Virtual Christian Magazine
Hope And Encouragement For The Real World

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Four Thousand Years of Christmas

By Gary Petty

It's the season for mistletoe and decorating the tree. But the origins of Christmas may surprise you. Did you know it was outlawed by one of the American colonies in 1659?



IT'S CALLED THE "SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS." The ringing of sleigh bells on a snow-covered night, Tiny Tim turning the heart of Scrooge, Santa Claus and flying reindeer--for many, it seems, the birth of Jesus takes a back seat to mythology, packed shopping malls and revelry. Every year, signs in front of neighborhood churches remind people to "Put Christ back into Christmas." Or, "Jesus is the reason for the season."

But is He?

In his book, *4,000 Years of Christmas--A Gift From the Ages* (1997), Episcopalian priest Earl Count enthusiastically relates historical connections between the custom of exchanging gifts on the 12 days of Christmas and customs originating in ancient, pagan Babylon. He shows that mistletoe was adopted from Druid mystery rituals and that the December 25 date has more to do with the ancient Roman Saturnalia celebration than with Jesus Christ.

Early Church celebration?

Not surprisingly, nowhere in the New Testament do we see Jesus' disciples observing the day of His birth. In fact, as late as the third century, the early Catholic theologian Origen was teaching against the celebration of Christ's birthday.

The first-century Greek city of Corinth was filled with various



polytheistic religions. Customs included temple prostitution and priests who performed sacrifices to the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods. The apostle Paul writes to these people in 1 Corinthians 10:19-21: "What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons."

Quite familiar to early Christians was the Saturnalia, an ancient Roman festival celebrated during the last days of December in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture. Many ancient religions conducted festivals at this time of year, the time of the winter solstice, when days are the shortest, to appease the various gods to restore the sun and bring an end to winter. The Roman Saturnalia included drunkenness, debauchery and other practices diametrically opposed to the teachings of Christ.

Yet this holiday would eventually develop into Christmas. What happened to change many Christians from Paul's stance of abhorring and resisting pagan forms of worship to accepting and participating in the name of Jesus Christ?

Tremendous forces were pressuring Christians away from the apostles' original teachings to avoid mixing idolatry with the worship of the true God. Thousands of pagans, while outwardly converting to Christianity, refused to give up the rituals and ceremonies of their former religious experiences.

Dr. Count sums up this historical struggle: "To the pagans, the Saturnalia were fun. To the Christians, the Saturnalia were an abomination in homage to a disreputable god who had no existence anyway. The Christians, moreover, were dedicated to the slow, uphill task of converting these roistering pagan Romans.

"There were many immigrants into the ranks of the Christians by this time, but the Church Fathers discovered to their alarm that they were also facing an invasion of pagan customs. The habit of the Saturnalia was too strong to be left behind. At first the Church forbade it, but in vain. When a river meets a boulder that will not be moved, the river flows around it. If the Saturnalia would not be forbidden, let it be tamed."



To adopt such pagan observance, December 25, the date of the Roman Brumalia, immediately following Saturnalia, was identified as the date of Christ's birth (even though biblical evidence shows this cannot be so). This date also marked a great festival in Mithraism, the Persian religion of the sun god. In A.D. 274, Roman Emperor Aurelian declared it the "birthday of the invincible sun." In time the Son of God, Jesus Christ, became indistinguishable from the pagan sun god in the minds of hundreds of thousands of "converts" throughout the Roman Empire.

Instead of being Christ's force for change in the world, nominal Christianity was changed *by* the pagan world it was supposed to transform.

Dr. Count relates: "There exists a letter from the year 742 AD, in which Saint Boniface... complains to Pope Zacharias that his labors to convert the heathen Franks and Alemans--Germanic tribes--were being handicapped by the escapades of the Christian Romans back home. The Franks and the Alemans were on the threshold of becoming Christians, but their conversion was retarded by their enjoyment of lurid carnivals. When Boniface tried to turn them away from such customs, they argued that they had seen them celebrated under the very shadow of Saint Peter's in Rome. Embarrassed and sorry, Pope Zacharias replied... admitting that the people in the city of Rome behaved very badly at Christmas time."

