, there's no room for idols."

Adams reminded students of Joshua's call for renewal in Joshua 24:15: "Choose for yourselves this day who you will worship. As for me and my household, we will worship the Lord."

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“God is good.”

On Good Friday, April 3, an American F-15E fighter jet crashed inside Iran. One of the two crew members was quickly rescued. The second airman had ejected and sent a message over his radio, saying, “God is good.” He was injured but hiked up a 7,000-foot mountain ridgeline and hid in a crevice. U.S. forces rescued him two days later on Easter.

“Having the extra volunteers absolutely helps so much — we could not do it without the extra volunteers,” said **Allana Russell** of Fultondale First Baptist Church. “And just the sweet attitudes and the giving spirit that they brought with them — they were just so happy to do it. It’s a great way to spread love and serve needs.” Russell was among more than 1,400 volunteers from 15 states who partnered with churches in the Birmingham metro/Shelby County area to work on more than 50 projects ranging from giving haircuts at shelters to building beds for children.

“These brothers and sisters are at a low, possibly the lowest, point of their lives,” said **Jared Baria** on University of Mobile students leading worship for a church service at the Mobile County Metro Jail. “What better news to bring in there than the hope of Jesus Christ?” Baria is an adjunct professor and director of student life at UM.

“I would just encourage everyone to pay close attention to who is texting you and how the messages are worded,” said **Chad King**, pastor of First Baptist Church Anacoco, Louisiana. “Sometimes just by the wording of a text message you can tell if it really is that person who they claim to be,” he cautioned. Also, church leaders should do their best to verify who has contacted them before responding. “Reach out to them and ask if they sent the message. ... Never click on a link or respond to something that doesn’t sound accurate. We are living in a world where it doesn’t matter if you are a church or minister — [fraudsters] are willing to do whatever it takes to scam for money.”

“Could God get you ready to visit Iran? Start praying! When the doors are opened, seek out ways to visit Iran. In the meantime, seek out Persians who are living among us.

Learn from them! Try a few greetings in their Farsi language. ... Meet with a believing partner or a Persian believer and share the gospel among a people who are desperate for the truth about Jesus,” **Mark Snowden**, who serves as director for the Cincinnati Area Baptist Association.

“One truth (my wife) Shannon and I have come to better understand over the years is that when we truly follow Jesus through the dark valleys — through the rain, trouble and death we experience in this life — in His time, He will lead us to discover how good He is when we are broken,” said **Bart Millard**, lead singer for MercyMe.

“We just wanted them to know the Word, just to dig into the Bible,” said **Trish Jackson**, who serves as next gen consultant for Alabama Woman’s Missionary Union, on the recent Complete event for teen girls. “I wanted them to have a passion for seeing how God’s Word speaks to their heart and their identity. I wanted them to be challenged to have a daily discipline in that.” More than 250 teen girls gathered March 6–7 at First Baptist Church Prattville for Complete.

“God’s wisdom has no boundary. It has no bottom. It has no ceiling. If for 10 million years you sat for 24 hours a day at His feet to listen, you would scratch only the surface of His wisdom.”

Paul Tripp
@PaulTripp on X

“Faith includes not merely the knowledge that God is, but also, nay chiefly, a perception of His will towards us. Faith is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favor towards us, founded on the truth of a free promise in Christ, and revealed to our minds and sealed on our hearts by the Holy Spirit.”

John Calvin
Theologian, pastor and reformer

LASS WORDS

BY KEN LASS
The Alabama Baptist



DEVOTIONAL THOUGHTS

A ‘puzzling virtue’ — humility

To me, the most puzzling virtue in the Bible is humility. I have spent many moments trying to figure out exactly what it is. I want to have it, but isn’t wanting to be humble the opposite of actually being humble? It’s all so confusing.

Whatever it is, God’s Word makes it pretty clear that we need it. The word “humble” is mentioned 93 times. “Humility” is mentioned 14 times. Those figures may vary a little depending on translation, but you get the idea. It’s a big deal.

Scripture teases us here and there with references to the quality. Proverbs 22:4 says, “Humility is the fear of the Lord; its wages are riches and honor and life.” In Philippians Paul writes, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (2:3).

OK, so we know what it looks like when we see it in others, right? But how do we acquire it for ourselves? Is it even appropriate to want it?

‘Last to know’

There’s an old saying that goes, “Once you are sure you have achieved true humility, you’ve lost it.” Show me someone who proclaims, “I am a humble person,” and I’ll show you someone who is not.

Could it be that humility is simply a natural by-product of living a godly life? Colossians

3:12 says, “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.”

So I guess if we really work on being compassionate, kind, gentle and patient, humility might come as kind of a free bonus! Sort of like getting a free drink with your combo meal.

Yeah, bad analogy. Besides, you can take hold of your drink and enjoy having it.

Truly selfless

When I tell the truly selfless people in my life they are humble, they seem surprised. They don’t even know they’re humble. They don’t think of themselves that way. Their reaction is so — well — humble.

I suppose the answer is, we should travel our journey through life, living the best Christian lifestyle we can; try our hardest to love and serve; keep our eyes on Jesus and His will and purpose for us. And perhaps, somehow, somewhere along the way, humility will quietly seep into us.

But we’ll probably be the last to know.

MEET THE AUTHOR

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

‘Be well and live whole’

Workshop helps veterans, first responders find path to God’s healing

By Tracy Riggs Frontz
The Alabama Baptist

A recent Birmingham-area workshop showed how any veteran and first responder who deals with post-traumatic stress disorder and moral injury can find help from others to obtain the health God offers them.

The GY6 conference was held Jan. 31 at The Church at Liberty Park in Vestavia Hills and was led by Andy Jenkins of LifeLift Ministries. “GY6” stands for “Got Your 6,” a term from early military aviation that means “I’ve got your back.” This mantra continues to be used by military personnel, law enforcement officers and heroes as a sign of teamwork and protection.

Jenkins focused on three basic questions about healing from the wounds no one sees — those internal issues that arise when a person’s been on the front lines:

1. What is God’s desire?
2. What is God’s design?
3. What is God’s direction?

Biblical approach to healing

Jenkins explained different kinds of healing described in the Bible. “Iaomai” is instant healing, and “therapeuo” is healing that takes place over time. Both are complementary and both are important, he said.

Jenkins also discussed how the body, soul and spirit are connected. Injuries to the body could be broken bones or wounds. Injuries to the soul may show up as PTSD. Injuries to the spirit are moral injuries.

“Any part of us can be injured, and any part can be made more whole. Each part impacts all the others,” Jenkins said.

Jenkins explained that while the



Photo by Travis Frontz/The Alabama Baptist
Andy Jenkins of LifeLift Ministries speaks at the ‘GY6’ conference event held Jan. 31 at The Church at Liberty Park in Vestavia Hills.

criteria to be diagnosed with PTSD is very specific, the ultimate goal of care is health.

“Many of our emotional disruptions are normal responses to abnormal events. Though most of us aren’t diagnosable for a mental or emotional health disorder, we will all benefit from ‘leveling up’ our health in these areas,” Jenkins said.

Jenkins emphasized that PTSD symptoms are natural, God-given reactions. God made the storage in our brains to automatically react to certain stimuli. This is a protective design that can result in “fight, flight, freeze or fawn.”

However, a person doesn’t have to be stuck there. There are ways to heal.

“Let me give you an easy 1-2-3 process that you can use in real

time. Here’s what you do. (First) you’ve got to learn to recognize the things you experience, and you’ve got to realize there aren’t good emotions, bad emotions — only healthy and unhealthy expressions of those,” Jenkins said.

Individuals on the front lines, whether in the military or first responders, see things that impact them negatively.

“Some of the things that some of you have told me ... I don’t think it would be

healthy if you went through that and you did not have a response. ...

“It would not be normal to see that and not be impacted by it to some degree,” Jenkins said.

However, it’s better not to stay there, he said. After recognizing an emotional response in someone, the second and third steps are to read

what they are saying without reacting and then respond in a healthy way.

Jenkins also taught about moral injury that hurts one’s spirit.

Among the examples of ways moral injury can occur, he shared:

- ▶ Not doing something that should be done.
- ▶ Doing something that has a bad outcome.
- ▶ Surviving an event when others were injured or killed.
- ▶ Feeling guilt and shame when something that couldn’t be controlled happens.
- ▶ Being betrayed by a trusted person.

Where PTSD has a visceral, physical reaction, moral injury manifests as guilt and shame — both barriers to healing. Healing moral injuries comes through close engagement, Jenkins said.

Moral injury leads to suicide more often than PTSD does, but both issues increase the risk. Jenkins encourages anyone experiencing symptoms or PTSD or thoughts of suicide to reach out to a professional who can help.

Jenkins urged those who have been healed to help others, noting that there is power in “connection, community and cleansing.” He said three reasons to look back include healing, helping and honoring.

Resources

Jenkins shared a number of resources where active military members, first responders or veterans can find help. These include:

- ▶ VA Health Care System
- ▶ Crisis Center Birmingham
- ▶ After Action Project
- ▶ BlueWatch Foundation
- ▶ Veterans Crisis Line
- ▶ S.A.F.E.R. Together
- ▶ American Legion Post 911.

For more information about LifeLift Ministries and GY6, including the upcoming GY6 book to be released this spring, visit gy6.online.

Alabama news

CHEROKEE ASSOCIATION

▶ **David Birchfield** is the new pastor of **Pleasant Arbor Baptist Church, Piedmont**. He had been serving as interim pastor. He and his wife, C.J., have three children.



