

THE SPIRIT BREAD

DAILY DEVOTIONAL



By Jerry D. Ousley
And Debbie Ousley

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**By Jerry D. and Debbie L.
Ousley**

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This daily devotional is a culmination of articles both Deb and I have written over the years. Some have appeared in publications like the Crothersville Times, The Southern Indiana Good News, and on many websites across the nation.

We humbly submit them to you with hope and prayer that they will become a daily blessing as you begin your day or end your day with a devotional reading. We have asked God to anoint these articles to bring peace, comfort, hope, restoration, and salvation to all who read them.

May our prayer be fulfilled in your life as we dedicate this work to our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

After a year-long battle with cancer, Debbie went to be with our Lord on June 30, 2016. We continue to include her articles as a tribute to her life.

Jerry D. Ousley

January 1

“Another Year” By Jerry D. Ousley

Another year is here! Wow! I remember when we wrote science fiction novels and made futuristic movies about this new century. It seemed so far away then, and now it is here. Years pass by, and time marches on. It's just a fact of life we can do nothing about.

I suppose what we have to concentrate on is what we make of it as it goes by. We have no choice as to what country we are born in, or whether our family is poor or a family of reputation and means. We can't help whether we've been born with a birth defect or not. It's not our choice if we develop a fatal disease, or are involved in an accident that isn't our fault, which may leave us scarred for life. All of these situations are out of our control.

I suppose what we do and how we react is what really matters in these situations. Fanny J. Crosby wrote many wonderful hymns and had a vision that few have witnessed; yet she lived her life in darkness because she was blind. How often have we heard of people who have overcome tremendous odds and handicaps to go on and do great things with their lives? How about the Wright Brothers of our own day, who have a dream and make it a reality even when others are saying, "It can't be done!" What about the Noah's in life who have built great ships in deserts, in faith to what God has told them to do. He lived through great persecution and scoffing because of his faith, but God proved Himself in the end.

That's the way it always is. We can choose to live what we may have left of this new century and this New Year in the "same old, same old," or we can take hold of that vision God has put in our hearts and make it a reality. Maybe we don't have the finances, or the means, but if God is telling us to do it, a step of faith will open the door and supply the means of getting it done.

Go for it. Let's make this the year that we trust God for what He said He would do. Let's put our faith in Him regardless of what those around us are saying and let's make a difference for the Kingdom, the world, and mankind!

January 2

“Happy Healthy New Year!” By Debbie Ousley

With the New Year now here, we are presented with opportunities for new experiences for us all. But let’s not forget how fast time passes by. It seems we were just getting ready to celebrate another year.

“Time stands still for no man, woman, and child.” I added the woman and child because even my twenty-five-year-old son and eighteen-year-old daughter are amazed at how quickly the weeks pass by, and this is supposed to be their fun-filled years (just wait until they get my age!).

I know with myself, if I don’t put forth a real effort, my “I’m going to do’s” turn out to be “I was going to do!”

Putting things in priority should be our first priority! But, “can we talk here?” This kind of self-discipline is not easy. With everything crowding in on us it seems we are over-taken and our priorities become a “ball of confusion.”

What’s the answer? And this is not easy either! We’ve got to quit putting more in one day than we can handle. Oh yeah! Sounds like a great revelation? No, it’s an old answer for a new problem. Just a simple answer, but, like the old saying, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink.” No one can do it for us (they’ve got their own problems).

It won’t happen over-night! But what’s your peace of mind worth? For more information, read your Bible daily.

January 3

“Doing It Right” By Jerry D. Ousley

Have you ever been in a hurry to get a job done only to pay for it later? The big blue fifteen-passenger van that I used to drive to work each day was reliable and consistent. By that I mean that when it decided to break down you could rely on it breaking down at the worst of times and it did so consistently. I was having trouble with it simply shutting down (usually at the worst moment – as if one moment was better than another) and after trial and error, discovered that a wire under the hood that had been unprofessionally spliced at one time, and had corroded at the splice. It didn't just die - it shut down. The headlights, four-way blinkers, engine, you name it – all stopped working - period.

There's nothing like driving along minding your own business on a dark morning only to have the routine interrupted by sudden darkness and a noiseless grind to a halt right in the middle of the road! That was it! This thing had to be fixed. I had stopped in the middle of the road with my hood raised bending and twisting wires to get the thing to start again for the last time! So, I went down to the local Wal-Mart and purchased a roll of wire and some wire couplers. I wanted to do it right. I got home, cut the wire where the bad place was and spliced it back together with a new stretch of wire and the couplers. When I climbed back into the cab of the van it started up just fine. Good! That was the end of that.

Monday morning, on the way to work, a good, quick breakfast sounded very appealing and so I stopped to get my usual. As I pulled up to the drive through window, paid for my meal and got ready to drive away it happened – The lights went dark and the engine went silent. Now think about the situation for a moment if you will. I was parked directly beside the drive through window. Have you ever tried to open a door to get out of a vehicle when parked at a drive through window? It isn't an easy task. As I began to climb out, I was successful in getting my feet on the ground but I just couldn't get the door open wide enough to squeeze through (I guess I had eaten too many of those good breakfasts). I realized that I was going to have to get back in the van and exit through the passenger side. As I began to wiggle back up into the van my belt caught on the latch. The lady at the window just stared at me while I lipped an apology to the person in the vehicle right behind me. The line was getting longer as I managed to get back into the van, cross over to the passenger side and get out.

I knew that the people behind me were in a hurry to get their meals and get to work just like I was. I pushed the wire back together, climbed back into the van and, thank God, it started. I put the van in drive to pull out and guess what? Yep! So, I went through the routine one more time minus the attempt to get out from the driver's side. This time it worked and I quickly pulled out of the way. I had to get this thing fixed! I felt like what I needed to do was just eliminate those couplers and twist the wires together like I had done in many other cases during my life. But I didn't because it wasn't the right way to do it. So, after work I carefully pushed those coupled wires together and this time taped it up good and tight and drove away without incident. The next day it did just fine. However, I decided to park and go inside instead of taking a chance at the drive-through.

Wednesday, I thought, "I've got it fixed," so I tried the drive through again. Guess what? Yep! Right up at the drive through window – black and silent again! I got it started but couldn't decide if my red face was from embarrassment or anger. After work I eliminated those couplers twisted the wires together good and tight and taped it up.

There's something to say for getting it right the first time. At times we regard our spiritual lives in the same way. "I'm running late so I'll just do a quickie prayer this morning." Or, "I'm pressed for time so I'll just read a verse instead of a chapter today." There's nothing wrong with that as long as we do it from the heart, but what makes one wonder is that if a "quickie" is okay perhaps we aren't doing it for the right reasons to begin with.

We always pay for our botched-up jobs just like we do for our "quickie" spiritual experiences. It will always cost us more sooner or later. I guess we should have thought of that in the first place, shouldn't we? By the way, the "twist and tape" method worked. That was the end of dark days on the road, at least in that vehicle.

January 4

“The Race” By Debbie Ousley

W*ell*, here we go again – A new year! What does the future hold? I guess if you want to waste your money you could call Ms. Cleo and if enough people make that call, she will have a better idea of what her future looks like (\$\$).

In 1 Corinthians 9:24 we find it talking about a race; a race that all Christians must run. This year, as I run this race, I will first of all know it's a race for all who call the Lord their Savior. We will be determined to finish the race. It is my goal to encourage the other runners, not to be a threat to them.

Finishing the race, I will accept a cool drink of water offered to me along the course and not take the ones that are meant for my brothers and sisters. I will acknowledge the other runner's efforts and appreciate their endurance. I will not belittle their form or question their determination. I will have confidence in their concern for me and not doubt that they are also rooting for my victory, unless they have proven by their heart-actions contrary to that. I will distance myself from their lane and continue in my race.

I will be kind and gentle to the new runners and will not withhold the information I have acquired during the course of my race because of my own personal aspirations or because of the pride that is natural in me that might reveal my own weakness.

When I hit the “wall,” a place in the course of this race that makes me feel like I can't go on, I will be reminded of all those who have started the race before me and made it. Again, in 1 Corinthians 15 we find a verse that tells us that if our hope is only in this life, then we are of all people most miserable and to be pitied. But our hope, as Christians, is in the power of a risen Lord Who not only brought us salvation by His resurrection but defeated the ultimate enemy - death.

I'm excited about the up-coming year. What will we see while on the mountains and what will we learn while walking through the valleys? Will we graduate from this “school of life” to the promised everlasting life during our race? If by some chance we could know the future the big question would still remain: “Do we have what it takes to get through what might be

facing us?” I believe the only way any of us could possibly know the answer to that question is when we’ve actually gone through it . . .

January 5

“Snow” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

*T*oday it snowed. However, that’s better than ice. I was looking forward to plans I had made but the snow changed things. I was very frustrated and feeling sorry for myself, wondering when I would get the opportunity to accomplish those plans. That opportunity did come and what I had planned to do got done. I should have known that it would because things have a way of working out.

Somehow it doesn’t seem fair. It snows and because of it, school is cancelled for the kids. Meetings for various things are put on hold, postponed, or cancelled altogether. But when it’s time to go to work neither rain, nor snow, nor sleet nor anything else can change the fact that somehow, we’ve got to go outside early, clean all the snow and ice off the car, put up with the cold, then carefully drive to work.

But what can we do about it? No matter what the weatherman says, regardless how much we wish that it would change, God has control of the weather and when it snows it’s because He knows that we need it. That white powdery frozen liquid, when it melts, will slowly seep down into the ground depositing into the soil all the good things that it’s supposed to.

The problem is that we are never satisfied. I caught myself a few years ago wishing for the winter. It was mid-summer and man, was it hot. The balmy, sticky humidity just made me feel clammy all over. In a passionate moment I caught myself thinking how good it would feel if a blast of wintry air would just sweep by at that moment. But only a few months earlier, when the wind was frigid and the ground covered with ice, I thought about how I had wished for the heat of summer.

We forget too easily about those things. The Israeli people did that too. The Bible tells us how they had longed to be free from the bondage and cruelty of slavery in Egypt. They had prayed for it because the Bible tells us that God had heard their cry. But after they had been delivered and had followed Moses into the wilderness there came a time when they began to think about all the food in Egypt and the Bible says that they longed to return. We just can’t be satisfied, can we?

It's something we need to think about. I'm certainly glad that God shrugs off our dissatisfaction. I know if I were God I'd say, "What's with these people? Nothing is ever right!" But God looks past our indecision and goes ahead and blesses us with what we need despite ourselves. When we think about it like that, how could we ever doubt God's Divine knowledge determining what the weather should be and when it should come? God knows what we need and when we need it. We must learn to be satisfied with what God allows to come, knowing that He has our lives under control, that He is our forward Guard and also our reward Guard. In other words, He goes in front of us and He's also got our backs, even when the snow is piling up!

January 6

“A Band of Men Touched by God” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

The story is told in 1 Samuel 10 of the very first king of Israel. Earlier, God had told Samuel that Saul was the one to be anointed as king. Privately he had poured a horn of oil over Saul and told him to go home and await further instruction. The day came when Samuel was going to anoint Saul publicly and so he called for an assembly.

The Bible tells us how that Samuel went through the ceremony of selecting the very family that their king would come from, then pin-pointed it down to Saul, the son of Kish. Everyone was standing in expectation hoping to catch a glimpse of their first king. “He’ll be a magnificent specimen of a human being” someone cried out. Certainly, he’d probably be a very rich individual capable of representing their nation. But when they called for Saul to come forward, while everyone looked around trying to see him a hush must have fallen over the crowd because Saul was nowhere to be found. Samuel had to send someone to look for him and they finally found their magnificent king hiding among the supplies they had brought with them. Not a very good first impression if you ask me.

When they did get Saul to come forward, they publicly anointed him and dismissed the congregation. Some belly-ached and complained; isn’t that just like people? You can’t please everybody no matter what you do! After Saul was anointed as king and the congregation was dismissed, I can’t help but think that Saul wondered, “What am I supposed to do next?” There was no royal city to go to; no palace in which he was going to be living and no crown to place on his head. His only choice was to go home just like everyone else. So here he was, the new king of Israel and his only option was to go home and plow fields like he had always done.

But the Bible tells us that a group of men who had been touched by God followed him. That had to be encouraging to Saul. God had given him a job to do and on this first day on the job I don’t think he felt very much like a king. However, this group of men had confidence in him because they had confidence in God. Their hearts were touched and in obedience they followed Saul and that had to make him feel better about the whole situation.

It made me to think about how God anoints us today to do a job. Often, He doesn’t give us a lot of detailed instructions because He doesn’t want to overwhelm us. But then many of

us need a plan and after God has given us a call without instructions, we may feel like we just stepped into “Dumb and Dumber” because we just don’t know what to do next. But think about it; when God does something He does it right. Even though He may not give us immediate instruction He will always provide a few who are touched by Him to follow us. They are there to help, encourage and lift us up.

Maybe you are the one called or perhaps God has dealt with your heart to follow. No matter what service God may call us to, it takes both. It takes the one to whom God has given the plan and those touched by God to help carry the plan out. A kingdom wouldn’t have been much without a group of people. This band of men was a start. It’s the same way today. Maybe you’ve been called to pastor a congregation. But that won’t happen until you have a band of people who see the vision and are touched of God to help.

Moses was a great man of God and was given personal instruction by Him as to just how to make the tabernacle and all its furnishings. But Moses had grown up as the son of a king. Then he was banished to the wilderness where he tended sheep for forty years. He wasn’t an artist and he knew nothing about metal-crafting or sewing or carving. But God told him to do it. That was where the people came in. God had especially prepared two men who knew all about that kind of stuff and could get the job done. Their hearts were touched by God to jump in and help with the project. It’s the same today. So, whether you’re the one with the calling or your one of a band of people, you are just as important. Let’s work together and build a Kingdom; what do you say?

January 7

“Are You Listening?” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

Listening is an art. We don't think about it much but really, it is. I know a few people who are very hard to talk to because frankly they don't know how to listen. They constantly interrupt and quite often change the subject on you in mid-sentence. I hate talking to one particular individual because he will ask a question and before you can finish getting your answer or response out, he's already interrupted with yet another question. It's frustrating to talk with him. It gives you the feeling that the person doing the interrupting really isn't interested in what you've got to say. All they want to do is to talk.

But then, I can't stand completely guiltless in the matter. I've done that to my wife many times and there's nothing more frustrating between a husband and wife than lack of communication. I know there have been times when she'd just rather not talk as to have me interrupt her.

On the other hand, there have also been times that I have tried to be a good listener and my lack of response has made her to think that I've just tuned her out and she'll respond to that by asking, "Are you even listening to me?" In her defense there have been times that I really wasn't. When that happens, I'm in the wrong because it's imperative for husbands and wives to communicate with each other. Besides, what she is saying is probably really important and you know what happens when you come back later and have to ask about that again.

Several times in the Gospels, Jesus said this in variations: "He who has ears to hear let him hear." I know you've read those words. The fact is most of us do have ears on the sides of our heads. Some may have lost them for different reasons and there are some who are deaf and can't hear. But Jesus wasn't leaving these folks out when He spoke those words. What He was saying was, "Those who care to listen will hear what I am saying." When it comes to God's word there are many deaf folks who hear better than those who have been graced with the sense of hearing. Jesus was telling us that He had something very important to say and we need to listen to Him – listen to the point that we understand what He is saying and then make it a part of our lives.

Many times, a lot of us will say that we have forgotten something. There are times when this is a justifiable excuse but there are other times when we have forgotten because we didn't listen well to begin with. I know because I've done it. We need to listen when we hear or read God's word.

There are also times when we need to listen in prayer. Did you know that listening is a part of prayer? We sometimes think that we need to do all the talking when we pray to God. We fill our mouths with words and spew them forth like an erupting volcano. When we pray, we need to also have our hearts tuned in to God and hear what He is silently speaking to us. There are times He's got the answer ready but we're just too busy talking to listen.

Yes, there's no doubt that listening is an art. We need to hone in on this great attribute and learn to listen, not only to others but also to God. When we read His word, we need to listen. When we pray, we need to listen. So, are you listening?

January 8

“Being a Good Follower”

By Jerry D. Ousley

We used to have a little dachshund that my son had fondly named “Casey.” He was a great little dog until it came time to following orders. Casey stayed in the house most of the time. He was a “lap dog” and any time I sat down in a chair he would jump up into my lap. He loved it during the winter time when it was cold and I would sometimes get a blanket and spread over my legs. He’d jump up and nose his way under that blanket and would lie there for hours.

Casey also loved the outdoors but he didn’t like being chained up. We had to do it because he’d run all over the neighborhood. Sometimes he’d wait for the door to open up and out he’d go. There were times he’d run off and I would chase him down. But as time passed and I got older I could no longer catch him. There were a couple of times he was gone for two or three days. Then he’d come dragging himself in covered with who knows what? I think he’d stay gone so long because he knew a spanking and a bath were what he was coming home to. He’d make the most of his “getaway.”

The point is that he was a good dog when he got his way but he wasn’t a very good follower. I’ve witnessed a lot of Christian people like that. Whatever God has put in the pastor’s heart to do (or other Christian leader for that matter), they’d say “That sounds fine. You do whatever God has told you to do.” They were all for it unless it required them to do something. Then it was a completely different matter. The attitude was, “You do whatever you want but don’t involve me.” The fact is, very little is done in the kingdom of God that is meant to be done by one single individual. God likes teams. He knows that the more people involved in a project or ministry the better the witness to the rest of the world.

Jonathan, the son of Saul the king, had a good follower. In 1 Samuel 14:1-23, we read the story of an encounter he had with the enemy. It was just him and his armor bearer. But God put it into Jonathan’s heart to attack a garrison of the enemy. He asked his armor bearer if he was with him. The armor bearer was all for it, but not just in word, he followed Jonathan up the hill and did his part. Because of the obedience of these two men a great victory was won that day.

I wish I knew that armor bearer's name but the Bible never gives it. He was a good follower. In today's world let's first be followers of God, then followers of those in whom God has placed a call to ministry. When we do, we'll see great victories not only in the lives of others but also in our own personal lives as well.

January 9

“Being in Debt” By Jerry D. Ousley

It hasn't been that long ago that we were in debt up to our eyeballs. With Americans it seems to be a way of life. How can you have anything without being in debt? At least that's the way I reasoned it out. We had car payments, credit card payments, and a house payment besides all the utility bills, insurances, doctor bills, and on and on. If you are like we were, payday was a welcomed event but only on that day because the day after, it was all gone and it was back to being broke.

Through a chain of events my wife and I were able to re-evaluate our financial situation and we were able to pay off all those credit cards, pay off our automobiles and we also did some belt-tightening on other things in order to get control of the situation. I praise the Lord because for the first time in our lives we use a debit card first and the credit card only if we have too. Even then we make it a point not to put more on that card than what we can pay off at the end of the month.

Sacrifices had to be made. We got rid of cable TV. We decided that for \$40.00 per month renting movies was cheaper. So now we've got a set of rabbit ears sitting on top of the TV set. You know what we discovered? All we watched during the week was the evening news. On the weekends we'd spend about thirty-minutes going through the channels trying to find something we were interested in or hadn't seen before only to finally give up and run down to the video store. At first, we'd buy movies but then we discovered that you could rent a movie two or three times for what you paid to buy it, and the ones we bought are still sitting on the shelf gathering dust. So, we cancelled cable, got the rabbit ears and joined an Internet video club. Now we watch what we want when we want for half the cost.

Anyway, other than the house, that's how we got out of debt and stay out of debt. By the way, we are also making sure that we pay extra on the house payment every month until we get rid of that one too.

I'm not going to preach a sermon today about the evils of debt. I believe each of us needs to figure out where the line is as individual families. It's also much harder to get out of debt when the kids are still home. That's not the point of our topic today. The Bible tells us in

Romans 13:8, "*Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law.*" While this verse is addressing debt (just read the few verses above this one) the greater emphasis is on a debt that we do owe: To love each other. This is an obligation as a believer in Jesus Christ that we cannot escape. It is how we are marked as Christians. This is our greatest witness. When we owe a debt of love to each other it becomes one we can pay with joy instead of drudgery.

Why are we obligated to a debt of love? It is because we really are obligated to Christ. In fact, the Bible tells us in Romans 8:12 that we are debtors. Jesus paid the ultimate price for our sin on the cross. When we deserved death, He died for us and His own sinless death paid for our sin. Doesn't it stand to reason then that it isn't a big favor we're doing for God when we love each other but only making good on an obligation we really owe?

January 10

“But First, A Word from Our Sponsor” By Jerry D. Ousley

Don't you just love the way they do it on TV? They'll get you all built up for the next exciting scene or leave you hanging at a point where the main character is in deep peril and then it's commercial time. It may really be upsetting but most of us will just sit there (unless we get a sudden urge to make a mad dash to the “fridge”) and wait through seven to ten minutes of advertisements all designed to get us to let loose of our hard-earned cash.

I remember a Jerry Lewis movie called “The Errand Boy” in which he played a young man who made his living running errands for people. One particular lady was his best customer because she endured the programs just to watch the commercials. After the commercial break she'd send him down to the local store to buy one of everything she had just seen advertised.

Life can be like a TV program with commercials. Ours may not be as exciting or adventurous as what we see on “the tube” but non-the-less, just like a TV show, it is interrupted ever so often with “commercial breaks.” These breaks may come as disasters, trials, loss, or tragedy, but they do and will come. That's part of life.

What we do during these breaks is what really makes the difference in our lives. For instance, during a TV commercial break we could jump up and finish a quick chore or we can just sit there and do nothing with that time. In life when these breaks strike us, we can just let it flood over us and destroy even more of our life or we can take it to God and let Him make something positive out of our negatives.

I'm not necessarily a prosperity teacher although I do believe God blesses us and meets our needs as a consequence to our service and devotion to Him. Nor am I a minister of “gloom and doom,” even though I know bad things will come to us as well as good. Somewhere in-between these two views I believe that when we go to God in prayer and let His word (the Bible) be our guide even though we'll get some lemons in life, God will show us how to squeeze them into lemonade. The Bible says, *“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose.”* (Romans 8:28). When we are in His will, called to His purpose, everything that happens to us,

good or bad, can be made into a positive to help us grow, aid us in helping others, and teaching us what we need to do in life.

So, the next time you hear, “But first a word from our sponsor . . .” what will you do with it?

January 11

“Somebody Help the Boy!” By Debbie Ousley

Picture it: A toddler has somehow hoisted himself up on the tailgate of the family pick-up truck. His legs are dangling in the air, not having the strength to pull himself on up in the bed, but afraid to drop back to the ground which, at this point, seemed to him to be a hundred-foot drop. As the father comes to his rescue, he hears the youngster cry “Someone help the boy!”

As the father caught his son up in his arms, he gave him a mini-lecture about the dangers of his actions, all the while laughing to himself about the youngster’s cry for help, and so glad at that moment he could be his son’s hero.

I believe deep inside of all of us is the dream of being a hero. You know, as we play a situation over in our mind, what if? - I came upon a burning house, or someone trapped in a car? - And don’t we all kind of envy that person who found the abandoned baby, just-in-the-nick-of-time!

I guess there are those who are satisfied just to mind their own business and take care of “them and theirs,” but I can’t help believe that they are very few. I know, not everyone has, or will have, the same experience when they come to Christ. But as I write this article, I believe many will relate.

When I met Jesus, I was like this little boy. My brain and will had gotten me into a place where I couldn’t pull it together, but I couldn’t let go for fear of where I’d land. My cry at that time was “Someone help the girl!” And even though there were a lot of caring, loving people who were willing to help me with their advice and lecture on how my actions were dangerous and could hurt me, it wasn’t enough, not until I came to the knowledge inside of me of Who God really is. I just kept dangling there, making a lot of noise and keeping people who loved me torn up.

But once I believed and was willing to let go of that tailgate, I felt a loving Father take me up in His arms and rescue me. Someone did help this girl, just like He has and will help all who call for it. Many of you who read this article can also say, “That was me!”

That's how it is when we really see Christ (Savior: A person who saves, rescues, or delivers). The Son of God came as a man so he could know how we feel. He is not a high priest that can't be touched by our hurts and needs.

Some people might be asking, "Who does this woman think she is - Some kind of spiritual Guru?" No, I'm a little girl (in His eyes) that one day cried out, "Someone help the girl!" and every day since, has made that my heart's cry. Believe if you will, the Father wants to "help the kid . . ."

January 12

“Straight to the Heart” By Debbie Ousley

Very few things get us “right in the heart” anymore. With bad news coming to our ears, and evil acts coming to our eyes, nothing seems to “shake” or surprise us. It has become harder and harder for us to really be “touched.” Tears don’t come to our eyes as easily as they used to.

Our own hurts and disappointments have made us more determined to NOT get hurt again! When we see our fellow man “down on his luck” it’s become a “that’s their tough luck” attitude, and sorrow and tears can only come when it’s our pain we are experiencing.

Sometimes it seems it will take a stick of dynamite to blast through those walls of stone we’ve built around our hearts. We have put them there for protection, but they have also become walls that block our affection.

But it’s not dynamite we need. Like fighting fire with fire, we must fight the lack of love with love. The love of a Man who has never stopped loving; a Man whose love understands all hurts and disappointments.

Jesus’ love goes straight to the heart. His love is not selfish; His love is unconditional; His love knows no bonds. To know Him is to love Him. To know His love is to really love others (John 3:16, Hebrews 4:15).

January 13

“Birth” By Jerry D. Ousley

I was privileged to be present at the birth of both of our children. I was in the birthing room when they passed from my wife’s nurturing body and made their entrance into this world. It was an honor and a privilege. Now I didn’t “cut the cord” or do any of the other things fathers do today in the birthing room. It scared me enough just holding the hand of this lady who was experiencing so much pain that I thought she was going to squeeze my hand off. You’ve also got to remember that I’m just barely out of the generation of fathers who paced nervously in the waiting room expecting the doctor to emerge at any moment announcing that you are the proud father of a baby boy or girl.

Birth is a special event. We normally put most of the emphasis regarding pain on the mother (and rightly so), but I’d bet that baby isn’t cozy and comfortable either. I mean, think about the process; that’s got to hurt! Birth is how we come into this world.

We Christians talk a lot about being “born again.” A significant conversation went on in John 3 when Nicodemus, a Jewish leader, paid a visit to Jesus one night. He had heard Jesus speak. What this man had said pulled at the heart of Nicodemus. He had to know more, but he didn’t want the other Jewish leaders to know anything about it; after all, if they were right in their belief that this Jesus was a false teacher and was only trying to stir the people, he didn’t want his peers thinking badly of him. So, he waited until nightfall and made his way to where Jesus was staying.

Nicodemus started out his conversation much the way he would have greeted a dignitary, with compliments and social grace. More than likely, he was expecting the same treatment from Jesus. I mean, he was a Jewish leader paying a visit to one who was considered a common individual. But Jesus seemed to change the subject and go straight to the point. He knew why Nicodemus had come to see Him. So, He simply said, “This is highly important; unless a man is born again – literally regenerated – he can’t see the Kingdom of God.” There it was. We must be re-born.

When Nicodemus heard this, he asked Jesus in so many words, “How can a man be re-born? Is he required to go back into his mother’s womb and experience birth again?” To which Jesus responded that we had to be born of the water and of the spirit. The water referred to the natural birth. In our mother’s womb we are surrounded by fluid. That water has to be released when we are born into this world. This was the birth of water.

But Jesus introduced a new fact to our birth. He added that we had to be born of the spirit. In other words, our human spirits, dead until regenerated by Jesus Christ, had to be brought back to life. Our spirit’s died in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve, our original parents, disobeyed God, sinning against Him. Their disobedience forced God to put a curse upon the entire creation. That curse included death. Adam and Eve didn’t die immediately like they had thought, but their spirits did. We are only worthy of the Kingdom of God once our spirits have been revived. That was the second birth – the bringing back to life of our own spirits by the presence of God the Spirit – The Holy Spirit – taking abode in our lives. He makes us a new creation. He restores us to completion. He makes us re-born. That birth can take place at any stage of our lives. We may be young - just able to understand this, or we may be old and advanced in years. But each and every one of us, regardless of age, race, sex, or social status must be born again. We must experience a brand-new spiritual birth.

January 14

“Burnin’ Clutches” By Jerry D. Ousley

“Wheeeee-Haaaaa, Drive ‘em Smokey!” came the cry of my co-workers. I had a part time job after high school hours during my junior and senior years at the Coca-Cola warehouse in Scottsburg. My job was to hand-load cases of canned soda in the side bays of the delivery trucks. This was in the early seventies so the trucks normally carried canned beverages in these two bays. The rest of the truck was loaded with skids of bottled soda (and yes, they were made of glass and were returnable then). It wasn’t easy work but I learned to have fun with it.

At the end of the day, after all the trucks were loaded and ready for tomorrow’s deliveries, we had to clean the floors, let them dry, then pull all the trucks back into the building. There was just one problem . . . I had driven a car with a clutch in it (and I wasn’t very good at it then), but a large delivery truck was completely different.

I was so afraid of driving them that I went to the supervisor, explained the situation to him, and got exempt from pulling them in at night. That was okay for a while. But I began to feel the pressure from the other workers when they’d go out to begin pulling in the trucks and I was just standing there. After a couple of weeks, they began to poke fun at me. I tried to explain, thinking they’d understand, but they had to do it so did I think I was something special?

I couldn’t take the pressure anymore, and one day I just went out, climbed into the cab of one of those big trucks, turned the key, took a big breath, and said a prayer. I began to let out on the clutch very slowly. I noticed a strange odor, but forgot about it when the clutch took hold and that big truck hopped forward. I never got it straightened out, but I did hop right into the building and pulled that truck in place.

When I got out of the truck, the odor was thick, and I had no idea what it was, but the other guys slapped me on the back, nick-named me “Smokey the Clutch Burner” and I was in the gang. It took me several weeks before I ever got the hang of pulling those trucks in without burning the clutch, but it eventually came to me.

Isn't life a bit like that at times? We face challenges, sometimes on a daily basis, and our first reaction is to run away as far as we can. Many do, turning to drugs or alcohol to ease their minds of the pain. In today's society, it's easier to blame others or a situation, rather than facing up to the problem, assume responsibility for it and just take care of it.

However, Jesus is a factor that no drug or bottle could ever match. Jesus becomes our strength and as we depend on Him, we can take hold of those challenges facing us, set our faces, and meet the situation head on. We may "burn" a few "clutches" along the way, but in Him we can conquer our problems and fears.

It takes a dedication to Jesus Christ. Many would try to censor this in today's society, because they are so afraid of being "politically incorrect." But I know, right now, everyone reading this has experienced a witness inside, whether you want to acknowledge it or not, that I am right. Jesus is the factor that changes lives, challenges sin, and meets the situation straight on.

Let's "hop" to it, "burn some clutches" and make a difference, what do you say?

January 15

“Ceremonies” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

During my years as a pastor, I had the privilege of conducting many ceremonies, especially weddings and funerals (I'm not a pastor now but I still take care of these ceremonies from time to time). Ceremonies can be tough and exert a lot of pressure both on the one conducting it and those involved in it. However, they also hold significant meaning in our lives; for instance - weddings. A wedding is just a ceremony of the commitment of a man and woman to each other. Different cultures around the world do this in different ways. We must remember that it's not the ceremony that makes the two married, but the commitment. That's why living together without being married is wrong in the eyes of God; the couple has not made the commitment.

I suppose all ministers have their share of wedding stories. My biggest blooper happened twice. The ceremonies of both went off smooth as clockwork until just at the end when it was time for me to announce, “Ladies and gentlemen, for the first time, I present unto you Mr. And Mrs. ...” and I blew it big time! I used the last name of the bride! Of course, I was able to joke my way out of that embarrassing situation both times but the mistake had been made and could not be undone.

But then, when it's all over, it is just a ceremony. We want it to be perfect and beautiful, but the bottom line is true commitment. I've performed weddings in back yards, front yards, nice churches, beautiful edifices, and even in a building under construction. When it all comes down to the bottom line, the ceremony is there just to show the world that a man and woman have made a commitment for a life-time (at least, that's the way the Bible teaches it).

Marriage is such a wonderful thing that God inspired the Apostle Paul to use it as a type of Christ and His Church. Just as we men are to love our wives, provide for our family and protect them, so Christ loves His Church. He loves His Church as a man should love and honor his bride. He provides for His Church just as we men are to provide for our families. He gives His Church good things, and offers the love and time that she needs. And He protects by laying down His very life for her.

Thank God, He is committed for life. Thank God, that He doesn't get mad and divorce us. If we stray away from Him, it is us who do the running and the leaving, not our Lord.

Those of us who have committed ourselves to Christ will be part of another ceremony one day. It's called in the Bible "The Marriage Supper of the Lamb." It's a great feast in Heaven following the time when Jesus will meet His bride, the New Jerusalem descending from Heaven. I want to be committed to be part of that ceremony, don't you? Come to Christ, become a part of His Church and be ready for that day. Then when that trumpet spoken of in the Bible sounds, you'll be assured of a place in attendance of the greatest marriage ceremony this world has ever witnessed!

January 16

“Coffee Break” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

The coffee bean - A small, black, bitter tasting fruit, vegetable, or nut (I'm not quite sure which) that is used to get many people off to the start of a good day. They say that the caffeine contained in it is not good for you; I can't say that I know much about that. I do know that when I drink too much of it on an empty stomach that I get the "jitters." But then in the right proportions I have to say that I really like it.

We take that small bean, grind it up into a granular format and then pour boiling water over it. Most in our modern times don't know how it was done in "the good ole' days" because we don't use percolators anymore (or most don't). We now use drip coffee makers. You put a pod containing the coffee into the machine, pour the water into the reservoir and out comes that rich, black, aromatic liquid that's like bring a fragrant bouquet to the senses.

However, drinking coffee requires an acquired taste. Some people "doctor" it up with creamers and sugar. But to drink it straight demands the skill of a true coffee lover. I remember how I acquired my taste. I was a teenager desperately trying to become a man. Every man I knew drank coffee. Naturally I thought that I had to learn how to drink it too. It smelled really good to me but when I brought the liquid to my taste buds it manufactured a face that would embarrass a raisin. I tried milk and sugar but after a certain point you can no longer classify it as a drinkable liquid – or at least coffee.

A week came when my parents brought home some raw coffee beans; I suppose they were going to grind it up themselves. Those beans smelled so good that I just had to have some. Somehow, I got my hands on a few of those beans and I sniffed them for a while, then did the unexpected – I stuck one in my mouth. It was extremely bitter but I was determined to like coffee so I chewed it up and swallowed. Now I was on my way and there was no turning back so I grabbed another one and put it in my mouth. After the third bean it was beginning to taste different. I had done it! I liked coffee! Ever since that day I have drank it straight. No cream, no sugar – I like it black.

My wife and I took the kids up to Indianapolis to the circle a few years ago. It was great – All decorated up for Christmas, the Salvation Army was playing on a corner and we had a

wonderful time. But the air was cold and we spotted a Star Buck's. A good hot cup of coffee would be just what the doctor ordered so in we went. The aroma was fantastic – a coffee lover's paradise! You could get virtually any kind of coffee you wanted! Megan loved a good cappuccino and Jeremy got hot chocolate or something. My wife always liked trying different things and so she got something special. Then it was my turn. Remember I had this acquired taste for coffee. So, I ordered a nice cup of black coffee. It seemed like that coffee bar full of people was suddenly silenced and all eyes were on me. Who buys a cup of black coffee in a fancy Star Bucks? Me. It was a very good cup of coffee even if it did cost \$2.50.

Could it be that being in love with God is an acquired taste? I think so. Most people think of God as the "Guy" Who takes all the fun out of things. We think of God as having a large, thick rulebook and always reminding us when we break a single one. He's the One standing up in Heaven thunderbolt in hand just waiting for us to do the inevitable so He can hurl it in our direction.

But God isn't like that at all. Once we experience a relationship with the Almighty and find out what He really wants for us then we can't get enough of Him. You might not think you like God or that He really likes you. But trust me on this one, He will fulfill you like you've never been fulfilled and you won't have to "doctor" Him up with condiments.

January 17

“Computer Man” By Jerry D. Ousley

*I*f you talk to anyone that knows me very well, they can tell you that I am into computers. From the moment my wife bought me my first one (for those of you who are familiar with some of the earlier models, it was an old TI99/4A) I was caught, hook, line and sinker.

It always fascinated me how you could take a bunch of 0's and 1's and turn them into almost anything if you had enough memory. I remember back in those days that I wrote a program that drew a “computer man” and then made him speak a dialogue at the push of a button. He would blink his eyes periodically, look back and forth, and make movements that gave him personality. It literally took months of using all the spare time I could muster to make this 10-minute (or less) presentation work. But it was cool, and the kids of our congregation liked it and so it was, in my estimation, well worth it.

It's a lot like many other things we do. For instance, if we have a dinner for our congregation most people never realize the amount of time that goes into planning who's going to bring what so we don't wind up with fourteen kettles of green beans, or twenty bowls of macaroni and cheese. And then there's the advertising, the setting up, and making sure all the dishes are cleaned up afterwards. Most people show up, bring their covered dish, and leave when everyone is through without ever giving a thought to all the preparation and clean up that goes in to something like this. I wouldn't know myself if my wife hadn't been the one doing most of the planning and running!

Many new Christians don't make it very far in their new walk with God for several reasons. First of all, they see the “seasoned Christians” who appear to never do anything wrong. Perhaps they seem to always have the answers and their lives are “together.” When these newborns fail, the first temptation they get is “you just aren't cut out for this thing so you might as well quit.”

Anything we do takes time including our Christian walk. Even though our souls are made instantly perfect by the saving power of the Holy Spirit, our human, fleshly side has to be dealt with. I firmly believe God can deliver and heal, but much of the time He does this

gradually so we aren't overwhelmed. It is for our benefit. It's like winning millions of dollars instantly when you are used to a near poverty level income. The change is so drastic that most people can't handle it. That's why we hear of people who have won an unimaginable amount of money a year later filing for bankruptcy. It's because they can't handle such a change so fast. It's the same principle in our Christian experience. If God gave us the change that He desires from us all at once we just couldn't handle it.

So, don't get discouraged when you fail. It's not an excuse and a license to say, "Oh well, I'm just human." We must do our best and we should feel guilty and repentant when we fail, but that's why Christ is making intercession for us at the right hand of the Father (Romans 8:34). We ask forgiveness, learn our lesson, repent and go on. With time, you'll soon wonder why you were even tempted with that thing. Keep going, you'll see!

January 18

“Copy and Paste” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

Copy and paste – Two very useful features in most computer programs today. These features have literally saved me hours of typing over the years. We don’t think much about them; we highlight the desired area click on copy then go to the program in which we want to deposit that information, click paste and there you have it! I’m sure that there’s a mountain of programming behind these two seemingly simple operations. We don’t see all of that because it’s doing its job in the background. All we really see is where we took it from and where we put it. That’s the desired result and most of us just leave it at that.

I have volumes of books on computer that I’ve copied from the Internet and pasted into word documents (don’t worry – They’re all “free domain” works which means that the copyrights have expired and they are open to public use). I think of all the time it would have taken to get these books by typing them (ugh!) or even scanning printed pages. But the task was made simple with good ole’ copy and paste.

Wouldn’t it be great if we could copy and paste in life as well? I can think of a lot of things I’d like to copy and paste overtop of what I had already done. Most of the time we try to erase those things in our lives and wind up with the smudged-up mess that’s left when you press or rub too hard with an eraser. Back in the days of the typewriter I used to use a lot of whiteout. It worked pretty good but it always left that rough looking splotch on the paper and a lot of times it was a lighter shade of white than the paper. It was pretty obvious that mistakes had been made. I’ve had a few of those pages that when held up to a light had almost more dark spots than regular paper. I wonder if you could have created a whole new sheet of paper with that stuff.

It’s so much better now with “copy and paste.” You can make your work look professional. Why you’d be surprised how many mistakes I’ve made getting to this point in this article! But you’ll never know it because of, yep, you guessed it: “copy and paste” (well I guess you do know it because I just told you).

God’s plan is a lot like copy and paste. You see we spend our whole life trying to erase and cover over our mistakes. However, in the process we leave a lot of obvious smudges and

evidences of our cover-ups. We start over a lot (or attempt to) as our trash can readily shows (see all the crumpled-up pages that have been rejected and thrown in there?).

But God doesn't do it that way. He doesn't require us to cover up our mistakes. In fact, He knows that we can't really cover anything up. The tell-tale signs of our work are prominently displayed.

Jesus died so that we aren't trying to cover up the errors of life. No, in fact He takes the perfection of His own life and copies and pastes it right into ours by way of salvation. But we've got to pay the price of the software. Correction, the software is free but we've got to agree with the terms of service. It's simple: We just give ourselves to Him and let Him do His work. He will copy and paste Himself right into our lives. You won't see any smudges or whiteout splotches because His work is seamless. You can't ask for anything better than that!

January 19

“You Might As Well Laugh About It” By Debbie Ousley

AS I get older, I’m realizing the importance of being able to laugh at myself and I’m learning as I do get older I have more to laugh at! As I “lighten up” I realize the things I took dead serious a few years ago weren’t “all that” anyway. When we take ourselves too seriously it doesn’t give those around us much mercy either.

The ability to laugh at one’s self is a great defense against those who really want to put us down. Really ... what fun is it to try and slam someone if they are literally laughing in your face; not at the slammer but themselves? It’s like when a dog tries to run your car and you slow down. That really frustrates them and it always gives me a good laugh. They are so put-out at you they tuck their tail between their legs and go lay down.