Over the centuries

Over the following centuries Christmas absorbed customs from German, Scandinavian and Celtic paganism like the yule log, decorating evergreen trees and hanging mistletoe.



In the Middle Ages, Christmas observances in Europe continued the excesses of Saturnalia. Penne Restad, in *Christmas in America--A History*, writes of the moral debate that raged: "Some clergy stressed that fallen humankind needed a season of abandonment and excess, as long as it was carried on under the umbrella of Christian supervision. Others argued that all vestiges of paganism must be removed from the holiday. Less fervent Christians complained about the unreasonableness of Church law and its attempt to change custom. Yet the Church sustained the hope that sacred would eventually overtake profane as pagans gave up their revels and turned to Christianity."

It didn't happen. Some Protestant Reformers tried reforming Christmas, but created little real change. The English Puritans waged a war on Christmas observance as unchristian behavior.

A *U.S. News and World Report* cover story, "In Search of Christmas," states: "When Christmas landed on American shores, it fared little better. In colonial times, Christ's birth was celebrated as a wildly social event--if it was celebrated at all... Puritans in New England flatly refused to observe the holiday" (Dec. 23, 1996, p. 60).

In more modern times many Christians have become concerned about the commercialization of the day that is supposed to celebrate the birth of the Son of God. Parades featuring Santa Claus sponsored by department stores, half-price sales, incessant TV and radio commercials--Christmas has become more about the accountant's bottom line than about worshiping God.

Many people approach the Yuletide season with a vague longing for a Christmas with more spiritual meaning and less commercialism. But is our fast-paced, commercial rendition of Christmas the real problem, or is there something wrong with Christmas itself?

Put Christ back in Christmas?

Christmas has become such a central holiday of American culture that it's difficult to get anyone to truly evaluate its Christian validity. You be the jury!

The facts are these: Jesus wasn't born on December 25. Christ's apostles rejected pagan ceremonies and rituals in their worship and told Christians to likewise avoid them. The early Church didn't observe Jesus' birthday. The selection of December 25 as Christ's supposed birthday was based on the dates of the Roman Saturnalia and Brumalia--a time for worshiping the god Saturn.



Most Christmas customs--decorating the evergreen tree, use of mistletoe, exchanging of gifts, Santa Claus--come not from the Bible but from pagan religions. For centuries Christianity tried unsuccessfully to rid itself of the paganism of Christmas. Throughout its history Christmas has propagated drunken parties. And the modern holiday is more about convincing children to hassle their parents to buy toys than worshiping Christ.

What is the biblical verdict? Some will say, "But we can't take Christmas away from the children." Others: "As long as it brings people to Jesus, what does it matter?" But what counts is what God says. The verdict of both the Bible and history is clear.

Earlier we saw Paul's instructions to Christians in the pagan city of Corinth. He continues his instructions in 2 Corinthians: "For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? ... Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? ...

"Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you... ' Therefore... let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (6:14-7:1).

The crucial question is, how can we put Jesus back into the season--when He was never part of it to begin with? It's a difficult question, isn't it? But it's one that's vitally important for you to answer correctly.

This article is based on the transcript of a Good News *radio broadcast.* Good News Radio *is heard on stations across the United States. For an Internet listing of stations and times or to download radio programs, go to* www.ucg.org/radio. *You can also download or request the free booklet offered on this program--*Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?.

The World Has Changed Forever

By John A. Jewell

Since September 11 our world has changed dramatically, and the need to proclaim Christ's message of hope has become more urgent.



AFTER THE TERRORIST ATTACKS of September 11, we all returned home to life in a world which, as the press said, had "changed forever." Indeed, subsequent events are now showing us how much the world has changed.

Past terror

I was a young teenager in England during World War II. My school years included gas mask drills and air raid drills where each day we would file in an orderly fashion to the nearest shelter. Each night I slept inside a steel mesh and steel plate indoor Morrison shelter set up in the dining room, listening to heavy aircraft overhead. In the earlier years of the war, the engines had the distinctive sound of the German Junkers bombers. As the war progressed, there was a different note to the engines as the Allies' Lancasters and Flying Fortresses flew eastwards. Then came a new sound--that of the engines of approaching flying bombs, the V-1 bombs launched by Nazi Germany to kill those who had done nothing except be born British. Following the flying bombs came the supersonic V-2 rockets. My school was destroyed by a V-2 the day before we were due back from school holidays.