Submitted photo

▶ **Brent Poole**

is the new pastor of **Calcedonia Baptist Church, Centre**. He previously served as pastor of Sandy Creek Baptist Church, Centre. He and his wife, Dyanne, have three adult children, six grandchildren (one of whom is deceased).



Submitted photo

▶ **Dailey Street Baptist Church, Piedmont**, will hold revival services May 3–6 at 6 p.m., with guest

preacher Jerry Stewart. Ted Anderson is pastor.

▶ **Nazareth Baptist Church, Centre**, will have revival services May 4–6 at 6 p.m., with evangelist Rodger Whorton. Chad Foshee is pastor.

▶ **Pilgrim Rest Baptist Church, Centre**, is hosting a one-day Vacation Bible School, May 30, 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

GENEVA ASSOCIATION

▶ **Jim Peters** (top, right) begins as the new

pastor of **First Baptist Church Geneva** on May 3. He previously served for 11 years as pastor of Daleville Baptist Church. He and his wife, Bonita, have three children.



Facebook photo

MONTGOMERY ASSOCIATION

▶ **Jay Spivey** is the new associate pastor of discipleship at **First Baptist Church Montgomery**. He previously served with the North American Mission Board and as missions



Facebook photo

pastor of Istrouma Baptist Church, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Spivey is returning to FBC, having served there as associate minister to students and outreach assistant.

He and his wife, Ashley, have two children. Mark Bethea is pastor.

SAND MOUNTAIN ASSOCIATION

▶ **New Home Baptist Church, Pisgah**, will hold its spring camp meeting at New Home Bible Camp, 8059 AL Highway 71, Henegar, April 20–22, 6:30 p.m. The guest speaker will be evangelist Garret Fitch from Minford, Ohio. Chris Guinn is the transitional pastor.



Photo by Jennifer McKinney

Fire destroys Abbie Baptist Church

Randy Davenport said it was hard to watch the building of Abbie Baptist Church in Leighton burn down in the early morning hours of March 29.

“It was a heart-wrenching night,” said Davenport, a member of Abbie Baptist.

The fire burned for about six hours. Inspectors are still working to determine the cause.

But despite the tragedy, the church plans to keep moving forward. Their pastor, 92-year-old Thomas Thornton, is ready to lead them into a rebuild, and for the moment, they’re meeting in the old sanctuary of Leighton Baptist until they make more permanent plans.

“It hurts, but hopefully we’re coming out on the other side stronger than we were before,” Davenport said.

Thornton said it “breaks our hearts, but the people are gathering together.” (TAB)

OBITUARIES

BETTY BAGGOTT

Betty Baggott, a retired columnist for The Alabama Baptist, died March 29. She was 91.

For 18 years beginning in 1988, Baggott wrote her Heart to Heart column about people, events in her life and current issues in ways that touched the hearts of readers everywhere.

Countless letters testified to how people identified with her experiences and were touched by her words. She retired from writing her column in 2006.

She also served on the board of directors for TAB from 1988 to 1997.

A native of Augusta, Georgia, Baggott attended the Junior College of Augusta (now part



BAGGOTT

of Augusta University) and continued her education at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, and Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas.

For years, she served alongside her husband, Bob, as he served on the staff of churches in Florida and Georgia and then of several Alabama churches — FBC Opelika, FBC Dothan, FBC Birmingham and Farmville Baptist Church, Auburn.

She also supported his 20-year chaplaincy position with Auburn University, and together they launched the college ministry at FBC Opelika, which drew hundreds of students each week.

After her husband’s death in 2000, Baggott moved from Opelika to Montgomery, where she served in a variety of ways at Eastern Hills Baptist Church until moving to Minnesota in 2019.

Baggott is preceded in death by her husband, Robert “Bob” Taylor Baggott Jr., and son, Jack Allen.

She is survived by her son, Robert Taylor Baggott III; daughters, Cheryl and Autumn; five grandchildren; and two great-grandchildren.

GLENN BYNUM

Glenn Bynum, who served as pastor of Alabama Baptist churches for more than 60 years, died April 5. He was 83.



BYNUM

Bynum served congregations across Marshall, DeKalb, Blount and Jefferson counties, including Pleasant Mount Baptist Church and Village Springs Baptist Church, both in Remlap. He also served with Kairos Prison Ministry and as a chaplain for Alabama State Troopers. Most recently, he

was an active member of First Baptist Church Attalla.

Bynum studied at Samford University in Birmingham and at New Orleans Seminary.

He was preceded in death by his wife of 64 years, Linda, and sons Bradley and Brian.

He is survived by his daughters, Michelle and Amy; three grandchildren; and one great-grandson.

Open line of conversation with kids is important

(continued from page 1)
encouraging digital safety, addressing mental wellness and working to prevent youth substance misuse. The organization disseminates information and resources to Shelby County schools and parents to educate them on the threat of sextortion.

“A common tactic is for the predator to send a nude image first (often of a young attractive person of the opposite gender of the victim) and then request one in return,” Plyler wrote. “Once the return image is sent, the sextortion and threats begin.”

Victims are shamed and threatened into creating more explicit content, which Plyler explained can lead victims to harm themselves or commit suicide. Creating, sharing or possessing explicit images of a minor is a felony in Alabama, he added. Once this content is created and shared, Plyler said it could end up anywhere.

“Parents need to also tell their children to come forward if they are victims of sextortion and that the parents will be there to help,” Plyler wrote. “It is often the shame and embarrassment of people finding out that lead to a victim’s self-harm or suicide following sextortion.”

Digital extremism

Amy Cooter, deputy director and co-founder of the Institute for Countering Digital Extremism, said an increase of digital extremism in recent years has led to offline violence.

“We work closely with some of the major tech companies to identify this activity on their spaces, to intervene with the networks and actors who are doing these harms,” Cooter said. “We coordinate with law enforcement all across the globe for similar reasons and also do threat assessments when we see particular bad actors popping up that we think maybe don’t have eyes on them yet.”

Rick Klepper, co-founder and managing member of Counter Threat Group, said the safety security consulting firm conducts threat assessments for places like churches, hospitals and schools. The goal of the group is to counter threats through information sharing with groups like the FBI.

Because these types of online threats are constantly evolving, law enforcement and parents often have a hard time understanding the

complexity of digital extremism. Klepper said his organization works to share information with parents and guardians about new threats.

“We want to get that information out to as many people that we can through the different outlets we have,” Klepper said.

External violence

Cooter said networks like 764 can even lead children and teens to commit external acts of violence. This includes school shootings.

“What’s potentially most disturbing about this is the way these groups are structured where there’s a kind of internal clout or status that’s developed from successful grooming,” Cooter said. “Many of the perpetrators that we see in this space are also children, minors, as opposed to some of the more traditional versions of extremism we’ve seen where youth have been led by adults.”

According to Cooter, the typical target age range for groups like 764 is 12–17 years old, although she has seen cases with victims who were as young as 8 years old. While boys and girls are targeted, the 764 network tends to favor girls, she said.

Klepper has seen cases with children as young as 7 years old being involved in sextortion and child exploitation. He said some of these children come from broken homes and have been exposed to violent or pornographic material so they are already desensitized to this type of content as they engage with online predators.

Targeted children

“There’s not just one profile,” Cooter added. “We’ve seen really well off, really privileged children being targeted for this as well as kids who are having difficulties at home and some of the more stereotypical challenges.”

Cooter said perpetrators often connect with children on online gaming platforms made for kids and begin

putting feelers out to see how comfortable a child is with seeing violent or sexualized material. Predators then lure children to private chatrooms off the original gaming platform to start pressuring them into making this kind of explicit or violent content, including carving the group’s name into their skin or using their own blood to write the group’s name on a wall.

“What they typically do is require these actions to be videoed; they’re either streamed or uploaded,” Cooter said. “Those videos are used to basically blackmail those kids into doing other things.”

Blackmailing victims

Victims are often told the videos will not be leaked if they keep creating similar types of content. Cooter said many children become scared they have made such a huge mistake that they feel like they have no one else to turn to except the predator for a sense of belonging or acceptance.

“(They determine) no one’s going to accept them,” Cooter said. “So, they double and triple down on the actions they are willing to do to maintain acceptance in these groups.”

The best way to protect children and prevent them from falling for these online attacks is having uncomfortable conversations with them about bad people online, even other kids, Cooter said.

“They should encourage their kids to watch out for signs that somebody’s trying to lure them to a different platform,” Cooter said. “Just making sure there’s open dialogue between parents and kids in terms of a variety of danger signs is important.”

Plyler encourages adults to report these situations to law enforcement. Oftentimes, predators do not share any explicit material they receive from victims once they realize they will not receive any money or their demands are not met.

“Don’t let your kids find out about drugs, alcohol and online predators the hard way,” Plyler wrote. “Be the first to tell them about what they are, why they are dangerous and how to prevent issues.”

Cooter said it is important for children to feel loved by parents and guardians so they can come to a trusted adult if they think something is wrong.

“If they have a parent they can go to, they can really have this open line of conversation,” Cooter said. “There’s a much easier pathway back out of all this.”

Monitoring devices

Plyler recommends parents use apps to monitor their children’s devices.

“Safeguards can be put in place to prevent downloading apps without parental permission,” Plyler explained. “Giving a child unfiltered access to the internet with no parental controls or restrictions is simply asking for trouble and is creating a preventable problem.”

