Virtual Christian Magazine
Hope And Encouragement For The Real World

*"If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."*—2 Chronicles 7:14

Volume 9 Number 10 December 2007

## Was Christ Really Born on Christmas?

By Lorelei Nettles *Page 3*



*Was Jesus born on Dec. 25? The Bible does not give the exact date of Christ's birth, so how can we determine it? Should the date really matter?*

## God's Blessing—Old Age

By Michael Caputo *Page 6*



*God requires respect for those old in years among us. But these wise individuals can provide many blessings for others, if we will only listen to them and follow their experienced example.*

## Positives for Older People, Part 1

By Graemme Marshall *Page 9*



*When the United Nation's General Assembly designated 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons, it was long overdue.*

## So—You're a Grandparent

By Glen White *Page 13*



*Being a grandparent is a great blessing, but it can be more challenging these days to really connect with your grandchildren. What can you do to make the most of the times you do have with them?*

## A Grandchild to Bring You Joy

By Anthony Wasilkoff *Page 15*



*One of the happier blessings of growing older, is the arrival of grandchildren. The bond and love you feel is truly a reward.*

## Lessons Learned During the San Diego Fires

By Roland and Dianne Clark *Page 18*



*The Santa Ana winds were howling, and the smoke became so thick you couldn't see. Then you could feel the ashes falling! Through the terror of October's wildfires we learned some vital lessons.*

## Letters to the Editor

*Page 21*

***Virtual Christian Magazine* Staff**

**Lorelei Nettles** - Managing Editor
**Lorelei Nettles** - Issue Editor
**Mike Bennett** - Editors
**Gayle Hoefker** - Editors
**Jada Howell** - Editors
**Patrick Kansa** - Editors
**David Meidinger** - Editors
**Suzanne Morgan** - Editors
**Amy Stephens** - Editors
**Debbie Werner** - Editors
**Jack Elliott** - Reviewers
**Eric Evans** - Reviewers
**Don Henson** - Reviewers
**Don Hooser** - Reviewers
**Becky Bennett** - Proofreader
**Chris Rowland** - Web Design

Copyright 2007 United Church of God, an International Association

# Was Christ Really Born on Christmas?

By Lorelei Nettles

*Was Jesus born on Dec. 25? The Bible does not give the exact date of Christ's birth, so how can we determine it? Should the date really matter?*



I HAVE HEARD MANY SERMONS and read many articles and booklets on the subject of Christmas. Surprisingly, they all lead to the same conclusions: Christmas just is not what it is cracked up to be. What do we know about the holiday known as Christmas? Was it always the celebration of Christ's birth, or was it based on something else entirely? The truth is that, early on, Christians did not celebrate Christ's birth; it was His death and resurrection that were supremely important.

## Ancient links

Dec. 25 was originally a date that the ancient Romans observed in their worship of Saturn and Mithra. Consider this information about Saturnalia from history.com:

"In Rome, where winters were not as harsh as those in the far north, Saturnalia—a holiday in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture—was celebrated. Beginning in the week leading up to the winter solstice and continuing for a full month, Saturnalia was a hedonistic time, when food and drink were plentiful and the normal Roman social order was turned upside down. For a month, slaves would become masters. Peasants were in command of the city. Business and schools were closed so that everyone could join in the fun.



"Also around the time of the winter solstice, Romans observed Juvenalia, a feast honoring the children of Rome. In addition, members of the upper classes often celebrated the birthday of Mithra, the god of the unconquerable sun, [*Dies Solis Invicti Nati*, or the Birthday of the Unconquered Sun] on December 25. It was believed that Mithra, an infant god, was born of a

rock. For some Romans, Mithra's birthday was the most sacred day of the year."

In the fourth century the major church of the day did not like that the above-mentioned holidays were being observed. They saw them as a threat to Christianity and decided they would have to do something about this. So, Pope Julius I chose Dec. 25 to celebrate Christ's birth, thus melding it into their worship, trying to Christianize the pagans as it were, but in turn, many pagan customs were soon adopted into the very fiber of the Christian lifestyle.

### What does the Bible tell us?

*Any good shepherd would not leave his sheep out in the elements to suffer from the cold.*

Carefully reading the story in the Bible, we find that Christ was not born in the winter. During the winter, it is usually cold and wet in the Holy Land. Any good shepherd would not leave his sheep out in the elements to suffer from the cold. Look at Luke 2:7-8: "And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night."

Note that the manger had room for Jesus, even if the inn did not. During the winter, this would not be so. In winter, the animals would have been in the barns using their mangers. Also, at night it would be much cooler than during the day, so even if the animals had been out during the day, they would not be out at night. Barns of the first century were not the elaborate buildings we have today—animals would have filled these small areas.