We lived with the daily danger of anti-personnel bombs, dropped at night and designed to attract the attention of curious children. Bombs such as the butterfly bomb were of odd structure and looked very unlike a bomb. But touch it and it would explode.

My father served as a Royal Naval Reserve engineer officer on ocean-going tugboats ready to tow back to England any ships of the Russian convoys to Murmansk, or Archangel, that might

have been damaged by predatory U-boats. My wife's father served in the Royal Navy and was torpedoed twice in quick succession in the China seas. He was rescued by the Japanese and then imprisoned in a camp in Java. He died in that camp just as the war with Japan was ending. My wife, Tina, born and brought up in Plymouth in southwestern England, was witness to a bomb in her own back garden and to the destruction of the city in virtually 48 hours.

Since the end of World War II many conflicts have brought untold suffering upon the people of this world. My wife and I have served as a minister to God's people in both Northern and Southern Ireland. We lived and worked there for five years from 1982. We became very familiar with the roadblocks, the security and the obscenity of the bombings, the shootings and the knee-cappings (destroying a person's kneecaps with a pistol or bat) by paramilitaries on both sides of the religious divide.

Who, in their worst nightmare, could have imagined such an appalling event as the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York?

However, over all the years that have passed since the declaration of war in 1939, we have never witnessed such a situation as is facing the world today. Who, in their worst nightmare, could have imagined such an appalling event as the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York? In a few moments all those thousands of people dead, thousands of families bereaved of their loved ones. Sudden death and suffering without even the formality of a declaration of war.

The newspapers said "the world will never be the same again." Indeed it won't be and it isn't! Since the 11th of September, hostilities have opened in Afghanistan against the terrorists and those who give them aid. It is possible that we are now about to witness the death of many thousands of people in that area from starvation, from the rigors of a severe winter or from war.

As I write, further terrorist attacks continue in the United States by the use of biological means. Even if this does not result in mass murder of innocent civilians, it may result in a number of deaths and more sorrowing families, generate panic and disrupt government.

A world held captive

Why? The real reason is beyond anything you will read in your newspapers. This world is *not* God's world. It is held captive by a spirit being who was originally known as Lucifer, or light-bringer, but who became Satan, Apollyon or Abaddon. These last two names mean "destroyer."

We cannot remain on the sidelines! The issue truly is one of life or death. God says, "Choose life."

Satan is intent on destroying you! And not just you, but the whole of mankind, and even the very planet itself. Is this a far-fetched concept in today's world? Even just 10 years ago it would have been! Even 12 months ago, would you have prophesied the way the world is now?

Satan and his demonic cohorts know they have but little time (Revelation 12:12). They know their ultimate fate! In the meantime they want to wreak as much destruction on the earth as they possibly can. But God will bring their destructive activities to a halt.

Bringing the message of hope

However, right now we are looking into the abyss with the dreadful prospect of witnessing even worse things coming upon this world before the real hope for humanity, Jesus Christ, steps in and sets up the government of God on this earth. The scripture in 2 Timothy 3:13 says that evil men will grow worse and worse as we near the end of this age and the return of Jesus Christ. Knowing this truth, we have to maintain faith, direction and our commitment to Jesus Christ, to God the Father and His work. We have to dedicate ourselves, as God makes it possible, to taking the only message of hope that there is for this poor, suffering planet. Let us join in bringing that message of hope to the people of this world.

We cannot remain on the sidelines! There is a battle going on and we are part of it. In World War I there was a famous poster showing General Kitchener pointing at the onlooker. The slogan on that poster read "England needs you!" Today there is another war, another poster with another slogan (metaphorically speaking), which reads, "God's work needs you!" The battle we face is for a people and a planet. The issue truly is one of life or death. God says, "Choose life."

If you would like to understand more about God and His plan and the times we live in, request the following free biblical literature: Who Is God?, Is There Really a Devil?, The Book of Revelation Unveiled and World News & Prophecy.