Signs a child is being groomed and pressured into violent acts include trying to hide physical signs of self-harm or harming small animals, even family pets.

Monitor any packages sent to children in case predators try to send them another device or burner phone if they know a children’s device was confiscated.

Make a report

Contact local law enforcement and give officers any devices with messages between a child and their perpetrator.

Plyler explained that sextortion predators are often in foreign countries and it can be hard for law enforcement to track them down; however, making a report and giving receipts of the messages between the victim and the predator to law enforcement makes a difference.

“If explicit images of you or someone you know have been publicly posted online, you can request those images to be removed by the specific website or flag them on social media platforms,” Plyler wrote.

Visit Stop Non-Consensual Intimate Image Abuse’s website (stopncii.org) or Take It Down’s website (takeitdown.ncmec.org) to have sexual images of minors removed.



Photo by Freepik

'GOD'S STORY TO WRITE'

In 'brokenness,' Coach Hugh Freeze finds hope and peace in Christ

By Margaret Colson
The Alabama Baptist

Speaking recently to students at All Christ Church in Auburn, Hugh Freeze described how he is experiencing God's hope and peace even amid the brokenness and heartache of being terminated as Auburn University's head coach during the team's 2025 football season.

Freeze recounted when he first accepted the head coaching job at Auburn in November 2022. Referring to his family, Freeze said, "I know God led us here. We believe that."

'Hard to understand'

Although Freeze had experienced the "highest of highs" in his four previous head coaching assignments where his teams had winning records, his record during just over two seasons at Auburn was 15-19.

"I had never coached at a place that I didn't win until here. That's hard to say; it's hard to understand; it's hard to believe," he said.

Still, even when he was winning big games and celebrating success, Freeze recalled that those times of high emotion were often followed by days of asking himself, "Is this all there is?"

With God's call to Au-

burn still fresh in his heart, Freeze was "called in," in November 2025, to "hear the words" that he was being terminated "because of not having success on the field." He then had to face his wife and children to share the bad news. He also carried the burden of knowing that many of his staff also would lose their jobs and livelihoods.

At that time, with a broken spirit, Freeze said he personally understood the truth of the Beatitudes, particularly Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Describing himself as "a competitive dude who wants to believe I can get it done," Freeze said, "There was a period of time when I really understood that Beatitude, when truly in broken humility I know that without God, I have nothing."

In the early days after his termination, the coach said he was counseled by other believers, including his pastor Miles Fidell, to answer the question, "Did you lead your players and staff in a godly manner?" and he said, "I knew the answer was yes."

He realized his identity had to be rooted in Christ, rather than the trappings of success as a football coach.



© 2026 All Christ Church
Coach Hugh Freeze (left) speaks with senior pastor Miles Fidell and students at All Christ Church in Auburn about realizing his identity had to be rooted in Christ rather than the success as a football coach.

His identity, he said, "has to be rooted in, 'Was it about His Kingdom, or was it about my successes and glory?'"

Submitting to God

Freeze admitted, "The brokenness of losing a job — when you think you're really good at it, and you think you have the right plan with the right staff, and you've recruited well, and it's not working out — that brokenness stinks."

Still, he has learned, "I don't have a seat at the negotiating table. It's God's story to write, and it's not mine. I have to submit to His story for me."

"I don't know why this happened the way it did, and I can't wait for the next chapter."

As he waits for the next chapter, Freeze said he and his wife, children and grandchildren, have chosen to stay in Auburn.

"We're not runners. We're not ones to pick up (and leave) unless God tells us to,

and to this point He has not done that."

Although waiting can be tough, Freeze is confident God will see him through the days of uncertainty.

Freeze, who describes himself as "a country boy who grew up on a dairy farm," recalls numerous past experiences where God's provision sustained him through seemingly impossible situations, only to result in unexpected blessings and opportunities.

Praying urgently

During his first head coaching job at Lambuth University (now a campus of the University of Memphis) in Jackson, Tennessee, Freeze had hired an entire coaching staff and enjoyed a winning season in his first season there. Soon, he discovered the university was experiencing serious financial instability, resulting in Freeze and his staff not being paid.

Although he was offered another coaching assignment

that would have met his family's financial needs, he prayed urgently and sensed God directing him to stay with the struggling school and ride out the storm alongside his staff.

Staying focused

Two months after that anguished decision to stay with Lambuth University, two wealthy men stepped up to provide financial support for the football program and its staff for two years. A few years later, after Freeze had accepted another coaching job, Lambuth University ceased operations because of its financial woes.

Speaking to the college students, eager to embark on their careers with big dreams, Freeze said, "Remind yourself of the gospel every single day. There is no hope; there is no peace; There's only guilt, pain, depression and anxiety" apart from the gospel.

Reflecting on 1 Timothy 3:16-17, Freeze said, "I need teaching every day; I need rebuking. Why? So that this servant of God can be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

"There is zero chance of us experiencing that peace and rest and being equipped for the career, for the calling, for the gifting — zero chance of that without us being in His Word, which is God-breathed."

"If I could beg you to have a consistency in opening up the Bible and seeing what God has to say to you about who you are and whose you are, then you will know your 'why' no matter what your 'what' ends up being."

"Rest and peace are found in Jesus."

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UPCOMING EVENTS

sponsored by the State Board of Missions

Encourage Senior Adult Conference is May 4

Looking for an event designed especially for senior adults? Look no further than the Encourage Senior Adult Evangelism Conference, set for Monday, May 4, from 9:30 a.m. to noon at First Baptist Church Prattville. This fun and inspirational time will feature music, preaching, fellowship and fun.

Speakers will be Edwin Jenkins, retired pastor and former state missionary, and Jim Henry, longtime pastor of First Baptist Church Orlando. Providing music for

To register, visit alsbom.org/encourage or scan the code below with your smartphone's camera.



the event will be award-winning southern gospel quartet Greater Vision.

Spend a morning in fel-

lowship with other senior adults being encouraged through God's Word and a time of music celebration. You'll be revived in spirit and motivated to continue serving God's purpose for your life.

The event is scheduled to end at noon to give you and your group the opportunity to enjoy lunch together at a local restaurant before traveling home.

The event is free, but registration is requested. Visit alsbom.org/encourage today to learn more.



JENKINS



HENRY



GREATER VISION

Senior Adult Sunday is May 3

Sunday, May 3, is designated as Senior Adult Sunday on the Alabama Baptist calendar.

This special day provides an opportunity to express appreciation to senior adults for their service to God and recognize their contributions to the work of the church.

If this date doesn't work well with your church calendar, you're encouraged to choose another date to honor senior adults in your church.

For ideas to help you plan a Senior Adult Sunday, visit alsbom.org/seniors.



Photo by Doug Rogers/SBOM

WORD search

- | | |
|-------------|-----------|
| BURN | JERUSALEM |
| CIRCUMCISE | JUDAH |
| CISTERN | JUDGMENT |
| COVENANT | KNOWLEDGE |
| DECEIT | LION |
| DESOLATE | NATIONS |
| DESTRUCTION | PLOW |
| DISASTER | REBELLION |
| EVIL | REPENT |
| FIRE | RETURN |
| FORSAKEN | SHAME |
| HEART | SPRING |
| IDOLATRY | SWORD |
| INJUSTICE | TEMPLE |
| ISRAEL | TRUTH |
| JEREMIAH | WIND |

M T J U D G M E N T K L K C C
 E M L H P N N F K S P R I N G
 L N O I T C U R T S E D W O N
 A H Y M H N M V E I K E D A N
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"This is what I commanded them, saying, 'Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people.'"

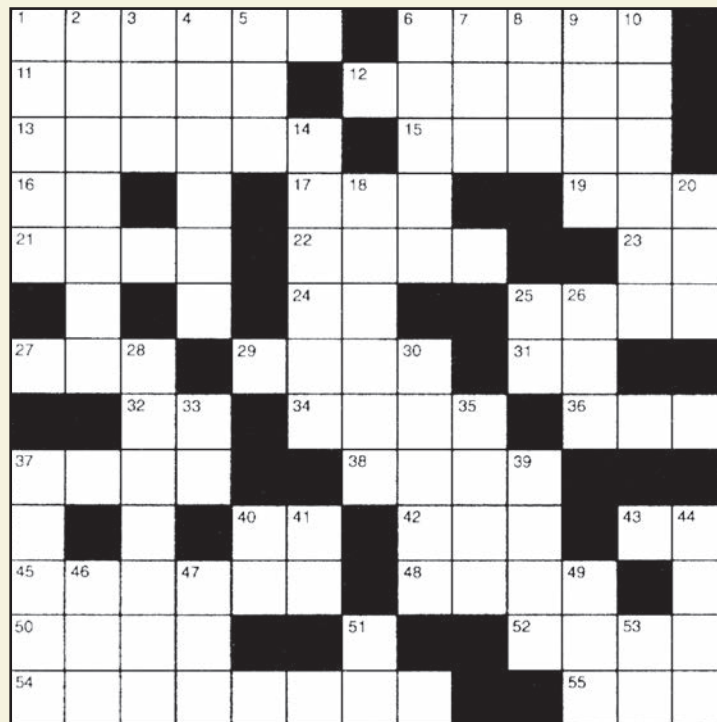
JEREMIAH 7:23a

CHRISTIAN Crossword



ACROSS

1. Led the Israelites over the Jordan river.
6. Queen of the _____. (Matt. 12:42)
11. A crown of gold round _____. (Ex. 25:11)
12. Disciple and successor of Elijah. (1 Kings 19:16)
13. Marked with bands.
15. Part of the small intestine.
16. Overdraft. (abbr.)
17. Born in his _____ house. (Gen. 14:14)
19. The _____es saw a man come forth out of the city. (Judg. 1:24)
21. _____ thou return unto the ground. (Gen. 3:19)
22. Loose outer garment worn by ancient Romans.
23. He built there an altar, and called the place _____bethel. (Gen. 35:7)
24. The Lord your God, _____ it is that fighteth for you. (Josh. 23:10)
25. Spiral or twisted form.
27. Which heard _____ words of God. (Num. 24:4)
29. Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be _____. (Prov. 29:25)
31. _____ an earring of gold. (Prov. 25:12)
32. Los Angeles. (abbr.)
34. Thus you _____ify the Word of God. (Mark 7:3)
36. One who excels.
37. If a man have long _____. (1 Cor. 11:14)
38. Past participle of lie.
40. The men of Bethel and _____. (Neh. 7:32)
42. Where golf ball is placed.
43. Give _____ this day.



