Virtual Christian Magazine
Hope And Encouragement For The Real World

"Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.'"—Acts 2:38-39

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Finding God in a World of Religious Confusion

By Rod Hall

Most people say they believe in God, but do all roads lead to the same place?



THE BULK OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION adheres to some type of religious creed or belief. Millions say they believe in God. Men in high political offices invoke the name of God in public ceremonies. Faithful Muslims make their pilgrimages to Mecca, and Hindus and Buddhists diligently practice the same precepts that were handed down to their forefathers' generations ago. Worldwide growth is occurring in these groups, as well as other religious groups like Shintoism and Judaism. Charismatics, New Agers, channelers, mystics, psychics and metaphysical alternatives abound as well. All of these conflicting religious philosophies cannot be right.

Christian confusion

Today even Christian beliefs seem hopelessly mired in a malaise of conflicting doctrines, ideas and practices. Hundreds of groups exist, from cults, fundamentalists and denominations, to mainline Catholic and Protestant organizations. Millions of Western Christians go to church every week. A full 85 percent of the adult population in the United States professes to be Christian.

Yet, a third of professing Christians say they never attend church and still feel they are Christian. This reflects the casual, convenient and comfortable nature of the way millions want to believe in God. Many want to feel better about themselves by holding to some religious thoughts or ideas but most simply will not go out of their way to find out more about the God they claim as their own. And many certainly do not want God sticking His nose into their business. After all, if someone finds God they may also find that He requires something from them.

A recent *Newsweek* cover story, "Spirituality in America," took a look at the rise of spirituality and why many Americans choose to seek spiritual experiences outside of traditional religions. "Fifty-seven percent of Americans consider spirituality a very important part of their daily lives, according to a new Newsweek/Beliefnet poll. But not all of those polled define spirituality in terms of a traditional religion. While the majority (55%) report that they are religious and spiritual, a significant number (24%) consider themselves spiritual, but not religious. And of those who say they follow a religion (64%), 19 percent say that they are not traditional in how they practice it. That number jumps to 29 percent of those in the 18-39 age bracket, according to the poll" (August 29-September 5, 2005, p. 46).

Because of this pseudoreligious and superficial approach to God, the sad reality is that many false religious ideas have become a deadening and mind-deluding spiritual drug—blinding millions from finding the true God. With all these different approaches we see a religious world hopelessly divided, confused and to a large degree blinded to the simple teachings of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 11:3).

Why this religious paradox?

Why have so many created a God that is of their own devising and insist on trying to find God in their own way and in their own time?

Why have so many created a God that is of their own devising and insist on trying to find God in their own way and in their own time? Millions have created, in their minds, a God that fits the image they have molded and only seek Him in ways they find convenient. Feeling spiritual without having to adhere to specific religious tenets and practices frees people to believe and live as they please.

Furthermore, in our day of intellectual and technical sophistication, vanity and pride prevents many from humbly searching for God and finding out what He says is the way to find Him and what their part is in a relationship with Him. Yet, if He is the true designer of this thing we call human existence, wouldn't it make sense that He has an interest in what He has made and has left a source for us to discover how to find Him?



In fact, the true God is found in the pages of your Bible. He reveals who He is, as well as the only way to find Him. But even many who call themselves Christian have never found Him because they have not diligently studied His Word and followed His instructions. They may have followed the traditions of their church and even held to traditional beliefs; but if these beliefs are not faithful to the inspired Word of God, they can worship Christ in vain. Jesus Himself said so. "He answered and said to them, 'Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: "This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of

men…' And He said to them, 'All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition'" (Mark 7:6-9).

Just following religious traditions is not enough. Jesus warned that many would come using His name to deceive the masses. "And Jesus answered and said to them: 'Take heed that no one deceives you. For many will come in My name, saying, "I am the Christ," and will deceive many'" (Matthew 24:4-5).

Most refuse to take God's Word for what it says. Stubbornly holding onto false concepts of God blinds millions from the truth (2 Corinthians 4:4). "And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting" (Romans 1:28).

How to find God

In the world of modern education, you won't find the class "Finding God 101." Even though some of the best human thinkers acknowledge there must be a God, few have found Him. The 17th-century British mathematician and physicist Sir Isaac Newton acknowledged, "This beautiful system of the sun, planets and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being…"

The ancient Greeks were also deeply mired in religious confusion, but the apostle Paul cut through the religious clutter to point them to the one and only true God. "Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you'" (Acts 17:22-23).

Today even Christian beliefs seem hopelessly mired in a malaise of conflicting doctrines, ideas and practices.

You can prove God exists and that the Bible is His inspired Word. Paul wrote a good portion of what became the New Testament of the Bible (2 Peter 3:15-16). Its pages reveal the way to find the one and only God. Paul explains, "God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

There are not many different religions that lead to God. Jesus Christ said He is the only door that opens the way to God and there is no other.

There are not many different religions that lead to God. Jesus Christ said He is the only door that opens the way to God and there is no other (John 10:9; 14:6). But the way to God is a narrow path that only a few ever find it (Matthew 7:13-14). (For more information on this subject, read our free booklet *The Road to Eternal Life*.) Most are simply not willing to change their lives and do what God says, so they remain cut off from access to Him. The only way to find God is to deeply repent, accept Christ's sacrifice for past mistakes and turn wholeheartedly to God (2 Chronicles 7:14; Acts 3:19; Matthew 7:7-10).

In a religious world hopelessly divided and confused, you can cut through clutter by going to the one source that reveals the way to find God—the Bible. Believe it, live by it and you can discover God.

Recommended reading

For more interesting information, please request our free booklet *The Church Jesus Built* and for more information on our beliefs, request *Fundamental Beliefs of the United Church of God*.