I do believe my God has a sense of humor also. Doesn’t it seem He always gives us a child just like we were when we were a child? Below are a few church bulletin bloopers I believe you will enjoy. Now I can’t say for sure if the people typing them out laughed, but they might as well have:

Don’t let worry kill you – Let the church help.

Thursday night – Potluck supper – Prayer and medication to follow.

Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.

For those of you who have children and don’t know it, we have a nursery downstairs.

The rosebud on the altar this morning is to announce the birth of David Allen _____, the son of Rev. & Mrs. Julius _____.

This afternoon there will be a meeting in the South and North ends of the church. Children will be baptized at both ends.

A bean supper will be held on Tuesday evening in the church hall, music will follow.

January 20

“A Call for Change” By Debbie Ousley

“Bumble bee, bumble bee, I see something you don’t see and the color is ...”

you remember that childhood game? The object was to tell the color of an item to the other players and they had to guess what the item was. Oh, I know it doesn’t sound like much fun but you just have to be there to experience the joy of guessing everything in the room or car that is the color blue and finally getting it right. And, yes, you always took the chance of someone being dishonest and changing the object when you had guessed it, but that was their issue.

Jesus saw things that no one else saw because He had a spiritual eye and his only objective was to teach. Remember, He didn’t have long to try and equip some people to carry on the ministry He would eventually die for.

And you know what? This generation of adults doesn’t have long to teach the next generation some very important truths about that same ministry. The Bible is forever talking about the generation to come. Do you know who that is? Yes, you are right. It’s my children and your children, your grandchildren and great grandchildren. These are the next generation.

There was a movie a few years ago that talked a lot about the circle of life. It was about a lion, a cub, and on and on. I believe there is a circle of life for us and I’m learning more than ever we are here in this “time” because of the generation to come. It’s all about what we are going to leave them with. I’m sorry to say that we have failed them miserably in some areas.

As I look back on my life and I think about those individuals who made an impact on me the most, I realize it was not those who had big fancy houses or cars; it was not people who had a pot full of money with no time for me. It was those people who were the same every time I was with them. They sowed encouraging words into me and were more patient than Job.

The other night we were talking with some kids and they were telling how old they were. We came to this one little girl and she said, “I’m seven and I can’t wait until I’m nineteen!”

Nineteen?! Does that bother you? It did me. What message are we giving our kids? “Hurry up and grow up.” “Lord, help us,” and I mean that with all of my heart.

The enemy, Satan, is a murderer and he has been from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for when he lies, he speaks his “native language.” He is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). We are buying into these lies and allowing the next generation to pay the price.

It’s no game! I see something and it’s gray and dark and unless we allow the light of God’s truths to shine on it, it will remain gray and dark for the generation to come, and the next, and the next.

January 21

“Black Gold, Texas Tea” By Debbie Ousley

The other day I was pumping that “liquid gold” into the Neon. I pump my gas in by the gallon, not by the price these days. It kinda eases the pain just to see the weird look on the attendant’s face when the total is some odd amount. I know it’s not their fault but ya gotta have a little fun.

I don’t imagine that any of us are laughing to the gas station these days, and I won’t even try to go into the politics of this MESS. As I squeezed out the last drop of my five gallons, I thought about my dad’s reaction to this situation if he were still living. Boy, it would behoove you not to mention it if you wanted your visit to end on any kind of peaceful note. I could almost hear him, and believe you me, it wouldn’t be words I would want to hear or write. This issue would not die quietly with him but it’s enough to stir up anyone.

I thought about those citizens who are living on a fixed income and how they have seen this thing go from pennies to three bills plus pennies. It has to be unbelievable to them when already they have to choose between groceries and medicine to make their money last the month.

“The times, they are a changin’” sure is true and with these changes are coming back to the people less and less change. My concern is also heightened toward our young married couples and the large amount of debt most of them are taking on so as to obtain the “American Dream.” Dream?

If you’re like me, I ask myself, “Where’s it all gonna end? Can prices keep climbing higher and higher as our work places expect more and more of our lives because of the lack of workers?”

“Boy, Debbie, this sounds like a doom’s day article! Can’tcha give us a little ray of light?” Yes, I can, in an old Red Skelton joke.

Mommy duck: “My instinct tells me to fly south.”

Daddy duck: "My instinct tells me to fly south."

Baby duck: "My end stinks too, but it doesn't tell me where to fly!"

Folks, we might as well laugh because crying only makes our eyes red. Proverbs 17:22
– *"A merry heart does good like a medicine."*

January 22

“Confirmation of the Word” By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*here was a time when I shook my fist at God. It happened during my teenage years. I had been raised up in church. I don't remember a time when we weren't involved in church activities, revivals, and really about everything that happened in whatever church we happened to be attending.

During my teen years I rebelled against my parents, the church and even God, not unlike most teenagers do. I suppose I was searching for my own identity and that always causes conflict. I had made a commitment to God many times. As a child growing up there weren't many revivals where an altar call was given that I didn't feel the tugging of God at my heart and so I would respond. I don't really know why; I guess I just wanted to make sure.

Anyway, I had entered my rebellion. I was fed up with church stuff, rules and regulations made not only by the church but also by my parents, and I was just mad at everyone. I distinctly remember standing out in our front yard all by myself, talking to God, complaining about my poor pitiful situation (of course every teenager who rebels feels like things couldn't be worse for them), and out of the blue I declared to God that there must be a higher power than Him. I literally shook my fist at the sky and told God that I was bound and determined to find that power and “show Him.” If you think about it, it's kind of funny in a way; here's this skinny barely over a hundred pounds kid shaking his fist at God like he's some kind of tough guy or something.

The short of it was that I never found a power higher than God. When I came to myself, I realized that God is the ultimate power. I repented of my sin and somehow God knew my heart and He knew that I'd come around. He could have struck me dead on the spot. Rebellion against God can be a dangerous thing. But you know, in my rebellion I never denied the existence of God. In my twisted way of thinking I was searching for a higher power but I knew that God was there. I had felt him in my past and I had witnessed His miraculous power both in my own life and in the lives of others. I just needed to know for myself I suppose.

Many would like to believe that God doesn't exist or perhaps like me, that there is a force greater than God. What we're searching for is the proof. We may want to believe but we

need to know for sure. Many testimonies exist that confirm how they found God in their lives. They are valid and true in most cases, but that still doesn't bring satisfaction to our individual souls. We want to know. We feel we need personal confirmation. I wish I could give that to you today. However, it is something we all need to find for ourselves.

It isn't found in church services or activities although I'm not bashing those. They are the results of our confirmation from God, not the actual confirmation. The great Apostle Peter wrote, *"And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts."* (2 Peter 1:19). Peter had just finished talking about his own experience along with a few of the other disciples on the mountain where they had witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus. They had seen some marvelous things but the one in this instance that stuck in Peter's mind was the voice of God booming from the sky that had confirmed that Jesus was the Christ – His Son, and that He was well pleased with Him. It was Peter's confirmation. We have that word of prophecy and it is a sure and certain word. For now, we need to simply believe that witness. But as you seek God the day will come when He will confirm Himself to you in your heart, and you will know that He is God.

January 23

“Crawling or Walking?”

By Jerry D. Ousley

There's a story about a traveler many years ago before the invention of the automobile (if you can imagine that). The man was walking when he came to a frozen river. It was early in the winter season so he wondered if the ice was thick enough for him to walk on. He was afraid to take a chance so he came up with the idea of crawling across the ice so that his weight would be a little more evenly spread. So, here he was, inching his way across the ice when all of a sudden, he heard someone whistling. He looked to his right just in time to see a man driving a horse drawn wagon loaded with coal going right across the frozen river and past him. I bet he felt silly right about then!

The fact is many of us are doing that very same thing. In 2 Peter 1:3-4 the Bible talks about the many precious promises of God. We've heard the old hymn "Standing on the Promises." But many of us seem to be trying to cross the iced-over river of life just like this man. We aren't certain that we can make it so we find ourselves crawling along just making it inch by inch.

But God wants us to stand on His promises. There are so many promises in the Bible that apply to each of us. God wants us to be happy people. He wants us to have victory in our lives. The problem is that so many times it seems like we've been dealt a bad hand. We find life just like this unsure traveler did, early on, not sure if the ice is thick enough to hold us up, wondering if we can really trust that promise or not.

We find ourselves crawling along wanting to believe; wanting to have victory but so many things have happened that we're just not sure that we can. There have been financial crises take place that leave us rocking and reeling. Some have lost their homes due to the major fore-closures that have left our country in a terrifying grip. Others have lost their health or have received bad news about loved ones. We find ourselves tempted by all these daily blows of doubt, to just forget about it. Maybe we think that the promises were true once but aren't for us today.

But I want to tell you that just about the time we begin to think like this, along comes someone who knows. This person is whistling as they go along carefree not giving a second

thought to the ice. They're experienced enough to know that it will hold them up and so they just go along with a horse drawn wagon full of coal and it doesn't seem like they have a care in the world.

You see, faith isn't something that we get as a gift except that first measure given to us when we come to the Lord. From there on it is something we build. Faith isn't increased by asking for more but like muscles; the more we exercise them the bigger they get. The more we trust the ice the more we know about when it is stable and how much weight it will take. The more we stand on the promises of God and trust them the stronger they become to us.

We also need to understand just what faith is. Many teach that faith is like a protective shield against bad things happening to us. Just when we want to start believing this, we see someone we know as a strong Christian getting a major disease like cancer and it makes us to wonder. But faith is really trusting God no matter what comes our way, what the enemy of our souls throws at us or how thick the ice really is. Faith means that we are fully assured that God will take care of us no matter what comes.

I've often thought about Daniel in the den of lions. God protected him and he wasn't even scratched by one of those big cats. But in the early days of the Church many Christians were thrown to the lions in the Roman arenas. Those lions tore them to bits. Didn't they have faith? I believe that it took the same faith to die by the lions as it did for Daniel to live in spite of them. Protection from the lions had nothing to do with faith. Faith meant that both Daniel and those early Christians believed in God and were committed no matter what the lions did. God chose to spare Daniel but not those early Christians. I don't know why but I'll tell you one thing: They weren't crawling but standing on God's promises!

January 24

“Crying from the Depths” By Jerry D. Ousley

“*Don’t* try it, Ken,” I shouted. We were fairly small children. Dad had dug a pit in the back yard to build a septic tank for the house where we lived. My brother, Ken and I were running in the back yard for who knows what reason, when I got the bright idea of jumping over this large hole. I made it with ease but it had been a bit farther across than I had thought. Looking back, I yelled at my brother to not try to jump over the hole. But I might as well have been talking to a rock. Wanting to do the same thing his big brother had done he took a flying leap and landed on his back directly at the bottom of that deep hole. You could definitely hear him crying from the depths!

In Psalm 130:1 we read the words of the Psalmist, “*Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord.*” There will come a time in all our lives when we will cry from the depths. It feels like we are in a deep, dark hole with no way to escape. That hole can take on many forms. It can be a host of problems generally categorized as human relationships, financial difficulties, persecution from others, or realization of sin in our lives we feel we can do nothing about. The illustration is one of a man in a deep pit. The hole is too deep to climb out of. The sides are made of loose dirt and each time we grab hold to pull ourselves up to the surface it caves in, and we slip back to the bottom of the hole.

Do Christians have to sin? I’ve heard arguments on both sides of this question. There are some who have said that man is not capable enough to keep from sinning and so he should just resolve that he is going to fail and know that what Jesus did at Calvary covers his sin. Others say that he has a choice and that he can keep from sinning. Some on this side of the fence have gone so far as to say that each time we sin we have to repent and start all over as if we had lost our salvation. Most Christians strive to not use the grace and sacrifice Jesus Christ has made and given, as a license to sin. We don’t have a license to do whatever we want whenever we want. We are to endeavor to stay away from sin. But the fact is that we often yield to temptation and we find ourselves in sin.

On the other hand, Christ has died once for us (that’s in the Bible). We don’t have to start all over again and again. But we do repent each time we have sinned. That doesn’t mean that we lose everything, like in a board game and go back to start. It means that when

we fall, we ask God to forgive us, pick ourselves up from the ground, dust off the seat of our pants and go on with the Lord.

If we don't, we find ourselves trapped in the depths of the pit of despair. We can't stay there for long or we will lose hope and give up on life. We must find a way out of our desperate situation. How do we get out of that hole? The only way is through Jesus Christ. When we find ourselves trapped in the pit of despair we reach up as far as we can and cry out to Jesus. It may seem like He isn't there or He can't hear us. But just at the right time if we'll keep reaching up, He will reach down, take us by the hand and lift us up and out of that deep, dark hole in which we have fallen. He will rescue us and pull us out of the pit of despair.

January 25

“Determination” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

They say love is a funny thing and sometimes I’m inclined to agree. Years ago, when my wife and I were dating, a big snow came. We got around twelve inches or better. I was working at that time in a town about five miles away. Still barely out of my teens and used to snow days in school, I felt like I needed a “snow day” bad. So, I called in to work and told them that I couldn’t make it in. Okay, I suppose that it’s alright to take a day off from work every once in a while. After all, it’s best not to be out on those snow-covered, slick roads if one can keep from it. That’s what I reasoned anyway. So, I stayed home.

After a few hours I was bored out of my head and began thinking about my sweetheart. It seemed a shame not to see her with all this time on my hands. So, I made up my mind that I was going to pay her a visit. Now she lived in the country about ten miles past the town I worked in. I hopped in the car and made my way up those treacherous roads, drove through the town where I worked and proceeded on to her house. I went down that even more precarious country road and arrived at her home. Of course, she hadn’t gone to work that day either. As a matter of fact, her road had just been cleared because it was covered over with those twelve inches of snow.

As I think about that now it probably would have cost me my job had they known that even though I didn’t feel like I could drive five miles to work I was willing to drive ten to see my girlfriend. We do silly things to get what we want don’t we? Most of us, when we really want something or want to do something, will find a way to get it or do it. We become determined and we find a way to make it happen.

Thinking about this situation I’m reminded of all the excuses we get when it comes to making Jesus Christ our personal Savior. People find all kinds of reasons, don’t they? Those excuses run from not having adequate clothing to needing to make changes in our lives, but when it comes right down to it they are merely excuses.

I read a little story one time about a pastor who visited a family. He was trying to get them to attend worship with his congregation. The family told him that they would love to come but they were so poor that they just didn’t have good enough clothes for themselves or for their

children and that they would be embarrassed to go to church. The pastor went to his board and convinced them to give him the money to buy this family a new suit of clothes for each of the family members. They agreed, he found out their sizes and bought some very nice clothing for them. But come Sunday morning the family wasn't in the congregation. Wondering what had happened the concerned pastor went to visit them on Monday and they responded, "Well pastor, those clothes you bought us were so nice we felt like we looked good enough to attend the big church a few blocks from here instead."

The point is that if we are determined that we're going to do something we'll do it. If we really want to come to Jesus Christ, we will find a way. It all boils down to that word "determination." Are we determined that we are going to serve Jesus Christ? If we are, there are no excuses that will keep us from it. But if we aren't then no amount of talking will convince us otherwise.

It just comes down to the fact that we must want to. If we want to, nothing will stop us. There are some in parts of the world that have been forsaken by family, kicked out of their community and persecuted simply because they came to Christ. But they wouldn't put up with that kind of treatment if they weren't convinced that Jesus Christ was their only answer, that they were determined enough to serve Him and no amount of hardship would stop them. That's determination. So, what are you determined to do?

January 26

“Cutting Off Skirts” By Jerry D. Ousley

A *very* interesting story is found in the Bible in 1 Samuel 24:3-6. Basically, in a nutshell what had happened here was that Saul was out with a small army looking for David so he could kill him. David had hidden in a cave with his band of six hundred men (that was no small cave). Saul came right into the cave to “cover his feet” or, excuse my frankness, to “ease his bowels,” not realizing that David and six hundred men were already in there.” While there and in a most vulnerable position, David crept up to him close enough to cut the skirting from Saul’s robe. That’s all he did. He could have taken the life of the man who wanted to kill him. At that moment he could have slain Saul and emerged from the cave as King of Israel. It looked like a great opportunity but he didn’t take it.

In this “dog-eat-dog” world we live in how often do such opportunities for advancement come to us? Not very often. Most of the time we are tempted to take them even if they seem a bit shady, in order to get that promotion, or get even with that individual. “After all, it’s only business” we might say. But if we are Christians then there are other things to consider.

The Bible says that David’s heart smote him. In other words what was in his mind to do “punched him hard in the chest” according to the original language. He knew he couldn’t finish Saul off. Why? Because Saul, even though in rebellion to God, had been anointed by Samuel as God’s choice for King of Israel. To take his life was to say, “God made a bad choice.” It would be going directly against God. But wait a minute . . . if he had killed Saul wouldn’t he be free from running for his life? Sometimes the right choice is hard but it is still the right choice.

David stopped at cutting off the skirting of Saul’s robe to have proof that he could have taken his life, went back to his hiding place, and took the ridicule of his men. He stood his ground for what was the right choice. People may tell us that we’re crazy for not taking advantage of something like that. But when we are in obedience to God then, regardless of what others might say, we will succeed. Maybe not as fast as taking the easy way, but nonetheless, we’ll get there.

So, the next time we're tempted to do more than "cut off the skirt," remember David and Saul. In everything we do we must honor our Master whether business, money, or whatever, Christ must come first. You won't regret it!

January 27

“Doing the Wash” By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*here are practices and rules when it comes to washing clothes. I’m glad we don’t have to do it like people used to, utilizing the old wringer washing machines and hanging all those clothes out on the line in the yard. I always felt funny hanging my underwear up for the whole world to gawk at. But I suppose that was better than what people had before – scrubbing them on a wash board in a big tub of water! Man, that had to be work!

Today the rules go something like this: Separate colors and whites, bleach the whites but not the colors, wash whites in hot water and rinse in warm, wash the colors in warm water, rinse in cold. Use fabric softener, and just the right combination of detergents. I suppose there’s good reason for all of this but sometimes it just doesn’t make sense to me.

For instance, most of my whites consist of underwear. You aren’t supposed to wash whites with colors because the colors could fade off on the whites. But if my whites are underwear that no one sees except my loving wife, who cares if they look a little pink? And there’s a whole lot of wasted space in that large capacity tub in the washing machine so why go to all the trouble of doing two loads when there’s plenty of room for one? This philosophy has gotten me into trouble.

I remember a time early in our marriage when I volunteered to do the wash. My wife and I were just getting started and we didn’t have a washer and dryer, so that meant trips to the laundromat. This was a hated place for both of us. I never was sure why my wife hated it so much, but I hated it because she hated it and also because it meant a couple of hours of mostly just waiting for the wash and dry cycles to run. And it cost too much!

Anyway, she had an appointment of some kind, I can’t even remember what it was now, but I thought I’d do a noble thing and volunteer to do the wash. After she had left I packed up the clothes and started toward the laundromat all the while thinking about the waiting and the extra money we would spend that could really be used somewhere else, and that’s when it hit me. The idea just popped right into my head! Mom and Dad had a washer and dryer and I was sure they wouldn’t mind me using them. Why, we could “kill two birds with one stone”

because while I was there, I could have a good visit with them, maybe even catch a good show on TV to watch with them and it wouldn't cost one red cent! What an idea (I thought).

I fulfilled my plan, had a good visit with my parents and got home with clean, wonderfully good smelling laundry and it didn't cost a thing! What a good deed I had done. I just knew that my wife would be totally proud of me when she got home.

What I didn't understand at the time was this thing wives have about providing for their husbands. I had no idea that there was an unwritten law somewhere that you were not to depend on the mother-in-law for things like meals, house cleaning, and especially laundry. I'm still not sure I understand, but, hey, I do a lot of things I don't really understand. To put it mildly when my wife found out that I had taken the laundry to Mom's it didn't go over well. But I tell you this I never did it again!

Serving God can be like those unwritten rules sometimes. We don't always understand why, especially now, but we are obedient to them because it is the right thing to do. I don't understand everything completely about the science of laundry, but it doesn't keep me from loving the feel of fresh clean clothing. I'd say I'm not the only husband that puts on clean clothes who couldn't tell you everything about making them clean, but I don't see them wearing the same old dirty clothes everyday just because they don't understand, do you?

There comes a time when we just have to trust. After being a Christian for many years, I still don't understand it all and probably never will on this side of Heaven. But I do know that it's been a good life and I wouldn't change it for anything. I'm nothing special. I know it can be the same for you. Today, stop trying to understand everything at once about God, and just turn to Him. It'll be the best thing you may not fully understand that you ever did!

January 28

“Facing the Real You” By Jerry D. Ousley

*“And he said unto him, What is your name? And he said, Jacob.”
Genesis 32:27*

Have you ever had to face the real you? Jacob, in the Bible had to. He was in a tough spot. After twenty years he was returning back to the land where God had told his father, and his father’s father, to live. It had been promised that one day it would belong to their descendants. But Jacob had been a deceiver. Because of it he had to flee the house of his parents and live with his uncle, for he had stolen both the inheritance and the family blessing from his older brother, Esau.

During those twenty years he had become a wealthy man. Now as he returned, he feared because his brother had sworn to kill him. News had reached him that Esau was coming to meet him along with four hundred men.

In his mind life had come to an end. All seemed hopeless. He had sent presents out to his brother in effort of softening his anger, and had separated his family and belongings into two companies. Finally, he sent his family on across the ford of the river and was now alone.

During the night a strange thing happened. A man identified as an angel of God, appeared to him and they began without words to wrestle. All night they wrestled. At daybreak the angel told Jacob, “Let me go, because the morning is coming.” Determined and feeling this to be his last hope Jacob said, “I won’t let you go until you bless me!”

At that point the angel asked his name. The King James Version of the Bible simply says that he said “Jacob” which is exactly what he said, but it doesn’t record the emotion that took place when he spoke his name. Read the words of the Amplified Bible: “[The Man] asked him, what is your name? And [in shock of realization, whispering] he said, Jacob - Supplanter, schemer, trickster, swindler!” After all those years, Jacob finally faced who he really was and what he had become. Afterwards he was blessed in the fact that he received victory in his life.

This is what we need to do isn't it? If we really want things to change for us, if we really want things to be different in our lives, then we need to face what we have become and realize what we have done to ourselves over the years. When we do this in the presence of God then we can begin to see a change take place in our lives, and the blessings will come. But you've got to face the real you.

January 29

“A Dirty Little Doll” by Debbie Ousley

TWO young sisters once found a doll in the trash heap and what a sight it was! It looked like a doll someone would throw away, having only one eye, stiff hair, and most of it missing.

The motherly instincts of the little girls kicked in and found the doll most pitiful and in need of some T.L.C. The girls brushed the dirt off as much as possible but realized right away that they needed soap and water if the little doll had any hope of getting clean.

You must know that this story took place in a time when there was no running water and the “powder room” was down a path. So, the sisters took their new project along with some soap down to the spring, which was also the family’s only supply of drinking water.

Did you know that sometimes the urgency of a situation will cause you to do a dumb thing? As the girls soaped-up the mistreated doll and scrubbed as hard as they could, their thoughts were not on the fact that they were also soaping-up what should have been their next glass of water (I sometimes pay a buck for now). But they found out quick enough when their mother went to the spring for the next needed bucket of water.

What a mess they had made! It was the “dog days” of summer and the spring was running like molasses so that meant that it would take some time for the soapy water to clear. Mother gave them a tongue lashing to go with the guilt thrashing and reminded them of how angry Daddy was gonna be when he got home (and he was).

The attitude toward the pitiful, abandoned doll quickly changed for the sisters. It was all that dirty little doll’s fault and they promptly threw the doll back in the trash, a little cleaner, but still missing an eye.

Unlike this story Jesus never picks us up, washes our sins away, and then because we make trouble “getting it,” throws us back into the same trash heap we’ve allowed our lives to get in. His love for us is forbearing and patient and He really does see what we are going to become someday because of our love for Him.

“Thank you, Lord, for Your saving power! No matter how deep we get ourselves buried in the trash of this world You are willing to clean us up with no threat of throwing us back.”

(This is a true story. The sisters were Josie and myself and it was her idea to wash the doll in the spring. That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.)

January 30

“A Grown-Up Friend” by Debbie Ousley

Most of the time, when people say, “can we be open and honest?” what is usually means is, “spill your guts and allow me to judge what’s been said.” Honestly, some people can’t handle the truth, especially if it doesn’t agree with what they are feeling or thinking.

Have you ever wanted a grown-up friend? Do you even know what one is? Well, a grown-up friend is a lot like a “kid” friend. They disagree at times, speak their mind, kick the dirt and go off for a few hours. But before you know it, they are pals again. What’s great about a “kid” friendship is that their right to disagree gives them freedom. That freedom brings them closer and their friendship is stronger for it. They can be honest and open and still be friends.

For so many grown-ups (and the jury is still out on this decision) we take someone’s lack of agreeing with us so-o-o-o personal. It’s a right, a freedom, a choice, and it doesn’t necessarily mean they don’t like us or, they are all of a sudden, the enemy. Why is it interpreted as an offense or an attack? It’s just their right!

Tolerance is not simply putting-up with someone but it’s allowing others to think differently and being respectful of that. We will always find out that “right” is somewhere in the middle if we talk it out. The sooner we can resolve to the fact that everyone is different the sooner we can have a few grown-up friendships.

Grown-up friendships will allow for difference, be respectful, and they will let you “kick the dirt” every once in a while, and not hold it against you because they know you will give them the same right. Grown-up friendships remember your strengths when a weakness is revealed. Grown-up friendships will not be thrown away because of little petty disagreements (unless of course there never really was a friendship there to begin with).

If you have any grown-up friendships you need to thank God for them. I know I do and I’m hoping there are those who consider me their grown-up friend. Grown-up friends are hard to come by these days. I guess it’s because it takes time invested and tolerance to acquire them. But it’s worth it because grown-up friends will go the distance for you. They will fight

your fight because they consider it their fight also. They will plead your case, defend your reputation, and stand shoulder to shoulder with you for the cause.

They won't make excuses for your flaws but will extend mercy because they know they have a few of their own. And if you're wondering how you can know if you have a grown-up friend, or if you are a grown-up friend, then just measure them and yourself up to these characteristics.

The bottom line is: I don't guess you have to be a grown-up to have a grown-up friendship. You just really need to know the meaning of "friendship."

January 31

“A Half Nelson: Body Slam and Sleep Hold” By Debbie Ousley

I know these terms are usually heard in a wrestling match, but this past week I discovered a different use for them and it's called the FLU. I praise the Lord I am not one to be sick too often, and believe me when I say, when I find myself in bed then I am sick!

As I went to my week's calendar where I record the appointments and planned events for the week, one by one I had to erase them because of this unplanned wrestling match between body and germs. It really made me realize something that everyone else around me already knows, "I am human." Yes, I can be stopped! (well maybe slowed to a crawl – from the bed to the bathroom!).

But you know something about this kind of sickness? We can't take it personal. Okay, we find ourselves in a very bad way, but hey! This too will pass! (More quickly for some than others, but with prayer, medicine, love from our family, and rest, it will pass). Somewhere we have been exposed to a germ that, for one reason or another, has taken us to our knees, and when we find ourselves down there, we might as well pray but don't take it personal.

You see, if I understand this thing, we are in a world that was cursed because of disobedience to its Maker. He who intended for it to be a paradise quickly found out that mankind is very selfish and self-willed and the rewards of that are still producing the same prizes which includes physical death, pain, sickness, and a whole lot of injustice to the innocent. People this is not Heaven! This is not the place that Jesus told His followers He had to go to prepare for us. In 1 Corinthians 15:19 it tells us that if in this life only we have our hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. I don't know about you but I am looking forward to that place that is promised to me and all who believe. A place where there is no more pain and injustice.

Oh, I know there are some of you that, as you read this article, are thinking "The fever has Debbie talking out of her head." Well, in all honesty that is where faith starts, when we go beyond what our heads are telling us. Without faith no one can even begin to see anything about Christ, and it's hard to take, but that same self-willed spirit is what will always separate

us from Christ and that place called Heaven. And remember that's what started all this mess to begin with.

February 1

“Deer Jerry” By Jerry D. Ousley

I just love looking at deer in the wild. They seem so graceful and from a distance they are absolutely beautiful. I've heard a lot of deer hunting stories and I'm certainly not going to put the sport down or anything; to each his own. But it's not for me. Oh, I love eating the deer steaks but unless I had too to survive, I'd probably not shoot one myself.

I did get a little closer look at one the other day though - A little closer than I wanted to tell the truth. I was driving along just minding my own business headed for work. I was doing a little thinking, you know how it goes; you see the road and you're driving safely, but not really concentrating, if you know what I mean. Suddenly I saw several forms moving across the road a short distance ahead and before I could get my mind completely focused there they were! Several deer were ambling across the highway and if they would have just run, everything would have been okay. But one deer decided to get a closer look. It stopped and stood sideways in my lane, and just took a good look at me. With deer to the right of me I couldn't take the ditch, and I had no time to see if I could swerve into the other lane. As quickly as I saw the animal, these thoughts went through my head and then, "WHAM!" I broad-sided the graceful creature, which now didn't look quite so graceful as it bounced and went skidding across the road.

Of course, I was very sorry that the deer had been killed, but I was also a little angry when I found out that the collision had done more damage to my little car than what it was worth (and naturally the insurance didn't cover it). If only that deer had run, we'd have both been saved a whole heap of trouble.

We can see examples of life on both sides of this story. From the deer's perspective, if it had made the decision to run instead of standing there thinking, "I wonder what that thing is?" it would still be frolicking in the woods. But if I would have had my mind more on my driving than on whatever I was thinking about at the time, perhaps I would have seen the deer sooner and would have been able to stop. The eyes in the back of our heads always see with 20/20 vision (hindsight is better than foresight).

We could all recite story after story of what we would have done if we could do it all over again. But we can't. Despite all the good things we think we could do if we could be transported back in time, it is a physical impossibility to ordinary man. Besides, in reality, if we could go back and change things, think of all the chaos that would be happening right now! It's really mind-boggling.

We can't change the things we've done, but we can learn from them. I had an uncle that always said, "Education is expensive." And that's true whether we get it in college, or from experience. It always costs something. But if we take it as that – education – then at least we benefit something from it. A child who touches a hot stove for the first time won't soon do it again.

When it comes to spiritual matters we also learn from those experiences. Isn't it wonderful that we have a God who's willing to forgive us? We give in to a temptation and wind-up sinning, even though we may not really intend for it to turn out that way. We regret it and wish that it hadn't happened, but it did and there is nothing we can do about it.

But wait, listen to this: "*My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.*" (1 John 2:1). Wow! What a Savior we serve anyway! We shouldn't sin. Most of the time we don't want to sin. But when we give in and do sin, He's right there making our case before God the Father. All we've got to do is ask for forgiveness. You can't beat a deal like that! It doesn't change the past and it certainly doesn't give us a license to continue doing wrong. There may be consequences to pay, but there is forgiveness and restoration.

Just turn to Christ today. You may not get your car fixed if you hit a deer, but there's much better things in store anyway.

February 2

“Disasters” By Jerry D. Ousley

Disasters seem to have become a way of life these days. From the Tsunami in the Far East to Hurricane Katrina, not to forget the war that continues to rage in Iraq and Iran; many people have lost their lives due to one thing or another. I don't know about you but it seems to me that more and more of these devastating events take place each year. I have my opinion about the “whys” just as everyone else does but for the sake of this article I'm going to keep my opinion to myself.

Many people are asking, “Why would a merciful God, if there really is one, allow all of this devastation to occur? Why would He let these innocent women and children lose their lives?” I know that there are mothers who deeply question God because they have lost a son or a daughter to war. I don't blame them nor do I condemn them for their piercing questions. The Church has preached many years about a God who is good and just; a God who loves everyone and only wants the best for their lives.

We have taught about a God who shows mercy to us when we come to Him in prayer. “This God,” we say, “wants to shower us with gifts and good things and is always watching our backs.” We paint a rosy picture for the world to see, depicting this God of ours as the answer to all our problems.

I certainly don't have all the answers. It would seem that in an age when technology and gadgets abound that in all our knowledge, we'd have an answer doesn't it? Perhaps God isn't really up there after all. Maybe it has all been a figment of our imaginations and the Bible is a cleverly arranged book of concocted lies. I believe that fairly sums up the attitudes of a lot of people today, maybe you are one of them. We can send a man to the moon but we can't figure out if there really is a God or not. That seems strange, doesn't it?

I won't answer from my opinion but I will venture an answer, at least a partial one from what life has taught me over the years. God is up there. He does care for us. I believe it breaks His heart when all of these tragedies strike. He is a God who sees even a small sparrow when it dies and He does care immensely. But when He created man as the crown of all His creation, He gave each of us, beginning with Adam and Eve, a thing called a “free will.”

He allowed us to choose between two paths. In the beginning Adam and Eve both chose the wrong path. They chose to go down the one that they thought would fulfill them the most. Because of it, all of God's creation was put under a curse. They had been warned. They had a choice. They didn't have to go down that path, but they did because that was what they really wanted to do.

We all have the same free will and we exercise it by going down the wrong path almost daily, don't we? Be honest with yourself now; we do. We fail God. So, we are just as guilty as Adam and Eve. It's because of wrong choices that storms, hatred, violence and all the other bad things that happen have become a part of our world. We sometimes call them "Acts of God." But in reality, they are all "Acts of man." We forced God's hand in the curse.

The good news is that there is hope in Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that "*The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 6:23). That simply means that we have to work to die and the wages aren't all that great. In other words, we spend our life working trying to do good deeds and the pay at the end is death. We can't live a life that is good enough to undo all that we've done wrong. However, the gift of God is eternal life but only through Jesus Christ our Lord. That's the good news. After we have spent ourselves in labor, we really only need to accept the gift God has given through Christ.

It won't stop all the bad things that happen in life. It won't make it all go away. But it will give us true and lasting peace and a love even for our enemies when the storms rage all around us. It may not bluntly answer all of our questions but at least we know we'll be able to get the straight of them someday face to face with the One who really knows.

February 3

“Fixing Dryers” By Jerry D. Ousley

“We’ve got problems,” I said as I climbed the stairway with dripping wet clothes.

If you’ve followed our writing for very long you know my theories on doing the wash. But this time I had followed the preferred methods of my wife. I had done everything right and it was time to take the clean smelling, fluffy clothes out and hang them up. But when I went downstairs, I noticed that the dryer was not making its usual sound and I didn’t hear the familiar pecking noises of zippers and buttons being tossed against the tumbler walls of the dryer.

I opened the door and to my disappointment, the blower was going but the tub wasn’t turning. It could only mean one thing: The belt had broken. I brought the still soggy clothing upstairs and my wife took them to the laundromat to finish drying them. I traded the wet clothes for my toolbox and headed back into the basement not having the slightest idea of what I was doing. I had never seen the insides of a dryer and didn’t know where to begin.

“Well, the back probably has to come off,” I surmised. So, I began taking screws out. Then I discovered that the lint shoot was in the way so I took the screws out of it. That left an opening big enough to see the broken belt lying inside the dryer. Well, at least I knew what was wrong with it for certain. But now there were no more screws to take out. How was I supposed to get to the thing anyway? It sure would have been nice to have the extra funds to just call a repairman and let him worry about it. But we didn’t and so I had some learning to do.

I finally figured out that the top had to come off, somehow. I loosened the control panel on top and carefully slid it to one side. I sure didn’t want any broken wires to complicate the problem! With some exploring I discovered that there weren’t any screws just clips. After a few more moments I had the top off. There was the drum. “It must come out in order to get the belt on,” or so I thought. I tried to just lift it out. Maybe it just floated on something in there. Nope! I did have enough mechanical ability to see that there were seals around it and I knew a broken seal would not be a good thing.

With parts lying all over the basement now, I could only hope that I could remember where everything went. But I didn't want to put it all back together yet because I didn't want to have to take it all back apart.

My wife got back with dry clothes and it was pushing bedtime so I told her that it wasn't fixed yet but that I would try to figure out what to do the next day. Thank God for the Internet! The next morning, I logged on and within about thirty minutes of searching, found a website that gave me step by step instructions, including pictures as to how remove and replace the belt. I printed them out so I could have them in the basement as I did the work. This website also told me the part number of the belt I needed to order. Wow! That was good information.

To shorten this a bit, I had done it all wrong. The only thing I had removed that really needed to be taken off was the top. It was a simple fix really, and after getting home from work that night with belt in hand, it only took about an hour to fix and a good part of that time was spent putting everything back that I had taken off! Boy, oh joy! I got it together with only two screws left over (I never figured out where they went but it worked fine and so I left well enough alone).

There is a spiritual point to this story. If you read Matthew 22:35-40, you'll find the account of where the Pharisees asked Jesus which Law was the most important. It was an effort to trick Him into a theological debate that would insure the downfall of His popularity. But Jesus' answer was one of complete wisdom. He said that we were to love God with our total being, and the second greatest commandment was to love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves. He further said that all the rest of the laws and writings of the prophets could all be hung on these two.

The sense of this is that if we love God with everything in us and love and treat others like we love ourselves, then we don't have time to even worry about breaking all those other commandments!

We try to live Christianity just like I tried to fix that dryer: We make it very complicated when all we have to do is what Jesus said. If we do that then we don't have to take it all apart to fix it. And we don't have to pick the Bible all apart to fix what's wrong in our lives. Simple is better!

February 4

“Hiney” By Jerry D. Ousley

The following story is not original. I heard Mike Warnke tell it a few years ago. If you've heard it, please humor me.

There once was an elderly gentleman who lived in the mountains with his granddaughter. They didn't have much but managed to make ends meet. However, one summer they found themselves in dire need of some cash. Their only recourse was to sell their one and only mule named "Hiney."

The elderly gentleman prepared Hiney for the journey down the mountain and when they were ready to go, placed his granddaughter on Hiney's back and so they began their journey.

As they passed the first house there were people out on the front porch and the elderly gentleman heard them comment as they passed by, "Look at that - A young, healthy girl riding that mule forcing that poor old man to walk!" After they passed the house the elderly gentleman stopped, took his granddaughter off Hiney and climbed up on his back himself. They continued their journey.

As they passed the next house the elderly gentleman overheard someone say, "Look at that! See that old man making that little girl walk? He ought to be ashamed!" So, after they had passed by the elderly gentleman stopped and pulled his granddaughter up on Hiney behind him.

The next place they came to the elderly gentleman heard someone say, "That poor old mule! Look at the way they're punishing him by riding double!" So, after they had passed by the elderly gentleman stopped and both he and his granddaughter got off Hiney and continued their journey.

Finally, they passed by another house and the elderly gentleman overheard someone say, "That poor, poor mule - Making him walk all the way like that way!" So, after they had

passed by the elderly gentleman stopped and he and his granddaughter managed to hoist Hiney up onto their shoulders and they precariously continued their journey.

As they walked down the mountain trying to balance Hiney over their heads they came to a bridge. Crossing the bridge, the elderly gentleman stumbled on a loose rock and tried to keep from falling but in the process accidentally dropped Hiney over the side of the bridge. Poor, poor Hiney!

Of course, the moral of this story is that if you listen to everyone else sooner or later, you're bound to lose your Hiney! Listen to God instead!

February 5

“Humility” ***By Jerry D. Ousley***

God has a way of making us humble. Have you ever heard someone brag about their humility? “I’m glad that I am humble . . .” Just as sure as we make that brag God has a way of exposing us. It’s been said that the moment we think we are humble our hearts are lifted up in pride and we cease to be humble; that’s a point to be well taken.

I know that God has little ways of keeping us humble. For instance, back in our pastoral days when we would have a special service coming up and I knew there would be a good crowd there, I would start feeling proud that I was going to get the opportunity to speak in front of a large group of people. Every time that happened, I would wake up that morning with a big zit on my face, or no matter what I tried I wouldn’t be able to get my hair to lay down, or I’d grab something to eat on the way to the service and spill it all over my clothes. It has a way of deflating an inflated ego.

Pride can come knocking with many personalities. For instance, we can be overly conscientious of how important we may be. But Jesus told us that to be a leader in the Kingdom of God we must first be a servant. What about someone who feels like they have all the answers? In reality none of us have all the answers. That privilege belongs only to God. We may use the terms “I” and “My” too much. When we do, that’s a sure sign that we think a lot of ourselves or that we are concerned more about ourselves than we are about others. The Lord told us to put God first, others second and ourselves last. An upside-down totem pole is a strange looking thing. That’s about what we’re looking at when we get “I” first before God and others.

Here’s one that I don’t have many problems with: Being proud of how good we look. I know that I’m not a good looking fellow. It takes me too long every morning to look bad enough to be presentable, let alone looking good. But some are blessed with being handsome or beautiful (depending if you are male or female). It’s a big temptation for those lovely people to be proud of how they look. However, they need to watch out because God has a way of bringing them down. I’ve noticed that good looking people who know they are good looking and are proud of it, have a way of not looking so beautiful on the inside, or at least what leaks out to the outside from their inside.

What about those who are in positions of authority and “push their weight around?” They are lifted up in pride of their position. There are also those who are impressed by titles. Every book needs a title but that isn’t necessarily reflective of how good the book is.

Then we have those who are proud of what they have done for God. There’s nothing wrong with feeling good about being obedient to God but when we go around bragging about what God has allowed us to accomplish then we just might be in for failure. Some people almost fall over each other to obtain an important seat at the table, when Jesus told us to take the lower seats, then if we are invited to move to a seat of more importance, we gain more honor.

