Virtual Christian MAGAZINE

hope and encouragement for the real world

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We are pleased to announce the March/April 2000, ***Good News*** magazine...

Read the Book



George Washington thought "it is impossible to rightly govern the world" without it. Queen Victoria exclaimed that it "accounts for the supremacy of England." Abraham Lincoln believed it is "the best gift God has ever given to man." Dwight Eisenhower said, "Our civilization is built upon its words." They were all discussing the same book, the Bible. They all read it. Isn't it about time the rest of us did?

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Virtual Christian Magazine

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Virtual Christian MAGAZINE Editorial

Is Anybody Out There?

by Mike Bennett

An atheist raises good questions.
"Does God exist?" may well be
life's ultimate question.

This week we received a thought -provoking e-mail message from an atheist. He lost faith in God in the midst of family tragedies. He became convinced that a good God couldn't have allowed his family members to die when he needed them most.

What pain and trauma this person must have gone through! How my heart goes out to him!

I wish I could think of words of comfort and easy answers to give. How would you answer? The issue defies the ability of a short e -mail reply to fix.

In my words of condolence, I didn't want to pretend to understand the pain he's faced. Still, it seems he had some desire for dialog on the subject. I wanted to leave the door open. If he's interested in knowing why, in spite of all the problems in the world, we believe God exists, I mentioned we could send him a thoughtful publication on the subject, or answer any questions he has.

New look at the beginning

The publication I mentioned was fresh on my mind. Just last month a beautifully illustrated new booklet was printed. Hundreds of hours of research, writing and editing went into this readable, relevant publication titled, *Life's Ultimate Question: Does God Exist?*

I personally love science, so the sections dealing with astronomy and biology grabbed my interest. But the booklet is understandable and interesting even if you aren't a science buff.

Consider this short selection from the sidebar dealing with the earth being "A Planet Perfect for Life":

"Could life on earth be the product of a blind watchmaker or no watchmaker at all? Could it be strictly the result of blind chance?

"Some scientists have concluded that earth may be the only planet in the universe that harbors life because the conditions necessary for life are so exacting that the possibility of life on other planets

is infinitesimal.

"Earth's atmosphere is one way our planet is finely tuned for life. No other planet in our solar system has anything remotely like it. High in the atmosphere, ozone blocks cancer -causing radiation emanating from the sun. The atmosphere shields us from meteors, burning up the overwhelming majority long before they reach earth. Otherwise they would cause great damage and loss of life.

"Our atmosphere contains a mixture of gases in perfect proportions to sustain life. Oxygen makes up 21 percent of our air. Without oxygen, all animate life --including humans--would die in minutes. But too much oxygen is toxic and makes combustible materials more flammable. If the proportion of oxygen in the air increased to only 24 percent, destructive fires would frequently break out and be much harder to bring under control. Objects around us could literally burst into flame.

"Nitrogen, making up 78 percent of earth's atmosphere, dilutes the oxygen and serves a vital function as a fertilizer for plants. During thunderstorms millions of lightning bolts around the earth each day combine some nitrogen with oxygen, creating compounds that are then washed to earth by rain, where they can be utilized by plants.

"Carbon dioxide makes up much of the rest of our atmosphere. Without it plant life would be impossible. Plants require carbon dioxide, which they take in while giving off oxygen. Animals and humans are the opposite, breathing in oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide. Plant life sustains human and animal life and vice versa in a magnificent, precise, self-sustaining cycle.

"Even the thickness of the earth's crust plays a part in regulating our atmosphere. If earth's crust were much thicker, it would hoard oxygen below the surface as oxides. But a thinner crust would leave us susceptible to frequent earthquakes and devastating volcanoes that would permeate our atmosphere with volcanic ash.

"How important is the precise balance in our atmosphere? Our neighboring planet Venus suffers from what is thought to be a runaway greenhouse effect in which heat is trapped and cannot escape. One NASA astronomer noted that our sterile, lifeless moon 'is a friendly place compared to Venus, where, from skies forty kilometers high a rain of concentrated sulfuric acid falls toward a surface that is as hot as boiling lead' (Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers*, 1992, page 117)."

The section goes on to describe how earth's size and position, the presence of life-sustaining water and even the placement of the moon and other planets in our solar system are precisely tuned to making life possible here. The booklet goes on to address everything from the big bang theory to the fossil record, with an emphasis on the wonders of creation and the meaning of it all.

The intricate design of the universe, our earth and the life upon it speaks to me of the work of a Master Designer.

As Albert Einstein put it: "Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe--a spirit vastly superior to that of man" (*The Quotable Einstein*, page 152).

In my backyard

As I write this, a cardinal enjoys our bird feeder in the backyard, and I look out on daffodils bursting forth, heralding the coming of spring. The beauty and intricacy of the world beyond my window also whispers to me of a loving Designer. Yes that whisper can be drowned out by the cries and cacophony of the modern manmade world, with its agonies and heartache. Why would the loving Artisan allow His creation to be trashed and ravaged? This ageless question cannot just be brushed aside. It deserves careful consideration.

This gets back to the atheist's letter. For the pain and suffering that led this person to question God's existence also cloak the question, What meaning do those lives--and deaths--have?

The answer I find lies at the heart of what man is, and what we are to become. We are not robots. Would we be fully human if we did not have the power to choose--the power of free will? Does not this ability to choose give us the opportunity to reach out to the Divine, to incorporate the true characteristics of all that is good and right and beautiful? But conversely, does it not also give us the chance to descend into all that is hurtful and destructive? And that destruction and pain naturally affect the innocent as well as the guilty.

Why does the evil have free reign in today's world? What can be done to change man's course from this way of destruction to a higher path? Of course the atheist must consider these questions as well. I find the answers to those questions is the whole story of the Bible.