Trustworthiness in the Marriage Relationship

By Cecil E. Maranville

A woman once quipped: "Never trust a husband too far or a bachelor too near." Being trustworthy isn't a quality much on the minds of the average person, but it is a crucial element in the marriage relationship.



IMAGINE A COMPANY trying to use trustworthiness to spice up one of those entertaining Super Bowl commercials. They could show two guys sitting on a bench when a woman strolls by. One man turns to the other and exclaims, "Wow! Now there is a woman I could *trust!*"

It doesn't have much zing, does it?

Of course, trustworthiness isn't a quality that you can spot just by watching someone walk by. You would have to observe the person over a period of time, before you could discern trustworthiness or the lack of it.

Too often many things are spoken of as "sexy" in our world. Clothes, cars, your hair, your eyes, your voice and your ideas might all be called "sexy." But while the topic of trustworthiness is not a flashy concept, it is actually a great deal more important to our marriages than many things people talk about.

Trustworthiness isn't a quality that you can spot just by watching someone walk by.

We need to start with a definition. One dictionary (*Houghton Mifflin*) says about trustworthiness: "Warranting trust; reliable." It implies the concept of being *sound*. When we use the word "sound" in this sense, we mean whole, complete, uncorrupted or unimpaired. It is closely related to the quality of *integrity*.

When dating and thinking about marriage, a question to ask yourself is, "Can I *trust* him (or her)?" And you need to ask of yourself, "Can he (or she) trust *me?*"

Let's look at a prophecy Jesus made to His disciples in Matthew 10:34-35 about difficult circumstances that they would face.

"Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law."

In the context, He was telling them the potential cost of discipleship. He was actually quoting an end-time prophecy from the book of Micah, chapter 7:6: "For son dishonors father; daughter rises against her mother, daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; a man's enemies are [those] of his own household."

Now, look at verse 5: "Do not trust in a friend; do not put your confidence in a companion; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your bosom."

This broadens the picture. Have you experienced a close friendship turning sour? That is, one who at one time shared your deepest secrets and then could no longer be trusted with any personal information?

Then we come to the comment about a wife. This does not mean that every believer married to a spouse of a different faith or to one who has no religion will have a terrible marriage relationship! But I brought this up because God inspired these analogies to illustrate what *He* considers trusting relationships.

The normal situation is that you would feel free to share everything in your life with your spouse. It shows how much trust would normally be in marriage. Is that how you would characterize yours?

The importance of trustworthiness

What inspires you to trust someone? What would break that trust? The answers might vary from person to person, but there are some fundamentals we have in common.



Trust is both vulnerable and powerful. Here are four true/false statements about trustworthiness. How would you answer?

- It's no big thing if I betray my spouse's trust in me, or if he (or she) betrays my trust, because trust is easy to reestablish.
- It's unfair of my spouse to expect me to be trustworthy at all times.
- I have no right to expect that I should be able to trust my spouse at all times.
- All there is to trustworthiness in marriage is remaining sexually faithful to each other.

All these statements are false!

Relationship with God

Our relationship with God is built upon trust. Looking at what the Bible says about trusting Him will help us understand its place in marriage.

In one of the rich exchanges between Boaz and Ruth as their relationship was building; he said to her, "May…a full reward be given you from…the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to trust" (Ruth 2:12, MKJV). Other translations word the ending "for refuge" or "to take refuge."

Here is a word picture of a bird gathering and sheltering its young under its wings. Ruth felt this way about God, because He made her feel safe.

She felt safe in leaving her family and her home country and becoming part of Naomi's community, her country and her God. Eventually, Ruth came to trust Boaz in the same way, and she married him.

How does this relate to marriage?

Notice Proverbs 31:11-12: "The heart of her husband safely trusts her, so he will have no lack of gain. She does him good and not evil all the days of her life."

The husband of the Proverbs 31 woman feels confident with her. He is not out pursuing risky and dangerous ventures. He trusts that she would not harm him.

The converse is also true, that the wife of a man of good character *safely* trusts in him, so she is not fearful. He will do her good and not evil all the days of his life.

What inspires you to trust someone? What would break that trust?

Regrettably, the lifestyle philosophy of this world is that we should put the self first—"the me generation." Herbert W. Armstrong used to say that selfishness seems to work in marriage so long as both are satisfied. But when one spouse in that kind of relationship no longer gets what he wants, selfishness explodes.

Terrible things happen. In order to make your spouse feel safe, you have to have true love, which transcends your desires and even your needs at times. Our philosophy as believers should be outflowing concern.

Integrity

I wrote above that trustworthiness and integrity are related. *Integrity* comes in part from a Latin word, *integretãs,* meaning "soundness" and *integer,* meaning "complete or whole."

A piece of wooden furniture that still has its integrity is uncorrupted by rot or insects. A metal spring that still stretches and retracts has its integrity. In other words, something that retains its designed or intended quality has integrity.



How does this relate to human character and to marriage? A person of integrity is sound to the core of his being. The goodness that you see on the outside springs from an inner belief system, principles that guide his/her judgment and behavior.

Consider Proverbs 11:3: "The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity" (NIV). One with a solid moral outlook on life will consistently do what God defines is the right action to take. You can trust him or her.

You cannot trust people who try to lie their way out of a difficult spot. You cannot trust people who change their behavior depending upon who sees what they are doing.

The goodness that you see on the outside springs from an inner belief system.

You cannot *make* someone trust you, for in the final analysis, every individual *decides* whether he or she will trust someone. And, it takes more to gain the trust of some people than others. That can be due to their temperament or it can relate to hurts they suffered at the hands of others before you ever knew them.

Of course, human beings *are* going to disappoint us from time to time. Every relationship is patched here and there with the glue of forgiveness. After all, we often fall short of our obligations to God, and He forgives us, for which we are thankful!