Another thing to think about is, if Jesus had been born in the winter, where would Mary and Joseph be willing to have her child, begotten by the Holy Spirit, born when the inns were full? Even mangers would be full of animals and their refuse! Putting a newborn baby into a probably freezing cold manger with only swaddling cloths would be unthinkable. Temperatures were probably 40 degrees Fahrenheit (4 degrees Celsius) or lower at night in late December. Instead, she would probably be clutching her child, all close together huddling in the corner. Assuming Christ was born in the winter just does not make sense, does it?

Varying evidence puts the birth of Christ in the autumn, when people could travel and after the crops had been harvested. At that time of year it would have been warm enough for the family to stay in a stable.

### Making sense of the census

One reason for the family to be in Bethlehem was because of the census. People had to go to the place of their origin to register.

Luke 2:3 states: "So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David." This could be why the inns were full—there

were a lot of people traveling to and from the places of census. The Romans would not have had the census in the winter when the people would have trouble traveling.

While there is some debate on the subject, it is believed that this was one of the very first censuses taken in order that all the people could be taxed. Some may say that it is unrealistic for people to have traveled so far for a census, but a Roman census document, dating from A.D. 104, has been discovered in Egypt that specifically commanded citizens to return to their original homes for the census (A.H.M. Jones, ed., *A History of Rome Through the Fifth Century,* 1970).

## Some hints

*"Around the time of the winter solstice, Romans observed Juvenalia, a feast honoring the children of Rome."*

We can find some hints about the date Christ was born by what we read in Luke 1:34-37. "Then Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I do not know a man?' And the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible.'"

In what way does this scripture help? If we note verse 36, we see that Elizabeth was already six months along in her pregnancy. We then can establish that Elizabeth's son, John the Baptist, was born six months earlier than Jesus Christ.

We also know that John's father was a priest. Luke 1:5 tells us he was a priest of the division of Abijah, which some sources say had one of its main duty periods at the temple around Pentecost, which generally falls in mid- to late June on our Roman calendar. Elizabeth conceived after her husband returned from the temple, possibly around late June.

*This would have put the birth of John around March or April, so Christ would have been born around September or October.*

Luke 1:22-24 says, "But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless. So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; and she hid herself five months."

This would have put the birth of John around March or April, so Christ would have been born around September or October. Though the Bible doesn't say exactly when Christ was born, it clearly wasn't in December. If you do the research, you can prove these things for yourself, and I encourage you to do so.

So, does it matter if we observe Dec. 25 as Christ's birth, even if we understand it is not Jesus' birthday? What does Jesus think of us celebrating it, and what does God think of it?

To help you with your research and to answer these questions, may I suggest you request our free booklets *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?* and *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*.

# God's Blessing—Old Age

By Michael Caputo

*God requires respect for those old in years among us. But these wise individuals can provide many blessings for others, if we will only listen to them and follow their experienced example.*



IN HIS GREAT WISDOM, God saw fit to allow human beings to go through their allotted years in pre-established stages. After birth we move through the "innocent" childhood years, followed by the "turbulent" and "rebellious" teen years, after which we spend many years in the "productive" adult years, until we finally enter the "sunset" years. Unless there is an unfortunate early death, all humans go through these stages and experience the challenges and the growth that result from them.

For some of the elderly in the world, the sunset years are a time of stagnation and discouragement. People who were once involved in challenging and productive work find themselves unable to use their minds and talents as they once had. This may be due to serious health issues or an unexpected injury, and it leaves them feeling much less useful and valued. Due to loss of family members or friends, as well as various other ailments, depression often may also afflict them. This does not have to be. There is value in growing old.



For converted Christians, old age is not a time of stagnation, nor is it a time of chronic discouragement. The sunset years are, for many elderly Christians, a time of accelerated spiritual growth and great joy and satisfaction. In fact, in many ways, Christian elderly can be especially blessed, while many elderly in the world may feel empty and hopeless. Having known many older Christians and having discussed their lives with them, I have concluded that several areas exist

in which they are spiritually blessed. They are as follows:

*Wisdom requires time and experience. It is the accumulation of foolish risk-taking, innocent mistakes and experiencing the consequences of all of these.*

**WISDOM:** It cannot be bought. True wisdom cannot be learned in colleges and universities. Wisdom requires time and experiences. It is the accumulation of foolish risk-taking, innocent mistakes and experiencing the consequences of all of these. It is the result of years of being tempered by life and being enlightened by a merciful God. Most Christians over 60 possess wisdom in very large amounts. *They are blessed.*

**PATIENCE:** Older people have seen the result of being impetuous and impulsive. They have paid for jumping hastily into things. They are now calm, reflective and long-suffering when younger ones are not. They are willing to wait long and very patiently. To the more impulsive younger Christians, patience is a trait they long for; to the elderly, patience has been learned. *They are blessed.*