Though the Bible records much woe and pain, the story has a happy ending. "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

This hope is powerful, and can help strengthen us to withstand the troubles of today, and to strive to preview that positive world in our lives here and now. To the atheist who considers this a false hope, it would seem that Christians would be of all men most miserable. But what answer --what hope--does atheism offer?

The United Church of God, which sponsors *Virtual Christian Magazine*, considers these questions very important, and offers thoughtful publications to address these issues. In keeping with our philosophy of the way of give, we offer these booklets free of charge. In addition to *Life's Ultimate Question: Does God Exist?* mentioned above, there are booklets about *What Is Your Destiny?*, *How to Understand the Bible* and *Is the Bible True?* A complete listing of publications can be found in our literature library, http://www.ucg.org/html/literat.shtml.

God is there. He cares, and He has a plan for you. Seek Him, and you shall find.

Christian Living:
Ordeal or Adventure?

Perhaps you've marveled at great feats of physical endurance.
But many lead lives of daily, often-unrecognized adventure!

By Larry Greider



UNTIL 1953 NO HUMAN BEING was on record as having set foot on the summit of Mount Everest, the world's highest mountain. Several expeditions from various countries had tried, but all had failed to reach the top of the 29,028-foot Himalayan giant.

In the fall of 1952 some Swiss climbers made their second attempt at Everest with an impressive expedition that included some of the world's best climbers. They had the finest and latest provisions--lightweight down parkas and mummy sleeping bags, equipment fashioned from aluminum alloys and canisters of oxygen.

Yet, in spite of the collective experience and sophisticated accoutrements, the Swiss team failed. The towering mountain, which sits on the border between Nepal and Tibet, was shrouded by inhospitable weather. The light air starved the climbers' lungs and their footing was ever unpredictable.

Early in 1953 the British Everest Expedition completed plans to conquer the legendary peak. Could they succeed where so many others had failed?

Ascent to achievement

The expedition included climbers Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay and numerous porters. Before the climb came extensive training and preparation. The participants determined the best strategy and allowed for alternate courses of action. Everyone seemed ready and determined to succeed.

The climbers prepared for a dangerous journey, yet, as they began the ascent, the challenge grew much tougher than anyone had expected. Snow blindness, frostbite, exhaustion and other difficulties thinned the ranks. Discouragement crept in. Danger increased the closer they got to the top.

Then the expedition considered turning back en masse. After all, any step could give way to a hidden crevasse. A blinding snowstorm could mean the death of everyone. A few of the climbers, however, stayed optimistic. Their vision was to reach the summit, and they were determined that nothing would deter them.



Finally, on a May morning in 1953, climbers Hillary and Norgay set out alone from Camp 4 on the mountain's south side. They were within several hundred steep yards of the summit. This was to be the most momentous day of their lives.

One by one those few last yards became the most demanding and risky steps of the climb. One wrong step or movement could bring about a fatal fall. But, driven by a clear vision of victory, the two men persevered step by step over the slippery ice.

Finally their dream burst into reality: They reached the summit! Exhilaration warmed their cold bodies. Their goal was accomplished. In a few days newspapers the world over would boldly proclaim their triumph.

What makes people go through such hardship and sacrifice? Hillary and Norgay, and subsequent successful climbers, endured agony in the name of high adventure.

The Christian life as high adventure

This magnitude of adventure parallels the Christian way of life. Yet some of God's people see their calling as a burden to bear. For a few, God's way of life looms as an ordeal to be endured rather than an adventure to take delight in.

The apostle James exhorts, "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials" (James 1:2). What is there about a difficult situation to rejoice in? What kind of attitude finds joy in illness, family rejection or the loss of a job?

On the surface, little in such situations seems positive. No wonder James encourages us to look at our circumstances from a different perspective and always as a positive step in our continuing adventure, the Christian life. We should look forward to the exhilaration of victory at the end of our struggle, because that is exactly what awaits a true Christian.

Certainly the Christian way of life, like any other adventure, demands resolute struggle against great obstacles.

We rarely picture great adventure as strolling down a country lane on a summer's day. Could such an outing be pleasant? Yes, but could it also pose a challenge? Hardly, unless the country lane lies in a war zone or angles up the side of the world's highest peak. The larger the potential danger and the greater the odds against accomplishment, the greater the thrill of victory.

In the same way, Christian living presents a challenge. We are locked in a struggle: "For we do wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12).

Jesus Christ issues us this challenge: "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

The whole world, deceived by Satan, is opposed to the way of life God reveals (Revelation 12:9). We stand as a small army against great odds. The wrong influences of the world are everywhere, and we must battle against them as well as our own human nature. We must, with God's help, fight the evil one himself--Satan the devil--who, with his legions of demons, determines to inspire us to forfeit the crown of life God has in store for us.

Certainly the Christian way of life, like any other adventure, demands resolute struggle against great obstacles.

Willing to endure

High adventure requires a willingness to undergo difficulties. Every mountain climber knows that an expedition demands physical sacrifice. Several days of dangling from ropes, sleeping and eating in cramped spaces, suffering frostbite and enduring bone-chilling cold go with the territory. These are but a few of the costs of heading for the top.

Paul's Christian life was one of hardship. In 2 Corinthians 11:24-28 he enumerates some of his experiences: "From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness--besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches."

In Luke 14:28 Jesus cautions His followers to count the cost of living His way of life, even if the cost could include their very lives. Christians must be willing to undergo difficulties to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus warned that he who is not willing to "bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple" (verse 27).

Anticipation of victory

An adventure comes with the expectation of victory. No leader of an expedition of mountain climbers can afford to expect anything but success. Negativism erodes esprit de corps. The vision of victory can be lost.

Although the Christian's way of life is no cakewalk, we must never lose sight of the attainability of our victory.

God reminds us to be confident of our triumph, that "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). We can go boldly before the throne of grace, knowing that our elder Brother has already reached the peak and holds the rope for us.



Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9:25-27, compares our struggle to a sportsman's. Athletes, he writes, compete for "a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown." Our reward is much greater than any we could win from any competition in this life, and knowledge of this certainty should motivate us. "Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection . . ."

Paul expected victory. We should count on it as well. We have Jesus Christ on our side, and with Him everything is possible (Philippians 4:13).

A Christian needs the attitude of an adventurer. View every inch and every foothold as progress. Consider each bruise and scrape a part of the price for our ultimate triumph. Continue the struggle for the supreme accomplishment: becoming a son of God.

No adventure is greater than the life of a Christian. See you at the top!

The Gift of Sex

Sex is a beautiful gift from God.
But when misused, it can bring tragic consequences.

By Graemme Marshall



JANINE (a fictitious name, but the story is real) was a pretty, 17 -year-old high school senior looking forward to her graduation--the last of the Millennium.

After graduation she spent a week at a beach resort--a vacation to mark the end of her years of formal education. Soon after she returned home, a shock overshadowed all her expectations. She was pregnant! She didn't intend to be. She had only had sex once.

During her vacation Janine had gone out with friends to celebrate. A friend of a friend came along and alcohol was involved. Although she had never met him before, Janine had gone with this new acquaintance to his apartment. Now her life was in turmoil. What would her parents say?

Another shock soon followed. The father of her unborn child didn't want complications to his professional career. He was older and wanted neither marriage nor an unwanted baby. He encouraged her to have an abortion.

Just weeks before she had been an innocent 17 year old with thoughts of exams, graduation, celebrations and the excitement of looking for a job. Now she had to face some tough decisions. Too fearful to tell her parents, she agreed to an abortion, ending the potential of her first child's life.

The loss

Within just one month, Janine lost many things. She lost her virginity. She lost a child. She lost the chance for God's ideal for marriage. Overnight she went from a teen about to burst into the adult world, to being robbed of precious things she will never have again.

What went wrong? With all the safe sex advertisements, how can this still happen? When "love" feels so right, why are the consequences so tragic?

Missing out?

If you choose to remain a virgin until marriage, do you feel you are missing out? For most of our world's history, sex outside marriage was not taken for granted. People were as sexually vital as today, but ordinary, healthy people waited for marriage. Most agreed that sex before marriage was wrong. If a girl or boy wanted to avoid sex before marriage, they could rely on support from family, friends and culture. Not so today.

Harder to say NO

Premarital sex has become so common it can be hard to find friends who agree with right moral teaching. It is harder to say no. That's why it is important to know why you should stand your ground. Virginity does not mean left out. It just means still waiting, still looking, still expecting the right lifetime commitment. Waiting for sex until the day you commit to one person for a lifetime of sexual fulfillment is good and it's what God expects.

A beautiful gift

There is nothing wrong with sex. Sex is a beautiful gift from God. These warm, exciting sensations did not evolve from chimps or ocean algae. These almost overpowering needs for love and companionship were put in you for a purpose. God meant you to experience them, at the proper time. Why would God create all this vibrant sexual energy and not allow you to release it?



Have you felt God doesn't want you to have fun? It isn't true. What God really wants is for you to be the attractive, healthy, wholesome, functional person you dream to be. He wants you to find the most wonderful girl or boy to date and finally marry. He wants you to explore the most exciting sexual moments that can be experienced with that one special person. He designed you to have that kind of sex life. It's why the passions, urges and emotions of sex are in your body.

The problem is that most people don't understand why God made them so sexually alive. Too many of today's movies, TV, videos and music speak an opposite, shallow message. So it is little wonder our thinking about sex is turned upside down. People assume moral guidelines keep them from full enjoyment of their senses. The opposite is true. God meant you to enjoy sex for a lifetime--with the one partner--in marriage.

The hurts and the risks

You can't replay abortion. Janine will have to live her life knowing that the child she could have had cannot be brought back in this life. Many women who have had abortions admit they would reverse the decision if they could. A baby dies. That hurt goes deep and you may never be completely healed from it.

What did Janine risk? Did she know whether her one-night partner was disease free? Does she know whether she has now contracted a virus?

AIDS is just the latest in a long line of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Some are incurable, like herpes. Some are deadly, like syphilis. Once you contract herpes, you have the disease for ever. For the rest of your life you risk infecting anyone you go to bed with--including your marriage partner. Syphilis works slowly causing brain damage, insanity and death if not treated. Another STD is chlamydia, an infection you may not know you have because its symptoms are subtle. One common result for men and women is infertility. Because STDs are increasing at an alarming rate, the only thing that can absolutely protect you is abstinence.

The honeymoon

The honeymoon for virgins is unique, incredible and can't be repeated. You get only one first time in life. There is great joy in experiencing it with the person to whom you have publicly committed the rest of your life. But that's possible only if you wait. For the sexually experienced, the honeymoon is merely another nice vacation.

Isn't it ironic that many of the boys and girls trying to get you to bed really want to marry someone who has never had sex with anyone else? If someone says he loves you, yet seeks other partners too, how can you trust him? These types will compare your performance with everyone else they have sex with. It's humiliating to know you're on a rating list. Surveys show that people who learn to take sex lightly before marriage tend to continue to do so after marriage. It's a reason many marriages are plagued by suspicion and jealousy.

Why wait?

Those who wait show each other they take sex seriously. They demonstrate the kind of self-discipline a relationship needs. It builds trust and respect. Remember, the sexually active can never recover lost virginity to be like you!

What God says about sex

The word "puritanical," which means strict and severe, does describe some people, but God is not that way. The Bible, the guide to God's mind, is very frank about sex. A whole book (the Song of Solomon) celebrates the sensuality of erotic love. It's not pornography. It is an account of how wonderful God intended sex to be.