Remember what Jesus added to the model He gave to teach the disciples how to pray. Matthew 6:14-15 reads: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

When your trust has been betrayed

When trust is broken, a blow is stricken at the most tender, the most vulnerable part of any relationship. It can be fatal to a marriage, but it need not be so.

What can be done if you feel betrayed? First, you should communicate clearly how you feel to your partner and tell your spouse that he or she has hurt you deeply.

You should communicate your willingness to forgive when the situation changes, rather than give the idea that there is no hope. Try to put yourself in a position in which you are physically, emotionally and financially safe. Obtain any counseling you need to help you through a difficult time. Avoid the temptation to "do unto others what they have done unto you" by breaching trust through slander.



The one who betrayed the other's trust should make every effort to come to understand the damage he or she has done to the marriage relationship. He or she should immediately take steps to right the wrong. He or she should stop the behavior that broke the trust and start behavior that works toward building trust. The objective is to become a person of integrity.

Allow the necessary time for healing and rebuilding the breach. You cannot demand that your partner trust you, nor can you expect to regain trust on a timetable. If necessary, obtain any help that you might need through counseling and don't discuss your situation with just anyone.

Components of trustworthiness in marriage

Certain personal qualities foster trust. They are truly pillars of character that make for a trustworthy person. What are they?

- A spiritual commitment to God's way of life, successfully resisting human nature and temptation.
- Taking financial responsibility to live within one's means, avoiding unnecessary debt, managing necessary debt and working together to decide the family's financial issues.
- A personal commitment to what is best for his or her spouse. Philippians 2:19-21 summarizes this point well about Timothy's caring nature; your spouse needs to be the one who cares for and about you like no other. Note: This needs to be mutual. You must be this to your spouse as much as he or she is to you.
- Honesty should have its own special category, even though it is covered in point #1, because it is so important. By the way, this does not justify unkind honesty or a lack of tact. "I can *always* take my spouse at his or her word" is a truly wonderful thing to be able to say. It is a valuable quality indeed. The opposite reality: "I can *never* be completely certain that what he or she says is the truth" is devastating to a marriage relationship. It seems so simple, but its worth cannot be overstated.
- Your spouse makes you feel safe and secure. He or she accomplishes this through countless gestures, large and small, conveying respect, kindness and gentleness.

With God's help, let's all work at being the kind of person in whom a spouse can safely trust.

Recommended reading:

Read our free booklet *Marriage & Family: The Missing Dimension*. Ask for your free copy by clicking the link below.

Promises, Promises!

By Robert Berendt

"No ifs, ands or buts," some will say! "Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'" (Matthew 5:37). We demand unconditional love and promise keeping. We consider a person of high value if he or she keeps to their word "come hell or high water."



YOUNG PEOPLE MAY SAY, "I'll love you forever," and be sincere in their exaggeration. Moms and dads tell their children, "I'll always be there for you." Our statements and words reflect a deed we may wish to perform, but reality says something different. Reality in most cases is the silent partner to our words. There is a distance between the "yes" and the "but" that remains unspoken.

We all are disturbed and feel terribly betrayed when another person breaks a promise. And yet we have all broken our word at one time or another. No matter how vehemently we deny that, it is a fact of life for human beings. Our "yes" is not definite—it carries unspoken and hidden conditions. The promise of a parent can be cut short by an accidental death. Unforeseen conditions can arise to interfere with what we may want to do. We humans are subject to various pressures we cannot control. Memory, distance, illness, emergencies or changing circumstances all play a role in our lives. Thus, we ought to realize (and I am sure we do) that we have a lot of "buts" in our lives.

The unspoken "but"

One area I have noticed that creates huge problems for Christians is in the promises God makes. James 5:14-18 has caused grief for many who were not healed of an illness—though they prayed fervently about the problem. John 14:13-14 has led some into grief as they suppose that whatever they ask in Jesus' name will be given. Some pick up snakes believing that God would not allow the snake to bite them. Some are hurt when, after praying long and strong for a job or some need they have, the prayer seems to go unanswered.

We dig deep to explain why it is so. There is a silent "but" that we must not overlook. We could ask "amiss" (James 4:3). There is a "time to die" (Ecclesiastes 3:2) and a "time to mourn" (verse 4). Life is not always smooth. There are many pitfalls and difficulties we face. Some are of our own making and some are due to other forces.

We are all disturbed and feel terribly betrayed when another person breaks a promise.

James 5:7-12 is a scripture that contains some sound advice. It precedes the promise of healing. James speaks of patience and of suffering in the verses preceding this. We are to learn to suffer in patience. In verse 12, James tells us not to swear by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. An oath leaves little or no room for a "but."

James hearkens back to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:33-37 where Jesus told people not to swear because they cannot even make a hair black or white (or grow hair, I notice). Jesus was pointing out that we are limited by being physical. We are limited in a great number of ways. Unseen events and circumstances in our lives may all have a bearing on our "yes." In other words, every "yes" has unspoken conditions imposed on it by the very fact that we are temporary creatures living in changing conditions in an ever-changing world.

The intention of a "yes" is good and necessary in life. In Matthew 26:41 Jesus stated, "The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." This does not diminish the need for determination to fulfill a promise—but it does add reality. God is a realist. One example Jesus gives is in obeying God's commandments. For example, Jesus kept the seventh day of the week as the commanded day of rest (Exodus 20:8-11). Yet He pointed out that it is acceptable to do good and care for the needs of humans and animals (Mark 3:4; Luke 6:9; 13:15; 14:5). Common sense provided the "buts."