**KINDNESS:** The kindest, sweetest people on earth are often elderly people. Their ways are gentle and their approach is tender. That is one of the reasons why their grandchildren love them so much. They have seen how harsh ways produce little good; seen how much unkind words hurt. They shun aggressiveness and meanness and use a soft touch. *They are blessed.*

**HUMILITY:** Most older people are humble. They have shed the pride of youth and they are framed by a realization that, indeed, as Solomon taught, All is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Many look at their life's accomplishments as having only relative importance. They can now see that what humans value is very perishable, and, ultimately, only what God values in them has any lasting worth. *They are blessed.*



**NO MORE ILLUSIONS:** There was a time when older people were young and they too chased illusions. They made money—some, lots of it. Some traveled far and wide. Some had power, prestige and respect based on position or wealth. They tasted what drives humanity and now see its worth as temporal and fleeting. They are no longer interested in illusions. They are not attracted by power and prestige. Great wealth has no importance to them. They value their family, their friends and, most of all, their Creator. *They are blessed.*

**TIME TO SOCIALIZE:** Our elderly have time now for things they could not do before, because of the stress of work and responsibilities. They can visit leisurely with people of like mind, without any hurry. They can visit their families and spend a lot of time with their children and, especially, their grandchildren. They can spend time with their Father in heaven without hurrying or being rushed. *They are blessed.*

**TIME TO REFLECT:** The time at their disposal gives them an opportunity to do something well known to increase spiritual growth exponentially: reflect, assess and repent. While before they mostly learned from prolonged experiences and, at times, repeated painful consequences, during the retirement years they have all the necessary time to dissect their whole life one detail at a time and learn what previously haste or pride prevented. Many insights God tried to teach them before, can now gel easily and thoroughly. The stubborn resistance of the past is no more. The hard stone has turned into soft clay, and more than ever they are responsive to God's corrections. *They are blessed.*

*The time at their disposal gives them the opportunity to do something well known to increase spiritual growth exponentially: reflect, assess and repent.*

**GIVING:** Though Christian elderly may be limited by finances and health, they have the power to contribute to the Church in a way most younger Christians cannot: powerful and effective prayers. Most of us who have been in the Church for some time have come to recognize the wisdom of turning to our elderly and asking them to join us with their prayers in times of need. The scriptures assure us, "The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much" (James 5:16). Most of our elderly are righteous, and their prayers are sincere, fervent and effective. Their intercessions before God do "avail much," and those who have asked them to partner with them in times of need know the difference that their prayers have made. God loves the elderly in His Church. Their prayers are like sweet incense rising before His throne. He values their requests and the Church reaps the benefits of their righteousness and intercessions. *They are blessed.*



God's Church has many wonderful and very special elderly people who add so very much to our spiritual family. We love them because we know they love us. We admire them because they, in many ways, are what we wish to be. We value them because we know they have much value before God. We savor our moments with them, because they offer us so much tenderness, kindness and gentleness. We are honored with their presence, because we know we have among us many future members of God's family not far from receiving their glorious crowns.

***We are blessed!***

# Positives for Older People, Part 1

By Graemme Marshall

*When the United Nation's General Assembly designated 1999 as the International Year of Older Persons, it was long overdue.*



THERE HAS BEEN A SIGNIFICANT SHIFT in Western attitudes toward aging and the elderly in the past few decades. Retirement coming at an earlier age has spawned a far-reaching trend: a huge pool of still vigorous men and women who too often are involved in a restless floating around the country. In and out of part-time jobs or in self-employment ventures, they search for effective meaning in this vital stage of their lives.

As governments' deficit spending eats away their retirement savings, there is an emerging gray army of still capable workers needing to pay ever-present bills. In the Indian subcontinent, Asia, China and South America, the economic value of older people seems better appreciated. Because of cultural and economic necessity, many of the so-called underdeveloped countries still value senior citizens. As a result, though walking into the sunset of their lives, they often maintain fitness, health and mental faculty. Perhaps these countries are actually ahead of the affluent West. Only now are some Western governments beginning to see the need to treat those in their "golden years" with more dignity.

## Changing attitudes toward aging

Western economics based on "consumption and planned obsolescence" have applied questionable values to older people through the policy of mandatory retirement. After that often comes abandonment of the elderly to old age and nursing homes. There is, however, a changing demographic that governments can no longer ignore. A predominantly aged population is bringing to the forefront "gray power." Springing up in response to being told, "Sorry, you are too old for the job," are home service businesses called "the gray army." Staffed by formerly employed tradespeople ages 45 to 70, these qualified workers offer such home repair services as plumbing,

electrical, tiling, carpentry or painting. They bring experience, reliability and competence along with reasonable rates.