We look forward to being of greater service to all those God calls as we seek to serve our heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

A Little Help in a Big Storm

By Hector M. Earle

An outpouring of concern brings a community together in distant Newfoundland after the tragic events in New York.



I WAS READING THE CLASSIC BOOK by Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, to my sixth graders when suddenly we were interrupted by the sound of jet engines overhead. Rushing to the windows we saw three low-flying jumbo jets in the skies above our school.

Seeing planes overhead is not a new sight for the residents in our area of Newfoundland since we are located not too far from Gander's international airport. But on this day these aircraft were unusually low and they appeared to be in a holding pattern waiting to land. By this time my students were all excited and as any sixth grade teacher knows, once you have "lost" your students, it's hard to get their attention back again. Therefore I decided the best thing to do was to stop the reading and check with some of my colleagues to see if anyone knew what was going on. In the hallway I was informed by another teacher that the World Trade Center in New York City was hit by two passenger airliners and another had crashed into the Pentagon.

Suddenly, the routines of our little K-12 school of about 300 students and 23 teachers was a buzz with the reports that these disasters may have been the result of a terrorist attack on our neighbor to the south. The news came hard and fast as we learned from radio and television reports that another plane was down in western Pennsylvania and there could be more disasters to come. Needless to say, a sinking sick feeling of shock and horror swept through our school. Teachers were trying to cope with the news as best they could while others were trying to keep order in their classrooms.



When I returned to my class, the kids informed me that the planes they saw earlier had gone and the students were afraid those planes may have crashed too. I assured them the best I could that this was unlikely and they probably landed at Gander.

On the intercom the principal summoned me to come to my office (I am the assistant principal) and quickly arranged for another teacher to fill in for me. In the outer office I saw senior high school students coming and going with dozens of questions and wondering what was going to happen next. Nobody was in any mood for classes. The principal and I decided that the best thing to do was to have all of our high school students assemble in the gym and watch the news of the disasters unfold on one of the leading American news channels.

The images of those two planes crashing into the twin towers will be forever seared into our minds. Some wept, while others held hands in support of one another. I whispered a word of prayer as my mind focused on the last day "perilous times" the apostle Paul spoke of in 2 Timothy 3:1-5.



We also learned from the news that all airports in the United States were shut down and many incoming international flights to America were diverted to Canada. Shortly after, we were informed that Gander had received no less than 32 international flights with approximately six thousand passengers stranded on the tarmac waiting to be checked out by Canadian customs before being allowed off.

The next day all residents in the surrounding area rallied in support of these stranded passengers. Suddenly five schools were shut down and makeshift shelters were set up. Free hotel rooms were made available and people opened up their homes to welcome anyone who needed a hot meal, a good bath and a place to stay. Our school was designated as a supply center and towels, soap, blankets, pillows and a host of life's other necessities poured in and was quickly delivered to the sites in Gander.

Hundreds of volunteers converged on the schools to bring in all the necessary supplies and food to make the passengers feel as comfortable as possible. Also, free telephone and Internet services were provided to the passengers to get in contact with loved ones, while counseling and clergy support was set up to assist anyone traumatized by the tragedy.

Towns outside Gander also rushed to help as many residents offered free room and board and volunteered free transportation to and from the stores and malls. For seven days and nights the town of Gander and her surrounding communities opened their arms to strangers. By the time the last plane took off, these strangers had become friends with bonds that will last a lifetime.

By the time the last plane took off, these strangers had become friends with bonds that will last a lifetime.

There is an old saying, "Those who help others, help themselves." Certainly this held true for us in the events that surrounded the September 11 tragedy. In our attempt to help these stranded passengers feel a little more at home in the midst of trouble in their homeland, we brought ourselves together in the spirit of oneness and community. I can't help but think that

when the perilous last-day events prophesied in the Scriptures are over, and Christ returns to set up His Kingdom, we will all be together as one in the wonderful world to come. Until then, let us continue to love our neighbors as ourselves with outgoing concern toward others.

What Cancer Cannot Do

By Janet Treadway

Cancer is a hideous, fearsome thing seeking to rob us of what we love. But there are many things that cancer cannot take away from us.