Jesus did not condemn the taking of a solemn oath. Marriage vows are very serious and solemn oaths and promises we take before God. At baptism, we repent of sins and in that repentance is the affirmation that we will not sin again (Romans 6:1-2). In truth, we all do understand the conditions of a "yes" or a "no," for we have all experienced these conditions to a lesser or greater degree. It is the frivolous and flippant use of God's name or some other valued object to guarantee the veracity of our statements that is the problem. It is our tendency to exaggerate to show our sincerity that causes us to make statements that are not complete or correct. It is a correctly valued point of character to be a "man of his word" (or woman of hers). It is right to expect that of one another—provided we realize that we are all human.

A change of plans

In 2 Corinthians 1:12-23 Paul writes about a change in his plans. He writes of sincerity and in verse 15 relates his intention to come to Corinth again. In verse 23, he explains why his plans were changed. Paul states that with God there is not a "Yes and No" (verse 19)—that is, there are no "buts" in the sense we humans have through our weaknesses. New factors were not known when Paul's promise was made, but the silent understanding was always understood in the promise.

The intention of a "yes" is good and necessary in life.

Although God never needs to deal with frailties within Himself that may interfere with keeping His promises, He nevertheless includes some "buts." One example is in the promise of God to King Solomon (I Kings 3:10-14), God states the "but" that is always included in His promises. That "but" usually starts with "if." The seriousness of acting willfully and carelessly by even the most saintly human is shown in Hebrews 10:19-31. A person who has accepted the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and received the Holy Spirit is still human. God understands that. But that person ought to heed his promises to God and strive to fulfill their commitment. That is vital to our character and for our own good on into eternity.

Luke 12:16-21 is another example of poor thinking. Our best laid plans and promises need to have the possibility of unforeseen events built into them. The man in this parable may have signed contracts and given his word—but death was a condition to his "yes."



We have all made excuses for being late, missing appointments or falling short of our promises—our "yeses." That is simply being human. There are always conditions, but our actions ought to reflect a "God willing" attitude. There is nothing wrong with a change of plans, but our character is under scrutiny. We should feel the obligation to express the condition that changed our plans. People do understand. We are all in the same boat!

We must remember that when plans or circumstances change, we are obligated to notify the other person about it, before the recipient is inconvenienced, only to hear an excuse later. For instance, this can happen when a hostess invites people to a dinner party. All too often, though she has prepared and set a place for them, they simply do not show up! Responsibility for our actions is a point of character. Wisdom in speaking and acting are paramount to our development as children of God.

So, we may conclude that godly character demands a sincere attempt to follow through with our promises—our "yeses." But a good understanding of possibilities that are part of our lives is needed. That is just the way it is — so we learn the great lessons of life.

Under Eagle's Wings

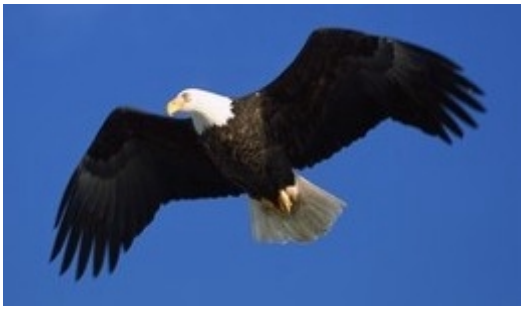
By Jean Jantzen

What can we learn about our relationship to God from the life of the eagle and how it raises its young?



THE BALD EAGLE HAS BEEN THE NATIONAL BIRD of the United States since 1782, when it was placed with outspread wings on the Great Seal of the country. It appears in many government institutions and on official documents, making it the most pictured bird in America. The eagle appears on the president's flag, military insignia and billions of one-dollar bills.

Like other eagles worldwide, the bald eagle is a symbol of strength, courage, freedom and immortality for generations.



The bald eagle can have a wingspan of up to eight feet and can weigh up to 15 pounds. It inhabits areas near large bodies of water where there are plenty of fish to eat and tall trees in which to nest. Bald eagles remain faithful to their mate until death.

An eagle's eye is probably the sharpest of any animals, with four to eight times the resolving power of a person's eye. It can spot a rabbit nearly a mile away, from an altitude of 1,000 feet. It can also sight fish swimming below the surface of the water.

When attacking prey, a bald eagle can reach speeds close to 190 miles per hour. And because they can only move their eyes slightly within the sockets, they are able to rotate their heads almost 270 degrees.

They are called the lions of the sky. Bald eagles carry some 7,000 feathers from head to tail. Their feathers are lightweight, hollow and flexible, yet very strong. The eagle's feathers protect the bird

from inclement weather, including excessive heat, cold winds and snow. Due to their sophisticated feather system, this bird is able to regulate its body temperature simply by changing the position of its feathers.

As an eagle

There are many instances in His Word when God uses the image of an eagle as an example of His care and concern and protection of His people. Notice one in Psalm 91:1, 4 where it says, "He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty… He shall cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you shall take refuge." Deuteronomy 32:11-13 also mentions that "as an eagle stirs up its nest, hovers over its young, spreading out its wings, taking them up, carrying them on its wings," God says He made His people "ride on the high places of earth" (KJV).

The Hebrew verb *rachaph,* translated in Deuteronomy as "hovers" (or "flutters" in the King James Version), appears only three times in the Bible and only twice in reference to the action of God: in this passage and in Genesis 1:2. When God created the world, the Spirit of God moved across the waters, and hovered over the deep. This possibly allows that the very first image in the Bible is of God as a mother eagle hovering, fluttering over the waters as she prepares the nest (earth) for the birth of mankind.

Eagles are noted in the Bible for their swiftness, endurance and power and for their loving care of the young. Think in terms of how God cares for us and how much we need Him.