Sex is not a big part of the Bible. Other topics, particularly our relationship to God, are given much more time and importance. But the Bible does address sex and in the way you'd expect a designer to write about his creation. The Inventor of this great process, better than anyone else, appreciates

what His invention means. He tells how it is to be properly used. And He has firm ideas about it.



Put simply: Sex is expected and blessed within marriage. Outside marriage it is an offense to the Creator. Hebrews 13:4 says: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral" (NIV throughout). Pure means unmixed with any other substance. It means to allow only one person into your marriage bed--your spouse. Don't adulterate the relationship with anyone else.

The Bible recognizes that sexual desire is a strong physical impulse. It presents marriage as the answer to that: "But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife, and each woman her own husband" (1 Corinthians 7:2).

The love we are to have in marriage should be modeled after the deepest, most intimate love of the universe. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25, 28). This is a selfless sacrificial love for humanity.

Jesus did not go into a lot of detail in Scripture, but you could summarize His instruction as: Sex is for marriage. Marriage is for life. Anything that breaks that apart, whether it is adultery, casual sex or divorce, is falling short of what God intended (Matthew 15:19-20, 19:4-9). In brief: adultery and casual sex are wrong (Exodus 20:14; 1 Corinthians 6:15-17, 10:8).

What does God say about controlling sexual temptation?

Flee the situation (1 Corinthians 6:18). This refers back to Joseph in Egypt who fled from a married woman trying to seduce him (Genesis 39:12). This is good advice for today! To help avoid clouded judgment, or worse, rape, don't drink alcohol or take drugs. To ensure sex belongs in marriage, practice self-control.

If your only reasons for saying NO to premarital sex are worries about pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, be warned! These are good and valid reasons, but if these are the only reasons you have, the pressure will get pretty intense if your date talks of safe sex.

Although STDs and unwanted pregnancy are serious problems, they are not the main reasons premarital sex is wrong. Many sexually active teenagers somehow avoid these problems, but that doesn't make it right. It's wrong for everyone--boy or girl, young or old--whether a person gets caught or not. Sex was designed by the Creator God to help husbands and wives stay close together--physically and emotionally. Any other use makes sex less effective in its purpose and design.

If you've had sex before marriage, what now?

Marriage is where sex rightfully belongs. Once you understand and accept what God intended, then no matter the mistakes made in the past, you can now decide to save sex for marriage.

The honeymoon for virgins is unique, incredible and can't be repeated. You get only one first time in life.

Premarital sex is as any other sin. It's not worse in God's eyes than lying or stealing. It often has serious consequences and may hurt you more, but God will still forgive you. You need to face reality and decide not to repeat the error. Ask God to give you the strength to carry out your decision.

You can't change the facts of your past, but you can change the way they affect you and your future. Change your lifestyle. Seek friends, peers and mentors who will help you be a better person. Make new friends who will not pressure you sexually. Avoid the pitfalls of drugs, alcohol and steady dating until you meet the right person for a lifelong commitment. Make your life something to be proud of from now on!

Janine learned some hard lessons because she chose sex before marriage. Sex is a good thing, but like anything else, it must be used properly. The right time is marriage. Waiting for the joy of sex in marriage, where it belongs, is worth it!

Election Year Religion

God is "getting a lot of press" lately as the presidential candidates have brought religion into the campaign. Is the U.S. undergoing a significant change? Or are we witnessing politics as usual?

By Cecil E. Maranville



RELIGION IS BIG NEWS in the U.S. presidential primary! So, are more U.S. citizens thinking of God? Not exactly. But they are hearing fiery campaign rhetoric about specific religions, religious leaders and political issues that are framed in religious terms.

Religion moved from a backdrop issue to center stage when the delegate selection contest for the presidential nomination moved into South Carolina, Michigan and Virginia in February. Senator John McCain lashed out at men he identified as leaders of "the religious right." Several sections of the country appeared poised to split into sectarian bickering in the primaries.

Last year, in a somewhat crass--albeit honest--declaration, senior policy adviser to Vice President Al Gore, Elaine Kamarck, told *The Boston Globe*, "The Democratic Party is going to *take back God* this time" ("Gore Includes Religion in Agenda," 1999, AP, emphasis added throughout). She was referring to her candidate's "religious strategy" in the 2000 presidential race.

Throughout the primary season presidential candidates have openly referred to their personal faith and offered promises of support for "faith-based organizations"--the generic phrase most candidates as well as reporters seem to prefer.

While Mr. Gore's principal spokesman attempted to distance himself and his boss from such a blatantly political approach to religion ("I don't think God is partisan"), campaign speeches from all candidates ring with a variety of uncharacteristic references to religion.

Mr. Gore regularly refers to his "faith tradition." (Few people know that he actually studied at Vanderbilt's divinity school as a young man.) In stark contrast to typical Democratic Party tradition, Mr. Gore has called for "a new partnership between church and state."

The vice president opposes organized prayer in public schools during the school day and also opposes using public dollars to send children to parochial schools. What, then, has changed? What he *appears* to promise is an open ear to the influence of the religious lobby. "If you elect me president," he said before a Salvation Army audience, "the voices of faith-based organizations will be integral to the policy set forth in my administration."

"The moment has come," said Gore, "for Washington to catch up with a rest of America... Americans profoundly, rightly believe that politics and morality are deeply interrelated."

He is certainly right about the popularity of religion in the United States. According to a recent survey of nearly 6,000 Americans, religion plays an important part in the lives of a majority. "Quite simply, God *is* back," said Ira Matathia, CEO of the group that conducted the survey ("'Trendsetters' Turning to Religion" 1999, News America Digital Publishing, Inc.).

"Faith-based" is the phrase of choice

Throughout the primary season presidential candidates have openly referred to their personal faith and offered promises of support for "faith-based organizations"--the generic phrase most candidates as well as reporters seem to prefer.