Authors like Gail Sheehy in her book *New Passages* proclaim that older persons, if in good health, do not have seriously diminished competence. She asserts, "For the first time in the history of the world most people in the advanced societies can expect to live into the long late afternoon of life." She notes that aging studies suggest that "a woman who reaches 50 today—and remains free of cancer and heart disease—can expect to see her ninety-second birthday" (page 5).



Outstanding older people have always stood out from the crowd. Yehudi Menuhin, an internationally renowned violinist, for example, was in 1998, at 82 years of age, away from his home in England conducting concerts throughout Australia. In addition, he was giving master classes for talented young musicians. The concern for those who may live as long is the need to make this final stage of our lives as equally profitable and productive.

## Social conditioning can trap older people into despair

The idea of retirement itself tends to push some older people into discouragement and despair. Boredom can result after the sudden loss of employment. After all, who are you when you are no longer defined by your work?

Retirement is considered one of the most troubling passages of adult life for North Americans. The higher the status one's work bestowed, the steeper and scarier the slide into anonymity. Seniors are subjected to outmoded cultural prejudices, at times labeled as "slow old geezers" and worse. The elderly who believe such truly underestimate their mental skills. More often, such reactions come from impatient, discourteous people. Pessimism can overcome many who believe the aging process has left them behind in reasoning and verbal skills. As a result, they can begin to adopt an unnecessary dependence on spouses, children or doctors.

*Those who are active in church, sports, community, who garden, read or have hobbies—doing things that stimulate the intellect—do better mentally.*

What older people need is to politely assert their own vital potential, as in this story: A well-meaning young senator was showing a party of seniors around the Senate chamber. He treated them as schoolchildren by explaining the legislative process in words of one syllable and shouting as if they were all deaf. Finally, turning to one of the group, the senator asked, "And what used you to be?" The old man fixed him with a beady eye and replied, "I still am."

## Debunking myths about getting old

The brain keeps growing. According to recent studies, brain cells do not die off in extensive numbers leading to mental decline. Rather, they shrink or grow dormant in old age, especially from the *lack of stimulation or challenge*. There is normally no change in intelligence or learning. There is strong evidence to suggest that using your mind preserves intellectual ability. For the brain to stay mentally fit, it must be exercised. Sharp older people become dull through inactivity

and boredom, not through a loss of neurons. One can expect to continue to enjoy full mental alertness throughout later age.




Why does one 70-year-old play chess, ski and dance while another is bedridden and has memory loss? Without overlooking obvious illnesses, in general, the more activities and subjects engaged in, the better are scores on memory tests. Those who are active in church, sports, community, who garden, read or have hobbies—doing things that stimulate the intellect—do better mentally. To keep the mind alert, we need to keep challenged, try difficult things and introduce variety for stimulation.

Just because someone *looks* old doesn't mean their brain is feeble too! And old people are *not more handicapped* than those younger. Anyone at any age can have sickness or become incapacitated, even from birth. A handicap is not solely the result of advanced age.

Memory doesn't run out. No one, unless affected by serious illness, runs out of memory just because of age. Certainly input and recall can slow down. The index file is still there but the office worker is older and takes longer to get to the filing cabinet, search through the files and come up with the right one. Most people in their 50s notice that they can't instantly recall names until some time later. Is it really that much different to a lot of children's responses when their parents ask, "Where is your jacket? Where are your shoes?" The typical youthful answer can be, "I don't know, must be somewhere." Aging does not automatically equal forgetfulness.

## The challenge for older people—a new career goal

There are still challenges for an older person. Getting old isn't the end; it is, in fact, a new venture that only the elderly can appreciate. Psalm 92 is positively encouraging: Part of the blessing of being "the righteous" is also that "they shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing" (verse 14).

*Each day is a window of opportunity to correct interpersonal mistakes.*

Older people need a new goal for this critical stage of life so that they become productive and fruitful. Instead of focusing on time running out, it is more positive to make the most of each day. There are different priorities when time is shorter. It is perhaps like the story of the aggressive young salesman trying to sell an insurance policy to a 95-year-old man. Despite polite refusal from the elderly gentleman, the young man still persisted. Finally the old man said, "Look young fellow, you don't seem to understand. At my age, I don't even buy green bananas."

If every day is welcomed with a joy for life and God's truth, you'll never feel too old. You will just keep on growing.

## Reconciliation and facing death

Reconciliation opportunities always exist, but we often procrastinate and let them slip by. It is of little help to others, when we want to make up for past mistakes, if we fail to do so before we die.

Each day is a window of opportunity to correct interpersonal mistakes. Cleanse the conscience; confront what has been too hard to address in the past.

In the sunset of life, you will feel less embarrassment at losing face. We are best prepared by life's wisdom to humbly accept blame for wrongs. The mellowing of age equips us to forgo pride in favor of doing the right thing.

The best gift we can give a child, spouse or friend is to set things straight while we still have the mental faculty, agility of mind and heart to do so. The older we get, the harder it is to lie to ourselves. How much happier we could be by clearing away a guilty conscience!