When a pair of eagles builds a nest, it is high in a tree or cliff and away from danger. You could say it is built upon a rock. King David recognized the safety of building one's foundation upon a rock. "For in the time of trouble He shall hide me in his pavilion; in the secret place of His tabernacle He shall hide me; He shall set me upon a rock. And now my head shall be lifted up above my enemies all around me; therefore I will offer sacrifices of joy in His tabernacle; …I will sing praises to the LORD" (Psalm 27: 5-6).

We learn from the Psalms that David throughout his life knew how vulnerable and weak he was, how much he needed and relied on God. (It is interesting to note that David's major lapse was when he was older and supposedly wiser. Should we not consider the dangers of that older/wiser, self-sufficient attitude that is so easy to slip into? Do we get puffed up in our own eyes as we progress in this way of life and think we can do it on our own?)

In the eagle's nest

The eagles start their nest with a lot of large sticks, thorns and odd and ends to build the base. Next, they get smaller sticks, twigs and grasses. Finally, just before they lay their eggs, they pull down and feathers from their own bodies to line the nest for a comfort to the newly hatched chicks. Feathers from their own bodies—what a wonderful analogy! It reminds one of a down

comforter, and the Holy Spirit taken from God Himself is described as our Comforter and is given to His newly baptized sons and daughters.



When the eggs hatch, the babies look nothing like their parents. They are small, featherless and ugly. Golden eagles weigh only three ounces at birth (85 grams). That is how we should see ourselves as we begin our journey as a babe in Christ—small, featherless and ugly—and in our vulnerability, looking to the mother eagle (Jesus Christ, the Church, God's Holy Spirit) for sustenance and comfort. We should continue in this humble, teachable attitude throughout our walk with God, as the apostle Paul learned well in his earthly sojourn. "My grace is sufficient for you: for My strength is made perfect in weakness. Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities…for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

It doesn't take long till baby eagles weigh 40 times their birth weight, only 45 days later. During this time the eaglets require that their parents feed and care for them. They are safe and comfortable in the bottom of their nest. It is their comfort zone. As they grow, they develop the majestic appearance of their parents. We, too, have the hope that we will look like the majestic Christ when our bodies are changed.

The babies gain strength and begin to move about the nest. Food brought into the nest is cut into very small pieces and gently fed into hungry little mouths. When we come into the Church, God looks after us like an eagle looking after its young. We, too, are fed God's Word, the truth given in small amounts, first milk and then meat.

Eagles are noted in the Bible for their swiftness, endurance and power and for their loving care of the young.

Soon, the eaglets will climb out to the top of the nest, stand upon the edge and look out over their parents' domain. We, too, look over our Father's domain, His heavens, the work of His fingers, the moon and the stars, which He ordained. We recognize that we are nothing in comparison. But we also realize God has made us a little lower than the angels, for a time. We know we are of little strength; but our weakness is temporary, and one day we will grow strong and our bodies will be changed and we will fly like the eagles.

Since their nest is up high, the baby eagles are exposed to severe winds and the eaglets quickly roll back into their nest where it is safe and comfortable. As the eaglets grow, their parents start throwing out the soft grasses and down lining of the nest, exposing the thorns and larger sticks. By doing this the parents are taking away their comfort zone. We find that as we grow in Christ, we, too, are exposed to more and more trials and sufferings of everyday life so we will grow in godly character. But we, too, can fall back on God's Spirit to comfort and guide us.

Leaving the nest

The nest seems smaller as the young grow to become more like their parents. They find themselves out on the edge, surveying the landscape and they dream of soaring with their parents. When the winds blow now, they don't have the nice soft place in which to hide. They stand with the wind in their faces and their wings spread, becoming stronger. They will soon be ready to take that leap, but they don't yet have enough confidence.

We, too, learn to trust in God. The Psalmist wrote, "I will set him on high, because he has known My name. He shall call upon Me, and I will answer him" (Psalm 91:14-15).

From its high perch, the young eagle can see the animals of the field and the fish in the stream. He becomes hungry and determined; he climbs to the edge of the nest, faces into the wind and spreads his wings. Waiting for the proper moment, he leans forward. The winds lift him. His heart pounds. At first, our young eagle tumbles in the air falling towards the ground. He sees the green of the earth and the blue of the sky passing with each rotation.

"Because you have made the LORD, who is my refuge, even the Most High, your dwelling place, no evil shall befall you... for He shall give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. In their hands, they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone" (Psalm 91:9-12).

Sometimes it is necessary for the parent eagle to rescue its young in flight.

Sometimes it is necessary for the parent eagle to rescue its young in flight. Maybe it does not spread its wings enough, but the mother is always watching, always aware of her young, just like God protects and lovingly watches over us, sending His angels to preserve and minister to us. When it's time, the mother eagle takes the eaglets on her wings and swoops downward suddenly to force them into solo flight. They flap their wings, but it takes awhile to get the hang of it. They may get tired and go fluttering down, but the mother stays close to swoop under them again whenever they grow too weary to continue on their own.

What a beautiful metaphor for a loving God, caring for us when we are weak, yet always aiming at the goal of our maturity and internalized strength, rather than keeping the babies in the nest forever. The next morning as the sun rises, we see three young eagles standing on the edge of the nest with their wings outstretched, their faces into the wind. One by one, they step off into the wind to begin their intended journey through life.

It takes courage to leave our nest. It takes determination and commitment to make a difference in our life and in the lives of others. God says, "But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

Are You Missing Out on a Blessing From God?

By Gary Petty

Time. It's the one thing that you can never recover. Is your life hectic and out of control? You may be missing out on a special gift from God.



WE LIVE IN A TIME-COMPRESSED WORLD. Technology is supposed to make our lives easier and create more leisure time. People purchase microwaves, home computers and riding lawn mowers to gain more control over their lives. Then, of course, they have to work overtime to pay for the time-saving gadgets.