AS I GAZED INTO HER HOSPITAL ROOM, I noticed all the flowers. In the bed lay a very frail lady, hooked up to morphine to kill the pain. How could this be the same lady who only a few weeks before was hopping into her car going to work every day? Why, she hadn't even taken a vacation in 11 years. She cared for her sister, her huge house and, at the age of 75, worked 40 hours a week.

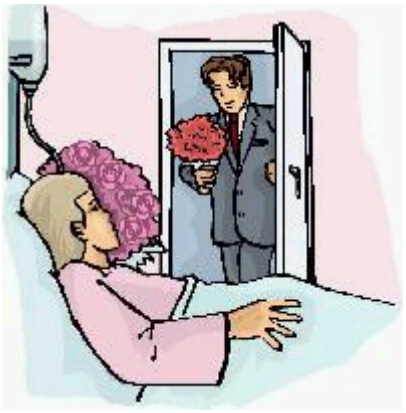
Our family prided ourselves that my mother-in-law was so strong and independent for her age. We just knew we would become frail and die before she did. She never complained and would not ask anyone to do anything for her. Now here she lay totally dependent on people to even take her to the bathroom.

It was just a few weeks ago that Dorothy, my mother-in-law, called my husband to take her to the hospital. She was in horrible pain. But while en route she had some loose ends to take care of. She needed to drop some things off at work before caring for herself!

A few days after taking her to the hospital I sat with my husband in a small room listening to the doctor tell us all the places that the cancer was. It might have been faster for him had he told us where it was not. She was not given any chance of surviving it. The best thing they could do for her now was to try and make her comfortable by reducing the horrible pain.

Cancer became a sickness to our family as well. Now I spend my mornings taking her for her radiation treatments. Keeping track of different doctor visits and giving her medication. Fighting with the insurance companies. Sitting in the waiting room and reading magazines and booklets on cancer in hopes of finding suggestions on diet and food she can eat without throwing up.

I have entered into a new world of people who are sick and



fighting cancer. I watch as friends and relatives bring in their loved ones for treatment. I can see the strain on some of the caregivers' faces.

It is emotionally draining as I try to stay positive for my mother-in-law, while crying alone or to a friend. At times I feel I am in a nightmare with no end in sight.

As I read our church prayer list, it seems to grow each week, with others being hit with the same dread problem. I also realize that many of us are facing, if we have not already faced it, caring for an aging or sick parent, while trying to care for our own families and maintain an outside job. The task can be unbearably hard without help from God. But is it up to God alone to give us help? How can we be involved in helping families who are dealing with such trials? And how can we cope if we are faced with cancer ourselves?

Here are some things that I have reflected on. I hope they can help you in dealing with such a trial, whether you are caring for someone who is sick or you have been told you have cancer yourself.

Stay close to God

You will need every ounce of strength that you can muster to deal with someone who is sick or with your own sickness. You need encouragement. Go to God and pour out your frustrations, anger, fear and sense of helplessness to Him. Your body can be severely afflicted and you may have a great struggle, but if you trust in God's love, then your spirit will remain strong. "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Remember, our greatest enemy is not the disease, but despair.

Find a support group

There are many help groups listed on the Internet including one just for caregivers. Find a positive, patient friend who will listen to your frustrations and calm your fears.

Love your family

Take the time to love your family. Our family has made this a team effort to help with my mother-in-law. My sons and daughter sit with her while I take a much-needed break. They help with taking her to the doctor and other tasks that may arise. This has caused me to love and appreciate my family so much more because we are pulling together in this. The times with my grandchildren are so much more enjoyable. My husband has taken more time to say I love you to his adult children. Life is just too uncertain to take each other for granted.

Learn to accept and adapt

Accepting the battles that we must go through and learning to adapt will make the course much easier. No matter what life throws at us, it is always going to be temporary. Paul, who himself suffered great trials, said in Philippians 4:12-13, "I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be

hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

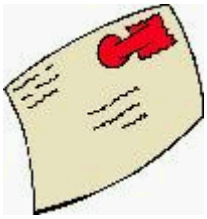
How others can help lighten the load

Ask how you can help.