And then as we get closer to the end of life's vitality, there is the "Everest" of all questions to be faced: Is getting old just a cruel joke by the Creator? Or did He plan humans to become old and wrinkled for a reason? What is becoming old supposed to teach? Near the conclusion of life's experience, shouldn't we grapple with why we were born, why we even had a life, and whether we have done enough of what God requires in order to be an honorable part of His plan for salvation?

Aged believers have a better realization of how close they are to the Kingdom of God. They stand on the brink of eternity. They have a sense of the urgency to make the most of each day, be closer to God and be concerned how true Christian works will be judged and viewed. A new and better world waits beyond the grave. With this thought in mind, gloom and pessimism should fade. The final heartbeat is not an end, but a grand beginning. As some of the inconveniences of old age arrive—serious health conditions, aches and pains—the expectation of life again in a new world order shines more brightly. This is to be more prized than any other physical possession.

*Aged believers have a better realization of how close they are to the Kingdom of God. They stand on the brink of eternity.*

God chose to portray His awesome appearance to Daniel and John by the description of the "Ancient of Days" with hair on His head as "white as snow" (Daniel 7:9; Revelation 1:14). Be delighted if "white hair" should come your way! Our creation-sustaining God is content to picture spiritual maturity that way. If white hair represents accumulated godly wisdom, you will have a badge of honor.

Old age should not be the "trash heap" portion of human life. For God's people it is a new phase that looks more wisely ahead to the imminent Kingdom of God. Successful aging means not viewing death as a full stop, ending a sentence, but rather a comma that briefly interrupts a sentence that has yet more to say.

Please read next month's issue of "Virtual Christian Magazine" for part 2 of this article.

## Recommended reading

To learn more about God's amazing plan for mankind and how all people, young and old, fit into His plan, please request the free booklet *The Road to Eternal Life*.

# So—You're a Grandparent

By Glen White

*Being a grandparent is a great blessing, but it can be more challenging these days to really connect with your grandchildren. What can you do to make the most of the times you do have with them?*



TIMES HAVE CHANGED from the familiar scenario of our youth. Then, our grandparents were likely settled in their comfortable retirement location, often in the countryside, readily accessible to the family with a short afternoon drive.

But today you might be like us—working past the big 65, with the shortest distance to the nearest grandchild a full day's drive away. The furthest grandchild is accessible by plane or telephone; however, the telephone conversations are fairly one-sided since he or she is just putting sentences together.

*When these rare visits occur, focus on the hours you will have together.*

Somewhere between the former concept and the present reality, those grandchildren are out there and needing Papa and Nana. What can we do to supply the experiences and memories these blessings from God will need as they mature to meet life on life's demanding terms?

Cards, birthdays, other gifts and phone calls (when they are old enough to converse) will help establish communication, but nothing can beat quality visits, when the opportunity presents itself.

## Planning for special visits

When we do have the opportunity to spend time with the grandchildren, are old habits of "go watch TV or play in the other room" perpetuated? Or does something special happen when they come to Grandpa and Grandma's house?

A major part of success depends on the planning for these occasions. When these rare visits occur, focus on the hours you will have together. Rearrange your schedule, plan the things you can share, and establish and reinforce values and habits that are fun and help form character.

In our home, I have a room full of sticks and strings (handcrafted bows and arrows). A growing number of "kid" bows are materializing. On the next visit with our preschool grandsons (and granddaughter), I plan to take them to a field to find adventure by shooting arrows into evil tree stumps and the occasional fierce-looking hay bale. Such are targets and fair game for the novice hunters.



If that's not your thing, what is? How about a trip to the zoo, astronomy or maybe you would like to offer a painting or sculpting session? How about the dreams you have pursued throughout your lifetime? Have you been a pilot, a craftsman, an inventor? What about the principles you had to learn to succeed in life?

Crafts and the use of one's hands are fascinating to most preschool children and preteens. It doesn't have to be hockey, football or video games. Most anything can be awesome to young children if grandparents are involved with them.

*If you are blessed to still be on the farm or horse ranch, you have a ready-made land of adventure for children.*

If you are blessed to still be on the farm or horse ranch, you have a ready-made land of adventure for children. Jumping out of bed on a frosty morning, breaking the ice on watering troughs or carrying warm water to the animals or chickens is great stuff for kids. (It can be a bit different from the adult point of view, but it was once an adventure for us too.) Further, exploring God's creation is a wondrous experience when it is explained in a context of living things. Even the animals cooperate in this, since they are alive and responsive to touch and the presence of humans.

Through all this, godly values are reinforced by active use. Patience, determination, responsibility, compassion and sometimes pity are experienced in the life cycle of the creatures being cared for. One of the greatest principles is also developed—respect. It has been stated that a child who grows up with respect for others and their property will develop respect for God and His laws.