From the beginning of his run for the presidency, Texas Governor George W. Bush has listed among his campaign goals: "Draw a moral line" and get "faith-based organizations" such as churches involved in easing social problems. Governor Bush has long been an advocate of school prayer and public funds for religious education. He makes no secret of his desire to garner the support of the so-called "religious right" in the presidential campaign.



His success in securing this allegiance prompted Senator McCain to launch a sharp attack on the governor's character in order to secure the support of northern Catholics in what the media portrayed at the time as the beginning of a sectarian war. It appears that it was more of "a tug of war"--for delegates.

In the Democrats' nomination process, both former Senator Bill Bradley and Vice President Gore eagerly courted the endorsements of liberal ministers Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson.

"Election year religion" has spilled from the presidential campaign into a high-profile senatorial election in New York.

In early February, New York senatorial candidates Hillary Clinton and Rudolph Giuliani scrapped over religion, trading accusations about the other making religion an issue in their race, at the same time as both claim to be "people of faith." Mrs. Clinton is a former Sunday school teacher who was raised in a devout Methodist family. Mayor Giuliani supports Governor Bush's proposals to promote the work of faith-based charities [that phrase again] and says that teachers should be able to post the Ten Commandments in their classrooms.

Another presidential candidate--in the *Russian* presidential election--recently proclaimed religious roots! Vladimir Putin said that he had been secretly baptized during the years of Communist domination. His declaration was met with skepticism, and is thought to be an attempt to soften his somewhat harsh image as the former head of the KGB.

Some fear talk is sincere--others fear it is not

Not to diminish or impugn the sincerity of any of the presidential candidates, but all of the sudden open talk about religion in the context of the upcoming election sounds more like politics as usual than a resurgence of genuine "in God we trust."

Does all this talk of "faith-based" things portend a significant change in the United States (or Russia)? Or will it live only as long as the campaign?

Will U.S. leaders actually lead the nation's citizenry, by example and by policy, to return to God? Time will tell.

Associated Press writer Sandra Sobieraj offers a blunt analysis: "For Gore, the political benefit of religious talk is twofold: it sneaks some ground out from under Republicans who have long dominated the morals debate; and, less overtly, may serve to disassociate him from [President] Clinton's personal scandals" ("Gore Includes Religion in Agenda").

Such overt embracing of religion by politicians has shocked organizations that are dedicated to the separation of church and state. It is indeed confusing in a country that bans religion from its classrooms. Last summer, a New Jersey first grader made national headlines when his teacher, citing First Amendment concerns, wouldn't let him read a story from the Bible to his classmates. A legal battle is currently underway in northern California where the Oroville Union High School barred the valedictorian of the class of 1999 from mentioning God in his valedictory.

It is a well-publicized conundrum that survivors of violence-victimized Columbine High School flocked to *neighborhood churches* for consolation and comfort--at the same time that federal law mandates that public schools maintains a sharp separation between religion and education.

Dropping God's name to get elected

Has the nation made a 180-degree turn to the things of God? Will U.S. leaders actually *lead* the nation's citizenry, by example and by policy, to return to God? Time will tell. For the present, what all have said thus far is a continuation of "politically-correct-speak" voicing support for concepts that are known to have wide appeal with the electorate. That's done, of course, for the sake of winning votes.

This article is not intended to be either anti or pro any political candidate or party, for the United Church of God, which sponsors this magazine, is nonpolitical. Our interest is much deeper than sampling the voter appeal of religion. Turning to God is profoundly more than providing support for the social programs of "faith-based organizations."

Quoting the God that many politicians seemingly want to publicly embrace,

If the campaign rhetoric produces nothing of substance, the speeches will be clouds without water in a moral drought.

"What right have you to declare My statutes, or take My covenant in your mouth, seeing you hate instruction and cast My words behind you?" (Psalm 50:16-17.) It is one thing to want to be photographed with God, so to speak, and quite another to actually do what God says.

Warning of the prevailing self-absorption of people of the last days of human history, the apostle Paul prophesied that societies would be dominated by men and women fettered by obvious indulgences. "But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God..." (2 Timothy 3:1-4).

Who could fail to see the shortcomings of such immoral character? How true are the cries of the candidates for a need to "reset America's moral compass," for its present compass setting is leading the country to certain shipwreck! Where are the leaders who are genuinely guided and live by godly principles instead of by the hedonistic forces listed in the above paragraph?

True faith is not a political issue

The above list of potential causes of corruption goes on to mention *religion*. Or, in keeping with the trends, maybe we should call it "faith-based corruption." Paul spoke of people motivated only by self-interest who have "...*a form of godliness* but *denying its power*" (2 Timothy 3:5). The power of God is able to transform lives *if* people honestly learn what God expects of them, stop doing what God forbids and literally behave as He intends they should.

Unless or until leaders actually embrace the words of God, they only flirt with the illusion of morality. If talk of "faith-based" this or that is only politics as usual, it is cruel talk indeed--so much "faith-based baby kissing." If the campaign rhetoric produces nothing of substance, the speeches will be clouds without water in a moral drought. Rather than follow those who voice such talk, Paul advises "...from such people *turn away*!"

Eugene McCarthy once observed that only two kinds of religion are tolerated in Washington: "vague beliefs strongly affirmed and strong beliefs vaguely expressed" ("Finding God" by Kenneth Woodward and Martha Brant, *Newsweek*, February 7, 2000, page 1).

How far beyond the Washington beltway might this philosophy apply? When it comes to soliciting votes, we suspect it applies the world around.

Calling upon the name of God is not a political ploy to be manipulated as merely another in an endless list of strategies to secure one's election to office. It's for men and women who believe God and will live by His words, regardless of the popularity of those words with the masses.

Sources: *The Christian Science Monitor*; *Nando Media*; *News America Digital Publishing, Inc.*; *AP*; *Agence France-Presse*; *Reuters*; *Electronic Telegraph*; *Newsweek*.