Offer to sit with the family member who is sick to give the caregiver a break.

Bring cooked food over. The caregiver is often so overwhelmed with many things and details that cooking is one area that can give welcomed relief.

Don't say "keep me posted" or "let me know how you are doing." Make it a point to call and find out. This makes the person feel that you really care.



Send a card. My mother-in-law often cries when she reads the verses in the cards or the kind encouragements. It gives her hope.

Now we all know what cancer can do, but here is what cancer cannot do, because it is so limited.

What Cancer Cannot Do

It cannot cripple love,
It cannot shatter hope,
It cannot corrode faith,
It cannot eat away peace,
It cannot destroy confidence,
It cannot kill friendship,
It cannot shut out memories,
It cannot silence courage,
It cannot reduce eternal life,
It cannot quench the Spirit,
It cannot lessen the power of the resurrection.

A couple of months have passed since the trial began, and we are still struggling with my mother-in-law's illness. We are learning to take one day at a time and live it as if it is our last. We live it knowing that God will walk through the day with us holding our hand, catching our tears and giving us great comfort. We are also given strength through the concern from our many loving friends.

Cancer can kill the body, but it cannot kill the hope nor the reality of eternal life. Keep your focus on God and the hope He holds out to all of us, that when this body is no more we can be given a new life--a life for all eternity!

"Son, You Never Quit"

By Joe Bellefeuille

Three time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong's battle for his life teaches a powerful lesson of persistence.



LANCE ARMSTRONG, THE AMERICAN CYCLIST, won his third consecutive Tour de France on July 29, 2001. The American news media triumphantly announced that he had won this grueling 2,000-plus mile race doing especially well in the difficult mountainous terrain.

Although I am not an ardent sports fan, the news of Lance Armstrong's victory was very satisfying to me, personally, because of all that he has gone through during his brief three decades of life.

According to his autobiography, *It's Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life*, Lance grew up in a suburb of Dallas, Texas. His mother, a petite woman, was 17 years old when he was born. She was not married at the time. Life was very difficult for them. She struggled to provide for him.

She did, however, impart pearls of wisdom to him. One was, "Make every obstacle an opportunity." Another was, "Son, you never quit." That latter statement stayed with him as he strove to excel athletically.

He tried a number of sports before finding his niche with bicycle racing. His whole life eventually began to revolve around racing. In no time he was into big league, serious racing. He was tempted to quit, but he remembered what his mom had said, and many times stayed the course.

Then everything looked hopeless...

When he turned 25, he got terrible headaches, started coughing up blood and noticed an enlarged testicle. He went to doctors who diagnosed him



with testicular cancer, which was spreading very rapidly. Then he discovered that, because of a job change, he had no health insurance. He read and researched everything he could get his hands on about testicular cancer and explored all treatment options. Then his doctors found cancer on his brain and in his abdomen. Everything looked hopeless.

He decided on a plan of treatment and immediately started it. Brain surgery was done and it was successful. A friend arranged for medical coverage. He had a heavy dose of chemotherapy which was devastating--full of pain, vomiting and misery. At times he couldn't talk or eat or even watch TV, but he fought on.

After his last chemotherapy treatment, he talked to children who were cancer patients, telling them, "You have to fight!" He started a charitable foundation. Then he went back home, tried to put his life back together and waited for one year to pass to see if the cancer returned. Blood was drawn each week and analyzed.

At the end of the year there was good news. The cancer hadn't returned. Although it was extremely hard, he set about to return to professional bicycle racing, and beyond all odds he succeeded. His amazing wins in cycling's most prestigious race, the Tour de France, have given him a place in history. Now he is married with a young son (Luke David) and at the time of writing he is expecting twin girls. (His children were conceived through in vitro fertilization from semen stored prior to the cancer treatment.)

"So if there is a purpose to the suffering that is cancer, I think it must be this: it's meant to improve us."

Inspiring insights

After all is said and done, what did Lance Armstrong learn from this? Although he is not a church-going, religious-type person, he has some insights that are positively inspired.

He states, "So if there is a purpose to the suffering that is cancer, I think it must be this: it's meant to improve us" (page 273). Does this sound familiar? It's similar to Romans 8:28, "God causes all things to work together for good" (NASB).