We rush to work, rush through meals and rush through conversations so we can hurry to a child's school event. We then tear off to a health club to ride a stationary bike. On weekends many people rush through church services so they can hustle home and spend a few hours "relaxing" in front of the television only to feel vaguely bored and restless.

Well-known marriage and family therapist H. Norman Wright has written more than 60 books on family and related subjects. He calls the results of our fast-paced lifestyles "the hurry sickness."

"It's a response that begins to make our internal clocks run faster...and faster... and faster. As with any illness, specific symptoms reflect the presence of the illness. In the case of hurry sickness, the symptoms are heart disease, elevated blood pressure, or a depression of the immune system that make you more susceptible to infections and cancer. These conditions are brought on when we exist in a state of stress, pressure, or constant rushing. Even tension headaches, and ulcers are tied to hurry sickness" (*Simplify Your Life,* 1998, p. 39).

The result of always running full tilt is that sooner or later the days, weeks and months become a blur of activities with no purpose or sense of accomplishment. Many people have forgotten why they're running so fast and don't know how to get off the merry-go-round.



Time stress affects health, peace of mind and relationships. We never seem to get everything done. Organized day care was supposed to give women more time to pursue fulfilling careers. Instead, many mothers experience guilt for leaving their children and then not being able to spend quality time with them due to exhaustion.

Children aren't escaping time pressures either. Preteens hurry through childhood driven by demands to grow up too quickly. All too many children and teens are exhibiting symptoms of emotional and mental breakdowns attributed to stress.

Has all the activity created a better life for you and your family? Or are you like so many people who are rushing themselves into high blood pressure, chronic tiredness, emotional burnout and spiritual bankruptcy? Maybe it's time to take a few minutes and take stock of how you spend your time.

The forgotten blessing

How often have you wished you had more time for the important aspects of your life, like family and self-reflection? Bookstore shelves are bulging with material on how to organize your life, but many of these sources are missing an important aspect of time management.

There's a lot of talk in the United States about posting the Ten Commandments in schools and government buildings. Few would argue against adhering to the instructions forbidding murder or stealing. Keeping these laws surely would bring a blessing to everyone. But in the debate one commandment is almost completely forgotten. In fact, its relevance is often debated even among those who promote keeping the Ten Commandments.

This makes the biblical introduction to the Fourth Commandment all the more potent: *"Remember* the Sabbath day…" It's as if this commandment is the easiest for humans to trivialize.

The need for rest

God's Fourth Commandment states: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God…" (Exodus 20:8-10). Physical, emotional and spiritual rest are human needs. To ignore these needs is to sow the seeds of anxiety, unrest, illness, depression and lethargy.

Imagine a day devoted to rest—no business calls, no painting the house, no lawn chores to take care of. Imagine a day with extra time to share with your family without the deadlines and pressing appointments of the rest of the week. Even entertainment such as action-packed television shows with intense sound tracks can leave our bodies and minds exhausted. Imagine a day when you can shut out the noise, the violence, the preoccupation with making money—and experience *peace*.

The result of always running full tilt is that sooner or later the days, weeks and months become a blur of activities with no purpose or sense of accomplishment.

Jesus says, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." A little later in the same account He explains, "For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Matthew 11:28; 12:8). The Sabbath is a time to experience rest for body and mind and renew our relationship with the Son of God.

For some it may be daunting to think of spiritual rest dedicated to reflection on our need for God and to thinking about what is really important in life. Sometimes it's easier to fill each waking moment with career, house, car or entertainment than to deal with our inner nature. Easier, that is, until the results in broken relationships, emotional breakdown and spiritual emptiness take their toll.

A day of renewal

The Sabbath isn't intended to be a day of total idleness. God told the ancient Israelites that the Sabbath was a "solemn rest, a holy convocation" (Leviticus 23:3). It's a time for, among other things, gathering with other Christians to worship God.

It's regrettable that in our hectic society even church services often have become a matter of convenience instead of a vital element of living. Some churches now broadcast worship services on short-range radio so people can sit in their cars in the parking lot dressed for golf or other activities. Then, as soon as listeners hear the last amen, they can rush to the next pursuit.

God, through the prophet Isaiah, reminded Israel of the Sabbath's original intent: "If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath, from doing your pleasure on My holy day, and call the Sabbath a delight, the holy day of the LORD honorable, and shall honor Him, not doing your own ways, nor finding your own pleasure, nor speaking your own words, then you shall delight yourself in the LORD" (Isaiah 58:13-14).

The Sabbath isn't intended to be a day of total idleness.

The biblical Sabbath isn't about a ritualistic obligation to participate in a once-a-week hour of worship. Instead it reveals a day dedicated to revitalizing our relationship with God in both private and communal worship. It's also important to understand that God didn't design the Sabbath to be a day of puritanical restrictions. The Sabbath is to be a time of physical, emotional and spiritual renewal. The Creator says we should recognize this day for what He intended it to be—a delight!

Jesus was questioned about healing a man on the Sabbath. He answered: "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it, and lift it out? Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:11-12). We can help renew the life of another person by visiting the

sick or elderly on the Sabbath. Giving time to others takes our thoughts off our own problems and brings rest to troubled minds. Such actions truly are putting God's way of life into action (James 1:27).

Observing the Sabbath sets the tone for the coming week. With rested minds and bodies, and a renewed relationship with God and Christ, a person is energized to reflect Christ in the following six days.

The weekly plan

Some time management gurus of several years ago promoted micromanaging each hour of every day in order to increase efficiency. Adopting this management style has also driven many people to a nervous breakdown.

A more common approach to time management today is to organize blocks of time dedicated to specific purposes and goals. This method uses the week as the natural framework of time management.