Some people are proud that they have contact with important people. Then there are others who brag about their plans. Finally, there are those who are lovers of reward, recognition, position and compensation. This just about covers everything we might be proud of (let me know if I’ve left anything out). The whole point to this is that we are told in Proverbs 16:18 that pride comes before destruction and a prideful spirit before a fall. In other words, we are setting ourselves up for trouble when we are lifted up in pride. The Bible has a lot to say about pride.

I believe there are certain forms of pride that are okay. I don’t believe that God is displeased with us when we are proud of our children or the accomplishments of others, and the reason for this is because we have put someone else in front of us. We are proud of what someone else has done. But our self-pride is a whole different matter. When we lift ourselves up above others because of pride, then we have lost humility and we better watch where we put our feet because a fall is shortly coming.

February 6

“A Powerful Force” By Debbie Ousley

. . . A power that would cause an old man to work on a BIG boat for 100 years without one sign of rain – yet it did rain!

. . . A power that would cause three ol’ boys to say “We won’t bow to your gods, go ahead and make us toast!” - Three with tans to almost die for!

. . . A power that would give a guy the courage to say “I’m not gonna quit praying, throw me in the lion’s den!” - “The Lions Sleep Tonight.”

. . . A power that would give a young man the strength to say, “Go ahead, beat me and hate me, hang me on a cross and lay me in someone else’s tomb; go ahead, I will be back!”

. . . A power that would change a man’s heart and life after being raised by a mother whose life was lived to prove there is no God and even after her disappearance, her followers still fight that fight – Madeline O’Hara’s son.

. . . A power that would cause a vibrant young girl to say, “Yes, I am a Christian!” while a gun is being held to her head, and after witnessing what this crazed gunman had done to her classmates – hundreds have come to Christ because of that answer!

. . . A power that in a few seconds can help you to believe and know that life as you know it can be changed into life like you couldn’t imagine!

“Deb, don’t give people false hope!” A power to even change that way of thinking!

False means “Not True.”

Numbers 23:19 – *“God is not a man, that he should lie . . . “*

Joel 3:16 – *“But the Lord will be a shelter for His people, and the strength of the children of Israel.”*

John 1:12-14 – “But as many as received him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in his name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

February 7

“A Silent Message” By Debbie Ousley

I recently had a dream I'd like to share with you which I am just now understanding the complete meaning of myself. In this dream others I know and myself were sitting around talking when an individual approached us and started handing out piles of money to everyone there. That was everyone except me. When he came to me, he took a single bill and crumpled it up in his hand and dropped it in front of me. This individual asked me, "What is that?" I answered, "A crumpled up dollar bill." He then asked, "Can you live with that?" I remember in my dream feeling kind of hurt because this person seemed to be withholding from me in a mean way. But I answered, "Yes, I can."

When I woke up the next morning the dream was still very real to me and I began trying to understand the meaning of it. And, by the way I do know that dreams are supposed to be about unresolved emotions and all that but I also believe for myself that God does send dreams for a purpose beyond the scientific.

At first, I thought, "Okay, I am just to resolve to the fact that I will never have a lot of money and I'm to live with that." Then I concluded that I was to be watchful and not degrading of other's good fortune and not be coveting of others.

But the question asked by the individual passing out the loot in my dream kept playing over in my mind, and that question was, "Can you live with that?" It was not, "Can you live on that." As I prayed to understand the meaning of the dream, I realized all the issues I mentioned early are good and according to the promises in God's word for His children. He says He will not withhold from us. It became clear to me the message for me in this dream was: I am to be content! Yes, I can live with that!

Contentment comes from within us. If we wait for all the circumstances to be perfect for our happiness and contentment, we will be waiting our entire lives. It's so hard for most Americans to be content. I guess we've not gone hungry enough times to just be so grateful and contented with the food we have at each meal.

Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 6:6 that Godliness with contentment is great gain. Verse 7 tells us that we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. Death has and will always be the great equalizer – It brings the poor and rich to the same place – Standing before God; but what about life’s journey? Will we live Godly lives leaning on Him and His amazing grace, knowing that, yes bad things do happen to good people? But can we be content in those situations also?

Thought: *“True contentment is not having everything but in being satisfied with everything we have.”* Author unknown.

I don’t always pay this much attention to my dreams, like pizza pies chasing me down the street and such, but when we can draw lessons from dreams as important to us as this, we should count it valuable. Sometimes it could be that while we are sleeping is the only time the Lord can get us still and quiet enough to speak to us.

February 8

“Falling Trees” By Jerry D. Ousley

“There it goes!” cried our daughter, Megan. She was referring to a tree in our front yard that I had spoken to her about just an hour or so earlier saying, “It will probably be the next one to go.” It was. One of the strongest storms in years ripped through our area with winds reaching as high as 75-80 miles per hour. I can tell you now that it was hard putting up a front and trying to be the “calm” dad and husband I felt a man should be for his family. It looked as if every tree around our house was bending over to touch its roots like a man touches his toes (if he still can)! The rain ripped through the sky like arrows from a thousand bows. Within fifteen to twenty minutes the storm had passed through and we were all relieved.

All in all, three trees had fallen in our front yard. It looked like a tornado had come ripping through. The trash can was in the driveway, our canopies in the back yard were “legs up” and it was just a mess. Leaves and limbs were scattered so closely together that it made you wonder if you were really in the right yard.

For the next several days we cleaned up, fixed up, and began the restoration process as many others in our community did. As we worked cutting up the trees that had fallen, I was amazed to discover that those strong heavy trees fell mainly because they had something wrong with them. Looking at the roots that had once been concealed under the ground, it was easy to see that two of the trees that had fallen were eaten up with bugs. The trees were hanging on for dear life anyway, being eaten from the inside out. What a way to go! Even though they looked somewhat healthy for trees on the outside, they were dying inside. When the winds of the storm blew, they just didn’t have the strength to stand under such opposition.

Doesn’t that sound a whole lot like people we know (perhaps even ourselves)? To casual acquaintances it seems that there is nothing wrong at all but when we meet someone passing by and they ask, “How ya doing today?” Our canned response is usually, “fine.” Is all really fine? It seems to me that there are people hurting everywhere but we have been conditioned and taught to not let it show. “Keep your head up! It’ll all be okay! Don’t let the world see you cry!”

But is all that “keeping it inside” really good for us? I think about those trees. If they fall from the winds of a storm because they are troubled and dying inside even though they might appear to be fine on the outside, how do the storms of life affect us? Maybe some of us are about to topple over from all the storms of life raging around us. Could it be from what’s going on inside of us?

That’s why we really do need each other. We do need people we can trust and who genuinely care for us. We need others to know what is going on in our lives and for people that begins the healing process of life’s emotional diseases. They are present and they are real but just as real is the cure. It comes from God working miraculously but also through other people we know and trust.

Seek for that true friend today. A true friend is one who’ll not hesitate to tell you that you’ve got mustard on your lip, or your hair’s all messed up, or that your fly is open. They might even tell us things about ourselves that make us mad from time to time, but remember they do this because they care. Don’t rip them up because they care! Realize that true friends who really love each other want to see us looking our best. That includes sharing those emotional storms that rage all around us.

Don’t have a friend like that? Maybe it’s time we stop being so critical of others and let those God has sent our way into our lives. It isn’t easy but it sure is more comforting going through a storm with someone else rather than by yourself. It might just keep the bugs on the outside.

February 9

“A Rock and a Hard Place”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Have you ever been there? Between a rock and a hard place, I mean. This position is a very uncomfortable. On one side is a big rock – it’s not going anywhere. I don’t know exactly what the hard place is but the picture I see when I think about this old adage is a man sandwiched between a big old rock and a very hard surface; not a good place to be at all.

I’ve been there before. This old saying describes a situation in which you cannot possibly win. I was minding my own business one morning on my way to work. It was still dark out and there were several spots along the highway that were patchy with fog. As I came up on a certain spot that went through a State Forestry, I suddenly saw some figures moving across the road. It took a couple of seconds for it to hit my brain that they were deer. Of course, I immediately hit my brakes and as I got closer, I could see several large deer running across the road. One of them looked at the approaching vehicle and I guess it wondered, “What’s that?” and so just stopped in the middle of the road to get a better look. I could tell that there was no way I was going to get stopped. I couldn’t swerve off the highway to the right because the other deer were still there. I couldn’t swerve to the left because then I would have been in the wrong lane and I could see headlights coming in the distance. That was the rock and the hard place. Even though I had slowed down I had no choice but to plow headlong into that deer. Unfortunately, I hit the critter hard enough that it killed it (sorry about that) and it demolished the front end of the little car I was driving. I didn’t win and the poor deer didn’t either, but that was the best of three choices.

In Exodus 14 the people of Israel found themselves in a similar but much more serious situation. Even though there was a closer way, higher up in the Sinai Peninsula, God had instructed Moses to take the people toward the Red Sea. They came upon the shore line and I can imagine a few of them scratching their heads wondering, “Now how are we going to get across that?” Not long after, Pharaoh had changed his mind about letting them go and so sent his army after them.

So here they were; the seemingly impassable Red Sea on one side and the great army of Egypt on the other. Death seemed imminent. They began to complain and accuse Moses of putting them in this “rock and hard place.” Then God spoke to Moses. Most of you know

the story from here because God parted the sea and the Israeli people walked across on dry ground. However, when the Egyptian army went between the walls of water after them, they soon found themselves in their own “rock and hard place.”

By the way, I read one time that some scoffer claimed to have proven that where the Israeli people crossed the Red Sea the water was only ankle deep. Upon hearing this report a little lady jumped up whooping and hollering. When questioned about her strange behavior she stated, “That means that God did a greater miracle because He drowned Pharaoh’s army in ankle deep water!”

God doesn’t make mistakes. Sometimes we may wonder, just like the Israelites, “Why in the world did God bring us here?” Let me assure you that He has good reason. After that day the Israeli people had a story to tell for centuries to come. It’s the same with us. When we see the reason why God has put us between a “rock and hard place” then we too will have a witness of the delivering power of God through Jesus Christ.

The next time you find yourself stuck between a rock and a hard place remember the children of Israel at the Red Sea. If you will hold your ground and wait for the deliverance of the Lord then you may just put the devil himself in between a rock and a hard place!

February 10

“Big Dog, Big, Big, Big Dog!” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

“Now what do I do?” I exclaimed to myself. I was in one of the worst predicaments I had ever been in! It happened during what seems another lifetime ago, when I used to sell insurance. It was a hot and humid summer day. I had driven up to this farmhouse hoping to find the family home and make an early sale. The house set quite a distance from the main road. But instead of making a sale, I got a surprise and a lesson in life instead.

As I pulled up to the house, my eagle eye began scoping the area for dogs. I had learned that in the country you just didn’t pull up and get out because dogs are taught at an early age to absolutely hate insurance salesmen. I’m not real sure how they know just who sells insurance, but trust me, they do. With no dogs in sight the next thing I did was beep the horn lightly a couple of times. This would usually bring someone to the door or they’d stick their head out of the barn. At least I knew that there was human life around.

Nobody appeared but neither did a dog. It looked as if I was safe. Not wanting to upset the fine folks who lived here I didn’t want to risk sounding the horn again so I stepped out of the car and began walking towards the back door. A fence surrounded the house so I opened the gate and walked up on the back porch. After a couple of times knocking, it was obvious that no one was in the house. The main door was open and only the screen door was closed so they couldn’t be far off.

As I moved my foot to turn and walk back towards my car a glint of something caught my eye. As I looked back, I saw one of the biggest Doberman Pinschers I’d ever seen in my life. He was inside the house not making a sound but just standing at the door watching me. The screen door was a “push and open” type of door - In other words no lock and no catch. You just push and its open, which meant all that dog had to do was to push the door and I was toast.

Maybe he was friendly (yeah, right!). When I looked down at him, I saw his teeth begin to bear; not a good sign! All I could do was prop my hand against the door and wait. I thought of running but remember, there was a fence with a gate and I had politely shut it. I didn’t have a chance of making it to the gate, let alone get through it and into my car.

There I stood leaning against the door trying to ignore the snarling dog with only a fine wire screen between us. How long would I have to stand there? Hopefully the residents of the house were close by. They had left their door open but who in their right mind would go into the house with “Cudjoe” inside?

Finally, after what seemed like an hour (but was really only about ten minutes) a man emerged from one of the nearby barns. He saw me and came to my rescue. I didn’t make a sale that day but I was overjoyed to leave empty handed – That was better than no handed!

How often do we find ourselves in similar spiritual situations? Every day for some of us! It seems like we are stuck holding “the big dog” in the house and we can’t get anywhere because we are helpless to move. I’d say most of us could identify with that situation.

I just want you to know that God realizes where we are when we come to that place. He will allow us to spiritually stand there for a while so we can contemplate and quite frankly, it forces us to come to Him. When we do, He is always there just at the right time, just when we need Him. It may seem like He has let us down, but He hasn’t. God would never do that.

If you don’t know Him, accept Him today through His Son, Jesus Christ. If you don’t know how to do that then find someone who can help. Or, if you have Internet access, go to www.spiritbread.com and click on the salvation page. You won’t regret it. He will rescue us from those big, big dogs in life!

February 11**“Dented Cans”
By Jerry D. Ousley**

Years ago (I won't say how many) I worked during high school at a Coca-Cola Warehouse. They used to sell the dented cans to employees for a greatly reduced price. You could buy a whole case for about a nickel per can. I used to take some of those home and we always had pop to drink. It was a great fringe benefit.

However, I decided one day that there wasn't the right kind of flavors in those dented cases and I sure had my taste buds whetted for a certain one. “Hey! I can make my own dented cans! Why didn't I think of this before?” I asked myself. All I had to do was pick up a case of my favorite flavor, “accidentally” drop it on the hard concrete floor, and viola! Dented cans! I picked up a case of my favorite flavor and did just that. It worked like a charm. I set my newly dented case aside and went on about my work.

But, as I thought about it, I decided to try another flavor as well. With a deep heaviness in my gut, I picked up that case, took it around the corner where no one could see, and ... I had a second dented case.

My heart was pounding, but something drove me to do a third. As I raised the third case into the air, I heard a voice, “what do you think you're doing young man! Put that down and get back to work!” I was nailed! My first “crime spree” and I was toast!

Of course, I followed instructions to the “T” but as I worked the Holy Spirit began to speak to my heart. I had sinned. I had stolen. I quietly asked God to forgive me, and, in His great mercy, He did just that. But He also spoke to my heart. I could almost hear the words; “Your job isn't over yet.” I knew what He meant and so I began to walk over to my supervisor. It felt like I was walking through knee-deep mud my steps were so heavy.

When I reached him, I spoke up, “Sir I've got something I need to tell you.” I had his full attention and I was scared stiff. It felt like I had swallowed a whole pack of cotton balls, but I managed to start, “I'm a Christian and I know what I did was wrong. I'm really sorry and I'll never do it again. I'll be glad to pay for the two cases I messed up. I apologize for letting you down.” Whew! I had that done. Now for my punishment that was sure to come. I just hoped it wouldn't cost me my job.

With a slow, steady voice, I heard my supervisor saying, "Don't worry about it, son. It takes a man to own up to what he's done. There was only one perfect person in this world and they nailed Him to a cross. Go ahead and finish your job and don't think any more about it; just don't do it again."

It was over! I felt that "handful of lead" leave my stomach and I walked back to my workstation almost floating like a feather in the wind! I never did that again. I had learned my lesson.

It was a lesson that stuck with me throughout my life and it is one we all need to learn today. Many times, we are guilty of stealing. Oh, maybe not just outright taking something that doesn't belong to us, but I'm sure we can all recall incidents where we cheated a little bit.

The important thing is not so much what we've done but what God is telling us in our hearts. We need to learn to listen to Him then be obedient to what He is telling us. We won't be perfect. We will make mistakes and sometimes commit outright sin. What we need to learn to do is THE RIGHT THING. Let's quit making excuses and blaming everything and everyone. Let's own up to it and let God change us. We'll all be better off for it.

February 12

“Chasing Bear”

By Jerry D. Ousley

The noise I heard in the bushes immediately sent a shiver up my spine. Did I see the silhouette of the elusive creature in the early morning darkness or was it merely a conjecture of what I hoped to see? My squinting vision intently scanned the edge of the woods with something far short of eagle-eyed accuracy while my feet were poised to run if things suddenly went wrong. But nothing emerged from the over-growth. I was both relieved and disappointed.

We were staying in a very nice house belonging to my cousin located about a mile off the beaten path about half way between Pigeon Forge and Gatlinburg Tennessee. We had only been there less than an hour when a watchful neighbor pulled up on his four-wheeler. Being a good neighbor to my cousin he naturally wanted to make sure that we were the people who were supposed to be there for the weekend. But during the course of our conversation, he was quick to warn us about the bear. They had been spotted by several people according to him. He even told us a few stories about how he and his son had hunted the creatures down. We grew excited and decided to keep our eyes open.

The second day we were there the neighbor came by again to check up on us. During our conversation his son rolled up on yet another four-wheeler with the news that two four-hundred-pound bears had been spotted. With that our conversation came to a close and father and son when wheeling up the road.

The next morning was when I heard the noise. I just knew that any second a black bear was going to emerge from that over-growth. But it didn't; probably just a squirrel or something. We never did see our bear that weekend. Of course, we began to doubt the man's word. Perhaps he was telling the same tale he told to all the tourists. He talked of how his son had killed bear up on the mountain. I wondered how he got the critter back down on his four-wheeler. But what if he were telling the truth?

We do that very often with God. His word makes some mighty tall promises. When we read those promises then compare them to our own lives sometimes it seems that God might be telling some tall tales. After all, they never happen to us so they must not be true. That's

what many of us assume. But we've got to look at the whole picture. We are just used to comparing things like this to our own lives. That doesn't make them true or false.

We might have left that house and rounded the corner when several bears came down out of the woods and sat in the yard laughing at how they had fooled those crazy tourists. Perhaps that dark morning I did hear a bear but he just chose to not come out of the bushes. Just because I didn't see him did that make him non-existent?

We do that to God. If He doesn't send thunderbolts and lightening down from the sky when we ask Him to, then we say something like, "Just as I thought!" But because things didn't go the way we expected they shouldn't make God any more or any less real. He's up there alright. He's taking care of things too. Sometimes He shakes a bush to get our attention whether we want to believe it was Him or not. I think we need to stop looking at the bushes and just know that He's there and that He's in control and leave well enough alone. What do you think?

February 13

“Can You Hear Me Now?”

By Debbie Ousley

Have you ever had a craving for something to eat and just could not satisfy that craving? You would eat something sweet and that wouldn't do it, so then you'd partake of a salty food item and that still left you with an unsatisfied feeling. Before you knew it, you'd eaten or tried every left-over and pre-packaged food in the house, but still you remained wanting SOMETHING ELSE.

I believe this craving comes probably from a long-term lack of a vitamin or mineral in our bodies (it's smarter than we are) which is telling us “We need.” If we knew what it was, we'd be more than willing to eat it at this point. But when we recall our diet for the week and it reveals we'd only eaten green vegetables once that ought to be a clue.

Depriving ourselves of nutritious meals is not always intentional. It's Monday and we start out the week with the meat, vegetables, milk and bread combination and that's good! Then it's Wednesday and pizza sounds easy and quick. By Thursday peanut butter and jelly sandwiches are about all we can manage to round up.

I'm in no way suggesting that this is good for us. In the perfect world we'd sit down every evening to a five-course meal, but you know what? This is more real to life than the former in these days we live in: We'll take our vitamins, our “One-A-Day's” and continue to try and supplement for that which we are not getting in our meals, and that's good but the real article is always better for us, we know.

I see a craving in the lives of individuals we meet every day and that craving is in churched and non-churched people. It's a craving that cannot be satisfied with food or drink or with securities of the world. It is the craving to hear from God. People need to know the purpose of their lives beyond the obvious. “There's got to be more than just surviving or accomplishing an “X” number of deeds that make me a success or failure as others view me.”

Our Father, God did not “call” us to religion. That was what the Old Testament was about. True, it is our “schoolmaster,” but when Christ was revealed He offered to us all a much more intimate and personal access to Him. As you may recall, in the Garden, Adam and Eve

walked and talked with God Himself. They were on a first-name basis friendship. Disobedience cut that friendship off for them but Christ came, the Second Adam, to give all of us that friendship back so we can hear from Him once again.

Oh, we'll do all kinds of things to supplement for the real thing. You can fill in the blank for your own lives. I have a craving to be close to God. We all have a craving to hear from Him and know without a doubt He hears us. But we must spend time with Him! Or, maybe I'd best say we should WANT to spend time with Him. Our "want to" is going to always be by our own willingness. God never "strong arms" individuals into this friendship. When that craving becomes so powerful in our lives to hear from the Lord and we, with a willing heart, act on it, He will be waiting patiently for us and He will satisfy that craving with His friendship, love, and instruction to us.

My son, Jeremy, and I were talking one day, and he said, "You know what, Mom? Being honest with yourself and others costs something. That's why so many people cannot be honest." The cost of being honest to some is their inner-most secrets about themselves and they won't even allow those secrets to be revealed to themselves, much less to God or to others. But we know that the Lord is only interested in the inner-most parts of mankind and sees all anyway. The sad thing is that nothing can be changed in us unless we trust Him as a true Friend (One that is out of this world different than the friends we have here), and know that He wants to help us.

To hear from the Lord, we need more than a passive relationship with Him. I am hoping that He has an attentive ear to my cry for help when a semi has crossed the center line and is heading for our van load of youth than I have had when He tries to cut through the "blah, blah" static that I allow to cut off His voice to me. He does not withhold His presence in our lives but we withhold our presence from Him.

February 14

“My Wife” By Jerry D. Ousley

One night, after a long hard day at work and a busy week of work, I sat in my favorite recliner and glanced over at my wife. The Lord in an instant allowed me to remember good times we had shared and all the years we had spent together. She has given me two very wonderful children and had taken time to make each day a special day for me. I realized, as I had for days before, that I loved her more than I ever had.

I don't know how others viewed her or what they may have thought about her, but I knew that she was a precious jewel that as priceless and I wouldn't have thought of trading her for anyone or anything. To me she was the most beautiful woman in the world and I was the luckiest man in the world to be her partner.

I don't want to take up your precious time boring you with my feelings but I have a need to say that it is important for us to look at our spouse in the light God intended. I remember the pranks she had pulled on me like catching me in the shower and dumping a full glass of cold water over the curtain, and the times she had dumped ice down my shorts. I remember the times we've laughed and the times we cried and they are all precious to me because they were times of getting to know each other and learning how to get along.

God had placed us together and I was sure glad. According to God's word it was my place to long after her and want to be with her. We got married the old-fashioned way; we didn't live together for awhile to see if we were compatible. We felt that God wanted us together. We trusted that feeling and made it work (with God's help of course). It wasn't always easy for either of us. We all have our quirks that irritate others, and we don't always make life easy for each other, but when a man and a woman have made that lifetime commitment in marriage then we should be willing to work together to make that contract successful. It takes two to make it work and it takes two to make it fail.

I know this article has been more serious, but I hope it has maybe stirred your heart a little and inspired you to work on your own marriage. That man or woman that you agreed to stay with “until death do us part” is a special person. It takes both of you to bring that special

person to light that is found inside each of us. Trust me it can and will work if both are willing to commit to each other in Jesus Name!

February 15

“Character Can Come In Small Packages” By Debbie Ousley

It is necessary for me to set the scene for this article, so if you will bear with me, I'd appreciate it. By chance, I met my sister at Scottsburg one Saturday afternoon and she had her great-nephew with her. I'd say he was around four years old at the time. This little fellow is a “cool” kid. You may have noticed I didn't say he was well behaved or all the things that would describe him as (and I hate to say the word, so I won't) a g___ kid. He decided he wanted to ride with Meg back to our house, so we loaded up our “cool” cargo and proceeded to follow Jo Jo (as he called her).

On our short journey north, we came upon a car which wanted to make a left-hand turn, meaning that because of on-coming traffic, a car had gotten stopped behind the turning vehicle. Jo Jo went around the cars on a wide spot put there for that purpose. Well, lo and behold, as she proceeded to pass the cars, the driver wanting to make the turn did so, and the vehicle that had gotten stuck behind it took off like a “Jeff Gordon wanna be!” So, you know where that left Jo Jo? Right - Trying to maneuver back on the highway with nowhere else to go but in the ditch (eventually).

This driver was so determined to “teach her a lesson” that he was willing to cause her to wreck (that's one she'd never forget and they helped!). With gravel flying, and dust thick, here we were on-lookers unable to do anything. I'll admit, I did get panicked and so upset with this person I blurted out, “you idiot!”

The little fellow sitting beside me looked at me with disappointment and said “you should not call Jo Jo an idiot; she likes you.” In seconds it seemed, all was well. Jo Jo had gotten back on the highway safely and the other driver was well on his way, feeling satisfied, I guess, that they had made their point. ME, ME, ME!

I had to repent for my words and I did, but my mission was only partially complete. I told this “Cool” kid that I hadn't said that about Jo Jo and I was wrong to say it about anyone.

This situation proved this little guy's love and dedication for his aunt. He knew she “liked” me and sensed that I was supposed to “like” her. His disappointment had come

because he thought I had betrayed her. I mean, here I am, over ten times his age, double that much or bigger than him, he's riding in my car (at my mercy really) but yet, with his tiny four-year-old voice said, "THAT'S NOT RIGHT!" (Hang the consequences ...). Having the right kind of love for someone and being a "cool" kid are the only things that can make this happen.

February 16

“Doing What God Tells Us to Do”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I've gotten into a lot of trouble with this over the years. Many have been the time when I really thought God was telling me to do something only to find out, usually the hard way I might add, that it wasn't God at all, only myself feeling like God was giving His blessing to something I wanted to do. For instance, many years ago I felt with all my heart that God wanted me to quit my job and begin preaching full-time. This has been a big one for me over the years. I was overjoyed when it came to me that this must be God. I reasoned that I felt the call to preach the word of God, that I was young and strong, and that I really wanted to do it, so it must be God.

What really got me going was when I was able to get an old tent for the fair price of nothing! Now I knew that God wanted me to go full-time in tent meetings. I did it. I gave notice to my employer, quit my job and started trying to fix up that old tent. It was rugged and ragged and needed sewing in more places than it was together. It didn't take a lot of hours poking that big needle into that tough, thick canvas to ask myself if I was really listening to God or not.

In John chapter 2 we read the incident of Jesus turning water into wine. This was His first miracle. He, along with His disciples and His mother, Mary, had been invited to a wedding feast. They didn't have enough wine to accommodate all their guests and the servants began to get very nervous as they drained the last drops from the wineskins. What were they going to do now?

Mary spoke to her son, Jesus about it. The point I want to make isn't about turning water into wine, or the discussion Mary and Jesus had, but in the fact that after she had talked to Jesus, she told the servants to do whatever He told them to do. They did and the result was that they not only didn't run out of wine but it was commented that they had saved the best wine until the end of the feast.

I firmly believe that God tells us things in His word. Those things should be “no-brainers.” We read the Bible and do what it says; it's as simple as that. But then God takes our personality, our emotions, our will, and the things that interest us and uses them for His

glory. I do believe that He speaks to our hearts from time to time but we sometimes hear one-sided. We tend to hear what we think is good for us and tune out what we don't want to hear. Come on now, I know I'm not the only one who's tempted to do that.

God will prod us in our lives by way of His Holy Spirit. But He'll never tell us to do something that is wrong, will hurt others, or leave a smudge on His reputation. He doesn't tell us one thing today and then the exact opposite tomorrow. We'll know if we really search deep in our hearts and be truthful with ourselves. We'll know by how it compliments and agrees with what He's already told us in the Bible.

When we are sure of what God is saying then we should follow up by doing whatever it is that He's told us to do. Sometimes this can be a very pleasant chore and sometimes we dread it with everything in us.

However, I guarantee you that if we are really doing what God tells us to do, we may sweat bullets like those serving water changed to wine at the feast, but in the end, it will bless us and those affected by it as well.

February 17

“Foot In Mouth Disease” By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*here is a real disease that is commonly called “Foot AND Mouth Disease.” I am in no way making fun of that terrible disease but it occurred to me that there is another disease that doesn’t really affect the physical body, instead affecting the recesses of the mind. I appropriately call it “Foot IN Mouth Disease.” We all have it to a degree. Some of us have a worse case of it than others. Let me illustrate. There was a time when we were dating that my wife and I went out to dinner one evening. Back then we thought we were doing something very special if we had the money to eat at McDonalds. This time we chose the A&W restaurant. We sat down and began looking over the menu to pick out what we wanted. I had made my selection and turned to her. What I meant to say was “What would you like honey?” What came from my mouth was “Do you want anything?” Duh! We were in a restaurant to eat. I’m sure her intention wasn’t to sit there and watch me consume my food like a big old hog while she ate nothing. I knew that and I wanted to enjoy a meal with her. She was of course offended by my words and responded with, “No! I don’t want anything!” She was angry and I could tell, but I couldn’t figure out why. Like a dummy I reasoned that maybe she really didn’t want anything so I ate my food while the tension grew.

Afterwards when I confronted her and she finally let me know what the problem was I immediately apologized; but it was hard for her to hear me while I had my desert of feet and toes. I’ve chewed on my feet so many times that they are beginning to prune up. Maybe it would be easier to just stick them in my mouth in the morning and get it over with. There have been times I’ve considered rubbing them down with honey or chocolate syrup in the morning to improve their taste.

Really, I have gotten better at keeping my feet out of my mouth as the years have progressed but every once in a while, I let my guard down and right back in my mouth they go. It’s a constant battle to be aware of what we say as opposed to what we mean and how it sounds to others.

But there’s another version of this “Foot IN Mouth Disease” that is much worse than the one I’ve confessed to. It has to do with our spiritual condition. How often have I heard the words “I don’t need to do it that way; God and I have an understanding and everything’s okay.”

Or, "That's not the way my parents taught me so it must not be true." Or how about, "God knows my heart and He's good with it." One more classic is, "I've got to make some changes in my life before I come to God." These and a host of others are really only excuses to bail us out of situations that require us to make a commitment to God and His word.

Now I know that we are told in Philippians 2:12 to work out our own salvation. Many have taken this partial verse to mean that they can serve God any way they want to and be okay. Most of the time we forget to quote the rest of that verse. Here it is in its entirety: "*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.*" It is linked with being obedient whether the pastor is present or not and doing it with great caution. The only way we can do that is by knowing what God says in the Bible and being obedient to that. When we bypass this process then we are suffering from the worst case of "Foot IN Mouth Disease." We do have the right to be obedient to God as He has directed us. But know this: God will not direct us contrary to what His word says. When we insist on a relationship with our Heavenly Father aside from His word (not what everyone else is saying) then we are spiritually walking around with our toes hanging from our mouths. You can decide for yourself but I look ugly enough as it is.

February 18

“Friend of God” By Jerry D. Ousley

The topic today centers around the life of an individual mentioned only twice in the New Testament whose name was Theophilus. If you could take the time to read the passages from Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-5 it would help you know more this man.

Theophilus means “Friend of God.” Two very important books of the Bible, Luke and Acts, written by Luke the physician, traveling companion of Paul, were dedicated to him. From what I gather in reading these passages Theophilus must have been hungry to know about the Lord. I can imagine how he felt; he just couldn’t know enough about Jesus.

The Gospel of Luke was, of course about the life of Christ. The Acts of the Apostles was about the acts of Christ through His Church. The first thing we need to learn from Theophilus is that we should have a deep hunger and need to know more about our Lord.

In the Gospel, the good doctor, Luke (who must have been an eye-witness of Jesus) was concerned that, with all the stories going around, Theophilus should hear the correct one. Again, the Gospel of Luke was about Jesus. Jesus was about salvation.

I agree that when we get saved, we get it all. Jesus doesn’t do anything halfway. Romans 8:9 tells us that “without the Spirit of Christ we don’t belong to Him.” Therefore, it stands to reason that when we get saved the Holy Spirit immediately takes up residence in our lives.

This is why salvation is the greatest gift we can ever receive. It is mightier than any healing or temporary miracle, as great as that would be, that could ever take place. Salvation changes our lives from a destitute, doomed sinner, to a new creation in Christ Jesus. We move from a slave of the devil to a servant of the one, true, holy God. We are transformed from a mess that could never hope to be worthy of even a second in the presence of God to one who is made worthy by the blood of Jesus. How could anything be greater than that?

Luke shows us a great transformation that takes place from the Gospels to the Acts. Look at the lives of the disciples: In the Gospels they are completely dependent on Jesus.

Only for a short time are they sustained without His presence when they are sent out two by two. They are followers of Christ. They react in fear and weakness, and at the first sign of real trouble, they flee and follow at a distance.

Now, even after salvation and the baptism of the Holy Spirit, we still do and always should depend on Christ. And we should always be followers of Him. But, after Christ ascended, the disciples tarried, and the Holy Spirit fell, a remarkable transformation took place. The disciples were changed into APOSTLES. Their fear and weakness was turned into BOLDNESS.

From that day forward they did not follow at a distance but spiritually stayed as close to Christ as they possibly could, in the midst of persecution and trouble. Luke wanted Theophilus to know that Christians are not weak but are made powerful through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

After much study in the word, I am convinced that the Holy Spirit is within us at salvation, but we really don't realize the power of His presence until we have tarried in prayer and longed for Him to the point that we realize His presence in us and release that SPIRITUAL DYNAMO that is already there.

Luke wanted Theophilus to know that to be a friend of God really meant coming to Him in salvation, and going forward in power, boldness, and might as a witness to God. This power and boldness is displayed differently in individuals. But that doesn't mean that He isn't there.

What about it . . . are you still living in the baptism of John, or in the power and boldness of the Acts? Are you still following as a mere disciple or are you allowing yourself to be transformed into a powerful APOSTLE – A friend of God!

February 19

“Getting a Raise” By Jerry D. Ousley

Sometime ago I got a pleasant surprise on my check. I got a raise. Now it wasn't anything spectacular mind you but it amounted to an extra annual gross income of \$509.60. Hey, any of us could use an extra 500 bucks, right?

Of course, I was thankful for it and don't mean to be complaining here, but I got to doing some figuring and here's what I came up with: Gasoline is costing an average of around fifteen cents a gallon higher (I know in some areas it may be more than that, but let's figure conservatively). Just driving to work takes about fifteen gallons per week so that amounts to \$117.00 per year. Well, that whittles my extra income down to \$392.60. Okay, but then I thought, “Uncle Sam's” going to get his part so I did some more figuring and it came to \$101.92. Now I'm down to \$290.68.

Then I remembered that I burn gas for heat. It took a skyrocket ride last season and hasn't quite found its way back down all the way, so I figure I paid another \$392.00 in heating costs this year. Well, now I'm down to \$-101.32. Hmmm . . . that means I actually lost money. Nothing gained here. I'm going to stop figuring now because prices have gone up on almost everything and I get myself into trouble if I go too far.

We are all in the same boat, aren't we? I know you have experienced the same increases I have. It makes me wonder where people are getting all their money these days to afford \$30,000.00 automobiles and \$200,000.00 homes. But maybe those of you who are fortunate enough to afford these things have budgeted over the years and invested correctly. I hope so anyway.

In order to get out of the pit of depression over these figures I had to start thinking about this spiritually. We all need a spiritual raise, don't we? I know I do. And that's where the scripture comes in. Here's a good one to start with. Jesus said, “*Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20). That takes a load off. When I'm faced with the difficulties of life, bills and all, He's still right there with me. I don't have to worry because He will give me the spiritual uplift I need to get through.

How about this one: “... *All things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose*” (Romans 8:28). Wow! That’s a pretty strong statement! It means that everything that happens to me, as long as I am walking in His plan, according to His purpose, those things, good and bad, will turn out for the best. All we’ve got to do is make sure we are in His plan, fulfilling His will, and it’s all going to work out. Don’t forget the important key there however, “**ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE.**”

These are just two examples from the word of how our Lord takes care of us even when we feel like the world is out to consume us and when it seems nothing is going right. Look to Him. He said that He’s right there. Then walk in His purpose. If you do these things, I guarantee that life will turn out alright! By the way, the spiritual costs never fluctuate and Uncle Sam can’t touch that value not yet anyway!

February 20

“From Here to There” By Jerry D. Ousley

I'm not extremely picky when it comes to automobiles. When I was young, I liked cars a lot. But as the years progressed (and especially when I found that I was responsible for the financial commitment associated with vehicles) I discovered that they didn't mean as much to me anymore. I usually wind up with the “pass-me-down” vehicles in our family. That's because I want my wife to have a good dependable automobile. So, when trading time comes, she always gets the newer vehicle. Again, I prefer it that way because it gives me peace of mind knowing that she is less likely to break down on the road.

Right now, I'm driving a 2012 Kia Soul. It's a small car and gets great gas mileage. It's an older vehicle but God has really blessed it. It has a little over 100,000 miles and still runs great. It isn't perfect. It has a few minor problems, but it gets me to where I need to go. I figure that if I can get from point “A” to point “B” without incident and have a few minor creature comforts along the way (like a good radio), that's all I need. I've found that my social status isn't defined by what I drive (at least not in my eyes ... I'm not sure how others classify my social status as the proud owner of a 2012 Kia Soul, but then, we don't have a monthly payment on it either). Again, if I can get from here to there without any trouble then I figure I've accomplished my goal - That's me.

We're all going somewhere. We've all got a point “A” and a point “B.” It can be a journey in our chosen profession; it might be getting through school or it may even be just getting through the day. The idea is that we've got a goal to reach. The journey is how we get there but the goal is getting there.

Life is a journey from a point “A” to a point “B” as well. Point “A” is this life. Point “B” is the after-life. We all will have an afterlife. Our souls will either live eternally or die eternally but either way they will exist for eternity. After death, by our own choice, we will either be found in Heaven or in Hell. That is a choice we make during our journey.

At the end of our journey, we will experience something we call “death.” Unless we would happen to be alive when our Lord, Jesus Christ returns to this earth, we are all heading for a date with death. We've talked about death before but I'd like to just clear up a few things

about it. First of all, in most cases it is usually harder on those left behind than it is on the person who is dying. Some live very long lives. I saw a guy on the evening news the other day who had reached 105 years. What a ripe old age! But I've also known people who, whether by accident, sickness or a freak turn of events left this life at very early ages.

The truest definition of death is "separation." Physical death separates us from those we know on this earth. The absolute worst kind of death is spiritual death. Spiritual death separates us from God. That is not good. To be separated from God is indeed a tragedy. If we don't accept Jesus Christ as our Savior we will be eternally (forever) separated from God. That is not the point "B" we want to arrive at.

We are going to make a move from point "A" to point "B" at some time or another. We will move from here to there. What we need to make sure of is that, regardless our journey, how much trouble we may have or how wonderful and exciting it may be, our point "B" is Heaven. The Bible tells us that if we acknowledge that we have been sinners and recognize that we need Jesus Christ as our Savior, then repent of our sin by asking God to forgive us, finally accepting the fact that Jesus gives us the free gift of salvation, then we can know just where "there" is.

February 21

“A Lion or a Mouse” by Debbie Ousley

“Don’t eat me!” cried the little mouse to the big furious lion, “I’ll help you someday!” he vowed. As the lion roared with laughter at the thought of this little rodent coming to his aid, he found mercy and set the near heart-failed mouse free.

As you know, if you have ever heard the story of “The Lion and the Mouse,” he did save the lion later in the story. How? He did it by using his tiny teeth to chew through the net that held the lion in helplessly caught. The poachers were sure to take this mighty “king of the jungle’s” freedom away, and forever change his life. No more would he be “king of the jungle” but an exhibit in the zoo, or maybe a rug in someone’s den for people to admire and boost its owner’s ego.

As we hear this story, I believe each individual can see himself as either the lion or the mouse. Lion: Strong and independent; not needing anyone; king of his or her jungle. Mouse: Small and insufficient by people’s standards, yet knowing their potential if ever given a chance (or maybe I should say, bold enough to show their stuff).

The moral to the story is simple but powerful in a day when power seems to be so important. It is not smart to believe and live your life as though anyone is beneath you and that you are so BIG and self-sufficient that you might not need help (“Who me? Need help from them?!”). How pious the lion must have felt when he set the little mouse free. What power he held in his big hairy paw as he, the king of the jungle decided the fate of the mouse! But the mouse didn’t think twice about doing what he did, not because it was an honor, but to fulfill a vow he had made if given the opportunity.

The Apostle Paul, in Romans 12:3, warns us to not think more highly of ourselves than we ought to, but to think soberly according as God has given the measure of faith. This is my thought, not Paul’s. We should not think lowly of ourselves either for that very same reason. It’s the graces given by the LION OF JUDAH!! We don’t need to roar and make loud noises, but just do what we know we can do because of who we are, due to those graces. I’ve seen it

many times in my life and it just doesn't pay to treat others with less respect than what you expect from them.

February 22

“Daily Rate” By Debbie Ousley

In 2 Kings 25:27-30 it tells us that King Jehoiachin, who had been imprisoned, was released and given new clothes. It tells us that the king of Babylon also gave him food to eat and verse 30 says, *“And for his provisions, [Jehoiachin’s] there was a regular ration given him of the king, a portion for each day, all the days of his life.”* *“A daily rate for ever day, all the days of my life.”*

As I read this passage it was shown to me how we, as Christians, also have a daily rate; an allowance of Christ’s grace and love to us. It’s enough and it is accessible to us every day for the rest of our lives.

The problem with us is that we want to take up tomorrow’s concerns and problems. We won’t relax in the daily rate that God wants to give us for that day.