He also said, "My illness was humbling... it forced me to survey my life.... I found that I had a lot of growing to do...the old me did die and I was given a second life.... When I was sick, I saw more beauty and triumph and truth in a single day than I ever did in a bike race" (page 4).

Christian parallels

In a number of ways Lance Armstrong's life parallels the journey of many Christians and of the Church of God itself. Things were going along with the usual trials and many triumphs. Then, bang! Everything seemed to be falling apart. One major disaster followed another. At such times, the cancer of doubt and disbelief spreads rapidly. When facing crisis, some, like Lance, dig in and do a ton of (scriptural) research, and offer up a whole lot of prayer too. Some use the crisis to draw closer to God.

After a crisis it seems Christians and the Body (the Church) must slowly recover. I have been

encouraged to see that people who have faced great trials are enduring, that there is still a light shining to the world, that the gospel of God's glorious Kingdom is being preached. The admonition of Matthew 24:13 to endure to the end is being heeded or, as Lance Armstrong's mother said, "Son, you never quit."

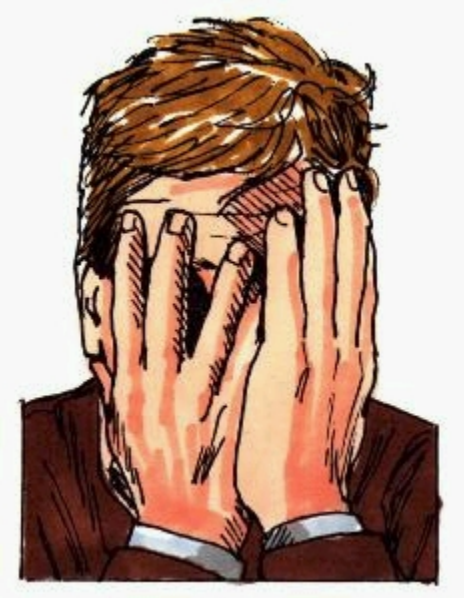
Let's encourage one another to continue our spiritual race so that we, like Lance Armstrong, will cross the finish line victorious.

Virtual Christian Magazine Editorial

Real Men Don't Cry

By Robert Berendt

Society has drilled into our heads that "real men" don't show emotions. Is that really what the Creator intended?



REAL MEN DON'T CRY? That's a lie! When I was a boy growing into manhood, I heard this phrase about real men quite often. It was considered a sign of weakness if a man wept. I can remember swallowing hard and blinking back the tears to make sure nobody could see that I felt emotion so strongly. To this day, I try not to show how I really feel. I suspect all men have similar thoughts.

I have learned that some of the most courageous and brave men have also shed tears. If real men don't cry, then we could not classify Jesus Christ (the hardworking carpenter who went on to experience terrible torture without flinching) as a "real man" because He wept on occasion (John 11:35). As a matter of fact, the Bible records many instances of men weeping. Courageous warriors like King David and strong followers of Jesus like Peter and Paul wept. We read of men like Job, who withstood all that Satan could throw at him, shedding tears at times. Great leaders like Joseph are recorded to have wept on occasions that were deep emotional experiences for them. With such a cloud of witnesses it is clear that to say "real men don't cry" is a lie.

We can read in the Bible of whole nations that were weeping. It is true that different cultures view things differently. Some groups of people are more emotional than others. Our culture taught that men do not cry, and so we struggle mightily to hide what we feel or at least hide the tears. I would say that every man who is normal has shed tears some time or another. It could be at the death of a loved one, the sympathy one feels towards a friend or at the calamity one sees in the world.



Then there are the tears of joy brought by unexpected examples of kindness, by relief from doubt, by discovering incredible truths. One man said, "I think I shed more tears of joy than grief. Maybe it is because I grit my teeth at grief and disappointment or, just maybe, it is because I see more examples in the Church which point to God's way to life and bring tears to my eyes."

We all have emotions and though we hold them in check, those emotions sometimes boil over. If we are not weeping outwardly, then we are inwardly. To deny this is to deny ourselves.