## Like handcrafted arrows

In conclusion, an analogy close to many of us who enjoy using sticks and strings. The arrow is an extension of the archer. As God uses us to bend the bow of love and instruction, the arrows (our children and grandchildren) are sent speedily to their mark (God's family).



A handcrafted arrow, like a child or grandchild, is created slowly from a raw, imperfect shaft of wood. It is carefully dried, sanded and straightened by repeated caressing of the archer's skillful hands, then sealed against the elements that will cause distortion. Design and decoration are then added, setting proper weight to the arrowhead. Then the stabilizing fletching (feathers) are attached.

These are all personally and carefully accomplished by touch and persistence. No machines wanted here. No video games of distraction, no distance or mass production methods of any kind. The bow is improved and the arrow designed in the same mind-set as the Master Potter improving the work of His hands.

So, in this analogy, it is possible for a less-than-perfect bow to learn and to send a more perfected arrow surely to its mark. How far will the arrow travel with surety and penetrating force before gravity (or, cares) pull it to the ground short of the mark? That depends on the effort put into the draw by the archer.

Proverbs 23:26, challenges youth to "give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways." We, as the "old ones," need to be ready to give them good reason to give us their minds and emotions for training. Malachi 4:6 asks fathers to turn their hearts to the children and surely the hearts of the children will turn to the fathers—and especially to the grandparents. They're great folks and have so much to offer!

If you'd like to read more about Grandparenting, see the article "Now Starring in a Supporting Role..."

---

## A Grandchild to Bring You Joy

By Anthony Wasilkoff

*One of the happier blessings of growing older, is the arrival of grandchildren. The bond and love you feel is truly a reward.*



IT HAS BEEN NOTED THAT THE ONLY TIME Sigmund Freud ever cried was when his grandson died. The death of little Heinerle Rudolph resulted in Freud's first ever depression. Three years after the fact, Freud told a confidant that it had been impossible for him to enjoy his life since the loss of the lad.

When the biblical character Joseph finally revealed his identity to his estranged brothers, he directed them to hurry back home and bring their father to start a new life in Egypt. Joseph added the following details: "You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near to me, you and your children, your children's children, your flocks and your herds, and all that you have" (Genesis 45:10).

One of the joys of parenting is to see one's children safely grown, marrying and starting to raise families of their own. Scripture describes offspring as being "a heritage of the LORD" and a "reward" (Psalm 127:3), and so they are. Similarly, grandchildren are a heritage and reward not only to the two parents, but perhaps even more so for the four grandparents and possibly even great-grandparents.

## A second chance

*One of the joys of parenting is to see one's children safely grown, marrying and starting to raise families of their own.*

It is with good reason that an adage says grandparents are parents who are given a second chance! Psalm 103:17-18 states, "But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, to such as keep His covenant, and to those who remember His commandments to do them." God's limitless love and concern transcends the fleeting life spans of human beings. Most parents want their children to have a better life than they did. This carries over to their children's children as well. According to the *NIV Study Bible,* "The close identity of a man with his children and of children with their parents, resulting from the tightly bonded unity of the three or four generation households of that ancient society, is alien to the modern reader, whose sense of self is highly individualistic. But that deep, profoundly human bond accounts for the ancient legal principle of 'punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.'"

Psalm 128:5-6 proclaims, "The LORD bless you out of Zion, and may you see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life. Yes, may you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!"

*He would take a chair into her bedroom and wait patiently for her to wake up from her nap!*

One of the finest blessings a person can experience is to live to see grandchildren born and to help them with the chore of growing up. I recall when my own dad would come to visit with my wife and me some years ago now. One of the joys of his visit was to spend some quality time with his only granddaughter. He would take a chair into her bedroom and wait patiently for her to wake up from her nap! I still have pleasant memories of something as simple as him taking her for a walk. I would watch this and marvel, wondering why he hadn't been that patient with me when I was growing up.

On another occasion, he witnessed me disciplining my son for some misdemeanor. Then he took me aside and admonished me for having been too tough on him. I wondered why he didn't follow his own advice when I was little. As I remember, he had often been pretty tough on me when I was a child. Proverbs 17:6 says, "Children's children are the crown of old men, and the glory of children is their father."

## The best inheritance

*One of the first surprises that a grandparent experiences, is how quickly he or she can become bonded with a grandchild.*

Proverbs 13:22 instructs, "A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous." Sinners sometimes manage to acquire an amazing amount of wealth. However, it will not do them or their heirs much good in the long run. On the other hand, a decent man is able to use his acquisitions with a mind to giving his grandchildren a good start in life, if at all possible. A little can go a long way when properly planned for. One of the most heartwarming passages for me with respect to this topic is found in Genesis 50:23 where Joseph's golden years are described: "Joseph saw Ephraim's children to the third generation. The children of Machir, the son of Manasseh, were also brought up on Joseph's knees." These children were like his very own children.