Even So, Come, Lord Jesus!

Facing family tragedy, there was a haunting familiarity in my grief. What I've learned has changed my outlook on the world, and the future.

By Janna Thomas



IN 1999, I KEPT A DEATHWATCH at the bedside of two remarkable women--my mother and my brother's wife. The experience was life altering and profoundly saddening for me. Afterward, I felt older in a way that had nothing to do with the passing of years. I acquired a personal understanding of Ecclesiastes 7:2-4, which states, "Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better."

My mother had been ill for many years and had suffered a great deal. At the end, she was spending more time in the hospital than at home. She began to resist the almost weekly trips that had become torturous for her.

The family prayed for God's guidance. We knew that her life was His alone.

Perhaps we could have held on a little longer with more hospitals, needles and machines--all the things that had become so unbearable to her. We began to feel selfish, hanging on at her expense. She seemed to require our permission to stop fighting a fight that she no longer held a hope of winning.

God guided us to an arduous decision that no one wanted to make. She died at home, under the care of hospice, with her family in attendance. God's presence throughout those last days was almost palpable, dramatizing for me Psalm 48:14, "For this is God, our God forever and ever; He will be our guide even to death."

A second encounter with the enemy

My sister-in-law's death stunned everyone. She collapsed at home, and within 48 hours was on life support. We prayed for a miracle. For reasons only He knows, God did not grant one. She died within hours, leaving my brother with four school-age children.

But death, albeit the enemy, won't be the victor, for God's gift to us is eternal life.

Both my mother and my sister-in-law were strong and tenacious, possessing a determined resolve to beat death. If it were possible to do so, I know they would have. My sister-in-law was renowned for her devotion to her children. Only 24 hours before she died, she insisted resolutely, "Don't worry. I intend to see my girls walk down the aisle." But she was wrong.

The Bible tells us that the last enemy that will be destroyed is death. Death certainly was the enemy to us. Yet, as I watched these strong women in agony, their bodies failing them, I found myself begging God for it, knowing they could no longer ask it for themselves. I had learned that there are indeed worse things than death, like ceaseless suffering, heart-wrenching indignities and the ravaging of the human spirit.

My emotions were a maelstrom. To adequately describe them is impossible. I felt the visceral anguish of impending loss; guilt, real and imagined; sorrowful regret for missed opportunities; and pain like a lava ocean--deep and hot. Capping it all was intense empathy for their suffering. Life was teaching me that sometimes loving best is letting go.

Learning to recognize the pain

There was a haunting familiarity in my pain that I couldn't examine until some time had passed. With God's wisdom and patience, I have since come to recognize it.

God first called me in the early '80s, when I learned about the Kingdom of God, Christ's return and His ruling kingship. I read verses about the kingdoms of this world becoming the kingdom of our Lord, and that He will reign forever and ever! I began to understand the thrilling promise of Revelation 21:4-5 concerning the new heaven and the new earth.

It was wonderfully exciting news, this Kingdom of God. There was just one problem. If all things were to be made new, life as I had known it would have to go. No more life in the fast lane, with 1.5 kids, two cars and a mortgage. Knowing that this fast-paced life would have to go was culture shock to me on a major scale.

I spent a lot of time feeling guilty, experiencing shameful unease whenever I heard an earnestly expressed desire for Christ's return. I did want Him to come back. I just didn't want Him to come yet. I asked myself if I could really be the only one not looking forward to seeing my country, culture and kinfolk destroyed, even for so wonderful an event?

Clinging to the familiar

According to psychologists, we cling to the familiar, even when it is to our detriment. This is a major reason we return to abusive situations, drugs, alcohol and other destructive lifestyles. We find comfort in the known, and are usually quite resistant to change. My world was far from perfect, but it was the only one I had ever known. Even the promise of Utopia--God's Kingdom--didn't completely assuage my unease.

The early Israelites themselves certainly fell victim to this very human trait. God worked unparalleled miracles on their behalf, both to release them from slavery in Egypt, and to sustain them afterwards. He promised to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey. The life He offered must have sounded almost as perfect to them as God's peaceful Kingdom does to us today.

Yet they often complained, desiring to return to the familiarity of the life they had left behind. "We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic," they grumbled in Numbers 11:5. I found myself wondering if I would have really reacted any differently from those early Israelites.

I took my concerns to God, telling Him that I wanted to look forward to Christ's return with my whole heart and soul. I did not want to be like Lot's wife, looking back at the crucial moment.

Time was passing. The world continues the relentless pursuit of sin and depravity that has occupied it for roughly 6,000 years. The end is surely coming, with each day bringing us closer than the one before.

Empathy and grief

Watching pain in others is something I find extraordinarily hard to do. Yet, as a result of the nightly news and other technological wonders of the age, I have had an open window to the world--a world in pain.

I cried for its abused and murdered children, for its evil regimes, genocide, war crimes and other atrocities. Meanwhile, I began to be aware of a feeling I couldn't name-- a strange mixture of sorrowful sadness and empathy. At first it was intermittent, but soon it was nearly always there, underlying everything. I became accustomed to it, like a leaky faucet you never get around to fixing. Still, I couldn't name it. Now I know that it was because I had no frame of reference for it.

What I was feeling was grief--anticipatory grief for a dying world. I was keeping a death vigil, watching helplessly as the disease process ran its course toward a certain end. Sin is a terminal disease --a cancer for which there is no cure except the atoning blood of Jesus Christ. It is often a silent killer, showing itself in all its ugliness only when the end is near, after it has conquered and consumed virtually all that is healthy and good.

There was a haunting familiarity in my pain that I couldn't examine until some time had passed. With God's wisdom and patience, I have since come to recognize it.

Our world today works sin and suffering. The wage it earns is death. God, because He is merciful, will not allow it to remain in its sin forever. The time is rapidly approaching when, like my mother

and sister-in-law, the pain of holding on will be greater than that of letting go.