This is the framework used by God when He told mankind, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God." By planning our time in a weekly structure, we can get control of the nonstop whirlwind and begin to balance our activities. Time can be scheduled throughout the week for work, family meals, exercise, household chores, personal Bible study and recreation.

The weekly schedule also gives us a goal at its completion. Biblical days begin and end at sundown, so no matter how hectic the week, the goal of Friday sundown—the beginning of the Sabbath—awaits with its promise of physical, emotional and spiritual renewal. As the Sabbath approaches, it is time to forget the work problems and mortgage payments. It's time to shut out the noise of the daily pressure cooker.

At the creation of the Sabbath "God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made" (Genesis 2:3). God set aside the seventh day as holy time. Jesus declares, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). The Sabbath was created as a blessing from God to all humanity!

Preparing for the Sabbath

God freed ancient Israel from slavery in Egypt. As they traveled to Mt. Sinai, where they would receive the Ten Commandments, the descendants of Jacob's 12 sons faced a food shortage in the barren wilderness. Through Moses, God told them that He would miraculously supply their daily needs. The Israelites would call the edible and nutritious substance they found every morning *manna*.

They were also instructed to gather extra manna on the sixth day so that they wouldn't have to work on the Sabbath. Human nature being what it is, some people went out on the seventh day to gather manna, but it wasn't there.

God responded: "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws? See! For the LORD has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days" (Exodus 16:28-29). Here God teaches the important concept of preparing for the Sabbath.

Have you been missing out on this special gift from God? Is your life so hectic that you don't have time to experience spiritual rest with Jesus Christ?

It's easy to spend the day before the Sabbath in frantic overload only to collapse as the sun sets. The day before the Sabbath should be a day of physical and mental preparation for the Sabbath. Begin planning early how to make the Sabbath special. Sabbath evening is a great time for a family dinner with favorite recipes and the china usually reserved for guests. This is a perfect occasion to invite a widow or family to share your Sabbath meal. Be creative in selecting Bible games and crafts for younger children to help them experience God's love.

It is also important to prepare ourselves emotionally for the Sabbath. As you come home from work at the end of the week, take a little time for prayer. Ask God to relieve you of your burdens and help you experience the holy time He created for our renewal.

The Sabbath as a memorial

In addition to the practical blessings of Sabbath-keeping, there are important lessons God teaches us through observing the seventh day as holy time.

The Fourth Commandment in its entirety reads: "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates.

"For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it" (Exodus 20:8-11). The Sabbath stands as a weekly testimonial to God as Creator.

How often have you wished you had more time for the important aspects of your life, like family and self-reflection?

Some will ask, "But wasn't the Sabbath given only to the Jews?" The Fourth Commandment states that God hallowed the Sabbath *at the beginning of creation* before there was a distinction between Israelite and gentile. Jesus didn't claim that the Sabbath was made only for Jews, but that it was "made for man."

When Jesus declared Himself the "Lord of the Sabbath," He showed that the Sabbath is a day to focus on what God is doing through His Son. Humanity turned its back on its Creator. The result is sin—the breaking of God's laws and disregard for His will—which causes death. Humanity's only hope is redemption.

Redemption is God setting us free from the enslavement of sin and death. Since we human beings can't save ourselves from death, God sent His Son to die for us, to take upon Himself the penalty of our sins and make eternal life possible. The Sabbath stands as a memorial to the redemptive work God is doing through the Lord of the Sabbath.

Have you been missing out on this special gift from God? Is your life so hectic that you don't have time to experience spiritual rest with Jesus Christ? Instead of cramming every day with exhausting activity, it's time to start enjoying the day God set aside for you to rest and renew your relationship with Him. It's time to begin celebrating the Sabbath!

Recommended reading

Why did God consider it so important to keep the Sabbath day holy that He included it as one of the Ten Commandments? What's behind this crucial command? This article has touched on some of the biblical background for the Sabbath day, but there's much more. You can discover more about this command—God's gift to us—in *Sunset to Sunset—God's Sabbath Rest*. For your free copy, just click on the link here!

Should Christians Fear Death?

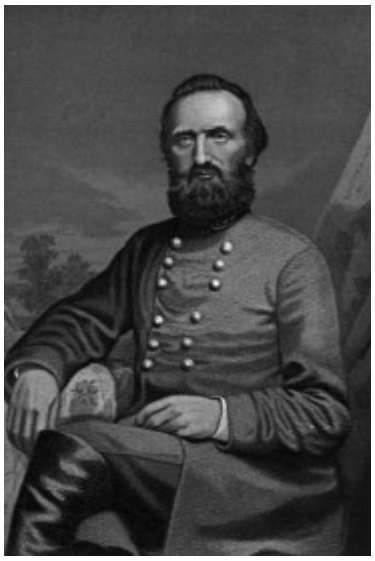
By James McCready

In a world that doesn't value life, can we have a proper understanding of death?



NEAR THE SMALL TOWN OF MANASSAS JUNCTION in July of 1861, federal shells screamed in and exploded, showering the Confederate troops with dirt and shrapnel. Wounded men cried out, as volley after volley of bullets zipped past, many men falling under the Union fusillade. The thunder of artillery had been constant, and the ears of the men rang with the concussion of each bursting shell.

Facing the center of the advancing North, Confederate General Thomas J. Jackson still sat astride his horse at the head of his brigade, holding both his nervous mount and his men in control. As the Confederates prepared to withdraw to regroup, Brigadier General Barnard E. Bee reportedly shouted, "There is Jackson standing like a stone wall. Rally behind the Virginians!"



Asked later by a fellow officer how he could remain so calm in the face of enemy fire, Jackson is said to have replied, "Captain, my religious belief teaches me to feel as safe in battle as in bed. God has fixed the time of my death. I do not concern myself about that, but to be always ready no matter when it may overtake me."