*“Change not thyself with the weight of a year,
Child of the Master, faithful and dear.
Choose not the cross of the coming week,
For that is more than He bids thee seek.
Bend not thine arms for tomorrow’s load,
Thou mayest leave that to thy gracious God.
Daily, only, He says to thee,
Take up thy cross and follow me.”
Author unknown*

As God sent manna every day to the children of Israel it was sufficient and it came every day. But as we know, some of the people decided to gather enough for tomorrow. Maybe they doubted it’s coming, but as we read, we find that what they gathered for tomorrow rotted and went to waste. Could it be that when we don’t appreciate and cherish the “daily rate” of His grace and love for that day by taking on the load of tomorrow we, in one way, allow it to go to waste?

There's a very good reason why the Lord promises us a "daily rate" of grace and love and that is because He knows we are going to need it for that day. In Matthew 6:34 the Lord tells us that "*sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*" In other words, there is enough evil coming tomorrow so just take care of today.

As the Lord instructs us to take one day at a time and to trust Him for that day, He then will speak about generations to come. It's so hard for us to believe that what we do today will have an effect on what is coming in the future. But you see the outcome of the generations to come only depends on what we do with the "daily rate" the Lord gives us for each day. The weight of tomorrow is the Lord's and He is able to take care of it. If we believe that to be true, we will accomplish what He has for us this day, we will have peace and we can allow the joy of the Lord to be our strength.

We can stand straight and tall because our shoulders are not bowed down with a load, our hands will be empty to raise in praise and extend to someone in need, our minds will be on the good things of others and not clouded up with the evil imaginations, and our hearts will be lighter and open to receive. The "daily rate" is enough and it's promised to us for all the days of our lives.

February 23

“Full Plates”

By Jerry D. Ousley

The other day we had a family dinner. The weather was perfect. The sun was shining, the wind was calm and the day was warm. We set chairs and tables under our carport, put a tent up over the picnic table and moved the swing out under the trees in the yard and really it was a picture-perfect setting. It was a pitch in dinner and as the guests arrived, they came with bowls, dishes and crock pots full of steaming aromatic delicacies that tempted the senses. I almost felt like one of those cartoon characters floating in the air, pulled along by the scent of a good meal.

There was a lot of good food there; chili, fried chicken, potato salad, deviled eggs, salads of all kinds and desserts that seemed almost sinful to eat, graced the table. It was a fat man's paradise (at least this fat man's). We prayed over the food and formed a line smorgasbord-style and enjoyed pleasant conversation as we moved ever closer to those delectable treats to be found on the table.

Finally at the table, I perused the selections and it seemed I had to sample a little of everything; after all, you don't want to take a chance of hurting someone's feelings because you didn't have some of what they slaved over in the kitchen. That would make them feel unappreciated. So, by the time I arrived at the end of the table my plate was nearly spilling over. They just don't make plates big enough, you know?

I sat down and began enjoying my fair share of those wonderful foods. It felt good going into my stomach because my wife and I hadn't eaten much that day in order to save room for the dinner we had planned. I was in culinary heaven – for a while anyway. Now I've always been in the habit of eating everything on my plate. I mean, think of all those starving children in, well you could name a lot of countries. It was sinful to throw food away. That's our justification anyhow. So, I ate it all. But by the time I finished, my stomach was so full it hurt. It was a chore to get up from my seat to throw away the Styrofoam plate. Then I felt ashamed. I had indulged in gluttony. I had put too much on my plate and now there was a price to pay.

What I should have done was not load up my plate with more than I should eat in the first place. In a way we're all guilty of that at times, aren't we? Most people who are

considered to be responsible have “more on their plate than they can swallow” these days. How often I have asked, “Why didn’t God give us a thirty-six-hour day instead of just twenty-four?” Thinking about that over the years, I have realized it was only by His mercy that He limited our days to twenty-four hours. If we had thirty-six, we’d only fill them up too and probably kill ourselves in the process.

Now, I’m as guilty as the next guy is, but what we need to learn is to “not fill that plate up so much.” That’s much easier said than done. However, if we don’t find a way, our bodies will. God is good and God is gracious, but we sometimes over-extend ourselves in our zeal to do something for Him. He doesn’t want us to just sit down and do nothing, but He does want us to seek His will, and follow His course.

After all, Jesus did say, *“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matthew 11:30). That means that He has work for us to do, but not to the extremes we sometimes make it. Let’s remember that the next time we start stacking up our plate.

February 24

“Giving to God” By Jerry D. Ousley

Y*OU* knew it would just be a matter of time before this “preacher” would address tithes and offerings. Most people associate being a minister with taking up a collection. You might have heard this story before but I’m going to ask you to humor me and listen to it again.

It’s been told that a passenger ship was sinking. There weren’t enough life boats to go around and the crew knew that their impending fate could quickly raise a panic that would make things even worse. Among the passengers was a minister. The captain quickly told his crew to get this man and have him do something religious to calm the situation. When they found him and shared the request of the captain, he immediately took off his hat and proceeded to take up an offering.

I don’t know why this is such a hot topic. The principle of giving is really very simple. Some people believe in tithing while others don’t. The facts are these: In the Old Testament, tithing was taught and practiced by the nation of Israel. The first recorded incident of tithing actually took place before the nation of Israel even existed. Abram had gathered a group of men together to deliver his nephew Lot and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who had been taken captive by a confederacy of nations. You can read about this in Genesis 14. God granted victory to Abram and they came away not only with the people, but also much spoil. The leaders of these two legendary ungodly cities offered the spoil to Abram. However, he refused it because he was afraid that it would be said that they had made him rich.

A gentleman by the name of Melchizedek showed up. He was a priest of God. Abram had the people give a tenth (or tithe) of it to this man. Later, when the nation of Israel was established, God chose to maintain and support the priests of Israel through the tithe system. The people were to reserve 10% of their income as well as the firstborn of their flocks, for God. This was a great system and I for one wish our government would do away with our current complex tax system and adopt the tithe system. To me, this would solve a lot of problems and for the most part, there would be plenty to support those government programs that are needed.

However, very little is said about tithing in the New Testament. It is referred to but is not specifically instructed by the early leaders of the Church. Giving was taught and encouraged but not necessarily the tithe system of the Jews.

Now I'm not going to take one side or the other on this issue. I believe that we each need to let God show us His will and plan for ourselves. I know that God blesses us for our faithfulness. But if we aren't careful, we'll be giving to God only for what we can get back from Him. That makes me to wonder if giving in this manner really benefits anyone except the receiver.

I'm going to say this about it: We need to be obedient to what God is speaking in our hearts. He may be telling some that they are to give ten percent. He may tell others that they are to give twenty percent. Still, He may be instructing yet others to give only five percent. Only you and God know your heart.

I've heard of ministers telling people that they were out of the will of God and in sin because of their giving or lack of it. I know it takes money to run a church. I know that people have to see the vision and be committed to it in order to see it through. But I also wonder why there are so many rich pastors and poor people in the congregation. I heard on the radio that the average pastor's salary including benefits is around \$80,000.00 per year. I guess I'm not average. I don't make that much working. I may never see \$80,000.00 a year. But I'll tell you this, I never will if I have to beg, accuse and border on stealing it from people. We need to be obedient to God concerning our giving but when it becomes more important in the church than our number one job of winning souls then something is mighty wrong. I might not have full pockets, but I sleep very good at night.

February 25

“I Put the Gold In The Fire And Guess What Came Out?”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Exodus 32 tells the story of the golden calf that Aaron, brother of Moses, made for the children of Israel when Moses had been up on the mountain with God for an extended time. It is a very serious story, but one that would cause you to twist your mouth to keep from smiling when you really think about it. You see, in verse 32 Moses had approached Aaron for an explanation as to why he had agreed to make this golden calf for the people to worship. Basically, what Aaron said is the title of this article, “I put the gold in the fire, and guess what? Out popped this golden calf!” The chances of that happening are ridiculously slim to none.

Now, in fairness to Aaron, he probably was a little concerned about what the people might do to him if he didn't comply and make them an idol to worship. After all they thought Moses had disintegrated on top of the mountain. He'd been gone for nearly forty days now. That's over a month! Something had to have happened to him. “Let's face it he's gone. You're in charge now Aaron so what are you going to do about it? We need to see what this God we've followed out here into the wilderness looks like. Here's gold – show us what you've got.”

The excuse he gave to Moses reminds me a lot of what we do today: **BLAME SOMEONE ELSE**. It's always been man's nature to do that. I mean, Adam and Eve did it, and man's been doing it ever since. In our modern society it seems that it is acceptable and sometimes even encouraged to refuse to take responsibility for our actions. It's always someone else's fault or we have become a victim of circumstances. I guess when we can blame someone else it makes us look better but it also erodes the confidence others might have in us.

It's much better to just own up to our mistakes and go on. Although we may come out with a little egg on our face and we look less than perfect, in the long run people will say, “There goes an honest man (or woman).” We may stand out with all those fingers pointed at us but the next time someone wants an honest opinion guess who they're going to look to?

This goes double when it comes to sin. You see, no matter how much blame we put on other people or things, ultimately the responsibility rests on our shoulders. God knows this and we can't get away with anything. We can blame all we want but to be forgiven we must be willing to say, "God, I'm at fault, I did it. I'm sorry, please forgive me." When we do God does forgive us.

You see, sometimes we push for people to "repent" in order to be saved, but then after that we fall short. I have found that repenting (asking forgiveness) when we get saved is only the beginning. Almost daily we find something more that lets us know just how imperfect we are, something that we have done wrong. We don't have to start all over and get saved again, but we must immediately ask God to forgive us, ask others that might be involved to forgive us and then go on. When we do this, we'll find that we feel much better for doing so, and people really don't look down on us for being wrong, just for wanting to be something more than human.

Willingness to be exposed for being wrong just might also make being a Christian look a little more appealing to those who haven't made a decision yet. How many times have we heard "well, I'm just as good as that Christian is..." They're basically looking at the fruit in the life of the believer. They're saying, "My good works are as good or better than theirs." And often they are right. However, when they see a believer asking forgiveness for their wrongs instead of justifying themselves so that they look holy, then there's not much argument against that. The unbeliever begins to see that we can't do it all by ourselves. They see that it isn't based on how many good works we do, but in being honest with God and man and being dependent on God for salvation. It just is the right thing to do.

February 26

“God’s Business is Not Big Business” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

I believe in the power of prayer. I know that when frail man humbles himself, quits concentrating on himself and expresses compassion toward another human being, that God honors that and begins to move, not because He’s just sitting around waiting for someone to beg Him to do something but because He wants us to have a part in what He does and He wants us to love others. However, there are those who would take the awesomeness of God, His goodness and grace, and make those things their big “profit making business.” They are nothing short of charlatans.

I’m not referring to those pastors who give their life for the gospel and live off meager salaries. I’m not speaking of those in other areas of Christian service whose main goal is to minister and consequently receive financial assistance for it. We’ve got to make a living to stay alive.

I am referring to those who are trying to get rich from the gospel. I immediately recall two such incidents in the Bible - One in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. In 1 Kings 5, we read the story of Naaman coming to Elisha for healing from leprosy. You can read the story for yourself but towards the end of the chapter Elisha’s servant, Gehazi, decided that it was crazy for Elisha not to take the reward offered him for Naaman’s recovery. He chased after Naaman and concocted a story, supposedly from Elisha, that he needed some of the silver and clothing for two other prophets. Naaman gladly gave these items because he was grateful for what God had done for him. The short of it all was that Gehazi wound up with Naaman’s leprosy for lying and for his greed.

The other incident is found in Acts 8. It is the story of the gospel coming to Samaria. There was a man there by the name of Simon who made his living by sorcery. He was converted, but then when other apostles came and the people received the gift of the Holy Spirit by laying their hands on them, Simon asked if he could buy this ability. Simon was a businessman and his conversion had put him out of business. I can almost hear Simon’s thoughts: “I can’t practice sorcery anymore, but if I had this ability to lay my hands on people and they would receive this gift, I could make money that way.” But his greed cost him. Read it for yourself in Acts 8.

There are many good, honest, and reputable ministries today. God has a place for each one and He is using each one to increase His kingdom. There are also many who see the potential for profit from the gospel and in their attempt (and in many cases success) to make money, they destroy the good of the gospel.

The generally bad perception of ministers, many who have given their lives to the gospel, comes because of those with bad reputations. But folks, there are those who have honestly given their all to the Kingdom of God. Don't throw them into one bag because of those who shouldn't really be there.

Know the word of God. Guard yourself against these charlatans who would promise or do anything to get into your wallet and pocketbook. Pray before you give an offering to anyone. Make sure God is telling you to do so. When you give because God has given you the green light, guess what? You will be tremendously blessed in what you need because of your obedience to God and the one on the receiving end will be blessed with what God has promised him or her. Everyone wins when it is done God's way.

To sum it all up, let me just say this: In the end each one will get his just reward. That's in the Bible too. I think I'll just be content to be God's employee and let Him run the "business." Don't you agree?

February 27

“Handyman” By Jerry D. Ousley

Leaky faucets are no fun. They start out as a slow annoying drip. The problem with the drip is it tends to get more frequent and more annoying with the passing of time. There is only one of two recourses since most leaky faucets tend to not “fix” themselves. We can either call a repairman, or we can buy the parts and fix it ourselves.

We had such a leak in our bathtub recently. I had tried to ignore the drip for more than a year. It wasn't too bad and it hadn't really affected the water bill. So, I chose to think that maybe it would eventually seal itself off or perhaps we could just try shutting the valve little more tightly. Shutting it off more tightly did work – for awhile (remember my statement above, they don't fix themselves).

But the day finally arrived when there was no recourse. The leak had grown worse with time until now it was a steady drip. I knew I had to do something about it especially when my wife had decided to capture and use some of that wasted water. She put a bucket under the leak and it managed to fill up in about a day and a half. That was a lot of water. It wasn't going away so I had to decide what to do. I had fixed faucets before so the handyman in me said, “This will be about a half an hour job.” I had fixed the kind that just took a few repair gaskets so I went to the local hardware store and purchased a variety pack of donut rings. This wouldn't take long.

I tore into the faucet only to discover that this wasn't what I was used to. I hadn't seen anything like this before. The cartridge I removed had a couple of donut rings on it so I replaced them from the pack I had purchased and began putting it back together. Only it didn't go back like it had come out. An hour later after I had tried tightening some of the connections on the cartridge and got it all back together, so I thought it was time to give it a try. My wife watched the faucet while I went down into the basement to turn the water back on (there were no shutoff valves for the tub). It hadn't worked. Now instead of a leak we had a strong and steady rush of water coming from the tub.

I returned to my task a little less confident because now I wasn't sure what to do. I began to tighten some more on the valves in the cartridge when suddenly the apparatus broke

in half. Now I was in serious trouble. It was a Sunday afternoon but fortunately a hardware store in the town south of us was open. I'd simply have to purchase an entirely new cartridge. But they didn't have one. Wal-Mart carried some plumbing supplies so I thought, "Okay, I'll try there." But they didn't have it either. I returned to the hardware store this time with intentions of purchasing a whole new faucet unit. I did and returned home. Okay, this job would take a little longer than I had expected.

But when I began the chore of changing the entire thing, I discovered that the piping wasn't as simple as I had thought. It didn't take me long to figure out that this job was beyond me. My wife mentioned a place in a larger town north of us so I resolved to return the new faucet I had just purchased and make the trip north. But they didn't have what we needed either.

Now there was no choice except to return home, catch as much water as we needed to get through the night and get ready for work the next day and hope that a few phone calls from work would turn up the part I needed. To shorten this story, fortunately I found the cartridge I needed and once I got home with it the job took the original half an hour, I had thought that it would. But I had definitely learned my lesson the hard way!

We do that in life too, don't we? We think we can fix ourselves with a few simple adjustments. What we usually discover is that we wind up complicating things even more. We need our Creator's help. We can't do it ourselves. Thank God, He is there and He will help us when we need it. That's why the Psalmist wrote, "*Our soul waits for the LORD; He is our help and shield.*" (Psalm 33:20). Life is more complicated than a drippy faucet. Thankfully we have the Master Handyman who knows exactly what we need and when we really need it!

February 28

“Friends” By Debbie Ousley

When I was younger, I had a hard time understanding girls who wanted only one friend at a time. You know the sort; they would just kind of leech on to one person and treat everyone else like they were second class citizens.

But I have to admit, as I get older, I realize maybe quality is more important than quantity. Oh, I still want to be acquainted with a lot of people and I consider myself to be a “people person” but you know what? A good friend is hard to find now a days.

There are those “fair weather” friends who are good when everything is going well, but just let a little breeze start to blow and they are “gone with the wind.” How about those so-called friends who, when you confide in them, later use what you’ve said against you?

Trust is a hard thing to gain from people any more. It used to be that preacher and priest were individuals who could be trusted but slowly they are moving farther and farther down on the list close to used car sales persons (no disrespect intended).

I really saw a lack of dedication to friends with the kids when we had the Youth Ministry. They would turn on each other in a heartbeat and it made me wonder what kind of role models they were seeing each day.

The evidence of a common enemy bringing people together quicker and with more strength than a common friend is a very sad sign of the times we live in. And I am one who believes it saddens our Lord even more.

I remember when I was still at home, the sisters and brothers could tease and pick on one another awful. But you let anyone outside the “clan” say the very same thing to any of us and “them was fightin’ words.” There would be a call for unified force and it would be one to be reckoned with. I’m telling you that’s a friend!

I don’t understand why there always has to be an enemy among us. Aren’t you tired of enemies? It really doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know who your friends are. They are the

ones who are spending more time building you up and bringing joy and support to the relationship than picking and poking at you. They are honest with you (even when it hurts) because they love you and they want you to be the best person you can be.

They do little unexpected things to, again, bring joy to our lives. And hey, when someone else is dogging you, they come to your defense even when there may be a degree of truth to what's being said. Loyalty to friends cost something but the dividends are great when we are investing in a friendship.

Jesus was into friendships. I believe He wanted His disciples to be friends even when they disagreed, and they did, but that is a part of a strong friendship also.

In the Old Testament, men would pledge their friendships to one another. The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a friend that would speak to his friend. Jonathan showed his dedication and love toward David by going against his own father's commands because he loved David as a friend but he also knew that his father was wrong.

Jesus told His disciples in John 15:15, *"No longer do I call you servants; for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you."* He trusted them.

Proverbs 18:24 says, *"A man who has friends must himself be friendly; but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."*

That friend is, of course, Jesus. There are never any wasted hugs when our love is true and pure toward those people to whom we choose to extend our friendship.

February 29

“His Image in Us” By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*here's a story that tells of a lady who was part of a women's Bible Study group currently studying in the book of Malachi. The women wondered exactly what Malachi 3:3 meant and how it was related to God. The verse says, *“He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver . . .”* One of the ladies decided to explore this further and so visited a silversmith, asking him if she could watch as he processed the material.

The silversmith went to work and she watched as he took a piece of the silver and held it over the fire. As he worked, he explained that it was necessary to hold the material over the fire where it was the hottest. This allowed all the impurities in it to burn away.

She watched the process with intense interest as she thought about the passage that again said, *“He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.”* She asked him if it was really necessary for him to sit and watch as the process took place. His answer was, “Yes, it is necessary and not only do I have to sit there but I can't afford to take my eyes from it at anytime or I risk having it ruined if it stays in the fire too long.”

The lady was quiet for a bit then asked the silversmith, “Just how do you know when the process is finished?” The man answered without doubt or hesitation, “That's the easy part; it's finished when I see my own image in it.”

Romans 8:29 says, *“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.”* God looked way out ahead, in fact from the very beginning of time, and saw those of us who would come to Him. He gives every man, woman, boy and girl the opportunity to come to Him. He loves everyone He has ever created. But in His unique and divine foreknowledge He knows those who will accept His call and those who will not. He didn't create anyone to be doomed for destruction but He does know those who will accept the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and come safely into the Kingdom. Only God possesses such knowledge and has the wisdom to act prudently on it.

The key is that we will be conformed to the image of His Son. He is like the silversmith. He sits and watches intently, each life that comes to Him. He feels the pain we feel and knows how difficult the process of burning out all the wastes and impurities can be. We have a lot of them. Sometimes it takes longer for some than it does others. It's different for each of us and that is by no means to say that some are better than others. We all need to be purified in our own way. He created each of us different and unique which means we not only have our individual qualities but we also have our individual flaws.

Often it seems as if the process will never end and frankly, for most of us it won't end until we are ready for Heaven. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes we may feel that death is imminent. We wonder why we have to go through some of the things that we do. We question as to why we must suffer so, when it seems that others have it easy. Only God knows the answers to those questions.

The good thing about this refining process is that we are not going through it alone. God Himself sits with His eye steadily on us. He sees everything we go through. He knows our pain and our suffering. He hurts for us but He also knows that this process is absolutely necessary if we are to make Heaven our home. It's comforting and wonderful to know that His eye never leaves us, because He's waiting for that right moment to remove us from the fire. That moment will come when He sees His image in us.

March 1

“Just Call Me Grandpa” By Jerry D. Ousley

Well, it's finally happened. I knew that if I stuck around on this planet long enough the day would come when I would move from Dad to Grandpa. Our daughter, Megan, gave birth to our first grandchild on March 1st of 2008. I'm not proud or anything, but if you'd like to see our new granddaughter, I've got plenty of pictures I could show you.

The first time I held my little “Peanut” I felt a love and a desire to protect her like I hadn't felt in many years. I also feel a great need to completely spoil this little girl. I hope she likes her grandpa as much as her grandpa likes her. By the way, her grandma is pretty proud too.

We visited them just last night and I got to hold that precious little bundle of joy for quite a while. As I looked down on the sleeping, blessing from God, I felt warmth transferring from me to her. I know she felt safe in Grandpa's arms because she slept like a little doll. Yeah, I don't want to brag too much but what can you say when you're holding the prettiest and most precious little baby in the world (of course I'm sure that each of you who have experienced Grandparentdom could say the same thing).

It reminds me of our Lord. You know, He probably feels the same way about each and every soul that is born into His Kingdom. He cuddles us and holds us and wants the best for each of us. Although He wants us to grow into mature Christians, I believe He also wants to spoil us with His blessings – and He does.

All through the Gospels Jesus told us not to worry about things and spoke of how much God the Father loves us. He talked about how that He was going to Heaven to prepare a place for us just like parents prepare a room for their expected child. He's getting it all set up and when we get there it will be finished, ready, and just exactly what we need.

My wife and I fixed some things up at our house too in anticipation of our little “Peanut.” We bought a crib and other equipment we're going to need because folks, we plan on doing our fair share of babysitting for this little girl.

God is making all things ready for us. The day will come and the time will arrive when we will be birthed from this world to our real home in Heaven. That will be an exciting day. I know we all dread it now, just like that little baby probably thought that life had come to an end when she moved from the warmth and safety of their mother's womb into this world. But it was necessary for the next step of growth. And so is our move from this world to Heaven. We don't know what to expect. It scares us to think about leaving the life we've known for so long. But let me tell you, it will be the best thing that ever happened, at least if we are believers in Jesus Christ – His disciples and followers of Him.

For now, we rest in the comfort of His arms, feeling His warmth and love surround us. Things aren't always pleasant and we get upset just like a baby who gets hungry or needs a diaper changed. I know our little "Peanut" isn't very fond of being changed or having a new outfit put on her; but then those things are very necessary. Sometimes God has to do some necessary things in our lives as well. We don't like it. It seems inconvenient and we rebel, complain and sometimes get very fussy. But it has to be done. It's for our own good.

So, the next time God puts you in an uncomfortable position or situation, just know that the best will come of it. It may not seem like it at the time but it will; you'll see. I'm going to stop now because I think I hear my "Peanut" calling me – from 10 miles away.

March 2

“Bridges and Ghosts”

By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*eenage boys can be pretty brave, can't they? At least we thought we were. While living in Azalia, Indiana (I won't say how many years ago) there was a weekend that my brother, my cousin, a friend and myself decided we were going to see if a local legend was true. We had secured permission from our parents to spend the night in a converted chicken house, now made into a clubhouse, on a Friday night. This was going to be a big night.

The clubhouse belonged to our friend's mother who was hard hearing and we took advantage of that. What our parents didn't know was that we had planned an excursion that night. The legend said that the old Azalia Bridge that crossed White River, long ago had been the sight of a wreck and a suicide. As I remember the story, at midnight a young man and his girlfriend had an automobile accident on the bridge killing the girl and the boy, lady in arms, jumped to his death over the side of the bridge. Now to make it even more interesting at midnight when there was a full moon, you could actually see this scenario re-in-acted or, so we were told. We wanted to see it.

It wasn't far from where we lived so we kept ourselves occupied by all kinds of sports, including playing "Frisbee" at night with a hubcap (I said we were brave not smart). At 11:30 we started down that dark gravel road heading for the bridge. We weren't afraid of no ghosts!

You need to realize that at this time, the bridge was an old steel suspension bridge one and a half lanes wide with a wooden floor. It hadn't been painted for years and was showing rust. It was pretty eerie looking at night I don't mind saying.

As we walked toward the bridge, we got close enough that we could see it looming ahead in the shadows. The horseplay stopped and each of us got quiet as we neared the bridge. It was about 11:50 now; only 10 more minutes until we'd be face to face with those ghosts. We ... we ... we weren't af-f-f-raid of no g-g-g-hosts.

I think I was the one who broke the silence. "Hey guys what if this thing is real? Do you think we'll just see it happen or will these ghosts know we're here?" I asked as calmly as I could.

“I never thought of that” spoke one of the others.

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this tonight. What do you think?” I guardedly spoke. I didn’t want to be the coward of the group but I soon found out as they all quickly agreed with me, that they were as relieved as I was. With that we turned in our tracks and began the walk back this time a little more quickly. After all we were still in sight of that bridge and it was just a few minutes before midnight. We all agreed we’d do it another time. But we never did.

I’ve had situations in life similar to this, haven’t you? It most often happens when something that we really dread and secretly fear, faces us. The problem is that we’re not children and we can’t just do an about face and run away. I’m talking about marital problems, financial problems, racial problems, and life and death situations that we’d like to just pack up and run from, but we can’t. Wherever we turn we are facing that “eerie bridge.”

That’s one of the reasons we need Jesus Christ. He knew we’d face these situations and He could remove us from them and protect us from them but then, we’d never really grow up, would we? Instead, He offers to be there with us through them all, and whether we acknowledge that He’s there or not, He is.

What we need to do is realize that He is there, accept His free gift of salvation, and, with His help and guidance, go to work on those problems. Accept His salvation today by giving your life to Him, won’t you? With Him in our presence we can face any “ghost” that looms before us.

March 3

“Gospolution” By Jerry D. Ousley

When I awoke early that Saturday morning and took a look out the window the ground was carpeted with a deep and lovely white coating. Overnight several inches of snow had fallen and even though I didn't look forward to driving in the stuff I had to give in to the beauty of that scene. It was a very wet snow and it not only blanketed the ground but also hung deeply on the branches of the trees. It was a wonderland if there ever was one.

But trash needed to be taken out and cars needed cleaning off if we were to get this day going and fulfill all our plans. So, I put on my coat and shoes and trudged out into the cold to get it done. When I was finished and, on my way, back into the house, I looked behind me. The trash had been duly deposited into the receptacle and the once snow-covered cars were now nice and clean, but oh what I had done to that beautiful carpet of white! The smooth, untouched surface was now covered with foot tracks all over the place. The snow lay in piles around the cars where I had brushed it off. I had completely messed it up!

Man has a way of putting his touch on things. In our attempt to make nature more presentable we often leave our marks. It isn't always beautiful. Just think of how a forest looks after it's been logged out. Where once stood magnificent trees and landscape untouched by man now stands skinny, rejected trees – those the loggers didn't want to fool with. The ground is cluttered with branches and dead limbs that were of no use to man. More often than not we leave behind a trail of destruction and mess. Maybe that's one of the reasons wildlife is so terrified of us. It makes you wonder.

In Exodus 20, God had just spoken the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel. After this He began telling them about how they were to sacrifice to Him. In verse 25 He told them, *“And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it.”* In the King James Version of the Bible the word “polluted” is used instead of “profaned.” In other words, God told the people that when they took the rocks used in building an altar and shaped them, they had actually ruined them. God wanted them used just as they were.

I'm afraid that our attempt to make things better, even when it comes to our worship and relationship with God, becomes no more than a polluted mess in His eyes. In the Old Testament, God insisted for several hundred years that the people use the tabernacle He had instructed Moses to build, as their house of worship. It was in King Solomon's day that an actual temple was built. God resisted man's desire until then, but He finally gave in to David and allowed his son, Solomon to build a temple. It was a beautiful sight from its description but was it really what God wanted? It seems to me that He preferred nature.

We still want to get our hands into things. While I like using the New King James Version of the Bible, we have literally translated the Bible into the English language to death. Each one adds its own flavor to the words and if we aren't careful, we find ourselves saying, perhaps indirectly, "God, it would have sounded better if You'd said it this way." While I completely agree that we need to have the Bible translated into words we can all understand I just wonder why we need so many different ones? It wouldn't have anything to do with making money, would it?

While we might be able to find better words to try to tell people what God is saying (as if He really needs our help), we've got to be mighty careful that we don't throw our two cents in during the process. We might just find ourselves trying to build altars to God out of our own prettier hewn stone, or worse yet, making dirty, ugly tracks in the snow.

March 4

“Honestly” By Jerry D. Ousley

Every accident I've ever had except for one, which wasn't my fault, has occurred while I was backing up. The most recent one (as of this writing) was in our Neon. I was talking to our daughter, while backing into our driveway. I had done this nearly a million times before so I wasn't thinking much about what I was doing when – WHAM! I had backed in a manner that crashed the front wheel into a culvert. It messed up the rack and pinion of our car. The mechanic said it would cost \$600.00 to get it fixed. But first he had to find one that would fit our car. This was on a Saturday.

He told me on Monday that he had been trying to locate a part. The problem was that in our model of Neon a total of three different rack and pinion sets had been used in the manufacturing process. Supposedly there was a three-digit number located in the trunk around the spare tire that identified which of these three sets had been used in the manufacture of our automobile. The problem was that he could not find that three-digit number. But he would keep trying.

On Tuesday he told me that he had looked everywhere possible, including in the owner's manual in the glove box, but all to no avail. He just couldn't locate that number. But he would keep trying. He told me that his brother also owned an auto repair shop in Lafayette, Indiana. He would call him after he closed that evening and see if he could produce any ideas. However, if he was unable to come up with an answer then I would have no choice but to take it to a dealer. You know what that would mean – If it would cost \$600.00 at his shop, I could expect somewhere between that and \$1000.00 at the dealer. I finished Tuesday in a cold sweat.

I almost chickened out on calling him on Wednesday. But I had no choice so I dialed his number. What a relief when he told me that he had managed to locate the part and had ordered it. Suddenly \$600.00 sounded like a good deal. He felt like the part would be in around noon on Thursday and there should be no problem picking up our car later on that afternoon. I took off work early so my wife and I could fit in everything we had to do and still have time to pick up the car. When I got home and called, the part still hadn't arrived. It was

in town but hadn't been delivered to the garage yet, but it was coming and he promised me that he would finish our car that evening.

We had another appointment at 6:00 and so we agreed to call him after that to see whether the car was finally finished or not. We completed that obligation around 7:00 and so I hurried to the cell phone to call the mechanic with whom I was now on a first name basis. It still wasn't ready. He promised to call us when it was done. So, we drove home and I waited impatiently by the phone.

At 8:10 the phone rang. It was Darrin, our mechanic (see I told you we were now on a first name basis). His words were, "I'm either going to make you very happy or very angry." I now wondered what was next. Let me back up here and tell you another fact before I finish. That evening I had just read a chapter in the book I was reading, that dealt with having favor with God. The writer taught that we should be aware of little things that happen in our lives that indicate God's favor upon us.

Okay. That being said the mechanic continued, "When we loosened the bolts to remove the old rack and pinion set a strange thing happened. The old rack and pinion set just slide into place. Nothing seemed to be bent or broken. I took it on a test drive and everything seemed to be okay so we just did a four-wheel alignment and that's all I'm going to charge you for." Now compare: \$600.00 to \$59.95. I'd call that the favor of God!

But the main point I would like to make about this incident is not the favor of God in my situation but the honesty of this mechanic. Honesty is a rare trait these days especially in the world of auto repair. We see it on news programs often. Mechanics who tell people that something is wrong with their car and charge tremendous bills for the necessary repair and never really ever do anything. This mechanic could have done the same thing and I'd never have known it. He could have returned the part for a refund, told me that he had installed the new part and still charged me \$600.00 and I would have been happy to just have our car back.

This mechanic spent hours trying to find the right part for our car then worked late into the evening trying to get it fixed for us. But it turned out that we really didn't need a new rack and pinion set. He spent all that time and only got the listed price for a four-wheel alignment. But he did earn something – all my future tire and underside work on any of our vehicles. I know he's an honest mechanic!

In today's world honesty without a written contract to hold the parties to their word is a rare thing. I propose, with all our modern conveniences, get rich quick schemes, and the race for the American dream, a few more honest mechanics in every field could sure make a difference.

March 5

“How to Be Great” By Jerry D. Ousley

Kids come up with some pretty unique ideas sometimes, don't you think? When we were growing up somehow the four of us decided the first glass of milk from the jug was the best. At that time milk came in a glass jug and it made a very distinct sound when the first glass was poured. It sounded something like “gulp, gulp.” So, when a new jug was opened, we fought and argued over who was going to get the “gulp, gulp.” Sounds pretty stupid, doesn't it? We were serious about it then.

To us, the person who got the “gulp, gulp” was very special and privileged. Because I was the oldest of four and I tried to get the “gulp, gulp” every time (though my success rate was about 25 percent). Whoever won and became the coveted recipient of the “gulp, gulp” was envied by the rest (for that moment anyway).

Even Jesus' disciples argued one day about which one of them would be the greatest in the Kingdom. When Jesus knew what the fuss was over, He basically told them the same words as what He said in Matthew 23:11 – *“But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant.”* Jesus used a lot of what I call “Positive-Negatives.” It is completely foreign to our own way of thinking. This is one of those “Positive-Negatives.” To us, being the greatest means, we do our absolute best and climb over the heads of others to get to the top. But in the Kingdom of God those who are willing to take the lowly servant's position and humble themselves become the ones most usable by God.

Under this philosophy it is actually possible for each of us to be the greatest! In our present world system, there can only be one greatest. But in God's Kingdom we can all be the greatest – If we're willing to become God's servants. This means that we may not always get the “glorified job.” We may be cleaning rest rooms or shoveling horse manure, but if we are doing what God has told us to do in our hearts and we know we are in His will then we are the greatest.

You can't fake it. We might try to pretend being humble. We could just act like we enjoy doing the menial tasks. But we've got to remember that God actually sees what is going on down in the deepest regions of our hearts. He knows if we truly enjoy being a servant, or if

we're just doing what we've got to do to get to the top. That too is very different from this world's way of thinking.

To be the greatest in God's kingdom doesn't mean that we have to be the best. It doesn't mean that we always make straight "A's" or that we are perfect in every way. In fact, some of us in the Kingdom may not even be as good at what we do as those not in the Kingdom. But because we have put our full trust in Jesus, acknowledged Him as our Savior, admitted that we have sinned and fallen short of God's own glory, and that we can never have the hope of making it without Him, that humbling of ourselves makes us the greatest. We all get the "gulp, gulp!"

March 6

“Iron On”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Military life demands cleanliness, tidy rooms, and well pressed uniforms. During the first year and a half of my duty, my wife took care of that for me (well, I took my own baths of course). But midway of my three-year commitment she was called back to work to her job here in Indiana. This left me to live in the barracks and be responsible for these things myself and I guess I didn't really appreciate what she had done until the job was mine. I didn't have much trouble with keeping a tidy room and keeping myself clean but when it came to those well pressed clothes, it was a completely different story.

As a good soldier I wanted to be “all that I could be” so I determined to learn how to use that “hot plate with a handle” and keep my uniforms looking top notch. I had good intentions. I went down to the PX and bought a brand-new iron. Back in my room, I carefully placed it on the shelf in my closet leaving it in the box so it wouldn't get damaged (I should have taken that as a sign).

The next Saturday when it was time to do the laundry, I made up my mind that I was going to use that new iron and have freshly pressed uniforms. Man, would the sergeant be impressed with me! But when I took my clothes from the dryer, I found that if I smoothed them with my hand as I put them on hangers, they didn't look all that bad. No use in doing work that wasn't really necessary, right? I'd use the iron next time.

After doing this a few more weeks I completely forgot about the iron on my shelf until my tour was up and it was time to go home. I returned home with a brand-new iron that had never been used and was still in the box. Hey, it wasn't a total waste! We had a spare if the one my wife used ever went bad or we could use it as a wedding gift.

Ironing my own clothes was a good intention that never happened. A lot of us have good intentions when it comes to serving the Lord but somehow, they never get completed. I remember a movie from the seventies starring Burt Reynolds. I can't remember the name of it now but one of the scenes really illustrated how that sometimes our good intentions can go “South.” He had been trying to commit suicide but every time he tried, he failed (this wasn't the good intention). In this particular scene he swam out into the ocean to drown himself but

then he changed his mind. He began to pray that God would help him to get back to shore and he promised God that he'd give Him 50% of his income. As he got closer to shore the percentage went down to 25% and kept dropping until now on the shore, he told God that if 1% wasn't good enough then he'd just keep his money and not give anything! He had good intentions but never fulfilled them.

Don't we do the same thing? We intend to give to the Lord in one way or another, perhaps in dollars, or maybe in donating our time for a worthy project. Maybe we've had a great idea to win souls into the kingdom of God but for some reason we never had enough ambition to see it put into motion.

Perhaps we've envisioned a great program but we don't think we are qualified so we promptly explain our idea to our pastor or teacher in hopes that they will get the ball rolling. Then we feel hurt or disappointed because they just didn't see our vision in the same way and nothing ever came of it. We need to realize that when God puts something in our minds, He's more than likely wanting us to give that ball the first push.

God wants to use us all, because we are all ministers of the gospel in one way or another. Don't let any more great ideas get put on the shelf because we don't feel qualified or we feel unworthy or come up with some other pious excuse. If God gives us the plan, then we are to carry it out. Iron on!

March 7

“Good News! It Is Good News” By Debbie Ousley

A *couple* of years ago we were among many in this area who viewed the awesome sight of the Northern Lights. It was such a treat for my family and me because it was something we always wanted to see and thought we never would. I wanted so badly to start calling individuals I knew that would appreciate such a sight, but I resisted knowing that most people would not welcome a call at 10:00 PM telling them to get up out of their warm beds and go outside.

But you know what? Sharing with others is the best part of experiencing good things. That’s why we include our restless and whining little ones when we go to places. It would be less complicated to just go alone, but as parents we have a heart to share new things with them. Let’s be honest, time passes so quickly they soon will be experiencing new and exciting things without us. And that’s the way it’s supposed to be.

I thought about how exciting the Good News of Jesus’ saving grace and His love shown to mankind, and the fact (not choice) that it is our commission to share it with others. I was saddened and repented for the “church” of today concerning the lack of excitement and joy we sometimes exhibit about it. I’m sorry for the long faces and slumping shoulders; I’m sorry for the whispered prayers and “praise the Lord’s”; I’m sorry for absence of enthusiasm and zeal when sharing how salvation has changed our lives. It is the greatest News in the whole world!!!

I’m sorry for the whining and restlessness (see earlier reference to this description) of those who are not sure they’ve made the right decision due to their unwillingness to let go of the “old man or woman” and their drive to still keep up with the “Jones’s” (or Smith’s or whoever).

As the wise men looked hard for the star in the Eastern sky, they knew it would direct them to the Savior of the world (they also knew it would be worth the trip). They searched with excitement and anticipation, and as they knelt before Him and worshipped Him, they were excited and happy because they knew they were a part of the most dynamic life-changing event in history – AND SO ARE WE!

Living for Jesus is the better way! And dying with Him in our lives is the ONLY WAY TO FLY!!!!

March 8

“Help! I’ve fallen and I’m too Embarrassed to Get Up!”

By Debbie Ousley

Years ago, which seems like another life-time now, I was single, worked at the US Shoe Factory, and had a place of my own not too far from there. I guess when I would be late for work, that’s why my foreman just could not understand it. I must confess there were a few occasions when my friend would dash over during her break to wake me up so as to help save my job. I did mention that I was a lot younger, and less responsible, didn’t I? Dag-gone getting older and more mature, but we all must do it sooner or later.

One icy, winter morning, because I was running late and didn’t want to clean my car off, I opted to walk to work. Believe it or not I arrived at work with enough time to drink a cup of coffee before it was time to fire up the trimming machine that would occupy my hands but put my mind in idle mode. My foreman was impressed.

The trip home for lunch later that morning played out a lot different though. Apparently, the sun had melted the ice just enough to make it very tricky putting one foot in front of the other intentionally. Had I not been so stubborn, I would have made my way back to the safe haven of US Shoe, but (more about that later) I didn’t.

You know how that, when you get over-confident about a situation, is just the time everything FALLS apart? Well, at the four-way stop sign on Bethany Road is where I got over-confident. It looked as though I tried to stop at the sign, well, my feet stopped for a second, but that’s where I finally stopped. And I wasn’t alone ...

I do appreciate the lady who had witnessed the accident not laughing too loudly and I understood the humor of it, but did she have to add, “You might have made it if you hadn’t stopped at the stop sign.” What could I do? What could I do? Nothing! Everywhere I placed my foot to raise my embarrassed “bod” up it would just slip and slide. Eventually I did grab the stop sign post and pulled my-self up, a little more humble and more mature (dag-gone getting more mature! It hurts!).