But death, albeit the enemy, won't be the victor, for God's gift to us is eternal life. As 1 Corinthians 15:57 says, He "gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Isaiah 26:19 describes that victory:

"But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning; the earth will give birth to her dead" (NIV).

God is infinitely patient, answering prayers in the fullness of His time. In the final chapter of Revelation, John says, "He who testifies to these things says, 'Surely I am coming quickly'" (22:20). It has been a long process, but I can now kneel and pray with fervent sincerity, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!"

Unleavened Recipes



Thanks for all the delicious recipes sent in by our readers. Let us know what your favorites are!

Brownies
Linda Cole, Oregon

1/3 cup shortening
1 cup sugar
1/4 teaspoon salt
2 eggs
1/2 vanilla
1/3 cup cocoa
2/3 cup flour
1/2 cup nuts

Mix all ingredients, bake for 30 minutes at 350 degrees Fahrenheit.

Coconut Bars
Linda Cole, Oregon

1/2 cup shortening
1 1/2 cups brown sugar
1 1/4 cups flour
1 teaspoon vanilla
2 eggs
1 cup chopped nuts
1 1/2 cups coconut
3/4 teaspoon salt

Cream shortening; add 1/2 cup sugar, 1 cup flour and 1/4 teaspoon salt. Mix well, spread into greased 9 inch by 12 inch pan. Bake in 375 degree Fahrenheit oven for 10 minutes. Mix remaining ingredients and spread evenly over mixture in pan. Bake 20 minutes more. Cut into 1 inch strips.

Deep Pan Pizza
Mary Ann Aust, Alabama

Crust batter:
1 1/2 cups flour
1 teaspoon salt
1 1/2 teaspoon Italian seasoning or leaf oregano
2 eggs
1 cup milk

Topping:
1 1/2 pounds ground beef
Onion
1 small can mushrooms, drained
1 can pizza sauce
8 ounces shredded mozzarella cheese
Optional: black olives and green peppers

Mix the eggs, milk, flour, salt and seasoning together. Pour it into a 9 by 13 inch greased pan.

Brown the ground beef and onion. Add mushrooms. Arrange topping over batter. Bake in oven at 425 degrees Fahrenheit for 25 minutes. Remove from oven. Top with pizza sauce and cheese. Return to oven for 10 minutes.

Farfel Cheese Rolls

Patti Josifek, California

2 cups matzo farfel
2 cups boiling water
4 egg whites
1 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese
1 tablespoon oil

Preheat oven to 425 degrees Fahrenheit. In a bowl, mix all ingredients. Coat a non-stick cookie sheet with cooking spray. Drop batter by the tablespoonful onto the cookie sheet. Place on bottom oven rack and bake for 5 to 7 minutes. Spray tops with cooking spray, turn over and continue baking for another 5 minutes.

Makes 16.

Flourless Chocolate Cake

for the chocoholic with discriminating taste

Ms. Terry Kay Hoffman, Arizona

Cake:
12 ounces bittersweet (not unsweetened) or semisweet chocolate
3/4 cup (1 1/2 sticks) unsalted butter
6 large eggs, separated
12 tablespoons sugar
2 teaspoons vanilla extract
Glaze:
1/2 cup whipping cream
1/2 cup dark corn syrup
9 ounces bittersweet (not unsweetened) or semisweet chocolate



Preheat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Butter a 9-inch-diameter springform pan. Line bottom of pan with waxed paper; butter paper. Wrap outside of pan with foil. Melt chocolate and butter together in heavy saucepan until smooth. Remove from heat and cool to lukewarm, stirring often.

Using electric mixer, beat egg yolks and 6 tablespoons sugar in large bowl until mixture is very thick and pale, about 3 minutes. Fold lukewarm chocolate mixture into yolk mixture, then fold in vanilla extract. Using clean, dry beaters, beat egg whites in another large bowl until soft peaks form. Gradually add remaining 6 tablespoons sugar, beating until medium-firm peaks are formed. Fold whites into chocolate mixture in 3 additions. Pour batter into prepared pan.

Bake cake until top is puffed and cracked and tester inserted into center comes out with some moist crumbs attached, about 50 minutes. Cool cake in pan on rack (cake will fall). Gently press

down crusty top to make evenly thick cake. Loosen cake from sides with knife and remove pan sides. Turn cake over onto serving plate and peel off waxed paper.

For glaze: Bring cream and corn syrup to simmer in medium saucepan. Remove from heat and add chocolate, whisking until melted and smooth. Spread 1/2 cup of glaze smoothly over top and sides of cake and place in freezer for approximately 3 minutes to set. Pour remaining glaze over the cake and smooth over sides and top. Chill until glaze is firm, about 1 hour.

Garnish with fresh mint leaves or fresh raspberries. Cut in wedges and serve at room temperature. Note: cake will have a very moist texture.

Light as a Feather Waffles

Richard A. "Tige" Herndon, Colorado



4 large eggs, separated
1/2 stick butter
1 cup sour cream
1/4 cup oat flour
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract

Cream butter until smooth then add egg yokes followed by sour cream, flour and vanilla. Beat egg whites until stiff but not dry then fold into other ingredients. Bake in preheated waffle iron. The oat flour not only makes these special but lower in carbohydrates.

Makes one large waffle to serve four (or two very hungry people).

Mini Pecan Muffins

Nancy Worthen, Texas

2 eggs (well beaten)
1 teaspoon vanilla
1/2 cup unbleached flour or whole wheat pastry flour
1 cup raw brown sugar
1 heaping cup chopped pecans
1/4 pound melted butter

Mix all ingredients well, then add pecans last. Spoon out into well buttered mini muffin pans. Do not preheat pans or butter used to grease the muffin pans. Bake in 350 degree Fahrenheit oven for 25 minutes.

Should make 24 mini muffins.