By Udena McKee Copyright 1994 ©Barbour Publishing Inc.

18. Full of sorrow.
20. Jonadab told Amnon to pretend to be _____. (2 Sam. 13:5)
25. Symbol for calcium.
26. United States of America. (abbr.)
28. Job's friend. (Job 2:11)
30. To fill with joy.
33. Symbol for Argon.
35. Thou hast not _____ unto men, but unto God. (Acts 5:4)
37. A tract of open land.
39. Your Father knoweth what things ye have _____ of. (Matt. 6:8)
40. Account of. (abbr.)
41. Part of the psyche.
44. All a man's ways _____ right to him. (Prov. 16:2, HCSB)
46. _____ is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her. (Prov. 3:18)
47. Give me children, or else I _____. (Gen. 30:1)
49. That which was torn by beasts I brought _____ unto thee. (Gen. 31:39)
51. Mother.
53. Before them there were _____ such locusts. (Ex. 10:14)

DOWN

1. A dress or shirt ruffle.
2. Shortest book of the Old Testament.
3. Hannah prayed for a _____. (1 Sam. 1:11)
4. To crowd together.
5. Indian tribe from western United States.
6. His _____ was in his hand. (1 Sam. 17:40)
7. Her mouth is smoother than _____. (Prov. 5:3)
8. _____ them to fasten the curtains. (Ex. 26:6, NIV)
9. _____ shall ye say to David. (1 Sam. 18:25)
10. Your step will not be _____ed. (Prov. 4:12, ESV)
14. Where Joseph found his brothers. (Gen. 37:17)

All Bible verses are KJV unless otherwise specified.

More 2026 senior adult events to come

Mark these dates on your calendars and plan to bring the senior adults of your church to these outstanding events.

SINGFEST

Join us for nearly two hours of congregational singing featuring the great hymns and gospel songs of our faith and heritage. Both of these events begin at 10 a.m. and conclude around 11:45 a.m. Registration is preferred for those attending, especially groups.

- ▶ Sept. 8 at Parkway Baptist in Auburn
- ▶ Sept. 15 at Gilliam Springs Baptist in Arab

SALT CONFERENCES (Senior Adult Leadership Training)

This one-day training/equipping conference is designed for staff members, volunteer senior adult leaders and members of the church senior adult committee, council or leadership team. This year's focus will be on offering practical ideas for creating a thriving, healthy ministry to senior adults in your church and community.

Each SALT event begins at 9:15 a.m. and concludes around 2:45 p.m. Breakfast snacks and lunch are provided. Registration for this event is required for each person attending. The deadline for registration is Aug. 11.

- ▶ SALT North — Aug. 18 at First Baptist Fultondale
- ▶ SALT South — Aug. 20 at First Baptist Andalusia

SAINTS ALIVE

This one-day event will be held Thursday, Oct. 29, at MeadowBrook Church in Gadsden. It will feature award-winning gospel group Karen Peck and New River. Randy Gunter, pastor of MeadowBrook, and Edwin Jenkins, retired pastor and state missionary from Huntsville, will speak.



JONES

The morning session is from 9:15 to 11 a.m. Attendees will be free from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. to enjoy lunch in the area. The afternoon session will be from 1 to 2:45 p.m. Registration is preferred for those attending, especially groups.

Remember, all of these events are free because of the gifts of Alabama Baptists through the Cooperative Program.

If I can serve you in any way, give me a call at 205-393-7020 or email fjones@alsbom.org. If I can provide counsel for senior adult ministry, I would love to help. If I can come lead a senior adult event at your church/association, it would be an honor to serve.

Frank Jones

State missionary and senior adult strategist

International & national headline news

Nicaragua repeats year of widespread repression, report says

Repression of religious groups in Nicaragua remained widespread in 2025, with Protestant communities, including Baptists, among those affected, according to a report by Christian Solidarity Worldwide.

The Association of Independent Fundamentalist Baptists was “stripped of its legal status in February,” according to the report. Other affected religious institutions included “schools, religious radio and television outlets, and faith-based charities.” CSW documented 309 cases of religious freedom violations in 2025. The report said pastors and lay leaders faced harassment, surveillance, detention and forced exile.

Under the leadership of co-Presidents Daniel Ortega and his wife Rosario Murillo and the Sandinista National Liberation Front, authorities also imposed “precautionary measures,” requiring religious leaders to report weekly to police, disclose planned church activities and seek permission to travel. Failure to comply could result in detention or exile, CSW reported. (Texas’ Baptist Standard)

Central Alabama Water to stop adding fluoride to drinking water

Central Alabama Water will stop adding fluoride to its drinking water, according to a recent announcement by the utility company that serves Alabamians in Jefferson, Shelby, St. Clair, Blount and Walker counties.

Officials said the decision was based on “a comprehensive evaluation of safety, infrastructure and financial considerations.”

Jeffrey F. Thompson, CEO of Central Alabama Water, said in a press release that the change would allow the utility to “focus resources on delivering safe, reliable and exceptionally high-quality drinking water” while reducing chemical handling

and the use of aging equipment.

The utility cited the \$3.7 million price tag of updating its aging fluoridation equipment and \$250,000 annual costs for chemical and recurring maintenance as motivation for the decision.

The change comes amid a national debate about the safety of fluoridated drinking water, most

notably concerns expressed by U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. (Alabama Daily News)

ERLC search team to nominate Evan Lenow as presidential nominee

Mississippi College professor Evan Lenow will be presented as the nominee for president of the SBC’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission when the ERLC board of trustees meets in April.



LENOW

The announcement by the presidential search committee concludes a seven-month search process to identify a successor for Brent Leatherwood, who resigned in July 2025. (Illinois Baptist)

Gov. Ivey signs Sarah Marsh Heaven’s 27 Camp Safety Act into law

Governor Kay Ivey signed House Bill 381 into law April 8, requiring overnight camps in Alabama to meet more safety standards and have state-issued emergency preparedness licenses.

The Sarah Marsh Heaven’s 27 Camp Safety Act is named after the 8-year-old girl from Birmingham and 26 other campers and counselors who were killed in a flood on July 4, 2025, at Camp Mystic in Texas. It is part of a national effort to increase camp safety.

“The Sarah Marsh Heaven’s 27 Camp Safety Act is about protection,” Patrick Marsh, Sarah’s father, had said in written statement. “It’s about protecting our state’s most valued and treasured asset ... our children ... our future. It’s about ensuring that no parent in Alabama ever has to experience what our families have endured.”

Requirements in the new law include a license from the Alabama Emergency Management Agency and severe weather and flood safety protocols.

Rep. David Faulkner, R-Mountain Brook and House sponsor of the bill, said Alabama has “some of the finest camps in the country” and said the new law will make camps safer. (Alabama Daily News)

Miss America’s Scholarship Foundation partners with Samford

The Miss America’s Scholarship Foundation Inc. has announced a partnership with Samford University, naming the institution an official higher education partner of the Miss America’s Teen program.

Through this partnership, the winner of Miss America’s Teen 2027 will be eligible to receive a \$100,000 scholarship to Samford University, further expanding the educational opportunities available through the program.

“A \$100,000 scholarship represents a powerful investment in the next generation of leaders,” said Robin Fleming, who leads Miss America and its scholarship foundation.

Jody Hunt, Samford University’s general counsel and vice president for government affairs, said Samford is “excited to partner with the Miss America’s Scholarship Foundation.”

Ten Miss Samford titleholders have gone on to become Miss Alabama, and one Samford student has earned the title of Miss America. (Samford University)

Zach Adamson named University of Mobile’s director of worship initiatives

The University of Mobile has named Zach Adamson as the new director of worship initiatives in the Alabama School of the Arts, a strategic leadership role designed to expand the university’s influence and innovation in worship leadership training.

Adamson, a 2009 UM alumnus, returns to his alma mater with 17 years of ministry experience at 3Circle Church, where he serves as worship pastor and executive pastor of creative arts and communications. He will continue in his role at 3Circle



Unsplash.com

Church while also investing in students and worship initiatives at the university.

Adamson and his wife, Julie, have been married 18 years and have four children. (University of Mobile)

‘Gulf of America’ label approved for Alabama state, local entities

Alabama lawmakers passed legislation in the final few days of the session requiring state and local entities to refer to the body of water to the south of the U.S. as the Gulf of America. It also mandates these entities to “make reasonable efforts” to update old materials to reflect the new name.