Naturally I tried to recover by laughing at myself, and continued to shuffle off to my place. Once there I checked for broken bones and bruises, but the only injury I had received was a bruised ego. I was so thankful I would not be forced to walk or slide back to work, and the old car I had complained about so many times looked like a Rolls Royce.

I am convinced now, many years and falls later, that it's not what happens to us that causes the most damage but what happens in us. We all must decide with every situation that we experience if we are going to be a victim in that situation or the victor – not by our retaliations or our actions but how are we going to allow it to affect us on the inside? Will we allow that person, or ice in my case, to have power over us?

So many individuals do not even realize that they have a choice. They will allow others who have fallen victim to a bad day at work, or someone else's hatefulness, to make them also a victim.

To change this mindset, we must be intentional with every situation. We must realize we have a choice and apply this liberating truth to all our "falls." We must not allow this truth to make us pious or puffed-up because if we do, we again have become the victim. Meekness is power in control. Meekness must come from God because it is not mankind's nature to be meek, and the power comes from God.

Our Father God does not want His children to be victims and He sure doesn't want His children to make others victims. Growing up is hard to do. Maturity in the Lord can be a painful thing but, "no pain no gain." Christ has always been about self-assessment first, and that takes a grown-up or a person who wants to grow up.

I wanted to let you know that the very source that had caused the icy streets to be so dangerous to me that morning had also melted the ice off my windshield. So, my enemy had become my friend.

March 9

“I Will Not Leave You” By Jerry D. Ousley

When I was a young teenager, I did something that was just plain mean. My brother and I had a game we played. I'm sure you've most likely played it too. It was a game that required one to stand behind the other. The person in front would then begin to lean backwards and drop into the arms of the one behind him or her. It was a game of trust. The falling person completely depended on the person behind to catch them. Each time the person behind would take a step backwards allowing the person in front to drop a little farther.

One day we were playing this game. I was the person in the back. My brother started falling and I kept taking a step backwards. The temptation became greater and greater and I finally yielded to it. When my brother fell backwards fully expecting me to be there to catch him, I folded my arms and let him hit the floor. I told you it was mean. It took some time to win his trust back before we ever played that game again.

In essence I left my brother. I let him down (way down). Jesus was quoted by the writer in Hebrews 13:5 as saying that He would never leave or forsake us. I can almost hear a lover speaking these same words to the beautiful lady of his intentions. He fully means to keep that promise. But it is a lie. We cannot possibly keep that kind of promise to anyone on this Earth. That's because it is an unconditional and unending statement. Things happen. We aren't guaranteed another day or another minute for that matter. We can say that as long as we live, we will never leave you. But even that is conditioned by our emotions. Should that woman or man do something that hurts us badly, we may not be able to fulfill that promise.

We make such a promise often when we walk down the aisle to marry that man or woman. We normally say, "Until death do us part." Most people mean it when they say it. But an alarming 50% of even Christian marriages end in divorce for various reasons. The divorce rate is slightly lower for the secular population but that is only because so many choose to live together instead of "tying the knot." If we count the split-ups between those who are unwed the rate would be staggering.

Jesus Christ is the only One who can truthfully make such a statement and give the assurance that regardless what we do or say, He will keep it. When He tells us that He will never leave us or forsake us you can take that to the bank.

But there are times when we feel like He hasn't kept His word. Sometimes it feels like He has stepped away and allowed us fall. So, what's the deal with that? The fact is that He has never left. He has remained where He has always been. He's standing there willing and able to catch us. So, what happened?

We were the ones who moved. We took too many steps forward. We didn't take into consideration what the will of the Lord was when we made our move. We often make decisions outside the will of God. When we do, the Lord will allow the consequences that are a result of our action. Is that because He's cruel and demanding? Is He trying to force us to do it His way? Not at all. In fact, He has actually given us the freedom and liberty to stray from Him. We can make our own decisions. We need to realize that those decisions may cost us. We may fail. We may fall.

The good thing is that the Lord's promise is steady and constant. It is true. He will never leave or forsake us. We just need to turn around sometimes and realize that we've stepped too far forward.

March 10

“Is There a God?” By Jerry D. Ousley

A *young* boy was having a grand time in the woods. He had been playing hide and seek with some of his friends. Many an enjoyable day had been spent in these woods, running, playing, and hiding. This particular sun-shiny day they had discovered an apple tree hanging full of wonderful sour-green apples.

It was time to hide again and so off the boy ran, apple in hand, and a mouthful between his teeth. Then it happened. As any responsible adult knows, it isn't a good idea at all to run while eating, especially something with a peel like an apple. Suddenly the boy found himself choking. He could not get a breath as a piece of the apple became lodged in his air-pipe. To make things worse no one else was close by. He couldn't speak and so he couldn't call out to anyone.

His only recourse was to pray – silently but with all his mental faculties. Now you can call it luck or anything else you want to call it but all at once that piece of apple just dislodged. The boy caught his breath and began to cough. That was close. This is a true story, by the way, and I know for a fact that you will never ever convince that boy that God was not there because that boy was me.

I could quote scripture to try to prove to you the existence of God but this time I'm not, because mere human reason should tell us otherwise. I know there are many in the world who would like to think that God doesn't exist. They come up with all kinds of theories to disprove God. I am here to tell you however that not one shred of hard evidence exists that will disprove God.

As a matter of fact, every proven and reproducible procedure, every scientific fact (not theory or good idea) always has and always will continue to prove that God is up there. There is a lot of speculation being taught as fact but when proper research is completed, we find out that it all boils down to what someone thinks and not to proven reproducible fact.

It is a fact that no matter how much mortal man tries to disprove, deny and ignore God, it doesn't make Him go away. He's still there and despite political correctness or popular thinking, He's still in control.

I am so convinced of this that I challenge anyone to send me hard proof that God does not exist. Folks I'm here to tell you that He does. I'm here to tell you that He cares and that He loves you more than you will ever know. Just because some choose to ignore Him proves nothing.

Now I know that what I'm saying is hard and challenging. I'm not trying to pick a fight. But I am trying to get others for one second to just suppose that God is real. Maybe He really does exist. Maybe He really is out there. What if ...? If He is then there must be more to the Bible than what many have been taught. If God really is out there then maybe there just is something to this salvation thing after all.

Maybe God did love the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever will believe in Him will be saved. What if ...?

March 11

“King of Your World” By Jerry D. Ousley

The world begins at 6:00 a.m. for many of us. Get the kids up and ready for school then it's "Hi Ho, Hi Ho," and off to work we go, flying down the road so we won't be late! For many of the ladies, after work it's another quick trip to pick up the kids, get home, fix supper, take baths and fall into bed so you can get up the next day and do it all over again. The men have to race to run errands before everything closes up for the day. And then there are all those endless school activities we feel compelled to participate in and support so our children will turn out to be "good citizens ... "

We do this routine five and six days a week trying to make a living for our families so we can have nice things that we never really seem to have time to enjoy. We mow our lawns and we realize that we only walk on them when we are mowing. We pay taxes so our government can spend the money on things that don't make much sense. And so, we go on slaving every day, being a "middle class" citizen who is footing the bill for all this stuff that we think gives us that dream life we always wanted!

We work day by day looking forward to the time when we can finally retire and enjoy life only to have a heart attack or other major disease, then have our kids put us in a nursing home where we'll spend the remainder of our days until this life is finally over.

When we look at life like this, when we see the world that each one of us has made for ourselves, sometimes it seems senseless and useless. Why do it at all? Many have considered these very thoughts and just given up or worse, felt compelled to commit suicide. It's an awful and tragic ending to what may seem like a trap of life that is inescapable any other way.

But I want to share something with you that I pray will inspire hope and peace in each of our lives. I don't have any simple solutions to the dilemma I have described but I do know that Jesus Christ wants to get involved in each of our worlds. We've heard it over and over but I want to tell you that Jesus really wants to be the King of your world! He really wants to give you peace in the middle of that raging storm that we call "life."

Coming to Jesus, amongst other things we associate with Christians, is not just a ploy to demand your time and resources but can be and should be the one thing that holds it all together and brings to life that fulfillment we so desperately need. He has made it easy for us to come to Him today. Just ask Him. He'll do it. Make Him King of your world.

March 12

“I Forgive You” By Jerry D. Ousley

“I love you Lord and all I want is to serve you. I’ll never let you down God!” That’s what I prayed the day before I committed sin big time. There’s no need to go into the gory details but I do confess that I sinned against my God. Now what to do? I really do love God and I really do want to serve Him with all my heart. But it seems that there are times I just simply can’t help myself. I don’t want to do it but I do it anyway.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not saying that I have no choice. I am saying that there are times I don’t walk in the Spirit and so I fulfill the desire of the flesh. However, I don’t think I’m alone in this. I’m sure I’m not the only weak person. Just the same if I am the only one then I’m glad God made provision to escape just for me.

The Bible says, *“My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world.”* (1 John 2:1-2).

I know that there are many of you reading this that are in the same boat I’m in. You see, after fifty plus years of ministry I have come to know that when we repent to God that the goal is to be perfect before Him but it’s a whole lot easier to say it than to live it. I find myself failing God in the smallest of things. There are times I have felt like Peter when He told Jesus that He was ready to die for Him then that very night denied Him. Peter repented of that and Jesus forgave him just as He does each of us when we come to Him and admit our sin.

The problem is that over the years Christians who have wanted to appear as being perfect have had to cover their sin and unrighteousness to keep up the charade. When those who have been honest with themselves, admitting their sin, see those who seem to be perfect, then they come to think that they must not have the goods and so simply give up with the thought that they’ll never make it. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this is exactly why God inspired John to write the above quoted verses. We should not sin but when we do we have Jesus Christ our Advocate who is forever pleading our case.

The bottom line is this: We must try to not sin. Sometimes we will win and as we learn to depend on the Spirit and walk in Him, we will find those victories coming more and more frequently. However sometimes we will fail. In these times remember that our repentance at salvation was just the first of many to come. We must learn to not “call it quits” but simply pick ourselves up, dust off the seat of our pants, ask God to forgive us, truly repenting, accept His forgiveness and go on serving Him.

It is not an excuse to sin. It is not to be used as a “cloak of maliciousness” (1 Peter 2:16). But our sincere repentance will indeed bring us to the place where we will hear God say, “*I forgive you . . .*”

March 13

“Keeping the Beat”

By Jerry D. Ousley

When we were kids every year or two our family would take a few days vacation and visit my uncle and his family in Hamilton, Ohio. We loved going there because they always had the latest gadgets available. We admired them because it seemed they had everything: toys, electronic devices, and music.

At least one night during our visit my cousin would sit down at the piano, his brother would grab his base and my uncle would pick up his guitar and away they'd go. Man, I longed to be playing with them and sometimes I would pick up an old coffee can or something and just beat the tar out of that thing. In those days I could only play a couple of chords on the guitar and I could only play them with a very long pause in between. The way they played there was no time for pauses, but I beat a “mean” coffee can!

I did eventually learn to play the guitar and even though I call it “thumping” it seems to work. I love music and both of our children have picked up on it (I love that too). When they were home it sounded good to hear our daughter practicing on the keyboard in her room or Jeremy brushing up for band on his trumpet. Passing something like that along is giving a heritage whose value cannot be consumed and never expires.

It doesn't have to be music. It could be knowledge, athletic ability, tinkering with cars or just about anything that is legal and sane (even though what some might think is sane may be a little insane to others). It is actually imparting some of our own interest into our children. That is fulfilling.

It is important to stay in beat. Keeping in beat is playing the right chord at the right time with the right key and string stroke, or it could be tightening a bolt to just the right torque. It is doing what we are good at when it is supposed to be done.

In music there is nothing as sour as the sound of a wrong chord at the wrong time. It doesn't take a well-trained ear to wonder, “Where did that come from?” It is the same in life. In everything we do keeping the beat is important.

I remember an episode from the Andy Griffith show in which Barney Fife joined the choir. He had taken voice lessons and felt that he was God's answer to the town chorus. But when he sang, he was completely out of harmony with all the rest and everyone knew it, everyone, that is, except for Barney. He'd just keep on singing thinking that he was the only one singing it right. It couldn't be him; he had taken lessons and considered himself an expert.

Often when life seems out of beat it is those who are out the most who seem to think everyone else is doing it incorrectly. We want to blame someone else because surely, we who think we are trained can't be wrong. It isn't us but the rest of the world. That attitude has gotten a lot of people into mountains of trouble.

Psalm 150 tells us to "praise God." We are to do it in the sanctuary, in God's great expanse of sky and space, praising Him for His mighty acts according to His excellent greatness. We are to do it on all kinds of instruments. But it ends with this statement: "*Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!*" It didn't say that only those with musical ability and talent were to praise the Lord but every living thing that draws breath. All of mankind and the entire animal kingdom sing together in a harmonious chorus of life bringing praise to the Almighty Creator! Wow! What a song!

In other words, we are all supposed to keep the beat. We do that by doing the very best for God in whatever our talent may be. We give Him praise with what He has given us. If we are doing our very best then it can't be wrong if we are doing it to praise Him. So, whether it's playing in a symphony, beating a coffee can, turning a wrench, flipping a burger, or pushing a button, do it like you are doing it for God – Because in reality you are.

March 14

“He’s The Man!” By Debbie Ousley

One of my favorite people in the Bible is John the Baptist. Now old John the Baptist was a man who came out swinging. He knew his purpose and as I understand it, he didn't pull any punches as he told it like it was.

It seems to me he, if anyone in the New Testament, gave all for the cause. John didn't look or act like anyone else. He came dressed in camel's hair and eating locust. I imagine most of the people came out to see the show when John came preaching. But they got a whole lot more than they bargained for once they arrived.

John was most definitely a rebel rouser and all the while he knew he was only a forerunner for Christ Who he most gladly acknowledged once Christ came on the scene. *“Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”* But John performed what I believe was the greatest honor to man. He baptized the very Son of God not for Jesus' purpose but for mankind's.

John sure was different and he paid the price for being so. He wasn't Christ and he told the people so. He humbled himself and gave place to the God of Glory. What was his payback here on earth for his loyalty and passion for the gospel? Well, you could say John completely lost his head because of it.

Most individuals don't enjoy being forerunners. They enjoy the spot light, the great praises and accolades that go along with accomplishment. Success by the world's standard is measured in numbers and newspaper articles.

Not very many people have a great passion for the preparation. But I, for one, thank God for those who have a heart to gather the provisions that it takes to go into the “Promised Land” as Joshua instructed the people. Those are the “prayer warriors” who pray for revivals, the sick, and the lost. Those forerunners who go to the jails and homeless shelters and are willing to show Christ's love toward individuals who don't love them back, and they just don't give out pats on the back.

If John the Baptist came today, I believe, because of his differences, there would be groups sharpening their axes to take his head just like King Herod, I'm sorry to say. You see it seemed easier for the king to just kill the messenger rather than to receive the message. But I wonder, had someone with position and power behind closed doors advised the king and said, "This act is not good for your reputation and it would be in your best interest to end this affair," would the king had cut his head off?

John had exposed the king to his sin. It was for his spiritual good. But who was John Baptist to bring condemnation on a KING?! Well, in God's pecking order he was the man with the authority to do so. Old John the Baptist was a man willing to not just stand for something but a man willing to lay down his life for it with no great news articles or ceremonies. He's one of my heroes.

March 15

“A Bag with Holes” By Jerry D. Ousley

I worked for a certain place in purchasing for several years. The job required me to walk out into the shop from time to time to take inventory and ask questions. On one particular day as I was walking, I happened to look behind me. There on the dirty concrete floor lay a shiny quarter. No one else was around so I counted myself fortunate, picked it up and jammed it into my pocket. I continued walking. Suddenly I heard something, looked behind me and there lay a dime. Again, no one was close by so I picked it up too, looking around to see if someone was playing a trick on me and I poked it into my pocket as well. The third time I definitely heard a pinging noise. Another person had to be following me and throwing coins at me, for there right behind me lay a nickel. I had to pick it up but this time with a smirky sort of smile for the benefit of whomever it was throwing coins at me. Hey, if they wanted to throw their hard-earned money at me as a joke, I'd be happy to put it in my pocket! But then, as I placed the nickel in my pocket, I made a startling discovery. As my hand slid in to place the nickel, I couldn't feel any other change. Where'd the quarter and dime go that I had found and where was my own change? Then my finger went a little deeper until it slid through a large hole in my pocket. The change I was finding was none other than my own! Despite my embarrassment I quickly retraced my steps to retrieve all my lost change and duly placed it in my other pocket which I had already inspected to make sure it didn't have a hole too!

It reminded me of life. How often do we feel like all the money we earn is quickly gone? When the bills pile up and we have to pick and choose which one to pay first and which ones fit into our weekly budget we soon feel as if we are just putting our money into a bag of holes. When we reach in to see what kind of surplus we've got, we discover that the bag is empty ... again.

In Haggai 1:6 we read, *“You have sown much, and bring in little; you eat, but do not have enough; you drink, but you are not filled with drink; you clothe yourselves, but no one is warm; and he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes.”* The Lord was speaking to the people who had returned from exile into Babylon. When they first arrived, they were allowed to build their own homes and get established in life. But the plan all along was that they were to rebuild the temple. Time passed and still they had not laid the first stone. I

can almost hear them when they'd have their town meetings, "We've got to get started on it. Joe, you head up the committee on getting the stones together, and Leroy, you take charge of the timber committee. Bill, you've got the interior finishing committee and Sally Jane, would you care to head up the decorating committee? Okay let's reconvene next month to see where we are so we can get started." The next month rolls around and nothing is accomplished. Everyone has their excuses as to why they haven't done anything and so they talk some more about how the funds aren't coming in, or this emergency or that has come up and they must use what they have to cover it. So, it goes on month after month with nothing accomplished.

Finally, the Lord gave Haggai the prophecy found in the first chapter of his book. Because of their procrastination no one was getting ahead. Am I trying to say that the lack of our blessings and our financial short-comings are because we've been disobedient to God? Not necessarily. They could be, but it could also be a result of our poor planning or not recognizing what God really wants us to do. We think we have to be like everyone else and often we find ourselves in the trap of "keeping up with the Joneses" or Smith's or whoever.

This can also apply spiritually. We can find ourselves down in the "mulygrubs" feeling as if we're getting nowhere fast in our relationship with the Lord. Could it be that we're putting our resources into a bag with holes, or poking them into a pocket without a bottom? Maybe it's time we get a new pair of pants, or a new bag, or at least patch up the old ones. We do that by seeking the Lord, reading His word, worshipping Him in spirit and in truth and then putting into practice what He tells us. When we do, we won't be looking back to see what's fallen from our pants pockets and then retracing our steps in attempt to regain what we've lost, but we can go forward with the Lord confident that we are not putting our resources into a bag with holes.

March 16

“Hot-Wired Fans” By Jerry D. Ousley

*O*f all the vehicles my wife and I have owned in our past, none to date were as reliable as our 1986 Oldsmobile. It was an excellent vehicle and carried me to work many early mornings when I felt as if I was breaking open the snow-covered roads for the plows. We purchased it used and it had provided transportation for someone else for 100,000 plus miles. I have often reminisced about that car and at times wished that we had it today, of course in as reliable condition as it was then.

But time leaves its mark on everything and everyone and after nearly 250,000 miles signs of wear began to make itself known. The car started overheating and we were told by a very reliable “back-yard-mechanic” that a sensor mounted on the engine had gone out. I’ll show my mechanical ignorance now by speaking in non-mechanical terms. Apparently, this sensor detected how hot the engine was and told the fan to turn on. Ours stopped working.

So, I went to a local auto parts store and bought the sensor needed to fix the problem. However, it didn’t fix the problem. I wasn’t sure what to do exactly and a friend volunteered to look at it. He suggested a “Jerry-rig” (I can say that because my name is Jerry). With his help we simply ran a wire from the fan to the battery. Whenever I drove the car, I popped the hood and hooked up this wire, the fan would start – problem eliminated.

But as time went on and the weather got colder it became a troublesome and uncomfortable chore to do this process every time we drove the car. I put my thinking cap on and came up with the idea of mounting a switch inside the car and wiring it to the battery. At first, I had a toggle switch and it worked for a few trips then one day sparked, smoked and burned out.

My final rig (and it was this way until we sold the car) was to purchase a 110-volt receptacle box designed to be used in a house, and mounted it on the dashboard. Yep! It looked just like a light switch in a car. I’d climb in, start the car and flip the switch to turn on the fan just like turning on a light in the house! It was weird looking but it did the trick and saved me a repair bill!

As I thought about this it occurred to me that while little tricks like this may work for possessions this kind of attempt to have a relationship with God won't work. We can rig things that we own to get by and maybe save some money but we just can't do that with God.

You see sin can't be covered up with anything but the blood of Jesus Christ. We can try to do better; we can promise to never do it again. We can say our "sorrys" a million times but only the grace of God through Jesus can actually get the job done.

Man has tried ever since Adam committed the first sin in the Garden of Eden to cover things up. He has worshipped the sun, the moon, every animal imaginable, and even hand carved statues of metal, rock and wood. But all to no avail! "Nothing But the Blood of Jesus" (to quote an old hymn) will do. Jesus Himself said, "*I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.*" (John 10:9). We can do good works and give the shirts off our backs but without Jesus it's all in vain.

So, the next time you think you can "rig" your way in touch with God just remember our Oldsmobile and know that it may work with things but never with souls.

March 17

“I Will Raise You Up” By Jerry D. Ousley

“This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.

Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

(John 6:39-40, 44, 54)

In this passage Jesus was talking to those who had believed on Him at the feeding of the five thousand. What a great and mighty miracle that was. Most of you probably know the story how that Jesus was preaching and ministering to a very large crowd in the wilderness. As it began to grow late, He became concerned that they had no food. Of course, Jesus knew what He was going to do. You can read the story for yourself earlier in this same chapter. Many of the people believed on Him but only because of the great miracles they had witnessed. I think that a lot of them also had the “free food” in mind.

After it was all over Jesus went to the other side of the lake and when the people realized He was gone they followed Him across. It was here that He began to give them some strong teaching that was rejected by most of them. The point of this is that we must come to Christ not because we are afraid or because we want provision. Christ gives us assurance of Heaven and He does give us “our daily bread” but these are byproducts of serving Him. When those things are scarce and gone where are we left standing? We need to be left standing in the light of His love, deeply in love with Him, giving him our trust and going forward by faith.

In the course of that conversation four different times Jesus used the phrase “I will raise him up in the last day.” He said it referring to:

(1) “All He {the Father} had given Him.” (verse 39)

- (2) “Everyone who sees the Son and believes on Him.” (verse 40)
- (3) “Those drawn to Him by the Father.” (verse 44)
- (4) “Those who eat His flesh and drink His blood.” (verse 54)

Of course, the “last day” is referring to the time when Christ returns for His Church. But there is more to it.

He also wants to raise us up daily. Because of our relationship with Christ, I believe He will also raise us up, or exalt us. At day’s end (regardless of what time of day it is to each of us) we are weary, sometimes sore, perhaps discouraged over something that has happened during our day, and at that point we are vulnerable to temptation, depression, and many other negative reactions. A lot of people will flush these negative emotions with alcohol or drugs thinking that these things will chase all the negativity away. But in Christ we can go to Him and He will turn all of this negative stuff into positive stuff. He will remind us of the good we have accomplished in our day. He will let us learn from the mistakes we have made. He will remind us that tomorrow is the beginning of a new day during which we can refrain from making the same mistakes. If we trust in Him and give Him the eminence then He will always raise us up.

He will also always raise us up at the last moment. Just when we think we’re going under, just when it seems the end has come, He will be there to “raise us up!” He is our provider. He said that He’d never leave us nor forsake us! He will not leave us alone. He will go through whatever trial, tribulation, or victory we may experience. He is there in sickness and in health, in poverty or in riches, and He will RAISE US UP AT THE RIGHT TIME!

The key is to be where we need to be. First of all, we need to be given to Him by the Father. Secondly, we must believe on Him. We must also be drawn to Him by the Father. Finally, we must partake of His Body/Kingdom.

So where are we? Do we fit into those four qualifications? We need to be saved, this is true and it is the only requirement to get into Heaven. But to really live a full life in Him we must not only believe but be drawn by His word through God and be active partakers of His Kingdom. Think about it, pray about it and do it. Then let Him “raise you up.”

March 18

“Have You Got the Money?” By Jerry D. Ousley

"Have you got the money?" my wife asked me. "Of course," I replied. It marked the early days of miscommunication between my wife and me. I'm sure no one else has ever had that problem.

It was fifty-two years ago, on our very first anniversary (which is today, by the way). In those days money was scarce. We had scrimped and saved as much as we could in order to celebrate with a nice dinner at the "King Fish" in Louisville. We had looked forward to it for weeks.

I don't know why but when she asked me that question I interpreted it as, "Are you sure we can financially afford to do this?" We had saved the money back and it was lying on top of the refrigerator, so when I answered, "Of course," I was saying, "Of course we can afford it. The money's on the refrigerator." However, she was actually saying, "Did you put the money in your wallet?" I misinterpreted that.

We went to the "King Fish," waited to be seated then ordered our food. However, before the waitress had a chance to bring us anything it struck me like a lightning bolt hits a tree, and I split right down the middle because I realized we had the money but it was still on top of the refrigerator.

We were in a jam because in those days we didn't even have a credit card to back us up. I looked in my wallet. I can't remember how much was in there but rest assured, it wasn't enough. It was "fess-up" time. It wasn't a pretty picture and I deserved everything that she had to say about it. I had ruined our first anniversary dinner.

We called the waitress and cancelled our order promptly and I explained the best I could. We managed to go ahead and have dinner – sort of; as it happened, between the two of us we put enough together to go to the carryout section and order something much less expensive and ate it in the car.

I'd like to say that I learned my lesson but I must confess that I have made many such mistakes since. I am trying to improve.

This situation just goes to show how differently people think and hear. It has to do with the way our mind processes information. We not only do that with other people but also with what we read, especially in the Bible. I really don't believe that when God had His prophets and servants pen His words that He meant for us to take it forty different ways. He, like all of us, meant what He said. We just have problems hearing.

God knows that our interpretation is a product all too many times of incorrectly hearing or incorrectly processing in our minds. He knew we'd have trouble with that because of this "sin-thing" we caused. However, that is why Jesus said, *"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you ..."* (Matthew 7:7). If we realize that we aren't going to be right all the time and we apply His word to our interpretation process joined together with prayer asking Him what the truth is, we will eventually come up with the answer to what God really means in His word.

I'm not going to even remotely suggest that I have all the answers. I know by experience. Over the years I've had to correct my "theology" many times because I was taught one way or had come to believe another way and after careful study and prayerful listening to the Holy Spirit, realized that I had been off base all along.

That's what we've got to do! We've got to realize that we do make mistakes in interpretation. Why is it that we can be quick to admit we have been wrong in other things, but when it comes to the Bible, we can never be wrong? It's a little trick of the devil called "deception." You see the devil likes to make us think that we can't be wrong in our interpretation of scripture. He does this to keep the Church in havoc. If we are always fighting and bickering among ourselves instead of preaching the Good News then he can keep us from seeing souls saved and born into the Church.

Let's remember that the basic beliefs of almost all denominations are saying the same thing. Yet when we come to interpretation of these beliefs, then we differ. But I believe there is hope. I'm not going to argue with my brothers in other denominations because they just might be right and I just might be wrong. It wouldn't be the first time. If we'll keep that fact in mind and concentrate on our job of seeing souls saved, we'd get along a whole lot better and we just might be a better witness.

March 19

Is It Time to Go Already? By Jerry D. Ousley

I read an interesting Scripture the other day and I'd like to share it with you. It says: "*Whether it was two days, a month, or a year that the cloud remained above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would remain encamped and not journey; but when it was taken up, they would journey. At the command of the LORD they remained encamped, and at the command of the LORD they journeyed; they kept the charge of the LORD, at the command of the LORD by the hand of Moses.*" (Numbers 9:22-23). When I read this, I couldn't help but think about how inconvenient this would be. Every time the Israeli people stopped to camp, they not only had their own tents and households to set up but the Levites had to very carefully set up the tabernacle with all its furnishings. It was to be done precisely and exactly according to instructions each and every time. During this period God was showing man His justice and so if it wasn't done correctly people died. There were no shortcuts taken in this process. Only certain ones could uncover those furnishings once they were put in place. Then Aaron and His sons had to very meticulously prepare the lamp stand and the fire for the altar.

It wasn't fun and games like going camping today. The kicker is that whether it was two days, a week, a month, or a whole year, they remained where they were until God gave them the sign that it was time to move. If they had set up camp only two days before and God gave the "high sign" that it was time to move on then they had to begin the process all over again in reverse order, taking down the tabernacle very precisely.

The thing that really gets my attention in this account is that, even though we read many instances of the Israeli people getting impatient and rebellious, we don't read one verse about them getting impatient when it came to putting up and taking down the tabernacle. I believe it was because they were respectful of God. They may have grumbled and complained about Moses and the other leaders but they did not complain about their worship of God.

Stop and think what it would be like today if every Sunday when it was time to go to our place of worship, before we could have service, we had to set up the building, arrange all the furnishings and get everything just right before we could sing the first song. I'm afraid a lot of us probably would roll back over in bed and say "forget it!" And yet we have more to be thankful for than the people of Israel could have ever imagined.

It amazes me in our own day, how difficult it is to get people to attend a service. We have to make the experience phenomenal for them to just think about it. And Heaven help us if we think we could ever get them to come on a Sunday night!

I'll step down from my pulpit now and hope that some of this has made us re-evaluate our Christian practices. Where ever you attend service think about it this week. We have a lot to be thankful for and God has made it so convenient for us. All we have to do is get up and get ready. No "big tent" to put up, no articles to set up; someone has already done that for us. All we have to do is get out of bed, get dressed and go. Please your Pastor this Sunday; be early ...

March 20

“It is Written” By Jerry D. Ousley

Some people hate to write. Me? I love it. For some reason nothing seems to make me happier than when I am at the keyboard writing. I don't get time to do it as much as I'd like, but then, that's life. Did you ever wonder why we write things down? I've found out that it's the best way to keep from forgetting something I need to remember ... if I can just remember where I put that piece of paper on which I wrote it down on. But now I write it down in my PDA which provides an alarm that won't let me forget.

Writing can be a challenge. I remember those writing assignments from school when we were told to write three pages on a certain topic, or in high school days it was a thousand words. If you're like me you tried every trick in the book to fill those pages or come up with those words. Now I limit myself to a certain number of words and find it hard to say everything I want to say without going over the limit. Strange, isn't it?

The words, “It is written” are found in the Bible three hundred and eleven times. That's amazing to me. But then having it written down is very important because it provides a reminder of something God doesn't want us to forget. It gives a clear account of something that took place and it keeps the story factual and in context. The written word is extremely important.

I talk a lot about the Bible and the importance of reading it. Many of us don't really like to read for various reasons but I can't emphasize enough how necessary it is to read God's word. When I see people taking it lightly it hurts my heart. Why? Because of all the literal blood, sweat, and tears that went into writing the Bible. We call it God's word and indeed it is. God gave the inspiration to men for the Bible. He told them to write. The book we call “The Bible” today, took fifteen hundred years to write. It is penned by nearly forty authors all under the inspiration of God. It's a miracle that we have thirty-nine books written by nearly forty authors and it doesn't contradict itself. You put forty writers in a room today and try to get them to agree on something and, well, you've got quite a chore on your hands. It had to be a miracle and it had to come from God.

Another thing that humbles me when I look at a Bible is how people suffered to get it interpreted in languages that the common man or woman can read. For many years it was only in Latin – a language not even spoken by a nation for hundreds of years. Only the very well educated could read it. They also were the ones interpreting it. Dishonest men used this to control people. They could get them to believe anything by saying that it was in the Bible (and they did). Some honest people felt inspired by God to interpret it into a language that everyone understood. It cost them their lives. They were literally tortured, burned at stakes and persecuted just because they wanted others to know what God wanted them to know. That's what happens when you get into the pockets of thieves and destroy the lies of control freaks.

When I pick up a Bible today, I remember these things. I think about what it cost to put this book in my hands so I could have the opportunity to know what God wanted me to know. I guess that's why I emphasize it so much; I know that God wants you to know it too.

Yet today we have those who take advantage of the fact that most Christians don't read their Bibles like they should. They use these opportunities to make others believe what they want them to believe and unless we know what the word says we'll just go along with them thinking that they know what they're talking about. There are many today who exploit the Bible in order to line their pockets with wealth. But I want to tell you that God wants His word freely spoken and read. We have such an opportunity if we'll only realize it and take advantage of it. Jesus wanted you to know about it; that's why He said, "It is written."

March 21

“How Much Does It Cost?”

By Debbie Ousley

It is not news that when mankind gets his hands on most truths God has ordained, we usually make them more complicated than He intended them to be. So is the greatest miracle of all - SALVATION.

Man has dropped his “two cents” into it for such a long time and has driven the cost so high that it seems only a few believe they can obtain it. Jesus, the Savior of the world, came to us in the simplest way possible in order to say to all, “This salvation is not just for the rich and famous, but for the shepherds, prostitutes, carpenters, and, yes, even for you and for “whosoever may come” to this renewed relationship of Lord and Friend.

Some may be thinking, “You sure are selling salvation awfully cheap.” But, folks, we didn’t pay the price; it is a gift. Christ said so Himself and if He can say it then I’m thinking, that should be the final word.

I don’t recall reading one instance in the Bible when a person’s heart or life was forever changed because of disapproval. Change will always come out of a heart of love, understanding, and compassion. The rolling of the eyes, wagging of the head, and crossing of the arms may bring change, but it will also bring resentment, and in most cases the change doesn’t last.

When Christ spoke out in disapproval it was against those who were always questioning who He was. He called them snakes and hypocrites. Man, can you imagine the response a pastor would receive today if he would be so brave?

Even when the Lord spoke so strongly to those who were giving Him grief, I believe He did it out of a heart of love. I know it’s hard for some people to understand. You may be thinking, “How could He have loved, saying such hard things to them?” Well, it was because He wanted their true hearts to be revealed. The result that Christ wanted for them was good, even though that was not what happened most of the time.

Grace: Unmerited favor. Not deserved – It's hard for mankind to grasp such a simple concept, and the price of that is costing us our families, our children, our peace, and our happiness.

March 22

“Instant Potatoes” By Debbie Ousley

No matter what you do, you can't really “doctor up” instant potatoes to taste as good as “real” ones. Even though Jerry has bragged to others that I can, they aren't as good, but I appreciate his kindness.

The scripture tells us that “We are wonderfully made,” and I believe that, don't you? But I also believe that there is a complexity in mankind that is so mind boggling that it “messes us up” to try and understand it. We are also warned in the word of God, “not to lean to our own understanding.” I have learned why, again because of what it does to us when we try.

That is why so many individuals find it impossible to see beyond reason to the spiritual and if there are no instant results, they find it hard to continue. But instant is not always as good, nor is it always God's way (the Spiritual).

The only Almighty God was able to create this whole “picture” in six days and we should be reminded it was “good.” He said it Himself. We should also be reminded that it has lasted through all the ages. What would seem like to us was done in an instant, is still “good” (I know there is a debate concerning this concept and I will try to respect that).

A very wise gentleman shared with me a valuable lesson at a time in my life when I needed it the most and I have “drawn” on it time after time since. He said, “Sometimes we need the journey more than the arrival.” Oh, the journey is not always so pleasant and it's not always what others think it should be for us, but folks, it makes for “real” mashed potatoes.

Reality programs are so popular these days, but who's fooling whom? I think we are the ones being fooled. Reality is a missionary in an impoverished country who, by that spiritual force that “reason” can't understand, said, “Send me; yes, Lord, I will go.” Reality is that mother and father who, by their faith in a loving Lord, continue to pray, love, and believe that their teen-aged son or daughter who has lost their way will one day return to the God of their Fathers. Reality is what you and I are living right now.

No, the journey is not always so pleasant, and, no, not everyone agrees with the direction we go, but someone's got to make the trip and someone's got to be willing to see it through. Yes, I know we can decide to just "check out" and it saddens me to see so many doing just that; even young people who haven't even begun their journey (it makes me want to cry). But, my goodness, what we learn while on the journey is so valuable because it has come at a great cost to us.

I've heard people say they would like to start their lives over, and, yes, it is true, most of us would do some things differently; (CLUE:) because of what we have already learned on our journey, bad and good. We should never be so quick to relinquish those lessons learned because they are valuable to us and some have come with much pain. I don't know about you, but I am not into "pain."

They have cost us something and have not been learned in an "instant" and they won't be forgotten so quickly either.

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March 23

“How Old is Old?” By Jerry D. Ousley

One Sunday my wife and I decided to go out to eat. We do that frequently. It's kind of nice to get a change of scenery ever so often. I'm not complaining about home cooking however. I want to set that straight right away. As far as I'm concerned, my wife is one of the best cooks I know (you can tell when you see me).

Anyway, we decided to go to a local restaurant where we could get a decently priced steak and salad. We made our selection, paid for our meal, and enjoyed the atmosphere. The food was good and we had a wonderful time of conversation while we ate.

I had put the receipt in my shirt pocket not thinking much about it at the time. When we arrived home, I cleaned out my pockets because you just can't get comfortable with all that stuff bulging from your pants and shirt and we sat down to watch a good movie. While cleaning out my pockets I found the receipt and as I looked at it, I noticed something that I wasn't accustomed to seeing. The lady running the cash register was really a young girl barely out of her teens. She was very nice and pleasant as she had taken our order but she had made an assumption that wasn't true. She had looked at us and had given us a senior citizens discount. Had I noticed it at the time I would have called it to her attention because, well, we just don't like getting something we haven't earned yet and taking that discount was definitely something we hadn't yet earned.

We I had a good laugh over it. By the way, at that time we definitely were not in that category. Apparently, this young lady thought so. She had made a judgment call from our appearance I suppose. But then when I look in the mirror, I didn't think I looked like a senior citizen. I knew my wife didn't look like a senior citizen. Now I'm not knocking our more mature classes of people. When one has arrived at that age, living a good, clean, full life, I believe they deserve those little perks, don't you? But folks I hadn't arrived there yet!

I appreciated this young lady's manners and tact in applying those discounts. She did it discreetly and in a way that wouldn't embarrass or insult a true senior citizen but honestly, I didn't think I looked the part! Apparently, she did.

We all make wrong assumptions from time to time. We assume that just because there are those in the Church who may be unethical at times, or pass judgment erroneously, or do things we think Christians ought not to do, that they are all “a bunch of hypocrites.” Have you ever heard that one? But the truth of the matter is that some are just victims of circumstances while others, who may really be hypocrites, will eventually be weeded out either by their own actions or by the grace of God.

Don't make a wrong judgment call when it comes to making a choice for Christ. By the way that's a ploy by the devil to keep you from doing what God is telling you to do in your heart and in the word. Thanks for your time but right now I've got to get back to figuring out how to keep from looking like I deserve that “special discount” in the future.

March 24

“Lightning-Fast Speed”

By Jerry D. Ousley

(NOTE: As you can tell, this article was written some time ago)

I just don't get it! The more advanced we get the more supposedly user-friendly computers become. However, for guys like me who cut their teeth on DOS (that stands for disk operating system), it sometimes becomes a world of foreign languages and funny looking gadgets. What's with all these letters anyway? When you figure out what they're talking about and how long it takes to explain just what an ISP is, it makes you wonder why they just didn't come out and say, "Internet Service Provider" to begin with.

Anyway, I've accessed the Internet via the old-fashioned dial up for several years now. It took me awhile to figure that out but after ten years I'm now an old hand at it. But alas the old must give way to the new and so I decided to take the plunge and go DSL. There's another one of those initial things (I think it means Direct Service Link). It provides for much faster speeds, after all, we've got to hurry up and get done so we can have time to sit idle in front of a TV (initials for Television) and go into "zombie mode."

So, I purchased the service, waited patiently for my software and hardware to come through mail and then waited some more for my service date (when the connection would be active – that means we wait until some technician has the time to push a few buttons).

The day finally arrived and, Oh boy, Oh joy! I could now serf the web at amazing speed and use my telephone at the same time – except it didn't work! I spent several days loading and unloading trying to figure out what I had done wrong. I had the filters on the line and it did connect a time or two but then would just flutter out.

It was time to call the service number. That was an experience in itself. After going through several minutes of recorded instructions I was finally told that all the service technicians were busy and the average wait was thirty minutes. Thirty minutes?! Man was I glad that this was an 800 number (yes, it made a difference in those days)! So, I waited and waited. Thank God for fast technology, right?

Finally, I got a live body at the other end of the line and after another half an hour he finally figured out that software didn't set the connection up correctly. Once the problem was pinpointed and he had walked me through setting it up, the Internet came up instantly. Finally! You'd think they'd put those instructions in the box, wouldn't you? But I know one thing for sure – I will definitely appreciate the service after all I had gone through to get it up and running!

I am thankful that God doesn't work like that. He doesn't offer service to millions but billions. When you call on Him you never get a busy signal, you never get put on hold, and you never have to listen to elevator music while waiting to get connected. It may seem like God takes a long time in answering prayers sometimes but that's only because He knows what is best for us. Sometimes we think that we need our answer instantly. We think perhaps God needs to be on DSL. But then just when the timing is right – Wham! We get what we need when we need it the most! That's God's way and I for one am thankful that He does it His way!