With the recent horrors unleashed by terrorist attacks, the whole world was witness to the tears in the eyes of the president of the United States. We also saw the tears in the eyes of Queen Elizabeth. Those are rare sights because these auspicious heads of state are not expected to show their emotions overtly. Yet I do not think anyone could honestly interpret these tears of compassion and genuine emotion as a weakness.

I do not think that anyone applauds uncontrolled or frequent wailing and weeping. That is a horse of a different color. Control of the self is a sign of maturity and character. This sort of control allows for the showing and expression of emotion that is healthy and positive. There are people who have very little control, and these people have a negative impact on others. say some people can shed "crocodile tears." This is another area that gives a bad name to tears of any kind.

Therapeutic tears

Ecclesiastes 3:4 tells us that there is a time to weep. We have been created with this capacity as God designed controlled tears to be therapeutic.

Job 2:12 tells of the friends of Job who came and saw his terrible circumstances. These friends were so shaken that they just sat down with Job for seven days and seven nights--and they wept. Their concern for Job was a great help (though later their words and advice turned out to be faulty). Instances in which close friends are suffering give us the opportunity to support and be of help. Sharing sorrow--even without words--is a great help.

Tears are also therapeutic for the person--for yourself. Luke 22:62 records the expression of Peter's anguish at his own weakness in denying Christ three times. Peter was a strong man. He was overwhelmed by his actions and probably did not understand himself at that moment. Peter wept and no doubt repented. This is a healthy reaction to our own weaknesses. Putting a cap on all of our emotions can be harmful as it forces those emotions to be absorbed in other ways. Our health is affected eventually.

God promises to wipe away every tear. He knows we humans have plenty of reason for tears now. He says

Parents shed many tears over their children. I have known people who have had to bury a child and who have not recovered from the trauma of that event decades later. This emotional loss is so great that it brings pain and anguish of the most excruciating sort. Tears do help to relieve the inner pain we feel. It seems they are actually part of the healing system God has installed. David felt deep anguish over the death of his

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son Absalom (2 Samuel 18:33). All parents who have lost a child can identify with this emotion.

Acts 20:37-38 tells of the congregation in Ephesus that wept at Paul's departure. This event was the departure of a dear man and mentor whom they would not see again. It is healthy to mourn the loss of a loved one. Tears are part of that mourning process. In the expression of love and compassion, there is a time for a few tears.

Revelation 5:4 carries the story of John who "wept much" because of sad circumstances that he could not alter. Hopelessness and despair about events in the world or society can lead to the tears. History has recorded an almost endless array of human suffering and depravity that touch us all. Today, the real fear of the annihilation of whole cities grips our minds. Destruction on a scale never known to mankind is now not only possible, but probable. There is much in our world that drives the emotions.

I have focused on men, but I do not intend in any way to ignore women who also are healed through tears. Women sometimes feel emotions even more strongly than men. They generally have not attached the same stigma to them. But this has been changing in recent years, and women can feel pressure not to show emotion in business and government situations. But still, not many people were unmoved by the tears in the eyes of Queen Elizabeth.

Wiping away every tear

Our Creator knows the emotions that bring the tears. He knows that part of the control of our emotions comes through the release of tears. Weeping expresses our feelings and releases some of the anguish. In Revelation 21:4 God promises to wipe away every tear from their eyes. He knows we humans have plenty of reason for tears now. He says that there will come a time when there will be no more death, sorrow nor crying. The causes of emotions that bring tears will be removed.

Until that time comes, we will continue to experience times of great sorrow and grief. We are to strive to control our emotions, but not to squelch them entirely. Tears are an outlet that promotes healing. They are a form of expression and communication.

When men shed tears, they are saying things that cannot be said with words. These tears express love, compassion and understanding. They do not express weakness and in fact pave the way to a resolve that shows great strength. We did not ask to be made the way we are, and that is why we are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). God made us! We have been given gifts of expression and one of these is tears. When used properly and under control, this form of expression is healthy and good.

Let us men not be ashamed that we have emotions. If you are of the mind that "real men don't cry" and can bottle up your emotions in public--then weep behind closed doors. This outlet has been designed for our good.

I always carry a hanky!