At press time, the bill was on Gov. Kay Ivey’s desk for her signature. (Alabama Daily News)



Photo courtesy of Illinois Baptist

TAB CLASSIFIEDS

Place a classified ad below for \$1 per word. For more information call 205-870-4720, ext. 200, or email ads@thealabamabaptist.org. To place an online classified ad for \$9.99/month, visit thealabamabaptist.org/classifieds.

CHURCH POSITIONS

SENIOR PASTOR

Cypress Shores Baptist Church in Mobile, Alabama, is prayerfully seeking a full-time senior pastor. Please email resumé to: cypress9631@comcast.net or mail to: 4327 Higgins Rd., Mobile, AL 36619.

PASTOR

Pine Hill Baptist Church, Pine Hill, Alabama, is seeking full-time pastor. Average congregation size: 55–60. Pastorium provided. Submit resumé to: victoria.collins10@gmail.com or call/text 334-455-9833.

PASTOR

Full-time pastor — Jasper, Alabama. Pastor retired. Prayerfully seeking a pastor to preach the inerrant Word of God and shepherd our flock. (SBC) Resumé: northsidebaptistchurchjasper@gmail.com

BIVOCATIONAL PASTOR

Fyffe First Baptist Church is currently accepting resúmes for a bivocational pastor. Send resúmes to: Fyffe First Baptist Church, 198 Church St., P.O. Box 194, Fyffe, AL 35971, or email to: Fyffefbc@farmerstel.com.

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.

MINISTER OF YOUTH

The First Baptist Church of Jemison, Alabama, is seeking a minister of youth. Inquire at secretaryjfbcc@jemison.firstbaptist.com.

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@mzbclife.net. Subject line: Student Pastor

OTHER POSITIONS

OPERATIONS MANAGER

Etowah Baptist Missions Center, located in Gadsden, Alabama, is a faith-based poverty-alleviation organization looking to hire an operations manager. Candidates must be a member

of a local church and preferably reside in Etowah County. The role will include facilitating daily processes to run the center, administrative duties, monitoring resources, volunteer oversight and scheduling. The role requires organization along with strong leadership and problem-solving skills. Questions can be directed to the executive director, Lance Hughes, at 256-295-7531 or by email at jobebmc@gmail.com. A more detailed job description will be provided upon submission of resúmes.

MINISTRY ASSISTANT

Palmerdale Cross Baptist Church is prayerfully seeking a part-time ministry assistant to provide administrative and financial support to the pastoral staff and church leadership. This position helps ensure smooth day-to-day office operations, assists with financial processes and supports the church's overall mission and ministry with professionalism, confidentiality and a servant's heart. Send resúmes to: dholley@palmerdalecross.org

SIGNS

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~A resource for congregational vitality~

Soaring congregations pivot to disciple-making

None remembers how the debate started, but they remember what happened at the small group leaders annual retreat six years ago — a move toward a disciple-making approach that has made a transformational difference in the active engagement of maturing and serving disciples in Kingdom-focused ministry.

Leaders recall that at the retreat, their small group ministry began making impactful changes. The intent of adult small groups was to help people grow deeper as disciples. As far as anyone could remember, the only strategy utilized to do this was to increase everyone's knowledge of the Bible.

If people really knew the Bible, followed its principles and exhibited a biblical lifestyle, then they would certainly be great examples of deep discipleship. This approach had been the practice in this congregation for as long as anyone could remember.

Their biblical theme was, "O Lord, I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You," a paraphrase of Psalm 119:11.

But a challenge arose. Not everyone accepted this approach when the conversation during the retreat turned to the plan for the coming year.

New approach, same goals

As the congregation launched the new small group year, many of the group leaders were new. They offered fresh energy and innovative perspectives. They were not only new group leaders but recent members of the congregation — even the denomination.

Several of the newer leaders challenged the long-term approach. They were not challenging the Bible. They believed a thorough knowledge of God's Word was important for maturing disciples.

But they challenged the use of the term "discipleship," advocating instead for a "disciple-making" approach. What was the difference? One of the younger and newer leaders spoke up.

"The process of disciple-making versus the program of discipleship made a key difference in my former congregation. Disciple-making engages followers of Jesus in a lifelong process of growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus as they continually mature in their faith. Of course, a biblical foundation, lifelong learning and ministry engagement are a crucial part of this.

"Gaining knowledge and skills that may also produce spiritual depth is often the ap-

proach of traditional Bible-based congregations, who offer various programs for small groups. But there is more. There is God's calling on the life of each disciple.

"The focus of disciple-making is the development of fully devoted followers of Christ who are living out their calling. Armed with an ever-increasing knowledge of the Bible, disciples must discover the unique way God is calling each of them to live out their life calling.

"We cannot stop with all we know. We must put what we know into practice as we are spiritually formed as disciples."

Developing a consensus

Leaders decided to allow small groups to choose a direction — stick with the Bible knowledge approach that had worked so well for decades or switch to the life calling journey, which was introduced to them by several newer leaders who spoke up.

The life calling journey had three inter-related parts — discipline, discernment and deployment.

First was a solid and significant Bible study discipline.

Second was a prayerful spiritual discernment process where each participant sought to identify the call of God on their lives as disciples.

Third was ministry deployment to put into practice what they felt was God's call on their lives for greater validation.

The results over the next six years were amazing and Kingdom-empowering.



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. In 2022, he began writing as a columnist for TAB Media Group's publication *The Baptist Paper*. Bullard continues to serve as a strategic thinking mentor for Christian leaders through his *ForthTelling Innovation* ministry. TAB Media Group is the publisher for his *ForthTelling Innovation* book series — 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 April 26

AUTHORITY **Matthew 21:23–32**

In the depiction of the epic Battle of Bannockburn in “Braveheart,” Mel Gibson’s William Wallace went out with the Scottish nobles prior to the engagement with the armies of England that were assembled against them. When asked where he was going, Wallace answered, “I’m going to pick a fight.”

One can imagine that Jesus intended to “pick a fight” when He released the animals from their pens in the Court of the Gentiles on the temple grounds and when He dumped over the tables, sending coins flying through the air and rolling on the ground. Jesus declared war on the practices of the authorities who held sway in the temple area. It did not take long for them to respond.

Authority Challenged (23–27)

Chief priests and elders of Jerusalem issued credentials to those who would be rabbis and teachers. Jesus had never enrolled in Temple Baptist Theological Seminary, so the senior faculty and administration asked Him for His transcripts, so to speak. Accreditation was a thing back then as well — just to remind my university colleagues.

Jesus answered their request with a question of His own. In fact, He agreed to answer their inquiry if they would answer His.

Was John’s baptism from God, or was it a man-made thing? Jesus had them backed into a corner. No matter how they responded, Jesus had an answer for them. This was His intent. He turned the tables on them.

Instead of facing prosecutors who were questioning Jesus’ right to teach, it was now Jesus who cross-examined their ability to affirm God’s calling on John’s ministry.

They were unable to answer, knowing that either possible response could be met with potentially negative answers. As

a result, Jesus excused Himself from testifying.

Authority Recognized (28–32)

Jesus told about two types of sons. He described a dad who asked his two sons to work in the vineyard. One said no but later got up and did what he was asked. The second son said that he would obey his father’s wishes, but he didn’t do it. The religious leaders confirmed that only one did his father’s will.

Jesus then described two measures of righteousness. One is the righteousness of faith, in which prostitutes and tax collectors are declared righteous because of their faith. They trusted John and his message to repent and believe.

The other measure is self-righteousness, in which people rely upon themselves to measure up to the Father’s will. They don’t, any more than the second son did what his father asked.

In the early days of Passion Week, Jesus faced a series of questions from a variety of religious groups, each intending to find fault with Jesus.

The elders asked Jesus about His credentials. Legalistic Pharisees conspired with the Roman-leaning Herodians to trap Jesus between them regarding paying taxes.

Sadducees proposed a levirate marriage scenario to make a farce of the teaching on resurrection. Then the Pharisees came back for Round 2, asking for Jesus to prioritize the Commandments. Jesus finally silenced them all with a question of His own.

When Jesus first began His ministry with the Sermon on the Mount, the crowds recognized that Jesus spoke with a spiritual authority far beyond that of the scribes and elders. As He walked through the final days of His incarnate ministry, His authority was recognized by those who received Him.

For May 3

HONOR **Matthew 22:15–22, 34–40**

Under Mosaic law, the priests, not the king, held the highest authority in the monarchy. The king was required to write a copy of the Torah, authenticated by the priests, by which he would govern the people under God’s authority (Deut. 17:18–20). When prideful King Uzziah breached the sanctity of the Holy Place in the temple to burn incense, 80 priests came in to tell him that he did not belong there (2 Chron. 26:16–20).

In the New Testament, the apostles clearly taught that Christians are to honor God-ordained secular authorities over them as His ministers (Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Pet. 2:13–17). However, when secular or religious officials claimed authority that contradicted God’s Word, Christians were to obey the words of Jesus over human authorities (Acts 4:19–20, 5:29–32, 26:24–29).

Government Authority (15–22)

Tax query. Should we pay taxes to Caesar? The Bible reader may consider this to be a simple question in which well-meaning men were asking for Jesus’ position on a governmental requirement. This was not the case.

Trick question. In actuality, the question was intended to be a political trap. Reread the verses. Pharisees sent their representatives along with Herodians. If Jesus told them not to pay taxes, the Herodians could charge Him with inciting insurrection. If He said to pay the tax, then He would be guilty of bowing to a foreign authority and could be indicted for teaching Jews to break the instructions of Torah: “You are not to set a foreigner over you, or one who is not of your people” (Deut. 17:15).