One of the first surprises that a grandparent experiences, is how quickly he or she can become bonded with a grandchild. You might expect that it would take a series of many encounters over a long period of time. However, the truth of the matter is that the connection develops almost instantly. This is why Sigmund Freud suffered his first depression as he did.



In his second epistle to Timothy, Paul writes, "When I call to remembrance the genuine faith that is in you, which dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and I am persuaded is in you also" (2 Timothy 1:5). This passage has intrigued me. How fortunate Timothy had been to have a mother and grandmother who were both believers. What a head start, what an advantage it gave him in living his life. Conversion is described as "genuine faith" in this passage in the New King James Version. It is something that actually "dwelt" in human beings as if it were something quite alive and growing. Certainly not lifeless and inert!

Lee Pitts, in his oft-quoted essay, wrote: "We tried so hard to make things better for our kids that we made them worse. For my grandchildren, I'd know better. I'd really like for them to know about hand-me-down clothes, homemade ice cream and leftover meat loaf. I really would. My cherished grandson, I hope you learn humility by surviving failure and that you learn to be honest even when no one is looking. I hope you learn to make your bed and mow the lawn and wash the car—and I hope nobody gives you a brand-new car when you are sixteen. It will be good if at least one time you can see a baby calf born and you have a good friend to be with you if you ever have to put your old dog to sleep…" ("These Things I Wish for You," *Chicken Soup for the Golden Soul,* 1999).

Grandchildren are a joy and we can be confident that our Heavenly Father may be enlisted to be sure of the right results for all the grandchildren in the collective Church of God.

# Lessons Learned During the San Diego Fires

By Roland and Dianne Clark

*The Santa Ana winds were howling, and the smoke became so thick you couldn't see. Then you could feel the ashes falling! Through the terror of October's wildfires we learned some vital lessons.*



WE LIVE IN A BEAUTIFUL AGRICULTURAL AREA in northern San Diego County. We have five acres of avocados and a relatively new home. It's usually an idyllic setting, but we knew there had been fires in this area before. One fire, four years ago, actually burned 80 percent of our trees, but thankfully not our home. So this year we had made every effort to be prepared!

Extremely arid conditions and the wild Santa Ana winds off the desert produced tinder-dry brush that led to perhaps a dozen major fires in Southern California this October, and the largest fire evacuation in California history.

## Concerned for our brethren

By Sunday night, Oct. 21, 2007, several of the brethren from our San Diego, California, United Church of God congregation had been evacuated from their homes. The winds were howling and the fires were going so fast they were almost impossible to stop.

Because initially the fires were south and west of us, we started calling to see if other members could make it to our home as a refuge. It is hard to believe, but so many streets were closed that they could not travel north or east.

Monday we spent time calling to make sure everyone was doing alright. The members all were safe, had found homes to evacuate to and were just wondering if they would have homes to return to. Some were being evacuated for the second time, and others were receiving reverse 911 calls telling them to evacuate.



On Monday night there were still fires to the south and west of us. It was almost still and slightly cool when we looked around the grove before going to bed. But that all changed about 4:30 Tuesday morning when we started smelling smoke and learned of a fire east of us that started in a home on the La Jolla Indian Reservation (later called the Poomacha fire).

Reverse 911 calls came in our area at 5 a.m. with a notice to evacuate. Fires can be quite frightening, especially with the Santa Ana winds howling, smoke so thick you can't see and ashes falling on you!

## Preparing to evacuate

*The first thing we did was pray. Then we called a son to contact other family members and friends.*

The first thing we did was pray. Then we called a son to contact other family members and friends. We also called our pastor to contact brethren for prayers. We put on masks and started the grove irrigation in order to wet down the leaves and also the yard irrigation.

Next we started to load the RV, pickup truck and Blazer with important belongings such as the hard drive, folders with CDs with banking and other important information and digital pictures. We packed papers from the safe, a few clothes, old picture albums and some pictures on the wall that we couldn't replace.

Earlier we had placed suitcases ready to fill in different areas of the house where we knew we would take things. We also packed an ice chest with food and drinks, and took some food from the cabinets. We closed our cat in the house until we knew we had to leave so he wouldn't panic and get lost.

The electricity then went off just before dawn, but our grove continued to be watered by gravity, although a little more slowly. We then needed regular sprinklers in the yard, as the automatic system didn't work without power.

## Two goats



Around 6 a.m., while moving sprinklers and trying to carry things to the car, we had our neighbor's two goats following us around. Our neighbors have many, many animals and not enough trailers for their horses along with the goats, so they let them out to fend for themselves.

The goats seemed to like our home and being around people. They needed security, so they kept right with us, literally right on our heels. Eventually the neighbors got another trailer and picked them up.