March 25

“Ministry”

By Jerry D. Ousley

***Ephesians** 4:11-12 says, “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ”*

As a child my mother had several names for each of her kids. For instance, if I was in trouble she'd call, “Jerry Dale!” I knew that one all too well. Whenever she'd include my full middle name, I knew I had done something wrong and was prepared for the worst. But if she was calling me in for supper or to have me do a chore, she'd only use my first name. I could tell by the way she called my name and the tone of her voice what to expect. We all have a call. Even those who have not yet given their lives to the Lord have gifts inside of them that they were born with placed there by God awaiting the day that they will come to Him and yield themselves. Those gifts are in rough form before salvation but begin to flow with anointing from God as we grow closer to Him.

The quoted scripture tells us that God anointed each of us with the spirit of a ministry gift but it doesn't mean that we will all fulfill them in the traditionally thought of way. Some will. But more of us will minister utilizing our ministry gift defined by the talent gifts which He has placed within us.

I don't read anywhere in the Bible where God called us to the ministry of “pew- sitters.” Yet by today's standards we have limited each other to this “artificial form of ministry.” If we can't stand before a crowd of people and preach or teach about God, we somehow think our job is just to occupy the seats. Not so. We all “preach” whether vocally or by demonstration. We all are called to the ministry.

We also need to stop and take a look at just what the word “ministry” means. It doesn't refer to some glorified position as a leader defined again by the confines of what we perceive today. It simply means “servant.” We are all called as the servants of Christ. That's exciting! We all need to be occupied in life and it's the same for Christians. We need to be doing something more than just following someone's lead from a pew.

There is purpose in our group assemblies. But those assemblies should be a time to worship God collectively and testify of the wonderful things God has done through our own personal service for Him. Isn't that exciting? We all have a part.

When we speak about a "call" from God, I have come to believe from His word that the "call" will fit our gifts. That call just doesn't fall from the clear blue sky above but begins from the moment of conception. As I have already said, He begins to implant within us desires and abilities that are unique only to us. We tend to look at talent, and that's good, but we can't compare talent when talking about ministry. Many can write better than I can but they can't put on paper what God has given me to put there. It's the same for each of us. Absolutely no one can take your place and do exactly what you can do because God has called you to that form of witnessing for Him and no one else. You are irreplaceable.

Often when we think of ministry we think of tools. The tools change with time. We use what's available. That's what Jesus did. He used examples and tools of His day to illustrate the love of God and to preach about salvation. So, it is with us. Tools change. They get better or sometimes stay the same. The tools are the means to interpret on a level that people can understand. We have a habit of making the tools the message, but the message is from God and will not change from what is written in the Bible. But tools will change because people change.

What I'm trying to say is this: We all have a call and God will use who we are, what we are, and what is available today to get His message out. After all, the message is the important thing, right? So, what is your ministry?

March 26

“Natural Navigators” By Jerry D. Ousley

Why do we men insist that our way is the best? We had planned a trip recently and as usual I had it all figured out. We had to wait until Saturday afternoon to leave which really made me pace the floor. You see I don't wait very well when it comes to taking a trip. When its time to go it's time to go, you know? But our daughter, Megan was scheduled to work Saturday morning and then she had to play with the school band at a ballgame at 1:00 PM. That meant that we had to wait until around 4:00 PM to leave.

Okay I knew that this was part of the equation. The problem was that a snowstorm was moving into the area. I was sure that if we could leave early enough, we could get ahead of it and arrive at our destination without difficulty. But the system hit our area early and as the white flakes drifted to earth, sometimes gently and sometimes in a blinding fury, I became more nervous by the minute. If only she hadn't have had to go to that game! But she did.

My wife suggested, “Why don't we just go part of the way and get a room for the night. Then we can get up and take our time going in on Sunday.” I became irritated because well, that just hadn't been part of the plan. I don't like it when things don't go according to the plan. So, I insisted that we go the full distance. I was sure that as we traveled farther south that we would eventually drive out of the snow and things would get better. I reasoned that it would be much more relaxing waking up at our destination rather than having to get up and drive some more.

But as time wore on, I realized that she was right. I had to apologize to her and so we called the motel where we had reservations and told them that we probably wouldn't arrive that night but sometime the next day.

Megan finally got home; we finished packing, loaded the car and headed out. It was obvious that the farther south we went the worse the snow got. Soon it was dark and driving conditions began getting worse. I knew more than ever that my wife had been right and I was extremely grateful that she had made the suggestion of stopping early. We did, had a good meal, a good night's rest and by the next morning the roads had melted and travel was much more relaxed. We had a great time. Had we followed my intended plans we may have wound

up spending the night getting our car out of the ditch or worse – in the hospital. That would not have been a great time.

Life is like that. We plan and have it all figured out or so we think. Life's maps are spread across the table and our route is marked. We know the steps that must be taken to keep on course and we determine that we are going to take them no matter what.

But then the unexpected happens and things change. Very seldom do things go exactly as planned in life. We just can't see that far down the road. Situations change, health fails, others let us down, and we have to change something in life's plan. It happens to all of us.

The good thing is that if we will recognize the fact that God is always with us then we can know that He is the One who changes our plans. He directs our paths and if we listen to him and stop early instead of pressing on in our own stubborn self-determination, we just may see His hand working to spare us some greater difficulty down the way. He does that you know. It may make us angry because things didn't go according to plan. But if we knew the greater difficulty that He has spared us from, well we'd probably not be so grumpy about it.

Trust in Christ today because you might just find yourself in a life situation that requires you to stop early. When we do it's certainly good to know that we have a Master Navigator that is much better at it than we are.

March 27

“Mountain Climbers” By Jerry D. Ousley

I've seen some pretty spectacular mountains. Here in the United States, we've got some awesome mountains. I've never traveled outside our country except for visiting Niagara Falls in Canada (at least at the date of this article). I've heard that there are even more spectacular mountains than we have here in the states elsewhere in this world. I speak regularly by email to a brother in Nepal where Mount Everest is located. He's sent me some pictures of the highest mountain in the world and I've seen it on TV but I don't think it would ever be as spectacular as actually seeing it.

There are some wonderful mountains in the state of Tennessee. We've visited the Great Smokey Mountains several times. We decided to go to Clingman's Dome during one visit. That's the highest point in the Smokey's and they have a tower there that you can climb. The day we went the clouds were so thick you couldn't see much. But then that was an awesome thought in itself to think that we were so high that we were in the clouds.

We had to walk from a certain point up to it. Let me tell you, to a fat man who doesn't get enough exercise that wasn't an easy chore. After climbing up the trail, on the way back down I was certainly glad when my wife suggested we stop and rest a while! We stopped at least twice and I was more than ready both times!

We are also climbing a mountain in our spiritual journey. Jesus talked about our spiritual mountains. He said in Matthew 21:21-22, *“Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ it will be done. And whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive.”* We've talked about this verse of scripture before but today I'd like for us to consider that we too are spiritual mountain climbers. In our mountain climbing experience there are basically three kinds of climbers; there are quitters, campers and climbers.

Let me explain. The quitters may give thanks and praise to the Lord. They talk a good talk. They may even appear to walk a good walk. They seem to be “on fire” for God. But after

the talk is over, the dust has cleared and everything has settled down they will walk away giving all kinds of excuses as to why it can't be done.

Then there are the campers; they too may praise the Lord. They may even get involved for a while. They'll put up their tents and nail down their pegs and it seems like they may be determined to do some climbing. But only a short way up the mountain they've had enough, will make some kind of excuse and may even say something like, "Oh well, at least we went part of the way," then they pull up stakes and head back down.

Finally, there are the real climbers. They may not make as much noise as the quitters and the campers. It may seem like they don't have as good of an experience as these other two groups. But they have set their face to climb that mountain. Sometimes there are paths that are merely uphill and sometimes there's a bit of cliff-hanging to be done. But no matter how rough the climb gets they are determined to make it all the way. They will do it or die trying.

In our spiritual mountain excursion, we have to have this same kind of attitude. Whether the climb is easy (and sometimes it will be) or whether it becomes a "cliff-hanging" experience (and sometimes it is that too), we must determine that we will do it or die trying. We have faith in God. He's told us that He would move mountains for us. But sometimes instead of moving the mountain He decides it's best to move us over them. No one who has gone before will tell us that it's always easy; but let me assure you that the experience is one that is well worth it. Climb that mountain!

March 28

“How Much Is Enough?” By Debbie Ousley

When we had the Youth Center, one day I asked the kids, during group time, what they would wish for if they had one wish. Most of their wishes were for “things.” The wish on the top of the list was no surprise to me – It was money. One little boy wished for a million dollars but quickly changed it to a billion dollars. We live in a time when it seems that even a million dollars isn’t enough. Money seems to be the answer to everything. Those who have plenty want more and those who have none want more.

It’s so ironic that a lot of millionaires aren’t happy and will confess that money is not the answer. Then the individual who has nothing will laugh at that statement and challenge them to let them try to be happy with that same million.

More and more I see our country having two financial classes – The rich and the poor. The middle class is slowly drifting to one side or the other and mostly to the latter because a million dollars is not enough (and how many of us have a million dollars?).

It’s hard for parents and adults to not send out the message to our children that money is the most important element in our lives. Most of our “no’s” are because we don’t have the money. Then the message is “If we had the \$ the answer would be ‘yes’.” So, the lack of it hinders them from having all they want, which, by the way, is not healthy anyway.

They see it in our lives: We can’t take a nice vacation because ... We can’t have a new car because ... and on and on. I wish I could say that I’m not guilty of this sometimes, but I can’t. I wish I could write that every time I see a “want” I replace it with a “thanksgiving” but I can’t. Can you?

But that is the answer, you know, to acknowledge the blessings. See it and really be thankful. Being thankful makes us more contented. Being thankful for what we do have brings peace.

We get caught up in this world system like this is all there is, but thank God it’s not. When King Solomon had the opportunity to have anything he wanted from God he didn’t ask for riches but for wisdom to rule his kingdom. When Esther could have received half of the

king's kingdom, she asked that not only her life be spared but all her people. And by the way, they both ended up with riches. But their first thought was for someone else, and God blessed them for it.

Most of us may not become millionaires, but we can know by the promises given to us in the word of God that our needs will be met. And we can also know that when we fail to be thankful and when we don't think of others, the Lord will forgive us and help us to realize all we do have here in this life and after – How much is that worth?!

March 29

“The Time Has Come ... Again”

By Jerry D. Ousley

It is spring. I know, not just because it says so on the calendar but because the once barren trees now have small, fresh deep green leaves; the birds are singing, the frogs are croaking, and ... the grass is growing. Yes, it's time to tune up the mowers, fill them with gas and oil and begin the trek over the lawn, back and forth until you have walked over every part of your yard. Some of us have yards large enough to warrant owning a riding mower that takes much of the time out of the job, as well as all the walking but usually results in more weed eating.

Ah, the wonderful joys of this time of year. It is possible during this time to have a day in which all four seasons present themselves. It can snow in the morning, rain in the afternoon, and make us change into our shorts by evening. It's kind of like breaking summer in a little at a time.

Then the day comes when summer is full-blown and with it comes the humidity and heat. During the winter we have longed for the summer when we can get out into the yard, sit at the picnic table and enjoy the sunshine. But we forgot again, didn't we? We forgot how that late last summer we had longed for cooler weather and a break from that weekly mowing job.

And just like we wished, it came. The fall fell and soon those first beautiful flakes were floating down from the sky. How wonderful they looked – until we got up the next morning and had to scrap it off the windows of our vehicle at 6:00 AM and fight the icy roads so we could get to work on time. It only took a couple of days of that and we were once again wishing for the “good ole' summer-time.”

Wouldn't it be nice if we could have the best of all the seasons year-round? It would never rain and the grass would only grow an inch and a half tall, and never required mowing. The sun would always shine but the temperature would never get above 75 degrees unless we planned to go swimming. Then the temperature would rise to about 90 degrees so the water would feel like a refreshing rain on the Sahara. The leaves would fall off the trees to make room for new ones but they would all fall in one day and a great wind would come along and

send them to an empty field where they would decompose making it more fertile for the next crop.

Of course, that could only happen in the recesses of our minds. The truth of the matter is that as long as we live, we will experience all four seasons each and every year. God meant for it to be that way because He knows we need change in our lives. The winter makes us appreciate the summer more, just as the summer helps us to enjoy the winter. The spring and fall serve as wonderful and colorful times of transition. Until God says it is time for it all to end, it will always be that way. How do I know? Because the Bible tells us that it will. *“As long as the Earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night will not stop”* (Genesis 8:22). Despite predictions of global warming, melting ice caps, and ozone layer disappearance, the seasons will not change this process. It never has because, ultimately, God has the helm of this great ship, ‘Mother Earth.’

March 30

“What’s That Bright Ball in The Sky?” By Jerry D. Ousley

The last few days around Southern Indiana the sun has been high in the sky and the temperatures have been very pleasant. After so many days of gray skies this winter it makes one squint to look up and the sun almost seems like a foreign object. But, hey, I’m not complaining. Really it is the perfect temperature – mid 60’s; not too hot and not too cold. You can get outside and enjoy the fresh air and it is also a very economical time of year. You aren’t watching your money dissipate into the air as the knob is adjusted up on the thermostat, nor are you watching the wheel go faster and faster on the electric meter when the air conditioner kicks in. You can throw open the windows and let that cool breeze blow through the house and, well, what can I say? It’s just a good time of year.

Several things are taking place. First of all, the frogs begin to “holler.” That’s an enjoyable sound on a nice spring night. We know that it is mostly mating calls from the males directed at those “beautiful” female frogs. Kind of makes you wonder what they’re trying to say though doesn’t it? “Love me tender, love me true” or “I think I love you!”

Other reptilian life forms are also emerging – Namely snakes. I don’t like snakes. Well, let me clarify that, they are fascinating to watch as they slink and curl behind a thick glass but when they are right there in the yard, well, I may be a man but let me make it plain – I DON’T LIKE SNAKES! My wife and I took a stroll just yesterday evening in the yard and found two of those varmints around our front door. That is not a good thing!

Another change happening in the spring is . . . did you hear it? Right you are, that funny quiet sound . . . you know what that is? Yep! The grass is growing and it won’t be long before the job of mowing will be in full swing! Mowing is one of those jobs that don’t seem too bad until you’ve done it every week since the first of April and its now mid-summer and you know you’ve got to keep doing this until sometime in late October. It just isn’t one of my favorite jobs. But it goes along with summer so I guess I’ll quit bellyaching about it and get to it.

The seasons come and go and even though we find something to complain about with each one the change is good (for instance, “It’s freezing outside I wish it would warm up!” or “Man it’s hot out there! What I’d give for a snowball right about now!” or “That’s all it does in

the spring is rain, rain, rain!" or "Fall wouldn't be so bad if all these leaves weren't around to rake up!" – Get my point?).

Some people think that the seasons are changing. No year is exactly alike and I do believe that there is an increase in devastating storms. There are those who believe that by the end of time you won't be able to tell the seasons apart some even claiming that's what the Bible says. But here is what the Bible really says in regard to the seasons: "*While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease*" (Genesis 8:22). That pretty well sums it up. God's going to take care of us. The day will come when the world will end and it makes sense to be ready for that event because even if it's a thousand years away, we don't know when it is scheduled on God's calendar. But until then we need to learn to enjoy the seasons, take the good with the bad, and let those lessons in nature teach us those things God wants us to know. Have a great spring!

March 31

“Fussing With One’s Self” By Debbie Ousley

A *man* was finally rescued after being stranded all alone on an island for fifteen years. While his rescuers toured his small island, they noticed that he had built three buildings while there.

When asked what they were the man replied, “One is my house. One is my church and the other building is where I used to go to church.”

We Americans have freedoms and many, many choices. But there is one area in our lives where we can’t “have it our way.” That’s in our spiritual lives. It has to be Christ’s way to be the right way even though we by nature have a very strong drive to have it otherwise. But that’s why we need Christ isn’t it? His will for us is out of this world different.

This little story is funny because it’s so real. If we can’t even get along with ourselves, how do we, by our own nature, think we can get along with others? We need HELP!

April 1

“How’s the Farming in Your Life?”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I’ve never been much of a farmer. As a matter of fact, I don’t like pulling weeds, watering plants and I don’t think they’ve ever succeeded in designing a hoe that fits my hands. I suppose if it came right down to necessity that I’d reconsider this point of view; I do like to eat awfully well. If it meant going hungry or putting food on the table for my family, I guess I’d have to get over my dislike of gardening and farming and just deal with it.

When I was a kid, I’d do most anything to get out of hoeing the garden. I remember one garden my parents planted. The rows were very short but it was on a long, narrow stretch of ground and there were a lot of those short rows and getting from one end to the other seemed nearly impossible. So, if I could find a good excuse to get out of it I would.

I know this may sound silly but I do remember one time planting a single grain of corn in the woods. I kept a good eye on that single corn stalk and believe it or not it came up, grew and yielded a couple of small ears of corn. I was proud of that; I suppose because it was all mine.

Living our lives for the Lord is a lot like farming. Actually, there are several instances in the Bible where the Lord used farming as an example. Our tools are a little different however. Instead of ground, we plant in our souls; instead of water and sunshine, we have the word of God and our worship of Him along with our own faith.

God wants us to be fruitful and productive in our lives. We’ve got to accomplish three things to arrive at these goals and we’ve got to do them regularly, not haphazardly, or we’ll wind up with a scrawny garden for God.

After the good news of Jesus Christ has been implanted in our lives, in order to grow, first of all we’ve got to make sure that the seed gets plenty of water and sunshine. The moisture causes plants to get the daily nourishment required for them to grow. Of course, we can’t control the sunshine but we’ve got to make sure that the plant we are growing is in a position to get the maximum exposure that it can. These things are like the word of God. We must have a daily dosage of God’s word or we just will not grow. Did you know that the

average Christian today has never read the Bible all the way through? It's true. We find time to read the newspaper, books for entertainment and other things but we don't read God's word. We've got to begin doing that even if it's just a few verses a day.

Secondly, farming takes a lot of work. Farmers have to till the ground, make sure their crops are weeded, maintain their farm equipment and on and on. We've got a lot of work to do too. As we read God's word, He will show us things that need to be taken care of in our lives. There's always something. Growing in Jesus Christ is a constant job. Sometimes our job requires us to endure cold weather as well as a hot, boiling down sun. We all have trials in our lives; times when we think we can't make it. But we can if we'll just stick it out and trust in God.

Finally, a good farmer has to wait. There's a period of time during the summer when the crops are planted and weeded and all he can do is wait until harvest time (this isn't to say that the farmer has nothing to do in the summer because there's always something that needs to be done on the farm). Waiting is a very hard job. It may not seem like it on the surface but to sit around and just wait can be very trying. If you're like me you hate to wait. But sometimes we have to. We have some waiting to do spiritually as well. Paul told us in Ephesians 6:13, *"Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."* The last phrase of that verse: to stand – means to wait. After we've done everything that we are supposed to, then we've got to wait. Waiting on God doesn't mean that He's slow or that He'll get to it when He can; sometimes the wait is for us. It gives us patience. Waiting is an art. Waiting on God is even more of an art. But when we wait good things come to us in the end. So, how's the farming in your life?

April 2

“It Takes All Kinds” By Jerry D. Ousley

Our very first service at our little pioneer church happened many years ago. We didn't have a building at that time so we met at the Senior Citizens building in Crothersville. It was Easter Sunday. We had planned an egg hunt for the kids and breakfast that morning, so we met early.

The day began with rain. It rained fairly hard for a while. We had breakfast and enjoyed each other's company. As the morning progressed more people showed up. Then it began to snow. We decided we should probably have the egg hunt indoors because of the weather (and a few people began to get concerned because of possible road conditions).

We went on with our service and had a great first meeting. As the final “amen” was said, the sun began to come out. It was certainly a mixture of weather for that Easter Sunday. Plans were being made on the fly to accommodate it. But it all worked out.

As I thought about that today, I realized that our daily lives are similar to our typical Indiana weather. We listen to the weather man the evening before and try to be prepared for what he (or she) says, but we can't be 100% positive that it will turn out as predicted.

Our lives are just so. We plan for things but we are never promised that it will happen exactly as planned. Sometimes it does, but more often it doesn't. That's because people are involved. No matter how hard we try to keep human error from happening, the only foolproof way is to take us humans completely out, and where's the fun in that?

Let's face it. We're all different. We think differently, we have unique and annoying habits; we walk, talk, eat, sleep and do everything in our own way. That's what makes us so special.

It keeps life interesting. It's the same in the Church. We all have our little “quirky” beliefs and build entire denominations and organizations based on them. My Dad once told me, “Son, you can find a church that will let you do anything you want to if you look hard enough.” And he was right!

But, after all, it is those unique differences that make life so interesting. I like to think, when it comes to churches, that each one has its own personality, just like people. If we really want to serve God, instead of trying to get everyone to join our church, we should be looking for those God has pre-ordained to be a part of our particular body of people. When someone comes that just doesn't like our style of singing, preaching, color-schemes, or whatever, instead of branding them as "sinners" bound for hell, let's send them to the church that fits their personality. That way we all get along, worship God and have the potential to be happy. As long as a congregation believes in coming to the Lord Jesus Christ in true heart-felt repentance, then all the rest just determines what we do until we get to Heaven, right?

It's been said that we have way too many churches. But I disagree. First of all, if everyone would go to church this coming Sunday, we'd find out very quickly that we don't have enough room in all the churches combined. Secondly, we'd see that each family would look for the congregation that suits them and their personality. If they didn't find it, they'd just go to another town.

I don't have anything against my Baptist, Methodist, Nazarene, Church of Christ and Christian brothers. We differ on a few things, but I have found that we all agree that we need Jesus Christ, and that my friends, is first and foremost.

April 3

“The Cracked Egg” By Debbie Ousley

*I*t's always a sad day when it's announced that this Easter you are too old to be included in the egg hunt. But, hey, when your back pops as you bend over to retrieve those eggs and you can pick them out of the lower limbs of a tree without tippy-toeing, its time, you know? The best part of the news is that you get to hide them from your successors in whom you are hoping will make you proud.

This year I get to hide them, vowing those little “seekers” will have to look long and hard, with visions of finding my eggs way into the summer. And the prize egg will be worth the find. It won't be just a “freebee” lying in the tall grass covered up with a few leaves.

Off we go to find hiding places for those colored treasures ... you know what? It's hard to find hiding places for five dozen eggs! I soon realize those before “my time” had the harder task and the only reward in this part of the “deal” is seeing the little ones find the eggs, or not find them! Maybe it will be worth it after all.

We watch as they run from their waiting place and start to hunt for the eggs. It's slow at first, but it gets more interesting and there's always that one with a basket bigger than they are, who stumbles, sways, and eventually leaves the basket, realizing “This thing is just slowing me down!”

I spot my niece as she picks up the eggs and inspects them. Some she puts in her basket and others she pelts over the hill. “Hey, kid'o, why are you throwing those eggs away?” I asked.

With a confident look on her face like, “Debbie has done this before, right?” her reply is, “They're cracked!”

“You can't throw all the cracked ones away. If you do then you won't have very many in your basket,” I informed her. “They're not bad because they're cracked.” Didn't she realize that by this day's end some of these eggs would be used down to the yellow yoke (or green by then)?

In life, if we throw away all those we encounter because they have a crack or flaw in them as we view them, we sure wouldn't have very many people in our "basket" either. And I know that I wouldn't be put in anyone's "basket" for sure.

Even if we're used down to the yoke, our Lord will – and He delights in – receiving us to Him. And His being raised from the dead is what makes that possible. This Easter, remember that He died, and was resurrected especially for us "cracked eggs!"

April 4

“By Choice” By Debbie Ousley

The victory ride into Jerusalem was short lived for Jesus. He knew it was the beginning of the end of His mission on Earth. The praises of “Hosanna to the Son of David” were soon replaced by “Crucify, crucify!” The palm branches turned into thorns and the ride on a borrowed colt turned to a walk through a gauntlet of cursing and jokes. Those who vowed they would die rather than forsake Him ran away and justified their cowardice with “Surely Jesus doesn’t expect us to put our lives on the line!”

But Jesus knew it was for this very reason He had come. In John 12:27 He says, *“Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour.”* There is a song that says, “it was love that held Jesus on the cross” but it was also love for mankind that enabled Him to face what He knew He had to face. Nothing happened to Him from the time He was arrested to the last breath He drew that He didn’t already know about. *“Speak to me,”* Pilate told Jesus, *“Don’t you know who I am? I have the authority to have you crucified or set you free!”* And Jesus reply to him was, *“You couldn’t have this power at all except it was given to you from above.”* In other words, *“Don’t get too puffed up, Pilate. This thing is bigger than you!”* From that time on Pilate tried to wash his hands of this situation (John 19:10-12).

You know what? This thing is bigger than all of us. It’s bigger than any church in the world, who are we kidding? It’s bigger than all the churches in the world! It’s bigger than our choice to believe or not to believe. It’s bigger than all the reasons, all the lilies, all the colored eggs, chocolate bunnies, and all the disagreements.

“Don’t get too puffed-up Pilate, your word doesn’t really count here, because this is going to happen, not your way, but My Father’s way. This is all about Me and Him!” And this Easter season it is still all about them. *“No man can take my life,”* Jesus said, *“I lay it down.”* We don’t decide whether Jesus died and rose again just because we believe it or don’t believe it.

Let's not be like Pilate who believed Jesus lived or died by our authority, but know that He died and rose from the dead because of God's authority (and that's a MIGHTY BIG AUTHORITY!)

April 5

“Post Easter Thoughts” By Jerry D. Ousley

As you are reading this, Easter Sunday is now a day in the past. For some of us it was another day at church, albeit a special day. For others it marked the semi-annual obligation, if you know what I mean.

Many had egg hunts during the afternoon. Those are always fun (for the big kids as well as the youngsters). Hiding eggs and watching the children find them warms the heart and brings to mind reminiscing thoughts from days gone by. It's always interesting to watch the parents “help” their little ones find those brightly colored but all elusive treasures.

I remember egg hunting as a child. It was kind of disappointing to me until I found out what my problem was. It was all I could do sometimes to scramble around and find a handful (which isn't very many eggs for a 6-year-old!). As it turned out, I needed glasses but just didn't know it. In my mind I thought everyone saw things as I did! I suspect I had always needed glasses because all my memories before the fourth grade (the year I got glasses) are blurry. It wasn't anyone's fault because, as I said, I thought that was how everyone saw things and so I didn't complain. That was why I couldn't find those eggs! The situation changed after that.

You know, that's a little bit like what Easter is all about. Mankind had gone along all those years not really understanding who God was. To them, He was just an all-knowing Divinity in the sky who made them do good in order to fulfill His Law. But at Easter, when Christ died then arose, it all changed!

I remember putting on my glasses for the first time. Man, I thought the floor was going to come up and grab me in the face! On the way home I could spot individual leaves on the trees instead of just a blurred green around them. It was fantastic! I just didn't know what I had been missing. That's exactly what it's like coming to Christ. He came to pay for our sin so that we could be out of “sin-debt.” But you can't claim that “payoff” until you realize what He's done for you and ask His forgiveness for your sin.

If someone left a check for you at the bank to pay off all your debt, well, the money is there to take care of things, but until you go in and sign the check nothing is done. Your debts

still remain and until you know the check is there you just keep right on paying those monthly payments. But once you sign the check, then that money can be applied to eliminate your debt.

That's what Christ did for us on Easter! He wrote the check to pay for our "sin-debt." But we must sign the check by asking His forgiveness and becoming His. When we do, the debt is eliminated.

Get your spiritual glasses today! Sign that check! You won't regret it!

April 6

“A Full Seed Bag” By Debbie Ousley

*I*n my mind's eye I can see my Daddy filling his seed bag and then begin to walk the field or area he was sowing. The seed bag was the old-fashioned way to plant, and as he would walk and turn the handle the seeds would fly out in every direction. Sometimes, when he had finished his work, he would find the seeds in the cuff of his pants and other places as well.

As a child, I believed that every seed he sowed would bear a blade of grass, but we all know that wasn't the case. He sowed anyway because there were many seeds that did take root and grow.

A young man from Massachusetts single handedly carried out a project in the early 1800's that is still bearing fruit today. We know that man as Johnny Apple Seed. When he had heard that only a few fruit trees existed in the Midwest, he was determined to remedy that situation. So, one April morning in Lick Spring, Ohio, he took his seeds out of his burlap sack, planted them, fenced off the plot and moved on. Can you imagine the response of the onlookers? But he just kept on planting and sowing those seeds.

Sowing is hard work, just as reaping is, but with reaping we do have evidence of our labor. That's not true with sowing. With sowing you just sow believing and hoping that your seeds will bring an increase. Sowing is the most important part of the whole growing process, and it's the part that farmers and Christians alike do by faith. The world needs more spiritual "Johnny Apple Seeds" who are willing to just go where there is no fruit of God's word and sow seeds.

"Oh, but I like to be in the harvesting time, the glory times, the life changing times!" Who doesn't? Jesus tells us in John 4:36 that those who plant and those who reap should rejoice together. Folks, someone will be reaping what you and I have sown many years after we have left out of here, if we are willing to sow our seeds. And where it is true that not all the seeds sown will take root and bring forth fruit, I believe, as sower's, it's our responsibility to sow and be happy in believing that God gets the harvest.

April 7

“Is There a Doctor in The House?”

By Debbie Ousley

God heals. He uses different delivery systems to bring His healing to us. He uses the prayer of faith. He uses medicine, rest, recreation, exercise, love, understanding, and a positive attitude. I've been very blessed to not have a grave illness in my life but those times that I have been sick I would pray and if a dose of medicine was handy, I'd not hesitate to take it too.

“Healing” is an area that has many, many opinions, scriptures, and theories, but all I know is Christ is called the Great Physician, and, by the way, have you noticed how many doctors pray with their patients these days? It might seem that they really know where it's coming from also.

What I do know is that anyone who is sick doesn't need someone braying them with “If you had enough faith you'd be healed.” What kind of compassion is that anyway? If we look at the many times Jesus healed someone in the Bible, most times it states that He had compassion for them first. Many times, He would instruct them to do something like “rise up, take your bed and walk,” or “go dip in the Jordan seven times.” They might have had something going on in their lives that they needed to address besides the fact that they were ill. Pride maybe, not to want to make a fool of themselves by dipping in the muddy Jordan seven times.

I don't know why some individuals are healed and others are not, but I do know that we are to show compassion toward all those who are sick. Jesus did. Do I believe that God can heal in a great and mighty way? Yes, I've seen it! But I also believe God uses other avenues to heal. He can, you know. He's God. He can do anything He wants to do.

In my early training I was made to believe that all conditions were spiritual and where I do believe all areas in our lives affect us spiritually, as our spirituality effects all areas in our lives, I have learned this training was not altogether true. Some conditions are physical and emotional and these conditions need to be attended to as such.

I heard a story about an elderly man whom all his life was a giver, encourager, believed in Christ, and brightened people's lives wherever he went. Well, this gentleman was hit by a car and killed. Upon examination by the medical department, it was stated that in reality he should have died years before because of the severe disease of cancer that he had.

Proverbs 13:17 states that, *"a wicked messenger falls into trouble but a faithful ambassador brings health."* 3rd John 2 says, He, an inspired man of God, would have us *"prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers."* No matter what our physical or emotional state is, we will always feel better if everything is all right with God.

NOTE: Debbie did pass away from a horrible year-long struggle with cancer in 2016. She is currently rejoicing in Heaven, completely healed, never more to suffer. Did God let her down? Nope. On the contrary, she is happier than she has ever been in her life.

April 8

“You’re Getting Sleepy . . . “ By Jerry D. Ousley

“BANG! SLAP! TUMBLE!” I heard a noise in the boss’s office. He had been on a conference call with our parent company in Dayton as he did for about an hour each and every day. The door was normally shut during these calls but I could hear fairly well what was going on, even without trying to listen. This was a different noise and could not to be concealed.

I got up and quickly opened the door to see what had happened only to find my boss picking himself up from the floor and hearing the people on the other end of the line saying, “What was that? Is everyone okay?” to which my boss replied, “It was nothing – just knocked something over in the office.” What really had happened was that he had leaned back in his chair during the call and had fallen asleep. When he leaned even farther back, well, you’ve probably already figured it out by now. I still laugh about that one.

I remember one Sunday morning when I was preaching what I thought to be a particularly inspiring sermon. It was close to the end when I heard a noise coming from my right. When I looked, a young man – on the front row even - had the audacity to fall asleep during my sermon and was even snoring. He was snoring loud enough for everyone in the congregation to hear and I had to raise my voice a little to get over him. It didn’t do much for the invitational part of the service but at least the congregation got a good chuckle that day. It didn’t do much for my moral, either.

Have you ever gotten into one of those boring, monotonous jobs that just lulled you to get sleepier and sleepier? I have - Especially when you are entering a very long list of numbers into a database or something like that. The monotony just puts you to sleep! Our natural body needs rest. It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to tell us that. Given enough hours awake we will eventually and simply fall to sleep.

I have a niece who is grown now but at the time of this story she was only about 5 or 6 years old. We were camping and her parents were coming to get her. She wanted to stay up until they got there but it was now growing very late. My wife and our kids had already gone to bed and so I agreed to wait with her until her parents arrived. She talked and talked and talked

and to be very honest about it, my eyes were getting pretty heavy and I found myself agreeing with her not even realizing what she was saying. Suddenly everything got very quiet and I realized that she had quit talking. I looked over at her as she slumped in her chair - she had fallen asleep in mid-sentence.

So, what's the point? I'm afraid that many Christians today have done exactly that. No, I'm not trying to shame anyone from getting "heavy-eyed" during the next Sunday sermon, but spiritually speaking, many of us have allowed the daily "hum-drum" to cause us to lose guard, and in a spiritual sense, we are falling to sleep.

We can't help getting tired, but we must guard very closely so that we don't become "heavy-eyed" spiritually. This is what Jesus was speaking about when He repeatedly told us to "watch." (See Matthew 25:13). It is extremely important that we not grow weary in the spirit but stay alert because it's during these "spiritually weary" times that we become weak and vulnerable to the devil's temptations and attacks.

Now, I don't have time here to really elaborate on this subject, but I can't emphasize enough what happens to those believers who do allow things to "zap" their spiritual strength. We must remain strong and alert. So, the next time you hear the devil whispering, "You're getting very, very sleepy . . ." shake yourself spiritually awake and realize what's taking place. You'll be glad you did.

April 9

“Cowboy Boots and Skunks”

By Jerry D. Ousley

“What are you looking at?” my wife asked me. We were camping at Hardy Lake and I awoke, needing to take a trip to the “little boy’s” room. Now when you’re camping, that task is not as easy as just getting up and walking down the hall (unless you have a self-contained camper, that is). We had a small camping trailer that was just right for a family of four, but you couldn’t move around very much without disturbing someone.

As I said, I was about to take my trip, when I saw some movement out the window. This previously-thought simple excursion into the night was going to be more difficult than I thought. Out the window I saw two very large skunks mulling around our camp site. What was I to do? If I irritated them too much, well, let’s just say that they have an “air” about them that lingers on and on and on. I had to get rid of them somehow and I couldn’t wait much longer. So, I began to peck on the window trying to frighten them off. That’s when my wife woke up.

I wasn’t sure what else to try when, much to my relief, they decided, I guess, that we didn’t have much laying around for them to get into and so off they went to bother some other camp site. What a relief. But we didn’t know how far they had gone, so I bravely pulled on my boots, and perched my cowboy hat on my head (that was a big thing to me at that time) and went out to make sure the coast was clear.

I felt as if I was doing the “manly” thing by securing our perimeter when I heard another noise. I looked around and saw my wife and son in the window of the camper laughing their heads off. “What’s so funny?” I thought. I looked around. The skunks hadn’t reappeared. So, what was so funny? Then I looked down. Have you ever had one of those moments when you were feeling pretty good about yourself and suddenly realized that you had done something really stupid instead? There I stood cowboy boots on my feet, my cowboy hat on my head, in my red sleeping shorts with nothing else on. What a sight to behold. It was kind of like John Wayne showing up for a shootout in his underwear!

I saw myself as I really was, and I had to laugh with them. But it taught me a lesson. How many times do we really look at ourselves? We may have a good job, nice home, and a sporty car. We may be feeling very successful in life until we really take a look at ourselves.

You see when we really see ourselves for who we are, aside from God, we are just like I was: Feeling good, feeling brave, but in reality, exposing ourselves and our weaknesses.

In Luke 12 Jesus told a story of another man who felt this way. He had been very successful in life and had stored up many goods for himself. His barns were full to overflowing. So, he decided that he'd build bigger barns, store up his goods, and just sit back and relax awhile. Now on the surface there's nothing wrong with that. It sounded as if he was getting ready to retire. I can understand that; I'd like to do it myself someday. But the indication from the passage is that he had forgotten God in his thoughts. He was feeling very good about himself and what he had done without giving any credit to what God had allowed him to have and to do.

That's the key. When we see ourselves for who we really are and realize how much we depend on God, then begin doing just that – **DEPENDING** on Him, He'll let us see our shortcomings and failures so we can begin to do something about them.

I eventually quit wearing cowboy boots and hats after that. I realized that my six shooters were empty and the skunks would have won anyway. I also "outgrew" those red sleeping shorts. But I'll never forget the lesson I learned that night. Just when we're feeling the best about ourselves and our accomplishments God will let a skunk show up to let us see just how inadequate we really are.

April 10

“Nothing to Draw With” By Jerry D. Ousley

In John 4 we read the incident of Jesus and the woman at the well. Daily this woman visited the public well in Samaria to get the necessary water she and those of her household would need. Carrying water is a very laborious chore. Water is something we take for granted until we can't just go to the sink and turn on the tap. We use water every day for bathing, drinking, cooking, and cleaning. We use a lot more than we think. My wife and I have had a few situations over the years when water wasn't available and I'm sure you have too. Making trips to the neighbors to fill milk jugs, buckets, pans and whatever else could be found to get enough for the day is an exasperating job. Water is heavy!

Filling a big pot of water at a public well and then carrying it all the way back to where you live, wasn't easy. But she, along with everyone else in Samaria did it. In way of observation here, it was kind of strange that she was alone at the well. I don't know if she went at an unusual time of day in order to avoid the looks and insults of the town folks or if the people living in Samaria just wouldn't go until she had made her trip, but whatever the reason, I believe it was because she had a reputation. She had been with several men and the man she was now living with wasn't even her husband. Today no one would think much about that because of all the loose morals of people; but then it was a big taboo.

Jesus knew that she would be alone at the well and so He sent His disciples into town to run some errands while He went to work on this woman. The short of the story is that He was able to prove to her that He was the Messiah because He knew truths about her. This was a miracle because He was a stranger. It caused not only her to come to the Lord but most of the town.

The point that stands out in this lesson is that when Jesus began discussing getting water from the well, she doubted His ability. She said in so many words, "Mister, this is a deep well and you don't have a bucket or anything to draw the water out with. How are you going to get water from the well?" In essence she could not believe in the miraculous. She could only believe what she could experience with her natural senses. Jesus proved to her the spiritual application of what He was talking about. But folks, in my simple mind I have no doubt that if

Jesus had wanted to actually get water from that deep well, He could have just commanded it to come out and it would have began gushing like an oil well.

Today many doubt the power of God. We have been conditioned to believe only what we can experience with our own natural senses. If we can't see it, hear it, smell it, taste it or touch it then we don't believe it. We've tried to explain the existence of man and this world so many times in so many far-fetched ways, when each and every time what is actually proven scientifically always agrees with the simple facts given us in the Bible. Yet, because we've been lied to so many times, we still don't want to believe it.

This attitude has even begun to bleed into the Christian world as well. We've been deceived by charlatans who have claimed to have great power with God. All too often we have believed because we need to believe, and over time they have been proven to be fakes. I know that there are a lot of false prophets out there. There have always been those who want to deceive in order to have power over people or to get their money. But I want to tell you today that the power of God is real. He is God and He can do whatever He wants to. Even though many want to try to work God like He is their servant, God is still God. He might let these folks alone for awhile but rest assured, they will be exposed as God just goes on doing His job. It may seem like the Lord has nothing to draw with, but folks He can get water out of the well when we can't.

He wants to get water from your well. He wants to give us the ever-lasting water of eternal life. He really does want to do that for you with no hooks or catches. Let Him draw from your well.

April 11

“A Garden Full of Dirt” By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*here's a story that goes something like this: Chuck considered himself to be a real gardener. He had purchased a program for his computer that allowed him to lay out a beautiful garden. It was full of exotic trees, bushes, and shrubs. It was adorned and decorated by colorful varieties of flowers from around the world. There was a rock path that wound around through his garden that allowed visitors to view all the magnificent plant life and was full of butterflies attracted there by its richness.

He had printed it out on paper and anytime he would have visitors Chuck would pull out his drawings and diagrams and show them his beautiful garden. He was certainly proud of that garden let me tell you, and it was a wondrous thing to behold.

There was just one problem with Chuck's Garden; it was all on paper. If you took a look out the window where he intended to put his garden all you saw was an empty lot full of piles of dirt covered with ugly weeds. There was no rock path, no butterflies and to be honest with you I'd be afraid to walk out in that patch of ground without being careful of snakes.

Chuck talked and talked about his garden year after year but never stepped foot out of his house to begin work on it. On paper and in his mind, it was a wonderful garden but it never became anything more than a garden full of dirt.

James 2:14-17 says, *“What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”* This verse hits fairly hard, doesn't it? James is not for a moment promoting the false doctrine saying that our works determine our salvation. When he asked, “Can faith save him?” he wasn't questioning salvation by grace. In fact, he was speaking not about our Christian salvation but of rescuing a person in need. He was asking, “Can his faith alone preserve his physical life?” There's no doubt that faith is important. But faith requires action.