Take a quarter. Whenever I teach this passage, I use a U.S. quarter and ask my students, “Whose face is on

the coin?” “Washington” is the obvious answer. In Jesus’ day, a denarius coin bore the image of Caesar’s face and the inscription of his name. Give to Caesar what is his and to God what is His. Jesus found a way to answer their question without transgressing any government authority.

God’s Authority (34–40)

Lawyer’s inquiry. After Jesus silenced the Sadducees and pointed them back to the instructions of Torah, one Pharisaic expert in the law determined to test Him about the greatest command. While many Christians are familiar with the Ten Commandments, Pharisees recognized a total of 613 commandments contained in the Torah. Which is the greatest single command?

Love God. Jesus identified the greatest commandment as Deuteronomy 6:5. The parallel passage in Mark 12:29–30 includes the Shema command of Deuteronomy 6:4 followed by the next verse: “Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind” (Mark 12:30). The command carries with it the concept of loving God with one’s whole self.

Love your neighbor. Jesus continued, pointing to another passage that carried the force of an imperative with “and you shall love” — this time from Leviticus 19:18. Loving one’s neighbor as one’s self is the complement to the first command. The vertical relationship between God and believers connects with the horizontal companionship of believers with other humans.

Learn more. In a related passage in Luke 10, a Pharisee asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus offered the good Samaritan parable to connect Leviticus 19:18 with 19:33–34. Students of the Word may find this a useful side note.

“Then He said, ‘Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.’”

Matthew 22:21

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

Sunday School Lessons

By Rony Kozman, Ph.D.

Assistant professor of Biblical Studies, Samford University



For April 26

A MISSION WITH A MESSAGE Acts 3:12–20, 24–26

Christ died, but God raised Him from the dead. (12–15)

Peter preached to his fellow Israelites as Israel's prophets did. After Peter heals the "man who was lame from birth" (v. 2), Peter explains that the man was not healed by either Peter or John's "power or godliness."

Peter then proclaims the gospel to the people. As he addresses his fellow Israelites, he sounds much like Israel's prophets who rebuke their fellow people and call them to repentance.

It is important that we in the Church who are Gentiles hear Peter's strong rebuke as one that comes from one Israelite to his fellow Israelites (v. 12). We are overhearing a rebuke given from one family member to another, and we need to be careful with how we Gentiles proclaim Peter's rebuke.

Unfortunately, in the sad history of the Church, statements like this have been taken up in ways that characterize the Jewish people as more wicked than the Gentiles, and such stereotypes have been horribly used as an excuse for violence against them. It lands and functions quite differently when Peter the Israelite prophet condemns his own people for their role in the death of Jesus and calls upon them to repent.

Although the people killed Jesus, Peter proclaims that God raised Him from the dead. The Resurrection was witnessed by Peter, John and the other apostles.

Further, the healing of the lame man, which is the restoration of this man's life, is further testimony that "the Source of life" has in fact been raised from the dead.

God raising Jesus validates Jesus as the Messiah whom God had sent, and Jesus' suffering was foretold in the prophets. In fact, even the people's role

in the death of Jesus and their ignorance of Jesus' messianic identity fulfilled what God said through the prophets, that the Messiah would suffer.

Repentance and faith in Christ restore us to God. (16–20)

Like Israel's prophets who chastise their people for their injustice and call them to repent from their sinful ways, Peter does the same. But the sin and injustice he calls them to turn away from is the death and rejection of Jesus.

Peter here sounds like Jesus when He pronounced woes upon the Pharisees and the teachers of the law: "Woe to you! You build tombs for the prophets and your fathers killed them. Therefore, you are witnesses that you approve the deeds of your fathers, for they killed them, and you build their monuments.

"Because of this, the wisdom of God said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they will kill and persecute,' so that this generation may be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets shed since the foundation of the world" (Luke 11:47–50).

When Peter preaches, he does not neglect to call his own people to turn from their injustice with prophetic directness.

We are blessed through our relationship with God through Christ. (24–26)

Even the Resurrection is not the end. Peter calls them to turn from their sins.

They can still turn and trust in Him so that they can receive forgiveness of their sins and so that God will send Jesus to come again and restore all things (vv. 19–21). And those who do not repent will be cut off from their people (vv. 22–23).

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

For May 3

A MISSION MET WITH COURAGE Acts 4:1–3, 8–12, 19–20

Speaking about Christ can lead to confrontation. (1–3)

As we saw when we discussed Acts 3, Peter and John healed a man who was born lame and then exhorted their fellow Israelites to repent from their sins and from their rejection of Israel's Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

Instead, Peter preaches, they need to turn to — and listen to — Jesus.

Acts 4 picks up from here and explains how the leaders of the people responded to Peter and John. We are told that Peter and John were speaking, and they were arrested because "the priests, the captain of the temple and the Sadducees" were irritated by their preaching.

The following day the "rulers, elders and scribes" along "with Annas the high Priest, Caiaphas, John and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family" all gathered in Jerusalem (vv. 5–6).

When Peter addresses them, he says "Rulers of the people and elders" (v. 7).

Acts is showing us that Peter and John are questioned by the political-religious rulers of the people, but we also read that when they preached prior to being arrested that "many of those who heard the word believed, and they numbered about five thousand" (v. 3). A good number of their fellow Israelites believed the preaching of the apostles, even as the leaders of the people rejected their teaching.

This is similar to the picture the gospels paint of the reception of Jesus' teaching, which was not uniformly rejected by the people of Israel but received special resistance from the leaders and teachers of the people.

Proclaim faith in Christ as the only way to receive eternal life. (8–12)

When the leaders of the people question Peter and John, Peter responds that the man was healed "through the name of Jesus Christ

of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead." Peter continues his prophetic chastisement in criticizing the leaders of the people for their role in rejecting their Messiah.

This same name through whom the lame man was healed and restored is the same name in whom there is salvation: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (v. 12). Peter and John repeat to the leaders the message that they preached in Acts 3 to their fellow Israelites.

And still, the leaders of the people do not receive the apostolic appeal to trust in the name of Jesus. Instead, they instruct Peter and John to no longer "speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus" (v. 18).

Speak boldly about Christ despite opposition. (19–20)

Peter and John refuse their request and say they "cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard" — to keep silent would be to listen to them rather than God.

The apostles have been commissioned by Jesus and filled by the Spirit of God to bear witness to what they have seen and heard as apostles who witnessed Jesus' ministry (Acts 1:8, 21–22).

Here in Acts 4, we see the boldness the Holy Spirit produced in the apostles to bear witness to what they had seen even in the face of persecution and opposition from people with power.

This is precisely what Jesus said in the Gospel of John would happen when He departed, that He would send the advocate, the Holy Spirit, to help them bear witness to His teachings (John 14:15–17, 26; 15:26–27). The power of the Holy Spirit is accentuated in that Peter and John, we are told, are "unschooled, ordinary men" (Acts 4:13).

They have been instructed by Jesus, as witnesses who were with Jesus, and they were empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear powerful and effective testimony.

IN NEED OF LOVE, SUPPORT AND PRAYERS

Why Gen Z women are leaving the faith and how your church can respond

By Denise George
The Alabama Baptist

Churches may be noticing a trend — women from Gen Z (ages 18–24) are quietly walking away from the Christian faith.

A recent Barna study noted 38% of college-aged women in the U.S. now identify as “religiously unaffiliated” and are among those referred to as “nones” (when asked their religion, they say “none”).

A 2023–24 Pew Religious Landscape Study confirmed a significant number of these women are turning to atheism, agnosticism and “no particular faith.”

Recent research suggests that as they transition into adulthood, young adult women are less likely to retain or adopt foundational Christian beliefs, a pattern that may have long-term impact on the future faith landscape.

Possible reasons

While reasons vary, many researchers say female Gen Zers are stepping away not only for theological causes, but also for emotional, relational and cultural reasons, including the following:

► Deep loneliness

In 2023 the U.S. Surgeon General labeled loneliness as a national epidemic, noting it is highest among young adults. Research showed 57% say meaningful relationships are more important to them at church than sermons, programs or music.

► Emotional and mental health

One study found 81% of young adults also struggle with anxiety or depression, with 36% of female



Unsplash.com

Gen Zers rating their mental health as “poor” or “fair.” The National Institute of Mental Health noted major depression occurs most often among those ages 18–25, with higher rates for females than males.

► Cultural and digital voices

Many women are discipled by digital voices, with social media influencers and online commentary shaping their views of purpose, morality, relationships, identity and sexuality — more than the church influences them. Many seek belonging and identity online, turning to cultural voices to define truth.

► Institutional mistrust

Many are not rejecting God but are struggling to trust institutions, including the church. They associate religious groups with hypocrisy, inconsistency or lack of compassion, and news.gallup.com said recent church scandals have

deepened that skepticism, especially among young women.

How the church can help

1. Provide genuine connection — Gen Zers want fewer programs and more genuine relationships. Traditional church small groups are not attracting younger women as they once did, as many fear not fitting in, worry that peers won’t accept them or don’t know anyone in a group and don’t want to attend alone, Barna reported.

2. Offer Titus 2:2–8 mentoring ministries — Some churches, like Shiloh Baptist Church in Hartford, are seeing success with intentional, intergenerational discipleship.