Next we started driving the vehicles, and trailer with a boat, to a safe place. With the last car ready to roll if we needed to leave, Roland started the grove perimeter fire protection sprinkling system.

After two hours, around 7 a.m., we had moved the vehicles and moved anything that could burn from the outside walls of our home and cut the few shrubs around the house.

As the sun was rising (but you couldn't see it), you could hear the fire, see the ashes, feel the heat and see a deep red sky and black ball of smoke below our neighbor's grove. Our neighbor called saying her husband was staying, but she was leaving with the children. We felt it would be in our grove soon, and it was time to leave as we had done everything we could.

*Our neighbor called saying her husband was staying, but she was leaving with the children.*

## Answered prayer

Then, all of a sudden, when we thought we would shortly have to leave, the wind died.

We later found out that two men who didn't leave their groves at the foot of the nearby hill actually put out two fires that could have come up to our neighbor's grove—and eventually to ours.

We also found that the wind didn't slow in other nearby communities until evening. That it stopped in our area had to be answered prayer. At one time during the day we heard the fire, which sounded like the low rumble of a powerful freight train. We couldn't see it but found out it was the fire racing up Mount Palomar just north of us.

For the rest of the day we just waited and watched. All of our neighbors kept their groves and yards wet. When darkness came, we all had a system where someone would be awake to call the others if anything flared up. We got calls on Wednesday morning at 5:30 a.m., but the fire was not coming into our immediate area.

Needless to say we did not sleep well on Tuesday and Wednesday. We all used small generators for electricity until Thursday. It was comforting and awesome to start seeing the huge helicopters with their 1,000-gallon Big Dipper Helibuckets start to drop on the Poomacha blaze on Mount Palomar. The firemen all over San Diego and Southern California did an outstanding job.

By Friday we were feeling much more comfortable and spent all day putting away what had taken us about a half hour to pack. Most of the brethren in our congregation returned to their homes, and those who were unable to at least knew they had a home to return to, except for the adult son of one family, who lost his home. We couldn't believe how blessed we all had been, especially the brethren in the hard-hit Ramona area.

*We also found that the wind didn't slow in other nearby communities until evening. That it stopped in our area had to be answered prayer.*

What a wonderful Sabbath we had! We all had stories to tell and many things to thank God for. Many of the brethren had a real mess to clean up when they returned home, but they were thankful to have a home. Even when evacuated, they were concerned about each other.

As we write this, it is two weeks after the first fire started, and the Poomacha fire is still burning a little along the ridge and on the eastern end of Mount Palomar, but there is no threat.

### Prayer and preparation

So what were the lessons learned? We learned that physical things are not as important as people. We learned that we must be prepared, do everything we can do in each situation, and then rely on God.

After previous fires in and around our Valley Center area, we all have fire breaks, weed abatement, perimeter watering systems, homes without trees or heavy brush around them, friends with water trucks and a close community to help one another. This kind of preparation should be made in all areas of our lives. We must have a close relationship with God and feel we are able to call on Him, but we still must do everything we can do.

We also learned to appreciate the care, concern and prayers of our brethren in other areas. We had concerned calls from all over the United States and even Australia. The congregation knew who to check on, and they did so.

We feel we were personally prepared, but we are very thankful that our system did not need to be tested. We did what we could and then relied on God.

---

## Letters to the Editor

### "Father, Please Heal My Broken Heart"



I have just read this article. I needed this, because I am hurting so bad right now. Someone who I thought was my friend betrayed me, and it hurts so bad... I never thought in a million years this person would ever do this to me.

### "Thoughts for Thanksgiving"



I am grateful to Mr. Meeker for this message, and it is also something that I think about daily. I live in Tasmania, on a beautiful five-acre property. I daily receive blessings in abundance, and I am so very grateful for the blessings I receive from God. Yet it makes me long for God's Kingdom even more.

I long for the day to come when all will have the abundance of blessings they were intended to have through obedience to God's laws and His way of life. How wonderful it will be to know that all will have such blessings, when all will acknowledge and love our Creator, obey His way and live the life that we ourselves take for granted.

— Helena Wisby, Tasmania

## Sorry, just online…



Will you be publishing this magazine for home delivery anytime soon? I would subscribe several of my young friends to receive it.

Bless you in all you do.

— Jean Wise

*I am sorry,* Virtual Christian Magazine *is and always will be an online only magazine.*

*We do, however, offer a couple of other free, home-delivered magazines that may interest you. Both are excellent and offer similar articles to* VCM. *Please visit the following Web sites and see if one of these magazines might work for your young friends. The first is* Vertical Thought *magazine at http://www.verticalthought.org. The other is* The Good News *magazine at http://www.gnmagazine.org.*

Some feedback messages are edited for space and/or clarity