When God shows us something that needs to be done for the Kingdom, He doesn't reveal those things for us to hand off to someone else. Our job is to help with what we have. Perhaps we don't have the money to bail someone out of trouble. But we can do what we can. There is always something. Otherwise, God wouldn't have sent them our way.

What if someone came to us saying, "I have no food." Would it meet their need if we just patted them on the back and told them, "There, there; don't be sad – be happy. Go on your way and I hope you are warmed and filled," would that accomplish anything? I'd say not much.

Did you know that the book of James was almost not included in the Canon of Scripture in the early days of the Church because of his teaching about works? But I agree with James. Only faith can save us. Only by the grace of Jesus Christ do we have hope of escaping the curse of death. But once we are saved, once we have given ourselves to Jesus Christ, once we know Him as our Savior, then we should want to do something for Him. In the Gospels we constantly read about Jesus having compassion for the people. He did something about it. As Christians – Christ-like people, we should also have this desire. It should be a natural thing once we come into salvation that we want to do good works. They don't save us. They don't determine our standing with God. But they are the natural results of being a believer in Jesus Christ. If we do nothing about it then we talk a good talk, but we walk in a garden filled with nothing but dirt.

April 12

“Beezzzzz”

By Jerry D. Ousley

When my brother, my cousin and I were young teenagers we were heavily into model cars. We would buy them, put them together, and then, using parts from other model cars, “enhance” them. Sometimes this re-model job included heating a paper clip or bobby pin to the point that we could actually cut the plastic. We’d make holes in the hood of the car to allow for a chrome “breather” to stick out for instance (of course this was in the days of the “muscle cars” and so you can imagine the kinds of changes we made).

One particular summer day we were doing our remodeling outside. Mom had run us out of the house because of the scent of melting plastic. Underneath the corner of our back porch a swarm of bumblebees had made a nest. We thought it might be fun to put a smoking rag in the hole and see what would happen. And so, we did.

We got involved in a re-design issue and sorta forgot about the bees; but not for long. In a single moment we went from cutting on model cars to swatting for our lives. It seemed the air was thick with bumblebees. Somehow my brother and I got “out of range” but I really think they got away from us because they all decided to join the chase. My cousin had gone racing down the driveway and the bees were in hot pursuit.

I’d like to say that he got away. Sorry, Ron. You guessed it; they caught up and three or four stings later they decided to give up. While they had been after my cousin, we got that smoking rag out of their hole and stood back. Soon everything was as it was (except my cousin had a few extra bumps).

This story made me think about life. How many times have we “stuffed smoking rags into bee holes?” We apply temporary solutions to serious problems and then forget about them. We don’t prepare for the swarm that is certainly coming. All too often we apply this same principle to spiritual matters. We say a quick, “forgive me,” and then go on our merry way. I don’t want to take away from God’s wonderful and complete grace through Jesus Christ. He does a complete work; there’s no question. However, there are times we trample His grace. Perhaps we don’t even realize what we’re doing.

True repentance over sin that we have committed is accompanied by true remorse and possibly even shock over what we've done. You see Christians only begin to repent when they ask God to forgive them at salvation. Am I saying that God's grace isn't good enough for our future sins? No. Am I saying that He doesn't do a perfect work in our lives the first time? No.

I am saying that even though we have become new creations in Christ Jesus that, while housed in this body of flesh we sometimes sin against God. We may not mean to do it. Perhaps we were a victim of the moment. That doesn't justify anything.

"Well, when we sin do we become non-Christians?" Not at all. "Do we have to ask God to start all over with us?" Absolutely not. It merely marks that we realize the wrong we have done to God. It's just like a child asking forgiveness and expressing sorrow for lying to his parents, or doing something he or she was told not to do. We tell God we are truly sorry then accept the forgiveness found only in His grace and we move on. But we don't do it to just "smooth" things over with God. We don't stuff smoking rags into bee holes, but finally and permanently solve our problem with God.

God will forgive us and even forget about the sin. That's good for us. So, don't just stuff rags but do what you know you need to do with God. Then you won't be running from swarms, but you'll really know what the buzz is all about . . .

April 13

“Butterfly Christians” By Jerry D. Ousley

“Look! It’s a monarch!” exclaimed our daughter. School had just started; the weather was still warm and in her biology class the teacher had them gathering monarch butterfly larvae and raising them into butterflies. I guess raising them is not the right choice of words. All they really had to do was to make sure that they had their ample supply of milkweed leaves and the worms did the rest.

The first one did wonderfully. It ate until it grew to just the right size, spun its chrysalis and a few days later emerged as a beautiful monarch butterfly. She proudly took it outside and released it to “do its thing.”

The second one, however, was a different story. It too ate its share of milkweed leaves and grew from a tiny spec on the leaf into a large worm until the time came for it to form its own chrysalis. The days passed and we knew that the time was quickly approaching for it to emerge.

It happened when we were away from home. She hadn’t done anything differently with the second one that she hadn’t done with the first one. A paper towel lined the bottom of the plastic container with the milkweed leaves on top of that. She had punched holes in the top of the container so fresh air would get in. Everything was just as it had been with the first one. But when we returned home, we discovered that this monarch butterfly had emerged from its green transformation chamber and had immediately crawled its way underneath the paper towel liner.

She took it out to let it fly away just like the first one, only it didn’t fly away. It slowly flapped its wings but never fast enough to get airborne. The best we could figure was that the weight of the paper towels had caused the moisture in its wings to dry together, causing the wings to stick to each other. It couldn’t fly. She felt terrible about it but as she went over the process in her mind, she knew she hadn’t done anything wrong. The only difference was that the butterfly hid under the paper towel instead of flapping its wings so as to “air dry” them.

I helped her to carefully place it on a tall flower. Perhaps it could eat some of the nectar and gain enough strength to break its wings free. We checked on it periodically all through the day but it never left the flower.

The next morning it was still there. We figured sure that it was done for. But after a couple of hours, when we checked again it was gone. One of two things had happened to it; either the dew from the night before had re-moistened its wings allowing the sun to dry them again, freeing them so it could take its natural flight, or it became breakfast for some passing by bird. We'll probably never know but we hoped for the first scenario.

As I pondered this situation, I was quickly reminded that these butterflies were symbolic of Christians. Many come to the Lord in salvation and take a natural flight doing wonderful things in the name of Christ. They aren't afraid to stretch their spiritual wings and follow the path that God has chosen for them.

All too many others, however, come to the Lord then "crawl" under what they think is a safe place never realizing how much damage they have done to their own spiritual growth and welfare. They become "deformed" Christians with beautiful wings that never take flight.

One of two things happen to these "deformed" Christians. Either they see their mistake and allow God to fix the problem in their lives "flying" on to fulfill their purpose, or they are devoured by the enemy of our souls and are no more. It happens. Which kind of butterfly Christian are you?

April 14

“Camping with Skunks”

By Jerry D. Ousley

“This is going to be great!” spoke one of the boys, “I love camping!” My wife and I had taken the youth group from our congregation on a camping trip to a local lake. It was only going to be for one night and we had more kids than two people could really handle, but it was only for one night, right? Well, we were young and we could surely get the job done! Really the trip went pretty well, but we did have our hands full! We had set up two tents, one for the boys and the other for the girls and, of course, I stayed with the boys and my wife stayed with the girls. The tents were wall to wall with kids laying in every direction and to be honest, I didn’t get much sleep that night. As I recall I wound up in the car about 3:00 in the morning and got a few winks there.

But what happened at bedtime is what I really want to tell you about. The girls and my wife were in their tent after having just returned from the shower house and were busy getting things arranged for a good night’s sleep (yeah, right!). Most of the boys were still at the shower house going through their bedtime toiletry (and probably getting into more mischief than anything else). I had stayed behind to watch the campsite. And that’s about all I could do – watch!

Much to my protest the boys had left the flap the tent door wide open (I had cautioned them to close it to keep bugs out) and I was about to get up and zip it shut when I spotted a curious critter ambling into our campsite. Yep! You guessed it – a skunk! I watched it a moment hoping it would take another path but it didn’t. It was heading straight for our open tent door! Now what am I going to do? I stood and started to yell hoping to chase it off, then remembered what they are famous for when scared and decided I’d better keep my mouth shut. And so, I watched.

Thankfully it detoured around the boy’s tent and I was glad they were still at the shower house because a bunch of loud talking, rowdy boys could have caused all kinds of odorous adventures. But just as I was beginning to feel like it was all going to be okay, it headed for the girl’s tent. They were in there and in the dusky light their flashlights played on the tent canvas. Now what? I thought about yelling a warning at them then remembered what girls do when

they get scared and decided that the screams from all those girls would have made the situation a whole lot worse. So once again, I prayed and watched.

To my relief the critter made a lap or two around the tent, probably nosing for any food scraps dropped on the ground, then headed down the road to bring excitement to someone else's campsite.

We get into life situations like this too, don't we? I mean, things happen that we'd sure like to do something about but we know that anything we do could just make matters worse. We feel helpless because we know we could make a difference for that person if they'd just let us, but then we know that it would only anger them more.

It could take the form of many situations and scenarios. But the result in each case is the same. Our involvement only adds to the anger of the individual or individuals involved. What can we do? We can pray. We've made prayer a "crutch-answer" in our Christian world. We tell people that we'll pray but do we really follow through with that? I'm here to tell you today that if we mean our words and we keep our promise and get down to business with God about the situation, He'll do His part! It does make a difference! God's very good at getting skunks out of the campsites of life!

April 15

“Spring - Fall”

By Debbie Ousley

Spring

“Why are you planting that big garden? The cellar is full of beans and tomatoes that you canned last year. You don’t need all those vegetables now Dad, since it’s just you and Mom. You’re not a young man anymore; you need to take it easy. Besides, you can buy that stuff at the store cheaper and with a lot less work!”

Fall

“Boy, these tomatoes taste great! Say, you got a ‘mess’ of half runner green beans picked for me, with ‘new’ potatoes? Some lettuce and green onions! Ya got golden queen corn? Say it’s sweet and full . . . got any more?”

How dumb can one know-it-all girl be?

Spring

“I don’t have to go to church! You made me go when I was little, but now I’m older and I can decide for myself, and I decide NO!”

“It’s a fairy tale, Dad! Heaven’s just a place you hope is true. That stuff was good for your time but now-a-days a person’s gotta make things happen. You can’t wait around for a higher power to change things.”

Fall

“Say, you can’t find my name in the Book of Life? Listen, I know You know my folks. They prayed and went to church all the time. They’ll vouch for me, just go ask them. Dad came about eleven years ago and Mom just last year. Hey, listen, I went to church when I was little, that’s gotta count for something!”

“Know Jesus? Well, kinda. Hey come back here! I know I can change this!” How sorry can one know-it-all girl be?

April 16

“Feeding The Birds” By Jerry D. Ousley

Recently, with our last child preparing to graduate high school and then getting ready to go to college, my wife and I discovered that we just might have some free time on our hands. We realized that without the extra activities and responsibility we didn't have much to fill in that time and so we decided that bird watching might be something we'd like to do. She purchased a book on it and I purchased a set of binoculars with a built-in digital camera and we felt we were ready for this new, exciting world.

What had really sparked our interest in this hobby was that most of the summer as we would sit in our swing in the backyard, we'd see all kinds of birds flying around and we would strike up conversations about them. The book had suggested that we get started by putting up a feeder in the backyard and begin there. So, one Saturday when she was working, I picked out a post cut from a tree we had lost in the big storm during the summer and nailed a flat board across the top then dug a hole and set it in the ground. It looked like a well disguised piece of equipment to me. My wife had some birdseed and so she sprinkled a generous portion on the flat base and we watched.

For a whole week we watched and couldn't catch even one bird feasting from this contraption. A couple of weeks later I checked it and the seed was all gone but for the life of us we couldn't catch a single bird in the act. We surmised that the last storm we had blew all the seed off. Anyway, we won't stop trying but I believe we need some more advice and probably need to read the next chapter of that book.

It's also possible that squirrels got the seed. There are several of them around and they are good at getting their goodies without being seen. Or, if it did blow on the ground, you can be sure that some creature benefited from the seed even if it was some sort of bug.

It reminds me of “spreading the Gospel.” Jesus compared it to a man sowing seed in his field in Matthew 13. In those days they didn't have all the fancy and convenient equipment we have now. They walked the field with a bag full of seed, grabbing a handful and giving it a pitch to spread the seed out over the field. It worked but in the process some seed fell on the hardened path where it couldn't take root, some fell in stony places and couldn't grow because

of all the rocks. Some fell among the weeds and were choked out. But some fell on good, fertile ground, took root and grew until the harvest time came.

We are all spreading seed of some kind. If we don't know Christ as Savior, we are still spreading seed that falls here and there but some will always fall on the fertile heart of others. I ask you, what kind of seed are you sowing? Are we sowing seed that will produce good, useful food for others or are we sowing weeds that bring no benefit at all to our fellow man?

Just like in the story, some creature got benefit from the seed. Those who are sowing the seed of the "Good News" of Christ will reap results. It may not be how we have envisioned it but it will happen. We just gotta keep on sowing.

April 17

“Fishing for Cows”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Doesn't it just make your blood boil to think about all the injustices that take place in the world? Think about it; little babies being killed just because a father or step father, or live in boyfriend got fed up with them. Or a mother taking the life of her own child in attempt to keep her parents from finding out she was pregnant. What about all those innocent people in Sudan, the Congo and Kenya who have paid with their lives and weren't even guilty of anything? Or a growing number of kids killed in colleges simply because a disgruntled student decided to end it all and wanted to take out a bunch of people with him. I don't know about you but these things boil my blood!

I think about all the money wasted by governments that was forked over by poor taxpayers who could have really used that money but instead it went for a frivolous party or to line someone's pocket. It doesn't seem fair to me. I think about people who have lost limbs, or have worked hard all their lives and now suddenly find themselves in a place where physically they can't work anymore. They have the hardest time getting on disability funds when some kid with four babies who never intends to work can get it at the snap of a finger. I'm not talking about those who really need it but those who just take advantage of the system. It's beyond me and again, it makes my blood boil!

It angers me to wonder why God would allow those things to happen to the innocent. But before we go off questioning God for some of His seemingly unjust decisions, let's see what the word says about it. Amos 4:1-2 addresses this situation. It says, *“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, Who oppresses the poor, Who crush the needy, Who say to your husbands, ‘Bring wine, let us drink!’ The Lord God has sworn by His holiness: ‘Behold, the days shall come upon you When He will take you away with fishhooks, And your posterity with fishhooks.’”* God, through the prophet Amos, was addressing the Children of Israel, particularly the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He was telling them that the day was coming when He was going to take His vengeance. He was going fishing for cows.

I know that sounds very corny to some of us but in essence that's what God said. He was going to use fishhooks to reel them in and catch them up in their own games. There are a

lot of things going on in this world that are not fair. They are not just. Innocent people are hurt by the selfish and uncaring. It makes us to question God and ask Him why He lets this go on. But be still. Just wait. The day is coming when God will take his revenge on those who have abused, misused, and destroyed others for their own selfish gain and pleasure.

It isn't easy to understand right now. I can almost hear someone saying, "But I believed God. I trusted in Him. I played my whole roll on what He said, and He let me down. Why did He let my son or daughter die? Why didn't He stop that husband that abused my family? Why didn't God intervene when that drunk hit my son on the road? Why didn't God protect them and change the situation?" I wish I could answer those questions. I really can't except to say that it hurts God too. He gave each of us a free will – even those who are evil. He will let them go on for a while. Even though it hurts Him deeply when an innocent is slain or destroyed or abused, He doesn't stop it because that evil individual has a will too. Their will is to kill and destroy but that is not God's will. I can tell you that the day is coming when God will get vengeance. But for now, just be grateful that even though an innocent has been hurt or has lost his or her life God has them in His hand.

He is getting His fishing gear and His pole ready. He's making sure He's got the right bait. The day is coming when God is going fishing for cows and I'm glad I'm a sheep.

April 18

“Would You Just Get Out of My Way?” By Jerry D. Ousley

What a morning it had been. Everything I did seemed like I either had to do it twice, or I had to take the long way “around the fence” to get it done. Have you ever had one of those days? After completing my self-appointed chores before going to work, I hopped in the car and took off. I have to admit, I was driving a little too fast trying to make up for lost time and I was running late. The town I worked in was about twenty miles away, which wasn’t a terribly long commute and I was winning the race for time until I arrived at a junction where I had to turn. There’s a truck stop there and, wouldn’t you know it, one had to pull out right in front of me. Yes, I had plenty of time to stop but remember, I was running late and so I began to scream at the driver (like he could hear me in that big rig). I didn’t curse or swear, but my attitude was just as bad.

The Holy Spirit began to speak to my heart and urged me to look at my watch and calculate how much time the truck driver had cost me. It was, well, every bit of 10 seconds. “But, Lord, I’m in a hurry. Why did You have to let this happen of all days?” The answer came to my heart, “You need to slow down, son.” What could I say? When He’s right, He’s always right. Well, I had some repenting to do to say the least.

How many days do we live life like this? For some of us it’s quite a few. I believe that this is one of the reasons we suffer things like ulcers and “Acid Reflux” (no, I’m not that smart. I heard it on a commercial once). We get ourselves going at top speed some days with worry, frustration, and just plain old anger. It is devastating to our systems not only physically but also spiritually.

When I looked back on the situation, I realized that I was taking all my frustration out on that innocent, unknowing (and unconcerned) truck driver. But I should have taken a moment, prayed to God, and allowed Him to calm me.

No matter how hard we live life and how much we try to cram into a day we’ve still only got twenty-four hours. During that time, we’ve got to eat, sleep, and do those things our bodies demand that we do. Yet we live like we don’t have time to waste on those necessary things because we fill our days up with, well, too much.

The other day as I was opening up a package, I pulled out a piece of the packing, held it up to my wife and said, "You know, Hun, someone probably got yelled at while trying to produce this and was told to hurry so they could fill a rush order, so they could ship it to a company that needed to put it in this box, and rush it out to the mail, so I could get this package, open it up and throw this piece of packing away." When you think about it like that it doesn't make a lot of sense does it?

I believe what God is trying to tell me is to slow down. Live a little more by noticing the things that really count like being kind to people, trying to understand them a little bit better and get off my race horse. I used to say that it would be nice if God had made thirty-six-hour days, and eight-day weeks. But you know what? If He had, I'd just fill that up too. What a merciful God we have to limit is to 24-7! We'd kill ourselves otherwise!

So, slow down a little. You'll probably accomplish just as much with a whole lot less stress. By the way, that particular morning I arrived at work a couple of minutes later than normal but I was still on time. So, what was the big deal?

April 19

“Not Your Father’s Oldsmobile” By Jerry D. Ousley

Can you remember your first car? I certainly can. It was a 1965 F85 Oldsmobile. This car was a V-6 three-on-the-tree lemon from the get-go. Later on in life I found out that the main problem with the car (if I understand it correctly) was a compression leak. I don’t really know a lot about cars but I do know this about my Oldsmobile – It took its time getting up speed. I mean I was lucky if I could spin gravel in a parking lot. There was absolutely no way I could leave rubber marks on pavement! It just didn’t have the “Oomph” for that.

When I was in Bible College, I worked at a nursing home part time. It was on the other side of town and you had to climb a large hill from a dead stop to get there. I don’t know how many times I would start up in third gear, down-shift to second, and if I didn’t make it to the top in second, because it wasn’t synchronized, I had to stop, make sure no traffic was coming, and roll down to the bottom. I then would come to a complete stop and go up again, this time in first gear all the way. It was embarrassing.

We all have our little stories to tell from our youth but I remember a time when we attended church in Seymour. I had driven my car and two of my friends had also driven. One of them had a Volkswagen Beetle, and the other a Pontiac GTO. We were driving home and decided to take the Interstate. My cousin was riding with me in the ol’ Olds and after getting up on the Interstate, naturally both of the other vehicles passed me like I was sitting still (or maybe going in reverse).

My cousin shouted “come on Jerry, pass them! Don’t let them get away with that!” But alas they left me like I was a snail on a race track. But all hope was not gone. I told my cousin “They’ll get down the road and forget about us then we’ll give them a little surprise!” So, I pushed the gas pedal to the floor and just let that little V-6 take its time getting up speed. I knew I was going around 85 miles per hour because the odometer needle bounced back and forth in a 40-mile range. Somewhere in the middle was about how fast you were going.

Just as I had predicted, we caught them a few miles down the road. Because they had forgotten about us, with ease we slid by the both of them! My cousin jeered and taunted them

as we passed. Yeah, I know it was dangerous, and I sure wouldn't attempt anything like that now and I'd ground my daughter for life if I ever heard of her pulling a stunt like that!

This story reminds me of how life can do the same thing to us. We pass up our problems like they're sitting still without another thought. It seems we've got it licked, when out of the blue they come speeding by us again. It makes us wonder just how we can get the victory over things.

There is a way. It is only through Jesus Christ, of course. The devil is going to keep flinging things at us and remind us every once in awhile about them. He'll even tempt us longingly from time to time, even after we've seemingly won out years before. But we must keep depending on Christ. When that temptation arises and is flashed before us, we've got to immediately cry out to Him for help. We experience difficulty when we try to beat the situation ourselves. We think that surely after all this time in the Lord we can handle this little old thing. But we are wrong. Our strength is never in ourselves but always in Christ.

So, the next time that problem comes up like an ol' Olds, don't forget to depend on the Lord. He'll make it seem like you don't even recognize that old thing. "REMEMBER THE OLDS!"

April 20

“One of Those Days” By Jerry D. Ousley

Have you ever had one of those days when it didn't seem like you could please anyone? I'm sure many of you have. I had one of those days at work. At that time, I did the purchasing of raw materials and it seemed like it was either “chicken or feathers.” You either have too much stock or not nearly enough. That equal balance just never seemed to happen. But that day (the first day back to work after a vacation day I might add) nothing went right.

Immediately I was hit up because inventory was really low (my superiors had been riding me about reducing inventory anyway). But it was down too low. That's not what I had intended. It was just that the trucks were a little slow coming in. Now, suddenly it was entirely my fault. I'm sure in your own job you know the drill and can relate. It wasn't an easy day trying to keep calm and collected. I tried but I knew I wasn't very good at it. But I did try.

Those days happen unfortunately. It can be the same spiritually. You can rise up in the morning, determined that this day is going to be the day that you accomplish great things for God. The day begins with a wonderful smile on your face; you walk in to work and your boss meets you at the door for whatever reason and really lays it on you. You take your verbal beating and pray, “Lord, I'm not going to let You down today.”

You get to your workstation, whether it's in an office, or at a machine, fully intending to do the best job you can. But when you say, “Good morning,” to the person next to you they respond with, “What's so good about it?” That's just the beginning.

As the day wears on, things continually get worse until you finally arrive home, relieved that the day is over, only to find that the other car is broke down, or something has happened to one of your kids at school. You throw up your hands and exclaim, “Where did I go wrong Lord?”

The fact of the matter is that the devil doesn't want you to have a good day and just as sure as we determine we are going to, he'll poke up his ugly head and try to throw everything across your path that he can to make it go wrong. Sometimes he is successful. We give in and wonder to ourselves, “just what IS so good about this day?” Or we question God by

saying something like, “Lord, I was determined to make this day Your day. Why did You let all these things happen?” BINGO! The answer is: God allowed the devil to tempt us with all those things to show us how strong or how weak we really are! It is an educational experience! God allows it because He already knows what we can and cannot take. We don’t apparently know that for ourselves until we experience it. So now we know! We either get through it victoriously and can rejoice that we made it, or we completely lose it somewhere in the middle and we now know what we’ve got to work on.

Paul wrote, *“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”* (Romans 8:28). That means that everything that happens to us works for our good. It does not mean that God intended all the evil that the devil throws at us to happen but that He will take that evil of the devil and our own failures and use them as teaching tools for us if we will allow Him to. If we are called according to His purpose (in other words, seeking His will for ourselves and others) then nothing is ever a defeat for very long but turns around for our good and betterment. You can’t beat a deal like that!

So, the next time your day begins to go rotten remember that the softer fruit makes the best jams and jellies! Remember that dried up grapes turn to raisins; coal, under pressure and with time, turns to diamonds; and broken, crushed flowers put out the strongest fragrance! Whether our day has gone good by our own standards or not, regardless if we succeeded or failed, if we have learned the lesson God wanted us to learn, then we have had a good day!

April 21

“It Is Eternal” By Debbie Ousley

One day, I was sitting in the Youth Center praying for direction as to how the Lord wanted us to allow Him to show Himself to the kids, we had the privilege of seeing each week, (and we did count it privilege). We viewed this as an opportunity even though it had been said that we were the cheapest “baby-sitting” service in town, and other comments that I dare not write. These comments may not be very nice but the one thing I realized was that the most important individuals involved were the kids. The most important thing is what we could impart into them about Christ.

You see, this is not a temporary thing, but it is eternal. It may not seem like they are really getting it, (in some cases they behave even worse) but if we don’t believe there is something supernatural happening, we could close the doors and feel okay about that. This is also the case with every church and youth group in town.

The answer that came to me that day is, “you must love these kids unconditionally.” No matter how they behave, what they look like, how they dress, or how they smell – unconditionally, without exception. “When you discipline them, it has to be out of the love you have for them. When you prepare the food, clean the toilets, beg for money and items to make it better for them, it all has to be out of the love you have for them.” Why? Because that’s how Christ is with us. Oh, He doesn’t approve of our bad behavior, but He loves us even though – Believing that one day we will not behave that way any longer.

As parents we look for someone to guide us to be wise and discerning as we raise our kids. Well, I have found the best Mentor of all and He is Christ. He always shows love and grace, but He never backs down from a challenge and, if necessary, He will go “toe to toe” with sin and injustice, but He does it out of love knowing that what He is trying to teach is best for whoever. He is always willing to correct us and then let it go. He doesn’t hold a grudge because He loves us unconditionally.

I recently saw a young man I had in my class while working with the Head Start program. He was now fourteen years old. He asked me if I remembered him because he was the same young man who one day in class got upset with me and in a single second

scratched, kicked, and spit on me. Yes, I did remember him! It wasn't easy recovering from his behavior that day, but I had a choice to make and that was: To make him pay by not letting go of his offense against me, or gather myself and apply grace toward him. It was only because I had experienced Christ's grace toward me many times that I could choose the later. I had to discipline him with a "time out" but I guess I'll never forget his face when I allowed him to join the class on a planned field trip later that day. He knew that he didn't deserve it, and he almost knew that he wouldn't be allowed to go, but because of grace he did. GRACE: God's unmerited favor toward us, not earned, and not being expected.

As hard as it is, we must learn to not take things so personal. It clouds our judgment, or should I say God's judgment? It will cause us to deal out punishment in comparison to our hurt, disappointment, and feelings, and, let's be honest, that's really not justice but "pay backs." If the Lord gave us back what we deserved, we would be in DEEP TROUBLE.

April 22

“Trust Me?”

By Debbie Ousley

Y*OU* meet all kinds don'tcha? But the kind we're going to talk about today is the most dangerous kind. We've all met those who consider themselves to be charmers. They will woo you, say all the right things, do all the right acts, and from all outward appearances, they seem so-o-o-o right. But when they think they have won you over it begins, and, hey, they have the patience of Job too. If it takes a month or months, it doesn't matter to them. They are determined to see this scam through (for the payoff).

When it starts it's always very sullen; a little favor here and making an exception there, because they're "good guys" right? Individuals like this are no more than con artists.

The most dangerous element about this kind of character is that they mess with people's trust. You know what? That's a hard thing for us to give away now-a-days, and even harder to get back. When someone like this is found out, first we feel disappointed, and then, you know what comes next? **ANGER!**

Trust in another person is very valuable. When we trust others, we give a part of ourselves away. As guarded as people are today (mostly because of this kind of character) we really give a lot when we give our trust. It's no wonder we feel betrayed when we are used and our trust is mishandled. It's important to warn those who have taken on such an immoral life style. **WARNING: YOU WILL BE HURT!**

The churches seem to be a favorite target for this kind of person. "Hey, churches are supposed to love, give, love, and give some more. Jesus did." It's beyond my thinking and I feel a fear for those who have the guts (no heart) to mess with God's property this way. But it happens. You can tug on Superman's cape; you can spit in the wind, you can pull the mask off the Ol' Lone Ranger, but if I were you I'd think twice about messing with the Son of Man. Hebrews 10:31 *"It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God!"*

April 23

“I Need Oxygen” By Jerry D. Ousley

During the last few months of my three-year army career, I did a lot of flying. My wife had been called back to work, and since I was only a few months away from being discharged and had no job or source of income to return to, she and Jeremy (then three years old) came back home to Indiana while I stayed in Washington DC. By combining leave time and holidays I managed to get at least one three-day weekend per month. I would fly home, spend a few very enjoyable days with my family, then fly back. The return trip to Washington DC almost always found it raining but then that matched my mood since I didn't really want to leave.

One return trip in particular proved to be exceptionally stormy. It included an approximate fifteen-minute stop in the Greenville, South Carolina area. We descended, dropping into a fog so thick you could barely see the tip of the wing through the cabin window. It was eerie watching the smoke-like fog rolling over the wing. I liked looking from the window way up in the air like that. It always reminded me of the Twilight Zone episode where the guy saw the creature out on the wing of the plane and to be frank that fog was so thick I half-way expected to see one on that night.

As I watched, the landing lights came into view but it seemed we were going awfully fast and coming down way to soon, then with a sudden “thump” the jet hit the runway so hard all the oxygen masks dropped from their hidden-from-view compartments. It all happened so fast there was no time to panic and I think everyone on that jet thought, “what just happened?” Nothing was ever really explained but I figured that the fog made the ground appear too quickly to the pilots and they had to make adjustments to their landing procedure. It could have been a nasty situation but thank God they did the right things because we came to a stop safely, the passengers getting off left the cabin and those coming on board found their way to their seats and we went on to Washington DC without further incident.

It caused me to think how quickly things can happen. When the oxygen masks fell it was completely accidental but it proved they were there and working if we had needed them. Living life for God can be like that. How many times do things happen so quickly that we don't have time to think? God never promised us that when we came to Him everything would go

smooth and perfect all the time. In fact, in many cases there seems to be difficulties at every corner we turn in life. But He did promise that He'd never ever leave us nor forsake us.

In every situation and circumstance in which we find ourselves God is always there to let down the spiritual "oxygen masks" just when we need them. He won't make everything go completely smooth but He will be there even when it may seem like He's a million miles away. He's right there saying, "Just look to me and quit looking away to other things." His oxygen mask dangling in front of us is an assurance that when things don't go right and the situation appears to be hopeless that He is still in control and is still providing just what we need when we need it.

April 24

“Wolves of the Evening” By Jerry D. Ousley

We don't have a lot of wolves in Indiana, but we do have coyotes. A coyote doesn't get as large as a wolf but they are big enough. Every so often you see one standing along the road or running across the highway but they aren't there to show off or say, "Look at me," because normally they are after deer.

The other morning on my way to work I saw one of those critters. It was during the twilight of the day (I don't know why but I love that name – twilight just sounds inviting to me). I was speeding down the road just minding my own business and watching the traffic. I was also watching for deer because after hitting two over the years you get a bit leery of them. As I was going past a patch of standing trees, I caught a glimmer in my eyes and as I passed by there stood a large coyote by the highway. I'm certain that he was following a deer trail but this fellow just looked like he was taking it all in and watching the cars as they whizzed by. He just stood there looking stately like he had all the business in the world of being there.

They are a magnificent looking creature and if you love animals, they remind you of a big dog and it makes you just want to stop and get out of the car and pet the thing. But I don't think I'd advise doing that - Especially if you value your hand and want to keep it.

In a passing phrase Habakkuk 1:8 mentions the evening wolves. The verse is actually talking about horses, and states that they are fiercer than the evening wolves. That phrase, in just two words is very descriptive of the creature. They love to roam the early night in packs hunting for food. They are extremely dangerous creatures and can kill in an instant. The wolves of the evening roam about looking for whatever unfortunate creature, whether man or beast, which happens into their territory. Their sharp teeth rip and tear.

Daily we battle those evening wolves. They come at us like a terrible pack at times. Their form takes on many shapes. They have the advantage, or so it seems, because they have slept all day while their victims have worked and labored. Now, at evening when their victims are worn down from the day, and they are at their peak, they attack at our weakest point. They can take the form of bad news about a loved one, or after a hard day's work coming home to find out that the water heater has burst, or some other vital appliance has

gone on the blink and instead of getting to relax in our recliner we have to pull out the tool box and work some more. It could be problems with children, sickness whether it is ourselves or someone close to us. They can attack as financial difficulties which leave us nearly hopeless and we work every hour we can get to earn the money to pay those indebtednesses, and it never seems to be enough. And then we listen to the news and find out that our government has once again raised a tax or that food or fuel prices have gone up yet another day. They are disguised and sometimes it is difficult to see them, but they are ever present and relentless.

Our evening wolves are none other than the devil and his cohorts. They seek to destroy us in any way they can. They know our hot buttons and they are more than eager to push them because they know that they will eventually wear us down. There are days when it seems we have no way to be rid of them and sometimes we're tempted to just lie down and let them have at us.

But there is a defense against these evening wolves. He is our only defense really. We speak of none other than Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that He said that He would always be with us. He is the brilliant White Stallion that is fiercer than the evening wolves. When we realize who our enemy is and who our defender is then we can call out to Him and He will take care of those evening wolves.

It isn't always that easy because even though Christ will ever be there for us, we have to call out to Him. It would be nice if He just automatically took care of those evening wolves. But then that would make us soft and ungrateful. He wants us to do battle with them by resisting their temptations to fly off the handle, or say things we shouldn't say whether that be in the form of bad language or in retaliation to someone with words we wish we could take back. We can, through and by Jesus Christ, resist those evening wolves, but we've got to beware and know when they are attacking.

April 25

“Plans That Work” By Jerry D. Ousley

Have you ever made plans that just didn't work? There was a day I had planned to do some writing. There were several projects I'd been working on and this day was reserved for getting as many of those as possible finished. There were just a few errands that had to be taken care of first. A trip to the bank was necessary. Okay, that wouldn't take very long ... except it was the first of the month when people who received government checks did their banking. The five-minute trip I had figured on turned out to be forty-five minutes.

Then we needed a few things from the department store, movies that had to be returned, a required trip to the hardware store, and a stop at a local restaurant for takeout. Okay, I don't mean to be complaining here; these things were all necessary and had to be done. The problem was that I had made very ambitious plans to accomplish too much in a single day. I got some of my writing done; perhaps not as much as I had intended but then, all in all the day had been a successful one.

Plans don't always work. At times it's mainly because we try to cram way too much into a twenty-four-hour time period. But there is a way to make plans work. If you're like me one of the things I do is try to do too much. We need to make our plans first of all workable, then reasonable.

The temptation that I am plagued with is that once I make all these plans then I go at it like my butt is on fire trying to get everything done. What happens next is that they all turn out to be work and burdensome. What should have been something I wanted to do was transformed into something I dreaded to do.

If we want our plans to turn out differently, we should take a look at Proverbs 16:3 and see what the Bible says about it. It says, *“Commit your works to the Lord, and your thoughts will be established.”* First of all, we need to do what we do like we are doing it for God because in fact we really are. In Colossians 3:23 Paul writes, *“And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men.”* Our plans should be thought of as work given us by God. It is committing our works to Him. If we think about it in that way, it suddenly becomes an honor to do what we do. It is not being done for men but for God. Our attitude should

reflect one that would be expected if we were on a very important mission for the Master. To be chosen to accomplish our duties, no matter what they are, if we are doing them for God and they are tasks that our Lord would do, we can not only be happy in our work but also consider ourselves fortunate and privileged to do them.

Proverbs 3:23 tells us something more. It says that after we have committed our works to the Lord that our thoughts will be established. It means that we can accomplish what was put into our minds to do. It's like an artist that has finally finished a masterpiece. He or she must feel elated to finally see what was in their minds eye, now before them on the canvas. What they had envisioned is now a reality.

There is a key to this. We must be listening to God in order for our plans to be His. We do what He wants us to do. If our work is His work then it must be according to His plan which means we've got to get ourselves out of the way. We can't expect God to put His blessing on something that is selfish or might do harm to others. But if we've put our plans in His hands then the day will come when we can stand back and admire the finished work. These plans will work.

April 26

“Moving Day” By Jerry D. Ousley

When we were pastors there came a time when we outgrew our facility and moved our congregation into another building. It was exciting for our growing group to have more room. But it took a lot of hard work before we could ever have our first service there.

There was painting, cleaning, laying new carpet and vinyl, minor repairs and so forth that just had to be done before we could ever move in. We wanted the building to be accessible to the handicapped so there was a ramp to be constructed. It took a lot of preparation but when it was finally done it was an exhilarating experience to move in.

A few days before, we had to carry over all of our necessary equipment that was used in service and in Sunday school classes. Saying farewell to the old building wasn't easy. There was a twinge in my heart as I looked around at the barren room we had used for so long as a sanctuary. But it was good to know that it would soon be used for a more concentrated ministry and wasn't going to be vacant long. That was another moving experience converting the old building into a fellowship facility and a youth center. I'm sure that everyone in town wondered what this bunch of backwoods hicks was doing when we went rolling a pool table on its side down the street to our old building.

Making a decision for God is a lot like that. Of course, all the preparation was done by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. He made sure that things were set up and cleaned. We can't do any of that type of preparation ourselves. We often try saying, "I'll make things right with God when I can get my life straightened up." But really there is nothing we can do except come to Him.

It may be tempting to look back at our old life and remember the good times we thought we had but we also need to remember all the bad things that took place. The children of Israel made that mistake. When God delivered them from Egypt, they lost sight of the goal of reaching the "Promised Land" and there came a day when they thought about the good things of Egypt. They remembered the good food and how plentiful it was. They remembered their homes and maybe the good times with their children. But they forgot all the slavery, the

beatings, and death that the Egyptians inflicted on them. If we are tempted by the things that were good in our old life don't leave out all those terrible things that went on as well.

Perhaps you haven't made a decision for Christ yet. Maybe you've been thinking about the mess that may be going on in your life and you know in your heart that you need to make a change. Somewhere you heard about God and being a Christian and thought, "That just isn't for me." But lately it's been reoccurring more and more in your mind. You know a change must take place before things fall apart.

Jesus can become that "moving day" life-changing experience that you need. Make a decision to follow Him today. I promise you won't regret it.

April 27

“Time to Mow Again” By Jerry D. Ousley

Spring has sprung, leaves are not leaving but arriving, and flowers are blooming. Spring is here. I'm glad to see the end of winter but I suddenly realized that a much-dreaded job is now upon me – mowing the lawn. I've written articles before about mowing and if you've kept up with them you know that it's not my favorite thing to do. I can think of an abundant number of jobs I have put off that equally need to be finished but the inevitable is that procrastination does not keep the grass from getting longer and taller.

The good news is that this season we have managed to acquire enough money to buy a new riding mower. It sets my heart all to flutter to think about not having to push the lawn mower all over the yard and to be honest (remember I am a man and we love those new toys) I'm looking forward to breaking in the new mower. I can tell you this: push mowing for the last few years has definitely made me to appreciate the fact that a new riding tractor is a luxury I don't want to do without.

Today is Thursday and we are scheduled to pick it up. I should have mowed earlier in the week when the weather was nicer but I just couldn't make myself go out and push mow the yard one more time knowing that today I can be riding it done. So, I put it off all week planning to get it finished in record time tonight.

But alas, rain is threatening for the next two days. I've been sitting here in my office at work monitoring the weather outside. It's been pretty good up until now. The time is 2:45 PM. We pick up the mower at 4:30 PM. But some sprinkles have already fallen. Maybe it will hold off. But if it doesn't then I get to take this new riding mower home and park it in the garage until the weather clears enough to do it right.

Why do we do that? We put things off until we can't do them and then sigh with a big, “Oh well. I was going to do it but now I can't.” The old cliché of the guy with a hole in his roof goes something like this, “When it's raining, I can't get on the roof to fix the leak and when the sun's shining it don't leak.” That's classic procrastination. My wife has compared me many times to Paw Kettle: *“I'll have to fix that one of these days.”* Who knows when that day will arrive?

Whether we want to admit it or not we procrastinate with God too. He speaks to our hearts about things we need to take care of in our spiritual lives with a gentle reminder. But how often do we push it back with an excuse we know doesn't hold water. We know that God knows the truth but we justify ourselves anyway.

We need to take care of those things of the soul. I know that when I finally get around to doing what God has been prompting me to do in my heart that I feel much better. I've done that so many times over the years you'd think I'd know better by now and just take care of it to begin with. But I don't always. I'd bet that I'm not the only one.

Let's examine our lives. Let's listen to what God is telling us to take care of and then let's get it done. We'll be better off and we won't have to worry about all those lost opportunities because we put things off. Well, I'll get back to figuring out just how I'm going to get the yard done in the rain.

April 28

“It Sure Makes Me Mad” By Debbie Ousley

“Those who don’t cherish the elderly have forgotten where they came from and where they are going. Those who take advantage of the elderly and don’t change their ways, we think we know where they are going!” Forgive me if that sounds hard, but what’s really hard is trying to understand anyone who would charm, cheat, or lie to our elderly, all for the love of a ‘buck.’