“We’ve made it our mission to see Titus 2:2–8 lived out in our church,” noted Shiloh’s associate and student pastor Elliot Weston. “Our groups are gender-specific, but diverse in age and life stage.”

In many cases, older women

mentoring younger women can provide “spiritual mothers” in the faith, an approach that restores belonging, wisdom, accountability and encouragement.

Generational gatherings

3. Organize generational gatherings for women — Host events focused on fellowship, food, encouragement, Bible study and prayer. They can provide a safe, welcoming place where young women ask difficult questions, share struggles and receive godly wisdom and counsel.

4. Focus on multigenerational ministry and service — Invite Gen Zers to serve, lead, teach and shape the church’s ministry programming. Multigenerational service teams build relational bridges naturally, so celebrate individual giftedness and help women feel valued, needed and seen.

5. Emphasize Christian counseling — Offer opportunities for Gen Zers to meet with church-sponsored Christian counselors in Q&A sessions or workshops that address loneliness, anxiety, relationships and identity.

The transition from youth to womanhood can be fragile for young women. After high school, many slip through the gaps of church life without spiritual guidance or community. Female Gen Zers need the church’s love, support and prayers to keep them grounded in Scripture, prayer, worship and Christian relationship.

Unlike culture’s digital voices, the church can offer biblical truth, Christian connection, Christ-centered relationships, discipleship and a pathway to hope and healing for young women.

Aging Well

April 16, 2026



CATCHING Zs

Tips for better night's sleep

BRAIN GAMES

Hidden images, word search and more puzzles



WALKING

Mental and spiritual benefits

Resources that encompass all aspects of growing older, including basic tips for staying healthy, coping with challenges and preparing for the future.



Movement as **worship**

BY STEPHEN LONG • BAPTIST HEALTH BROOKWOOD HOSPITAL

Rethinking physical activity in the life of a believer

For many people, the idea of being physically fit feels out of reach. But according to David Peacock, manager of spiritual care and chaplain at Baptist Health Shelby Hospital, that mindset misses a deeper truth. Physical fitness begins not with workouts, but with movement, and movement is something everyone can embrace.

Peacock, who also serves as adult groups pastor of Westwood Baptist Church in Alabaster, emphasizes that for believers, the conversation around physical health is tied to spiritual health. If God dwells within us, then our

bodies are temples. Stewardship, then, extends into how we care for our bodies through rest, nutrition, relationships and physical activity.

This perspective reframes even the simplest actions. Drawing from Colossians 3:23, Peacock explains that everything we do, no matter how ordinary, can be done as an act of worship.

“When you go for a walk, when you exercise, even when you’re doing daily tasks, it can be spiritual,” he says.

Expression of faith

Movement is not separate from faith. It is an expression of it.

That understanding is rooted

in a holistic view of the human person. First Thessalonians 5:23 describes believers as spirit, soul and body — an integrated whole. Peacock often describes the body as an “earth suit,” a temporary tabernacle carrying God’s presence.

Just as the Israelites were given careful instructions for maintaining the tabernacle in the wilderness, believers are called to care for their bodies with intention and reverence.

Practically, that care begins with a shift in mindset. Movement does not have to be complicated. Peacock encourages people to start simply. Walking, for example, is one of the most accessible and

effective forms of exercise. It requires no special training and can be incorporated into daily life. The goal is not perfection but consistency, choosing to move regularly rather than waiting for the perfect plan.

Being consistent

Consistency has been a defining theme in Peacock’s own life. A lifelong runner who competed through high school and college, he has continued to pursue endurance challenges, including the Boston Marathon. Over time, his approach has evolved. Rather than focusing solely on running, he has embraced cross training by incor-



“Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

1 THESSALONIANS 5:23

porating swimming, core work and varied routines to maintain overall strength and avoid injury.

That evolution has not come without challenges. Several years ago, Peacock underwent surgery on his Achilles tendon after years of strain. The recovery process was long and humbling. He had to relearn how to walk, rebuild atrophied muscles and slowly regain strength. At one point, he was told he might never run again. Through persistence and discipline, he eventually returned not just to running but to completing the Boston Marathon once more.

“Anything meaningful takes work,” Peacock explained. “Whether it’s your faith, your health or your career, there are no shortcuts.”

At the same time, he is careful to draw a distinction between commitment and identity. Fitness, he says, should never become the foundation of who we are.

“I’m not a runner. I’m a [child] of God who happens to run. It’s something I do, not who I am.”

Physical activity is not a short-term commitment tied to a particular season. It is a lifelong discipline that adapts with age. What works at 30 may not be sustainable at 60, but while the form of movement may change, the commitment to stewardship remains.

Whether through walking, swimming, strength training or other low impact activities, the goal is to keep moving.

Beyond the physical benefits of movement, Peacock highlights a profound spiritual impact. Regular movement often creates space for reflection, prayer and connection with God. Some of his most meaningful spiritual moments, he said, have come while running — times when distractions fall away and clarity emerges. Movement, in this sense, becomes not just exercise but a rhythm that allows God to speak and work more deeply.

Community

It also opens the door to community. Through years of running, Peacock has built relationships with people from a wide range of backgrounds, including different professions, beliefs and life experiences. In a world that often feels divided or insular, these connections provide opportunities for growth, understanding and shared humanity. He describes it as a kind

of mosaic, where diverse pieces come together to create something richer and more complete.

For those who feel overwhelmed by the idea of starting, Peacock’s advice is simple. Begin where you are. Small steps matter. A short walk, a modest goal, a slight adjustment in routine — these are the building blocks of lasting change. He encourages people to avoid comparison, set realistic goals and celebrate progress along the way.

Adding up

Above all, he returns to one central principle. Consistency. It is easy to start something new, but transformation happens through persistence. Day by day, small acts of movement add up, shaping physical health and strengthening spiritual lives as well.

In the end, movement is about far more than fitness. It is about stewardship, discipline and worship, an opportunity to honor God not just in moments of stillness, but in every step we take.

EDITOR’S NOTE — Stephen Long is marketing manager for Baptist Health Brookwood Hospital based in Birmingham.



4 simple priorities for better well-being

Healthy routines are more likely to last when they fit into the rhythm of everyday life rather than compete with it. Big changes can feel motivating at first, but it is often the small, repeatable choices that quietly shape how people feel over time.

Move

When schedules get full, exercise can become something to get back to rather than something that fits into the day as it unfolds. A missed workout can quickly turn into a missed week, even for people who value staying active.

Regular movement supports heart health, muscle strength and overall energy, but it doesn’t need to be all-or-nothing. Short periods of activity spread throughout the day can still make a difference, especially when long stretches of sitting are the default.

Walking between meetings, stretching in the morning or add-

ing light strength exercises at home are simple ways to stay active without blocking out extra time.

Reduce stress

Ongoing stress can interfere with focus, sleep and eating habits, making it harder to maintain healthy routines. Simple practices like deep breathing, mindfulness or stepping away from screens for a few minutes can help reduce tension and restore attention.

Making time for rest and reflection, and setting realistic expectations, can also support emotional balance. What supports the brain often supports the heart as well, reinforcing the value of caring for mental and physical health together.

Eat well

Food decisions often happen on autopilot as meals are squeezed into busy schedules and long days, making nutrition one of the most influential daily habits.

Meals do more than provide fuel.

When built around nutrient-rich foods, they support muscle health, brain health and heart health.

An overall healthy eating pattern includes a variety of whole foods like fruits, vegetables, whole grains and lean proteins, helping the body keep up with everyday demands.

Socialize

When life feels busy or stressful, social connection is often the first thing to get pushed aside, even though it plays an important role in emotional health.

Staying connected doesn’t require packed calendars or constant interaction. Shared meals, short conversations or a quick check-in with a friend or family member can help maintain a sense of connection.

For more information and educational resources on nutrition and healthy living, visit Heart.org. (American Heart Association)

Walking

is good visual of our spiritual health

BY DAVID L. CHANCEY • PASTOR AND AUTHOR

My primary care physician promotes brisk walking for 30 minutes per day at least five days a week. Walking is good for us!

The American Heart Association recommends at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity, which can include walking, per week. Moving even a little means a lot to our heart health, according to AHA.

In a December article, Runner's World listed "8 Science-Backed Health Benefits of Walking":

1. Blood sugar stabilization. "Even a leisurely 10-minute stroll after dinner can help regulate blood sugar levels," according to the article.

2. Healthy weight maintenance. "Any amount of calories burned can help with your goal of maintaining or losing weight," Dr. William Dixon said.

3. Stress relief and mood regulation. Taking a walk to "clear your mind" actually works.

4. Better sleep. Walking "is the single best way to improve sleep

quality," said sleep expert Dr. Michael Breus.

5. Reduced risk of dementia. Some research shows that getting in your daily steps — right under 10,000 is ideal — is associated with a reduced risk of dementia.

6. Boosted recovery. Individuals who enjoy intense exercise benefit from walking as a recovery tool.

7. Inspiration to move more. Consistently hitting your daily step target leads to setting even more ambitious goals, according to the article.

8. Easy to stay consistent. The article points out you can easily incorporate walks throughout your day. Every walk doesn't have to feel like a workout.

A metaphor

From a spiritual perspective, the Bible uses walking as a metaphor to describe an intimate relationship with God and faithful Christian living. The idea of walking points to a growing relationship highlighted by sweet daily fellowship.

Two men in Scripture were said to "walk with God": Enoch (Gen.

5:22) and Noah (Gen. 6:9). When everyone around him was corrupt and evil, Noah "was a righteous man, blameless in his generation." Noah faithfully followed God. He marched to God's drumbeat.