Passover Indian Rolls

Patti Josifek, California

3/4 cup matzo meal
1/4 cup potato starch
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon onion powder
Dash white pepper
1 cup water
1 tablespoon oil
3 egg whites
Cooking spray
1 teaspoon minced garlic
2 scallions, chopped
3 tablespoons chopped cilantro

Preheat oven to 375 degrees Fahrenheit. In a medium bowl, combine dry ingredients. In a saucepan, bring water and oil to a boil. Mix into matzo meal mixture. Add egg whites, one at a time, and beat thoroughly after each one. Beat for 2 minutes. Set aside for 10 minutes. Coat skillet with cooking spray and fry garlic and scallions together for a minute. Add cilantro, stir for one minute more. Generously coat a foil-covered cookie sheet with cooking spray and drop matzo batter by the spoonful. Slightly flatten each and make an indentation in the center. Place 1/2 teaspoon of the onion-garlic mixture in each indentation. Bake for 35 to 40 minutes. Pull up from foil immediately.

Makes 10 rolls.

Ricotta Pancakes

Richard A. "Tige" Herndon, Colorado



1 cup ricotta cheese
4 large eggs
1/3 cup oat flour
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
1 tablespoon melted butter
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/4 teaspoon grated nutmeg
2 tablespoons powdered egg whites

Blend all ingredients in food processor or blender then pour onto hot buttered griddle. Powdered egg whites (Just Whites) add body, but can be omitted for thinner cakes.

Serves two or more.

Spiced Shortbread

Pat Jones, Tennessee



1/2 cup granulated white sugar
1 cup butter (2 sticks)
2 1/2 cups all purpose flour
1 teaspoon cardamom, ground
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract
1/4 teaspoon pure almond extract

Icing:
1 cup powdered sugar
1/4 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/4 teaspoon almond extract
1 1/2 to 2 1/2 tablespoons milk

Preheat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Grease a glass 8 inch by 8 inch pan. Beat room temperature butter and sugar together until fluffy. Sift in flour and cardamom, add vanilla and almond extracts and mix well. The dough will be on the dry and crumbly side. Press the dough evenly and firmly into the pan. Bake for 30 to 35 minutes, until the edges are golden and center is firm to the touch. Cut into squares while warm, then let cool before icing.

To prepare icing, sift sugar into a small bowl. Add pure vanilla extract and pure almond extract. Drizzle in milk while mixing with a small whisk or fork. Add milk slowly enough that you can stop when a good drizzling consistency is reached.

Yields 24 small squares. Preparation time is 10 minutes and baking time is 30 to 35 minutes.

Strawberry Bars
Patti Josifek, California

3/4 cup strawberry jam or preserves
1 cup sliced almonds

Glaze:
1/3 cup (5 1/3 tablespoons) unsalted butter
1/4 cup sugar
1/4 cup apple juice
2 tablespoons honey

Crust:
1 3/4 cup flour
1/2 cup sugar
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup unsalted butter, softened
1 large egg, beaten

Preheat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Lightly butter a 15 by 10 by 1 inch baking pan. Puree strawberry jam so it will spread evenly.

To make glaze: In small saucepan, combine butter, sugar, apple juice and honey. Heat to boiling over low heat; boil 1 minute. Remove from heat and set aside until ready to use.

To make crust: In a large bowl, stir together flour, sugar and salt. Cut in butter until pieces are very fine. Add egg and blend until texture comes together. Crumble mixture evenly over bottom of pan. Press dough into an even layer.

Place strawberry jam in small saucepan and heat just until it is warmed and easy to spread. Spread in thin layer over cookie dough. Sprinkle evenly with almonds. Drizzle with honey glaze. Bake bars for 25 minutes. Cool before cutting into bars.

Makes 28 bars.

Unleavened Pizza

Katherine Rowland, Indiana

This is my original recipe, modified from the one my mother has been using for over 20 years. It was a family favorite while I was growing up, and is still a favorite now that I have my own family.



Crust:
2 1/3 cups + 1/4 cup all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons olive oil (I prefer extra-virgin)
1/2 cup milk
1 egg
1/3 cup warm water
Topping:
1 1/3 cups tomato-based pasta sauce
2 1/2 - 3 cups shredded cheddar cheese
2 cups shredded mozzarella cheese
1/4 teaspoon dried chopped onion
1/4 teaspoon Italian seasoning**
1 tablespoon Parmesan cheese
3 tablespoons sliced black olives
1/4 cup canned sliced mushrooms

Preheat oven to 425 degrees Fahrenheit. Grease large baking sheet; if desired, sprinkle with cornmeal. Put 2 1/3 cups flour in large, greased mixing bowl. Add olive oil. Mix milk and egg, then add to flour mixture. Stir until mixture is moist and crumbly. Add water gradually until mixture clings together (you may not use all of the water). Use fingers to shape dough into a ball. On lightly floured surface, knead in enough of the remaining flour to make a dough that is smooth and elastic, and not sticky. Roll into a 15 inch by 10 inch rectangle; place onto baking sheet. use a fork to prick the crust evenly. Build up edges slightly. Place in oven for 12 minutes or just until golden.

Remove and spread evenly with pasta sauce. Sprinkle with cheeses, olives and mushrooms. Be sure to spread toppings evenly to edges. Sprinkle with seasoning and onions. Return to oven for 15 minutes or until cheese is melted. Let cool for five minutes before cutting.

Serves four.

**If you like, you may substitute equal parts of oregano and thyme and a pinch of rosemary.

Unleavened Popovers

Linda Cole, Oregon

1 cup flour
2 eggs
1 cup milk
Dash of salt

Preheat oven at 425 degrees Fahrenheit. Blend all ingredients until smooth and bubbly. Grease muffin tins well with butter. Pour batter into muffin cups 1/3 full. Bake 30 to 40 minutes.