Although a fine combat general, appropriately nicknamed "Stonewall," Jackson had a well-known reputation as a Christian gentleman. His attitude toward death showed a remarkable amount of faith, especially for the times in which he lived.

With the world in a noticeably downward spiral, we see many deaths occurring every day—not only in natural disasters, but also in day-to-day life in the form of accidents, terminal illnesses and murders. Further, we are visually assaulted by violent killings in both movies and television, where those who die are too often portrayed as weaklings or "losers"—too unfit or unlucky to survive. The value of human life is minimized. This negative exposure, coupled with a natural fear of the unknown, brings about a fear of death.

What is death?

Aside from being a cessation of physical life, what is death? Is that all there is? What happens afterward? As Christians, what should our own attitudes be toward the subject? More importantly, how does God view death? We have only to look into the pages of our Bibles to find the answers.

Let's take a look at a couple of Old Testament scriptures first. We'll start in Psalms:

"Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints" (Psalm 116:15).



What does that mean? If God loves us, why are our deaths precious to Him? From the time of our calling, we dedicate our lives as Christians to grow and overcome our weaknesses and sins, becoming as much like Christ as we can. Our deaths—the ending of our physical lives—mean that our struggle is ended. Our battle is won. We have qualified through God's grace to be resurrected as spirit beings (the continuation of our spiritual lives) and rule with Christ on His throne, teaching the nations to live as we have lived, as Christ Himself lived. In essence, we become part of the family of God.

Now, let's look at Ecclesiastes 7:1: "A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one's birth."

We can see now why the day of our death is better than the day of our birth. At birth, our struggles are all ahead of us. At death, they are all behind. We've succeeded. We've won. Notice what the apostle Paul wrote in both 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians:

"For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?'" (1 Corinthians 15:52-55).

We can see now why the day of our death is better than the day of our birth. At birth, our struggles are all ahead of us. At death, they are all behind.

From these scriptures, we can see that the death of any saint—a true Christian—is not a negative experience. It can even be a positive thing. According to the Bible, it is a victorious moment!

Can God bring good out of a death?

As a longtime member of God's Church, I have been blessed with the opportunity of retrospection in the way the deaths of my parents and even a great-grandparent have affected my calling. Can God use death as a positive, constructive force? Yes, without a doubt.

My grandfather's parents were active in their church in southern Ohio through the late 1800s and early 1900s. Upon my great-grandfather's death, my great-grandmother moved north to the city of Columbus, Ohio, where she put herself through nursing school to be able to earn a living. My grandfather, the oldest boy, quit school after the eighth grade to help support the family.

The connection with her church there was broken, leading to the following successive events:

Part of the fear of death is fear of the unknown: What's going to happen and what is it going to be like?

Shortly after the death of my mother in 1967, my father began listening to Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong on the radio, which led to my siblings and I being raised in God's truth. Although my father never attended services to any extent, he believed the truth and proved it to his own satisfaction. My mother was active in the Lutheran church before her death, as was most of her family. In trying to figure out why God allowed her to die, I came to believe that she might have opposed our affiliation with the Church of God.

After the death of my father in 1992, I became more determined than ever to stick to the truth. If I gave up, I felt that his life would have been in vain. His pain and sacrifices for the opportunity to be in the Kingdom of God would have been for nothing. I want him to be proud of me. I want to be there as a spirit being when my family is resurrected.

In short, death has been a powerful influence on my life as a Christian. I made the life choices, but the path has been shown through the deaths of key members of my family. I, in turn, will have the joyous opportunity to teach them God's way in the world tomorrow. By no means do I deny the pain of loss to my family and friends. Death can be tragic when a spouse dies of cancer or a dear one is killed in a car accident. Death is harder for those left behind than for those that depart this life.

It's like sleep…

Part of the fear of death is fear of the unknown: What's going to happen and what is it going to be like? Can you remember visiting your grandparents' house and perhaps getting sleepy as you sat on Grandpa's lap? Next thing you know, you're waking up the next morning in your own bed. Perhaps you go to sleep riding in the car, and you wake up somewhere else. And it's OK, because Mom or Dad, or both, are there.



Just as there is no consciousness in sleep, there is none in death. Time passes without awareness. As it's written in 1 Corinthians 15: 51-52: "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."

In Psalm 13:3 it states: "Consider and hear me, O LORD my God; enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death." That's what death is like. In many more places in the Bible, scriptures liken death to sleep. You simply awake in a better world or, for Christians, rise into the air to meet Christ as He returns.

Ultimately, it all depends on your point of view. For the Christian, death is the threshold over which God carries us into the Kingdom. As it was stated by English poet John Milton in the 17th century, "Death is the golden key that opens the palace of eternity."

God's Kingdom is the next step in His great plan of salvation for mankind. It's literally just a heartbeat away. The apostle Paul understood this well, as he wrote to Timothy:

"For I am already being poured out as a drink offering now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only, …but unto all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

We see now that death is not failure. While death is the enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26, 54-57), the resurrection gives us victory over this enemy. It is not a thing to be feared. God alone chooses the time of our departure from this life, and He chooses a time when He deems us ready for the next step, our first step into His glorious Kingdom. This is not something to be feared, but to be rejoiced about. This is why God's people stand firm in the face of adversity. Victory is but a moment away.

In this light, let us recall the words of Stonewall Jackson: "…I do not concern myself about that [death], but to be always ready no matter when it may overtake me." He paused, looking over at the younger officer. "That is the way all men should live," he added, "then all would be equally as brave."

Should Christians fear death? Look at 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14: "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have

no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus." The hope of the resurrection can help us put death in better perspective.

Suggested reading

For more inormation about this subject, read our free booklet *What Happens After Death?* For your free copy or to download a copy, just click on the link here.