Scripture

What does Scripture say about walking? How shall we walk?

- ▶ Walk humbly. (Mic. 6:8)
- ▶ Walk in obedience. (Deut. 5:33, 8:6, 10:12)
- ▶ Walk in the light. (Isa. 2:5, John 8:12, 1 John 1:7)
- ▶ Walk guided by God's Word. (Ps. 119:105)
- ▶ Walk properly. (Rom. 13:13)
- ▶ Walk by faith. (2 Cor. 5:7)
- ▶ Walk in the Spirit. (Gal. 5:16)
- ▶ Walk wisely. (Prov. 4:10-15; Eph. 5:15)
- ▶ Walk intentionally, re-deeming the time. (Eph. 5:16)
- ▶ Walk doing good works. (Eph. 2:10)

▶ Walk in a worthy manner, fully pleasing. (Col. 1:10)

▶ Walk in love. (Eph. 5:2)

Many mornings when I run in my neighborhood, I pass two ladies who routinely undertake a brisk walk. They obviously enjoy each other's company.

They are energetically talking, gesturing, smiling and laughing. They walk in step and keep pace, never falling behind or getting ahead of each other.

That's a great picture of what it means to walk with God. Do you walk with God? How is your walk with God going? What "steps" can you take today to grow closer to Him?

EDITOR'S NOTE — David L. Chancey lives in Fayetteville, Georgia, and serves as transitional pastor of Griffin Church, Griffin, Georgia. Visit him at davidchancey.com to see his other writings, including his three books.

'Quiet hero of healthy habits' helps improve mental health

It is well-known that walking has physical benefits, like increasing circulation, strengthening muscles and aiding in respiratory function. But walking is also incredibly good for mental and spiritual health.

"Strong bodies grow from steady habits. Walking is the quiet hero of healthy habits. No equipment. No pressure. Just steady movement and real benefits," according to the Arthritis Foundation.

Nature's benefits

Research has shown that physical activity, even walking just 30 minutes a day, can release endorphins — feel-good chemicals that improve mood — while simultaneously reducing cortisol, the stress hormone.

Walking in nature can increase these benefits, but that doesn't necessar-

ily mean hiking in the woods is necessary to reap those rewards.

"Humans have an innate, evolutionary tendency to like nature," said Whitney Fleming, an environmental psychology researcher.

Her research shows that paying attention to plant life while being active reduced stress more than when the person focused on human-made elements during the same activity.

Even indoor natural elements — houseplants, photographs of nature or nature sounds — can boost gains made through even the gentlest movements.

So can unplugging from technology, as chaplain Joy Freeman learned when a ministry outreach made her leave her phone at home.

At first her anxiety increased. Soon, however, she learned to "trust that my world was not going to have a major crisis just because

I was out of contact for a day."

Breaking away from technology also can create opportunities to commune with God.

Made to move

"Choosing to move our bodies can be an act of stewardship — honoring God by caring for the vessel He's given us," according to the Christian Mental Health Initiative.

"Psalm 139:14 says, 'I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.' Moving our bodies in gratitude and worship reinforces this truth and aligns our physical rhythms with spiritual rest. ... You were made to move, breathe and live freely in the joy and strength of Christ. Let movement become a part of your mental wellness toolkit." (Tracy Riggs Frontz)

"Walk in obedience to all that the Lord your God has commanded you so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess."

DEUTERONOMY 5:33

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Catching Zs

BY SHAWN HENDRICKS • TAB MEDIA GROUP

Try these tips for a better night's sleep

According to the American Heart Association, one out of three adults struggle with getting quality sleep. Been there?

A lack of sleep can result in poor health that impacts everything from heart function to immune system and mental health. Sleep is also referred to by some experts as “the ultimate internal detox.”

“When our bodies are at complete rest, it provides the chance for our internal systems to regenerate,” writes Leigh Farmer of VCU Health of Virginia Commonwealth University on the school’s website.

“Sleep is so important; it helps with the recovery process with our endocrinology system, it helps supply oxygen into our brain and to our organs, and overall helps our bodies and our muscles recover from the activities of the day,” said Anna Caitlin Paylor, a family nurse practitioner who works at Wilmington North Carolina’s Health’s Sleep Clinic.

Essential for regulation

“You’ll see patients with a lot of headaches, weight gain and difficulty losing weight,” Paylor told Channel 6 WECT. “You’ll see patients with poorly controlled blood pressures, deregulation in their diabetes or their blood sugars.”

Knowing all the dangers, how does a person get a better night’s sleep? There is a lot of advice and quite a few sleep “experts” online — including information found on AI platforms.

For instance, according to “Dr.” (not a

doctor) ChatGPT, it all boils down to:

1. Keeping a consistent schedule.
2. Creating a “wind-down routine.”
3. Limiting screen time before bed.
4. Creating a more comfortable sleep-worthy environment with a good mattress and room that’s cool, dark and quiet.
5. Limiting caffeine and eating before bedtime.

10-3-2-1-0 sleep rule

The “10-3-2-1-0 sleep rule,” brain-child of sports medicine physician and pediatrician Dr. Jess Andrade, suggests these tips for better sleep:

10 hours before bed — Stop drinking caffeine which can throw a person’s ability to fall asleep all out of whack.

3 hours — Stop drinking alcohol or consuming a meal or heavy food. This reportedly helps with digestion and sleep cycles.

2 hours — Stop working.

1 hour — Avoid screens, particularly that blue screen light that reportedly suppresses the sleep hormone melatonin. This includes phones, televisions and computers that produce artificial light.

0 — This is the number of times people should hit the snooze button in the morning. By refusing to hit snooze, this will help a person maintain a more consistent sleep schedule.

Overall, reducing stress is a key factor to better sleep, noted Farmer of VCU Health. “Work on destressing with techniques like meditation, deep breathing or a warm shower.”

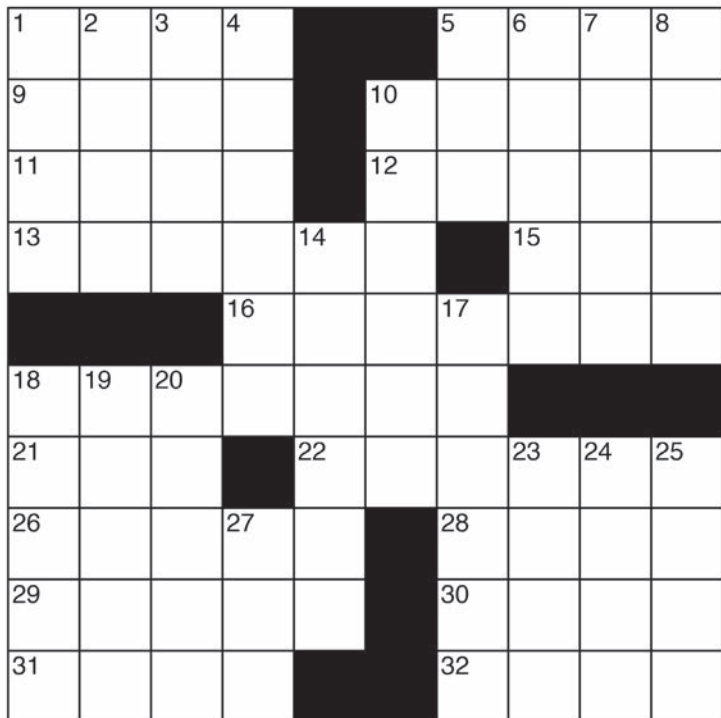
“When our bodies are at complete rest, it provides the chance for our internal systems to regenerate.”

— LEIGH FARMER

VCU Health of Virginia Commonwealth University

Brain games

Crossword puzzle



ACROSS

- 1. Large fish hook
- 5. Summer event for kids
- 9. ____ name (email maybe?)
- 10. Plant-based textile
- 11. Withered
- 12. Ancient Greek marketplace
- 13. __ cab
- 15. Nickname for Jacob's youngest son?
- 16. Decomposed organic matter
- 18. Noisy summer insects
- 21. To be
- 22. South American camelids
- 26. Large flat transport

vehicle

- 28. County path
- 29. Limited in express lanes
- 30. One of the widow's coins (Luke 21:2)
- 31. Bird's home
- 32. Winter toy

DOWN

- 1. Pour
- 2. To or toward the sea
- 3. Do you prefer Boston or Christmas?
- 4. Citrus soda
- 5. Wheel tooth
- 6. Philippine dish with marinated chicken or pork

- 7. Female horses
- 8. A time to ____ (Eccles. 3:2)
- 10. Warm-blooded animal
- 14. Lots
- 17. Sacred poems
- 18. Small house
- 19. Furious
- 20. Dwarf planet between Mars and Jupiter
- 23. Snail or electronic
- 24. Prefix meaning "in front of"
- 25. Mustard is the smallest (Matt. 13:31-32)
- 27. Greenwich Mean Time (abbr.)

Find the differences



— ANSWERS —

- 1. Hair is shorter. 2. Coat is different. 3. Belt is different. 4. Cloud is missing. 5. Sandals are different.

— ANSWERS —



Hidden image

This image is hidden 5 times in the Aging Well section. Can you find them?



— ANSWERS —

- 1. On page 1 on the bucket.
- 2. On page 3 in the grass in the cartoon. 3. On page 4 in the right shoe print.
- 4. On page 6 in the flowers. 5. On page 7 on the pillow.