As we watch the evening news, we are seeing more and more stories of our elderly being defrauded, stories that should be very upsetting to us who have integrity and have a concern for everyone’s grandparents. My prayer is that I am never required to sit on a jury trying one of these cases (or maybe that should be their prayer).

A “good” salesperson can swoop in and make their commission by selling an item to someone who is a “target” no matter if they need the item or not. An example of this is one close to my heart concerning my “Mom” and a \$1200.00 sweeper. This was sold to her to assist her in cleaning the carpets of a small two-bedroom mobile home. By the way, the sweeper and all of its attachments nearly filled up one of those bedrooms!

The product was no doubt worth the money to someone young and strong enough to operate it. It would have been good for someone who had a big house and three kids to clean up after, BUT COME ON! You may ask, “Did she use it?” Yes, yes, she did – To hang her housecoat on! But it required someone a bit stronger than herself to run it through her “trailer.” It makes a person wonder if those who prey on our elderly would approve of someone doing the same to their loved ones. I think not!

We all should take these kinds of acts personal. I do, because I know where I’m going! I’m headed for sixty . . . seventy years old and I’ve got a news flash for those opportunists, **SO ARE YOU!**

Just as a reminder to the elderly, not trying to get in your business or anything but be cautious not to give out too much of your private information over the phone. Don’t let anyone in your home you don’t know – even to use the phone. Get a second opinion before allowing

anyone to work on your heating or cooling system, or do any home repairs. Don't hesitate to ask a trusted family member or friend for advice. You really aren't a "bother," that's what they are there for...

April 29

“Where Is God?” By Debbie Ousley

I'm sure as I write this article that this question has been asked many times, and I have asked it myself more times than I'd really like to admit. Every time I have felt saddened because of it. That was, until I realized that Jesus Himself wondered about His Father's presence in His time of need and despair (Matthew 27:46). “Father, why have You forsaken Me?” All of my situations pale in comparison to Jesus' reason for asking His Father, “Where are you?”

Jesus had done everything that was required of Him while He was on earth. He pointed people to His Father many, many times and then endured humiliation, pain, and suffering to finish His appointed mission. Then to realize that He was all alone must have been a hurt that words cannot describe.

We get bent out of shape if others don't acknowledge we've cleaned the church. Lord, help us as only You can! Disappointment is a hard thing to overcome because it requires trusting someone. Trust these days is a precious commodity maybe because we do get disappointed. You are probably thinking, “Wait a minute, Debbie, aren't we supposed to trust God and others?” Of course, the answer is, “Yes.”

As Jesus questioned His Father's whereabouts during His last minutes on this Earth (which, by the way, hadn't been a vacation for Him compared to His present home), this question came out of the pain and despair of His physical man. God could not look upon all our sins that had come upon Jesus at that moment. This was a part of the mission Jesus knew was coming in His Spirit but could not imagine its impact on His physical.

We have to understand the whole reason for Jesus coming to this Earth by way of the man-child and that was to experience, and I might add, successfully endure all that we must experience so that the scripture might be fulfilled. Hebrews 4:15 – *“For we do not have a High Priest which cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin.”*

Do you see it? Nothing we must endure while on this Earth, no temptation or disappointment is new to Jesus. He's been there! So, we can't say, "He doesn't understand." He does understand and He has compassion and empathy in our times of questioning, "Where are you?"

I believe some disappointments come because we expect more from others than they are able to give us, or are even good for us. As 'hard' as it might sound, just like Jesus needing to experience what He did so He would understand us, we must experience things so as to understand others. How can I have compassion and understanding for someone else who has been disappointed and hurt by others if I haven't experienced it myself?

Let's be reminded that the story of Jesus didn't end up on the cross with Him feeling betrayed and alone, but with the next chapter came deliverance, joy and power. The same Father He of Whom He had wondered, "Where are You?" raised Him from the dead, and He was taken back home to sit by His side.

Our hope in disappointment, loss and pain is that God will deliver us when we look to Him, not with lost hope, but with faith believing that He does want good for His children. Deuteronomy 4:29 says, *"But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul."*

April 30

“Patience”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I *was* never very patient as a kid (come to think of it, it's not one of my best qualities now). I remember one year at Christmas time our parents had given us the money to buy presents for our siblings. I won't say how long ago this was but I can tell you that it was when the "Etch-A-Sketch" first became popular. I really wanted one.

I began to shop for my two brothers and sister but I couldn't take my eyes off that coveted "Etch-A-Sketch." I figured and looked and, Wow! I could buy them something else and still have enough money left over for this great and much needed piece of equipment. So, I did (much to my parents' disapproval I should add).

Feeling very proud of myself, I strutted around the house with my "Etch-A-Sketch," the envy of my brothers and sister. When Christmas came and I began to open my presents, yep! You guessed it! One of them had bought me an "Etch-A-Sketch!" Even though I felt guilty and very small, I couldn't undo what my lack of patience had caused.

Nearly two thousand years ago, one hundred and twenty people gathered in a dimly lit, hot second story room, and waited in prayer for what was to come next. Their Master had been taken up into Heaven but before He went, he had instructed them to wait for power from on high. The next ten days were spent in longing expectation. In the beginning of those days the number had been around five hundred (see 1 Corinthians 15:6), but as the days passed more and more had become discouraged and left, until only the one hundred and twenty remained. These men and women were greatly rewarded for their patience because the Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit entered the room in a very dramatic and powerful way and so the Church was born (you can read about this for yourself in the Acts 2).

I shudder to think how the Church might have turned out or even if it would still be intact, had they demanded the instant answers and action that we insist on today. Sometimes these conveniences are a blessing but if we aren't careful, they can be a curse that causes us to not look to God for the answers. God requires patience. That is why He sometimes takes so long to answer a prayer. It's not because He's too busy, or will take care of it when He gets around to it, but because He knows what we need the most first.

Patience never comes easy. Paul tells us in Romans 5:3 that “*tribulation produces patience.*” It is not something that can be learned in a book or taught by an individual. What I am telling you is a good lesson, but it will not teach you patience. Patience only comes by experience. This experience is usually in some form of hardship. As we have trusted God and waited for His answer during this time, whether it is physical, emotional, or conditional, in the end, when the answer does come, we also acquire more patience as a by-product.

So, the next time you find yourself in a hardship (and I’m sure some of you are there right now), remember that no matter how much you are tempted to just “throw it all to the wind” God really does care, He really is there, and He definitely knows what is going on inside of you. He isn’t withholding from you but He just wants you to see the broader picture. You will be better for it. Your faith will be increased because of it. You will gain new tools for telling others about Christ from your experience. You will be closer to God than you’ve ever been in your life when you get through it. You will gain more patience.

May 1

“Radio Station LIFE” By Jerry D. Ousley

When I was about eleven years old Mom and Dad bought us a record player. It was used and I'm not sure where they bought it but it was new to us. I realize that there are many today who may not know what a record player was. Those were not the days of electronic gadgets small enough to fit into the palm of your hand and no one had even envisioned MP3 or digital sound and images so if you wanted to hear music you either played a record or listened to a transistor radio (well, I'm really showing my age now so I'll stop there). We felt like we were among the rich to have such a possession of our own. It had two detachable speakers. But the feature that set this record player apart from the rest was its microphone, allowing the operator to blend his or her voice right into the music – the Karaoke forerunner!

Being the brilliant children we were, we came up with a game to play. Dad had given us some old forty-fives (that meant that the records were about seven inches in diameter and played at a speed of forty-five RPM – rotations per minute) and we decided to play “radio station.” Our room was on the second story of our house and it was summertime. So, we opened the window, set the “miracle” record player up close to it with the speakers pointing out and began announcing the songs and spinning records. What disc jockeys we were!

We were having a wonderful time and became completely oblivious to what was going on outside. We played for a couple of hours. Then we noticed something that we hadn't expected. Down on the sidewalk below, a small crowd of children had gathered to listen to our “broadcast!” At first, we were embarrassed but then we began to really ham it up!

Isn't life like this sometimes? We go on about our business, unaware of others around us yet we influence people every day. Friends, family, even those who don't seem to like us, are listening to our words, and watching our lives.

Whether we realize it or not, we are on Radio Station LIFE. Are you giving your best performance? All too often we get wrapped up in our own problems and concerns and forget about our affect on our audience. But each of us touches the lives of others every day. How we react to anger, how we receive complements, what we do when the lady at the checkout

counter gives us too much change, and on and on. People see what we do. If we want to be good Christians and influence others to come to Jesus Christ then we need to realize that the boldest and loudest message we preach is not with words but what we broadcast from Radio Station LIFE.

What about our own problems? God wants to help us with them. Often His help comes by our own help and influence to others. We will find that as we become more and more concerned about them our own problems don't seem so bad and just maybe, we'll become too busy to think about our own problems. Every day we need to list those things we have to be thankful for, concentrate on them and then use our talents and experiences to help others. Turn your life over to Him and allow Him to make you the best DJ on Radio Station LIFE you can possibly be!

May 2

“Lemonade”

By Jerry D. Ousley

When I awoke my bed was surrounded by doctors and nurses with unending questions. I had become ill while in the US Army basic training program. With only two weeks of training left, during a very critical period of field testing, I had bled heavily from my rectum. I tried to shake it off but after that, I couldn't complete a two-mile run because it seemed all my strength and breath just left me.

I had complained to the drill sergeant who had told me that I could go on sick call but also told me that if I missed any of this training it would have to be made up. Anyone who has experienced basic will tell you that all you want to do during that period of time is to get it done and move on to the next step. These were my feelings and so I tried to push on. But my body wouldn't allow it.

A week later I found myself giving in and signing up for sick call. Thinking it was the flu (after this particular bivouac probably a third of our platoon came down with the flu), I was checked in to the hospital and took some blood tests, as well as a host of other tests, and afterwards I was so tired that all I wanted to do was sleep. Even though I was placed in a ward with eight or ten other soldiers who wanted to talk and play board games, I had no trouble at all drifting off into the world of slumber.

The next thing I knew the doctor was shaking me and asking questions at the same time. When I looked around and saw all the other doctors and nurses gathered around my bed, I knew something wasn't right. This was no typical flu bug.

What had happened when I had experienced the bleeding about a week before, according to the doctor, was that I had lost almost half of the blood in my body which explained my sudden loss of energy. After more testing the prognosis was that I had developed a peptic ulcer. The main concern however, was not the ulcer but re-building my blood supply.

It would take a month or longer and to my horror, meant that I would have to make up those last few days of training after all. Seven weeks later I was back into a unit to finish my training and, to make a long story short, arrived five weeks late to my AIT unit. Most of the people I

had been in basic with were already very close to finishing. It was a trying time emotionally for me. I questioned God "Why?"

Since this incident I have taught others that God has a way of taking life's lemons and squeezing them into lemonade. You see, even though this seemed to be a very traumatic setback, it proved to be to my advantage. Almost every soldier that I would have graduated basic with was assigned to Korea - which was not the most desirable place for a young man who wanted to take his family with him when assigned to a duty. But because of my delay with the ulcer, when it came time for my assignment, I was stationed in Washington, DC.

God does that for those who have committed themselves to Him. Many of you can recite similar incidents that perhaps you had passed off as mere coincidence. But God has a plan for us and in His love and mercy, will make lemonade out of those lemons when we put our trust in Him. Regardless of your situation, whether your troubles are financial, physical, marital, or emotional, put your trust in God and look to Him during this time of need, pain, and frustration. He will see us through it and turn it into freshly squeezed lemonade!

May 3

“It’s Not What It Looks Like” By Jerry D. Ousley

I don't know how it is in other states but I know that our Indiana Highway Department is notorious for having what looks to be too many people on the job. If you work for the Indiana Highway Department, I want you to know that I really don't mean to insult you here and maybe all isn't as it looks, but when you pass by a crew and see one man digging a hole while three are leaning on shovels telling him how deep to dig, how wide to dig and where to throw his next shovel full of dirt, well it looks a little suspicious to us passers-by.

But I know that situations aren't always what they appear to be and that it depends from which side of the window you are looking through. For instance, while driving through town, my wife and I have observed couples mowing their yards. The wife is hard at work behind the mower while the husband looks like he's taking it easy. But I know from experience that there have been times when I just finished my shift with the mower and my wife was taking over while I rested. To those driving by it looked like another lazy man letting his wife do all the work. Sometimes we're just too quick to judge, aren't we? I realize that there are some out there who would lean back and let the precious little lady slave away, but all of us aren't like that.

I don't know how many times I've criticized fellow ministers for their choice of messages or the way they handled a situation. Surely, I could have done better. But over the years I've found out that the old saying about throwing stones if you live in a glass house, well, I think you see the picture. Another well used and worn phrase says, "What goes around comes around." Our criticisms have a way of coming back to us.

My wife and I were watching the program "Survivor." You may have watched it yourself. One of the ladies on the show decided that she wanted to go home. Her mother was ill with cancer and she was having second thoughts about going away for what could have been thirty-nine days and taking a chance of something happening to her mom. My first response was that she was using that as an excuse to bail. I felt extremely guilty when it flashed on the screen that her mother passed away eight days after she left. There go those feet in my mouth again. I think I'm going to start putting sugar on my toes! It's a funny sight, seeing a fat man try to get his feet in his mouth but some of us have gotten pretty good at it.

It's all too easy for us to criticize others. Often times it becomes a way to take attention from ourselves and get it focused on someone else. It temporarily relieves the pressure on us. But let me tell you, I know from experience that it is only a temporary relief. It will come back to haunt us.

That's exactly what Jesus was talking about when He spoke of judging. He said "Don't judge so you won't be judged" (Matthew 7:1). In other words, it's best that we don't pass judgment on others especially in the light of relating how much better we could do the job or what we would have done in the same situation. How do we really know that? Since I've been quoting worn clichés here, what about the one that says "Don't judge a man until you've walked a mile in his shoes?" That's pretty sound advice. So, we might want to take a moment and toss that stone up in the air a few times while we think about it before we hurl it at someone, especially if we live in that glass house!

May 4

“Do-Overs”

By Jerry D. Ousley

On a hot summer day, a game of baseball is a wonderful pass-time for a group of restless boys. The sweat trickled down our faces like great drops of rain. Ever so often a gentle breeze would sweep through the ball field and dry the sweat leaving salty clean streaks on an otherwise dirty face.

It was my turn to bat and the pressure was on. The score was four to five and we needed a run badly. It was the bottom of the ninth. The first guy up at bat had made it to second base giving our team a ray of hope. However, the next two fellows had managed to strike out. It wasn't looking very good for the home team.

But we were now in a position to win the game. All it would take was a simple home run. If I could just hit a home run the score would be six to five at the bottom of the ninth – We Win! There was only one thing between the home run and the victory; the little word “if.”

The first pitch was thrown and I swung with everything a four-foot eighty pound small-framed body could put out. “Strike one!” was the call from the umpire. It sure would have been nice to hit that ball on the first pitch but at least there were two more.

The second pitch came hurtling at me like a freshly fired cannonball. “Bal-I-I-I One!” screamed the ump; another pitch; “Bal-I-I-I two!” Okay the next one has to be it. With a swing that almost took me to the ground I heard the umpire say, “Strike two!” Oh man – two and two. The next one was also a ball naturally and so I stood at a full count.

D-Day had arrived and the pressure was definitely on. The pitch – the swing – the call: “Strike three yer out!” I couldn't believe it. Without even thinking I cried out like I had done so many times in our practice games, “Do-over; do-over!” But in an actual game there are no do-overs.

Thank God that He does give us do-overs in life. Many people will disagree with that saying something like “we only get one go around in life.” Perhaps it does seem that way. But

I can think of many instances where people have completely blown life and by the grace of God have been offered a second chance.

I worked with an individual who spent years addicted to drugs and alcohol but who finally found Jesus in his life. He is a changed individual. He can never reclaim the lost years but they say, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life."

The Bible says, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."* (2 Corinthians 5:17).

May 5

“It’s Beyond Me!” By Debbie Ousley

I recently heard a true story that really “blew me away.” A minister had been counseling this young man whose life was in a bad way. One night, very late, the pastor’s telephone rang, and it was this young man. He told the pastor he was at his wits end; he had a gun lying in his lap, and he was going to kill himself. The pastor, realizing the severity of the situation, reminded the young man how much God loved him and pleaded with him to turn his life over to Christ.

Now, I want you to hear the man’s reply: “Give my life to Christ . . . you’ve gotta be kidding, pastor. I’ve got too much living to do!” The young man believed that turning to Christ was a step down from where he was at that point in his life. And just where was he? Hopeless and contemplating taking his own life! How can a person be so deceived?

I realize our reality is what we are living in right now, but can we not believe in a brighter reality? The reality of knowing Christ is not a “giving-up” so much, but of getting so much. Whose life had this guy been watching anyway?

Are we Christians giving out the message that we’ve made the sacrifice and if so, why then did Jesus die? Why would He tell us in John 10:10 *“I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly . . .”* [than you’ve got now]. Why would He tell us in Romans 6:23 that the wages [or my pay] for my sin nature is death, but His gift is life.

The word “gift” implies something good. And ya know all that living that old boy was going to do wasn’t gonna be all that long with the kind of thinking he was having. But the time after his life would be eternal. That’s a reality I pray no one has to live. [If you get time, read John 1:4-5].

May 6

“Yell For Me” By Debbie Ousley

*T*here was a little girl who came into the Youth Center when it was open. I believe she had just turned six years old. She was a treasure; an angel at times, but other times tottering on the line of being a “smarty.” In a way it made her witty beyond her years.

When she was playing a competitive game against another child she would say, “Yell for me, Debbie,” or anyone else who was watching that she felt should be supporting her. The amazing thing about her though was that she didn’t just say that when she was playing, but also when her sisters competed. You can guess who she wanted us to cheer for when she competed against one of them.

“Cheer me on!” “Let me know you’re out there!” “Encourage me!” My goodness, everyone sure could use a lot more of having someone on the sidelines saying, “You can do it!”; someone making some noise, letting us know we are not alone in this thing, whatever it may be.

Kids like to be cheered-on. They receive it for what it is: A sign of support, and even if they lose, they don’t feel like they were alone. But have you noticed that when they start getting older that the cheering isn’t received as much as support, but that their ability is being questioned?

Is that pride or independence? Is that why older kids (adults) will sometimes receive a word of encouragement as pity or consolation? Maybe it has to do with who it is that is doing the encouraging, or how they feel about that person. I don’t know.

But I do know the little kids have the right idea (but what else is new?). A few more, “Cheer for me’s,” “Yell my name,” would sure help anyone anytime they could get them.

May 7

“Po’ But Proud” By Jerry D. Ousley

Back when I was about twelve which was - let’s just say a few years ago - we had started a local fad in our neighborhood. Our Summer play clothes consisted of a t-shirt with holes, a pair of “high water” pants (for those of you who don’t know what those are, they were pants you’d outgrown and the cuffs were a few inches above your ankles – right in style now-a-days), and a length of binder-twine for a belt. We looked like something right out of “Lil’ Abner” (if you remember him). It was very comfortable attire but not very fashionable.

Anyway, there came a weekend that our family went to visit with my uncle’s family in Hamilton, OH. We always loved visiting with them. This particular weekend however, I decided I was going to take my “comfortable clothes” and told my mother that I was packing my “play clothes.” She replied that it was fine, thinking jeans and so forth, not the uniform she allowed us to wear around our country home.

We made the trip to Hamilton. The next morning, we all showered. My cousins both emerged from the bathroom with nice polyester pants (that was considered really “dressy” at that time by the way). It came my turn. After the shower I proceeded to put on my “comfortable clothes” thinking that I was sure to be the envy of all in my “country fashioned wardrobe.” I was wrong.

I pranced from the bathroom straight into the kitchen and asked, “Is it almost time for breakfast?” I was expecting total admiration from all but the look in their eyes was far from that. My horrified mother responded with, “what have you done?” to which I defended, “I told you I was bringing my ‘play clothes . . .’” From their reaction the pride I had in my attire soon turned to shame and I don’t believe I ever wore that outfit again, even at home.

But for awhile I had been very proud of my rags. Pride will always do that to us. In the Book of Obadiah, the Bible relates a prophecy given to the nation of Edom. Read it for yourself. Basically, God told the Edomites (who were rock dwelling people) that even though they were lifted up in pride and hard to get to in their mountainous homes, He would bring them down. Pride of one’s self is a very dangerous thing.

As a matter of fact, God hates it. Yet we lift ourselves up with pride over and over again, most of the time not even aware that we are doing it. As the title of this article suggests, even those in this country that are considered poor are proud of it.

Pride isn't limited to the rich and famous but strikes even the hearts of those who have almost nothing. According to God's word it is dangerous because it causes us to think about ourselves all the time.

Pride tells us that we must be on top and be the best even when we are wrong. My wife and I were just discussing the other night a young girl we know who is so competitive and so proud to be a winner, that when she is losing, she'll say, "I'll let you win," just so she's still on top. Folks that is simply reflective of an ever-growing attitude and problem in our nation. Until we can "weed" pride from our lives and really put God first how can we ever expect His will to be done in us?

Even the church of today is proud of how many they had in service Sunday, or how large the offering was. I always feel like turning tail and running when pastors brag about their large attendance this week. It's a loaded question to ask, "How many did you have Sunday?" God isn't interested in the numbers. God is interested in the quality. Really, He is.

Let's throw pride out, even if we're "po." "*Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.*" (Proverbs 16:18).

May 8

“Sisters”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Sisters can really upset a boy's world, can't they? You think you have to do everything better than a girl when you're a boy. In fact, your peers even taunt you with things like, "you throw like a girl!" Or, "You run like a girl!" Boys take it as an insult but then they are shown up by the girls! You move the guys in the outfield up when a girl gets up to bat only to have her knock it out of the field. It's very frustrating to a boy.

Of course, I'm talking here from my experience as a boy which was, let's just say, more years ago than I care to admit. Things have changed. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not. Some of it is but somehow it just doesn't seem completely right. I mean, if a girl protests that she isn't allowed on the boy's football team some equal rights society will come to her aid and force the issue. There she is hustling out with the boys! But let one of those boys try to get into an organization for girls and, well, that's a completely different matter (somehow?). Oh well, I'll climb down from my soap box now.

My sister was no different. Euleda was born into a family of boys. I was the oldest, she was next and after her were Ken and Terry. With three brothers to contend with I suppose you learn to hold your own very soon. But her competitiveness was a threat to me. When we were young, I didn't like her very much because she could sometimes out rope, out run, and out fish me. I didn't like that.

When I was in the second grade (of course that put her in the first grade) we didn't live very far from school and so we walked. Since I was the oldest, I was supposed to look after her but I must confess that I didn't do a very good job. I remember one particular day as we walked home that a kid came up to us. For some strange reason (and I've never been able to figure out why) he liked my sister. He wanted to hold hands with her as we walked. But she didn't want to. Now, as her "protective older brother" it should have been my job to tell him to leave her alone. However, he plainly told me that if I didn't make her hold his hand that he'd shortly "pound" me. I wasn't very brave and this kid was bigger than me; I didn't look forward to a "pounding." So, I promptly insisted on her holding his hand.

I've always been ashamed of that. Even though I felt a "pounding" wasn't worth a sister, I still should have stood up for her. But I didn't. It taught me the wrong way how to handle a bully. Nothing more came of the matter except that I'm sure Sis held a grudge for some time. I can't say that I blamed her.

God isn't like that. It may seem sometimes that He lets others bully us around while He does nothing, but let me assure you that God is always on the job. If He lets others get away with it, it's because He has a more important and beneficial reason for it. He never runs away when others push us around. The Bible tells us that He is always with us and will never leave nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). That's not only comforting but also lets us know that He's always there. He won't let us be bullied for long and He'll never make us hold hands with the bully.

May 9

“Oasis”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I took a vacation day today. I wasn't planning a trip and I wasn't trying to get paid for being off sick. It was just a day to get caught up on some things that I hadn't had time to get finished (like this article).

It has been an unusually busy week, working extra hours on the job, and being away from home almost every evening. It left me feeling exhausted and I just needed to catch up.

I know that you've been there too. A day of peace and quiet is just the prescription needed to get things back into perspective. We all need that from time to time. If we don't take it on our own then our bodies will eventually take it for us.

This day is like an oasis in the week. I love being with my wife and my daughter, but a quiet day at home while she's at work and our daughter is at school, being able to do just what I have planned to do is refreshing and calming. Don't tell me you've never been there or at least wished that you had.

God ordains oases in our lives. He gives us those "time outs" to allow us moments of refreshing so we can get our thinking straight again and be ready to face the things that will always be there. We can't escape them. We can't run away because they will somehow find us, whether as the same old problems or under guise of brand-new ones, they'll catch us. We might as well face them.

As the daily battle rages on, there are just times we've got to get away. I can't tell you how many times I have faced a situation without the slightest idea of what to do. But after a few hours of sleep or time away from the problem the answer just pops into my head. I know you can identify with that.

The "oases" in life are ordained of God. There comes a time for all of us to get away – To put ourselves into a place where we can hear from Him. In Psalm 46:10, He said, *“Be still and know that I am God.”* To know Him and to know that He is with us in our battles we've got

to get somewhere and be still. We need to listen to Him and that requires us to stop doing things, stop talking, and focus our attention on Him.

I'm not sitting under a palm tree sipping lemonade. I'm not on some exotic beach just sitting in the sun (physically anyway). But just the same I'm going to enjoy my oasis today. Maybe it's time for you to go to an oasis too.

May 10

“Signs of the Times” By Jerry D. Ousley

People are always looking for signs; something to tell them what is going to happen or what to do next. That would be very helpful, wouldn't it? After all, we have road signs that direct us to where we want to go. It would be pretty hard without them.

I remember once as a teenage Christian I was riding home with my parents after dark. I was in the back seat of our family car. I was thinking about the miraculous things God can do. As I thought about these things, I spotted a hill looming in the darkness and remembered the verse where Jesus said that if we had enough faith, we could tell a mountain to be removed from its place and cast into the sea (Matthew 21:21). I thought about it and prayed in my heart, “Lord, I've got enough faith; I command that hill to be removed from its spot and cast into the sea!” I sat there fully expecting to see that hill uprooted and flying through the air toward the ocean. But, it didn't. As I became disappointed that God hadn't honored my faith, I prayed, “Lord, why didn't You do what You said You'd do?” Immediately this answer was returned to my mind, “You don't know who lives on that hill.” Then I realized what a selfish prayer I had prayed.

People are constantly looking for signs of God. “Lord! If You'll just give me a sign that You are real, I'll serve You!” But Jesus answered this very question to the Pharisees. They basically said, “Give us a sign that You are who You say You are and we'll serve You.” Jesus responded, “*When it is evening, you say, Fair weather; for the sky is red. And in the morning, Foul weather today; for the sky is red and gloomy. Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky, but you cannot see the signs of the times! A wicked and adulterous generation seeks after a sign. And there shall no sign be given to it, except the sign of the prophet Jonah.*” (Matthew 16:2-4).

In a way, Jesus was telling them that there were signs all around them but they just refused to see them. It is the same today. God has left signs all around if we'd just see them. One of the things He is doing is dropping signs pointing to the fact that He will be returning very soon. Now, “soon” could mean today, tomorrow, next month, or even ten years from now. We've got to remember when we're talking about an eternal being like God, time doesn't mean much.

What happened after 9-11 was a sign. I'm not talking about the actual incident. I'm talking about the response of America to the tragedy. Look at the history of this great country. During its two hundred plus years, every major disaster has been followed by a period of great revival. The disaster caused people to turn their hearts to God and great things came out of the war or tragedy.

However, even though we prayed and thought about God for a couple of weeks, it wasn't long before the politicians who were praying went right back to supporting the issues that are anti-God. It was only a few days before our schools were told "you can't pray to God here." It was only a few short months when they tried to say that reciting the "Pledge of Allegiance" was wrong because of one short statement about God.

Our morals are worse than before. Look at the advertisements of the newest shows that are coming out this fall on television: They are blatantly sexual. Yes, the signs are here. All we have to do is look for them, and ask ourselves, "are we ready?"

May 11

“Smashed Fingers” By Jerry D. Ousley

A few years ago, we decided to go on a weekend family mini-vacation. It was going to be a three-day weekend and not much was going on so it was a perfect time. The only thing stopping us was that the car needed an oil change. I decided to do it myself. Even though I would never profess to be a mechanic, this was a simple task and I had done it many times before. So, I purchased the oil and filter needed to do a good job.

It was during the early spring of the year when we have warm days and cold days. This was a cold day. Our young daughter wanted to help Dad with almost everything he did. So, we went out to the garage, raised the hood on the car, and began our task. Now, this was the kind of hood that had the shock-type lifters to hold it up instead of springs like the good old days. The hood was up, and I was working away. I had to crawl under the car for just a second to get a wrench I had dropped. Because of the cold, Megan had gotten bored with the job and was on her way into the house. So, I got down to look under the car and had my fingers in the hood well for balance. About that time, our cat decided to jump up on the car and this was just enough bounce to cause the weak lifters holding the hood up to “think” that I had decided to shut the hood, and so, in an instant, I found myself half laying on the floor of the garage with the hood completely shut on three of my fingers.

I yelled out, not so much in pain because at this point my fingers were numb, but more in being startled at the situation. I couldn’t get up and to get out required someone to pull the hood release inside the car. Thankfully, Megan had not quite gotten in the door yet, and I cried out, “Megan, get Mom!” She didn’t understand what had happened and I was sure in no state of mind to explain it to her right then, and so I told her again, “Get Mom - please!”

She did, and my wife came running out, pulled the hood release and raised it back up. I pulled out my fingers expecting the worse. All kinds of things ran through my mind, “Were they broken? With the sharp metal edges around the hood well, are they hanging by a thread of skin? Would I ever be able to play the guitar again?” You know the drill. Amazingly, there was no blood at all. But an inspection of the fingers revealed that they were for sure smashed! It reminded me of a swayed back horse because right in the middle of the knuckle and joint just above the fingernails, they were just flat!

Well, we rushed to the emergency room to have them x-rayed to see if anything was broken and find out how much damage had been done. To make a long story short, astonishingly, they were just smashed flat. Nothing was broken, and in a few hours, they filled back out to their original configuration. They were just a little bit sore. I was sure to thank my Maker for not allowing the situation to be worse than it was.

How often do we get ourselves in just such situations? Maybe not physically, but spiritually, we find ourselves with our fingers stuck and we just need help. How wonderful it is to be able to cry out to our Savior, Jesus Christ, and He is always there to rescue us! He said that He'd never leave us nor forsake us. When we get into those situations, we can't be too proud or ashamed to call on Jesus, because He hears our prayers and He will rescue us in the way that best suits our need. By the way, from then on, I was careful where I put my fingers and when working under that hood and a 2x2 was always propped under it as added support.

May 12

“MOM”

By Debbie Ousley

As mothers it's our job to nurture and safeguard those little ones God has loaned us, and we all know that with loans come high interest rates. Motherhood (as well as Fatherhood) doesn't end at age eighteen. It's a lifelong "hood." We are not only expected to hear, see, and know what's going on now, but also all that might happen. You know what? That is impossible. That's the Almighty God of all's responsibility. But we must consider all and do the very best we can do.

As a mother, I must share a story (Oh no! Not another mother story! Sorry). It was when Megan was about three years old, she and I went blackberry picking. I knew she wouldn't really be picking as much as eating, so I dressed her for the hot weather more than for the task. Off we went, myself dressed in long pants, long sleeves (well, you get the picture), and Megan in shorts, sandals and a little cotton top.

The berries were ripe and as was anticipated, Megan got her fill of them pretty quick. But her blackberry craving got filled a lot quicker than my bucket. I spotted a place under a soft-needled pine tree that offered her shade and a place to drink the refreshments we had brought. The spot was perfect; nice and grassy, close enough for me to keep an eye on her, and talk to each other (and at the age of three, talking is very important).

All went very well with the exception of a few briars, but so goes life. Meg and I collected our stuff, admired the berries and headed home. We were pleased that we had spent time together out in the fresh air and that our time had been productive.

I was feeling pretty "motherly" as I washed those berries when Megan came to me with a complaint. She was itching – Was she ever itching! If you haven't guessed why, I will share with you my very words when I realized why, "Oh my Lord, I've never seen so many chigger bites on one little girl in all my life!" Her miseries quickly became mine and, thank the Lord, we were able to purchase an oatmeal bath and relieve her suffering.

As hard as we may, we mothers can't always see the dangers our kids might encounter. But with that silent, but ever presence of the God Who is also their God, we can know that they can't get out of His all-seeing eye. Our part is to just keep bringing their name before Him.

May 13

“Mothers” By Jerry D. Ousley

Mothers are very special people. I know that there are some fathers, who are good with small infants, but I'll tell you this, none are as good and natural at it as a mother.

One weekend, our niece, who had a newborn, just needed a break. She called my wife on Saturday night and of course she accepted. I was terrified. There's nothing that will bring a man, no matter how big and how strong, to his knees in defeat like a newborn.

The baby arrived and it was only a short while until I retreated to the spare bed upstairs where I spent the night huddled under the covers feeling safe from this tiny threat to my existence.

My wife, on the other hand, was left to “fight the battle alone.” This child succeeded in giving her a very un-restful night's sleep. But she was a real trooper. She did not shirk from her duties and come morning, the parents of the child picked up their baby and the mission was accomplished, no thanks to me.

I mentioned sometime that evening to my wife that I wasn't sure how we raised our own from babies and she was quick to let me know that during those early years, I had very little to do with it. After the way I had retreated that weekend, I couldn't come back with anything to defend myself. She was right.

Thank God for good mothers. We fathers have our place, and I know there are fathers who have successfully raised their own children. But in most cases, they have had to battle against their nature to do it, and I admire them for it. God made mothers and He gave them the ability to do a good job.

I also realize that there are mothers who have not done such a good job. I believe they have gone against their natural ability in those cases. Of course, I'm speaking in general terms here.

Now, I teach and preach that to really see God in His truest image, it takes both a father and a mother (that's not to say that we must be married to be a complete Christian, just that God has traits reflecting both mothers and fathers). The father provides shelter and food, but none can provide love to a child like a good mother.

I thank God for my mother, and for my wife who has been a wonderful mother. But I thank God even more, because through a good mother I can see partially who He is and how much He loves me. You can too.

May 14

“It’s Just a Love Tap” By Debbie Ousley

There’s an old story about a visiting evangelist who was holding revival services in a church in town. He was preaching well to the people and as he would call out a sin a pew of dear sisters would “amen” him, letting him and the congregation know they agreed.

The Revival was “reviving” for these sisters until the evangelist named off an indiscretion that was a little too close to these ladies’ hearts. All fell silent in the “Amen Pew.” One sister leaned over to the other and whispered, “Well, now he’s gone from preaching to meddling!”

The moral to this story is: If we hang around the word of God long enough it’s going to hit us where we live. It gets right in our business, ya know?

I’m no scholar, as you have found me out. I have an electronic speller that I just used to spell that word. I can’t spell! My calculator is not far from me. I use a pencil because it has an eraser, and Jerry edits all my articles, and by now you are thinking, “And she has no pride.”

But there is one truth and great piece of knowledge that I know. The word of God will always hit us where we live. No matter who we are, who we know, where we go, or how long we live, that is its everlasting purpose.

P.S. Contrary to belief, all the messages are not for someone else.

May 15

“It’s Not so Easy!”

By Debbie Ousley

*I*t’s been said we teach an “Easy Gospel” and we have been questioned why we, through these articles each week, don’t “lay people out.” Well, we decided to let the funeral homes take care of that since they do such a great professional service.

You know folks, if looking people in the eye and telling them that in reality this “thing” is between them and the Lord is easy, then maybe we are guilty. If our relationship with the Lord is a set of guidelines we are trying not to break (or see how close we can come before breaking them) then something is wrong with that picture. If I need a man or woman to just keep putting me in “check” all the time, then where is that love for a Savior? Where is the commitment to Christ?

If we are looking for a rule book, we don’t have to look any farther than the coffee table or, better yet, by our bed. That Bible is the Book we all must become familiar with. I’ve learned that anything we do, if we don’t invest in it, it doesn’t mean a whole lot to us. And if someone else is doing all the investing in our relationships with Christ ... need I say more?

When one of my kids comes to me with a decision they are struggling with and one action taken seems easy and the other more right, I ask them “How are you feeling about it?” They hate that response. You know why? Because it forces them to search their own hearts and it makes them choose what they are going to be able to live with. To teach our children the responsibility to choose “right” or “wrong” is one of the many duties of a parent. How can they know how to do that when they are grown up if they haven’t had any practice?

Leaders in the Church have a big responsibility first to Christ (it’s a personal relationship), and then to teach and impart to people what’s going to enable them to see this “thing” through. We all know the saying about the horse and water. The leaders of the Church can’t make it happen (Christ won’t even do that). It’s our free will (not free Willey)!

Jerry and I are grown up enough to know that not everyone is going to agree with or like what we say in these articles. But every time a person opens themselves up, they take the risk of being criticized misunderstood, disagreed with, and just downright disliked (maybe that’s

why so few people do it). But we count it a blessing and privilege to share these articles and it's worth the risk to us if just one person is encouraged, smiles, or if a "word" will make them stop and think about their own personal relationship with Christ. Just one!

May 16

“Shifting Gears” By Jerry D. Ousley

I remember the first time I drove Dad’s pickup solo. Well, I was driving solo but my younger brother and cousin were in the truck with me. It was an old 1957 Chevy ¾-ton pickup - four on the floor. It was designed to be a working vehicle, not a high-performance machine. First gear was called “granny gear” because it went so slow and the transmission wasn’t synchronized so you had to come to a complete stop to shift to first. I hadn’t had my license that long and really only had a few hours (maybe minutes) experience with a standard shift at the time. What I’m trying to say here was that trip home (about 3 miles) was interesting to say the least.

This truck had a “trick” to shifting; sorta like a “one man horse.” If you didn’t know the trick it made you look like a fool. I felt very foolish that day. Somehow, I managed to get it into “granny gear” and onto the highway at a whopping five miles per hour. A quarter mile on down the road I finally got it into second and now we jumped up to fifteen mph. After about a half mile more, miracle of miracles, I got it into third. Now we were really cruisin’ at thirty mph (mind you, this was on open highway and then the speed limit was 65 mph).

I never got to fourth gear. My brother and cousin laughed at me all the way home. I couldn’t wait to get there. If I’d just known the trick to shifting gears ...

It’s the same in life. So many times, we get stuck in third gear and just can’t seem to get out. It seems like the whole world is just passing us by and we’re not getting anywhere. After awhile, we get so accustomed to our “routine” that it becomes normal for us.

God wants us to make that “shift.” But we just can’t seem to find the “trick” to it. Therein lays the key. We can’t do it ourselves. We must give ourselves over to Him and let Him make the shift that will bring us out of our hum-drum routine and into the newness of life that He desires for us. We tend to look for the “trick” in changing our life’s habits and styles. We believe that we’ve got to do something to change. We try. We fail. We try again. We fail again. Finally, we come to the point when we say, “What’s the use!”

But there is no “trick.” Only realizing that the Father is sitting beside us and all we must do is let go of the stick and He’ll shift it for us. Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:12-13, *“For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”* In other words, after we’ve done everything we know to do, just stand still and realize that Father is by our side. He’ll take care of the rest.

If you are a Christian then you need to learn to let Father do the shifting. If you haven’t given your life to Him yet, know that He is there. Know that He is reaching out to you and all you’ve got to do is to allow Him to shift your life by believing on Him. Don’t worry about what you may have to give up or quit doing. Just let Father have control. He’ll take it from there.

May 17

“I Love Small-Town Living” By Jerry D. Ousley

I have come to know that to really appreciate the benefits of small-town living, you have to live in a city for a while. I found this out first hand while in the US Army.

While I was in AIT training at Ft. Monmouth, NJ, my wife and our son were able to come and live with me for a few months. It was more than thrilling after eight weeks away from them to see them once again and have some kind of semblance of a home life. However, it was far from a rural area and getting around could be quite a challenge for a couple of Indiana hicks like us. It was nothing unusual for someone to greet you with a “California Howdy” for no apparent reason at all (if you’ve seen the movie, “The Beverly Hillbillies” then you know what I’m talking about).

I found out that being first in line at a red light waiting to turn green was not a privilege. It was a no-win situation. You could count on at least two more vehicles to come through the light from the opposite direction after their light turned red and yours turned green, so to just take off as soon as the light turned could be disastrous. But if you waited more than three seconds after the lights changed you could count on several horns blowing at you from behind! Like I said a no-win situation.

From there we lived two years in downtown Arlington, VA which is just across the Potomac from Washington DC. I was stationed at Ft. Myer, VA that adjoined Arlington National Cemetery. It was a good experience for us. The drive into base was about three miles from our apartment, but thirty minutes away. Let’s see ... that calculates into six miles per hour ... Not real good driving time. We took several excursions into the city of Washington DC and it was definitely an experience.

One thing we learned from living in a city was that we really liked small town living better. I would suggest to any person who can to live a short while in a city just so you know for sure which you prefer. We hear so many young people complaining about nothing to do in a small town, and I know that can be a challenge sometimes, but they’ll never know if they like a city or not until they try one! During my time in the military, I also found out that I really like our state too! But I wouldn’t have known that unless I had lived elsewhere.

Being a Christian is a lot like that. I don't mean that it is good that we were in sin before we gave our life to the Lord, but that experience lets us know how much we appreciate Him. The Bible says that all have sinned and come short of God's glory, so all who know Jesus as their personal Savior know what I'm talking about.

When we realize what Jesus has saved us from then we can appreciate our salvation experience more. We'll go back to the city someday, but one where the streets are paved with gold. I think I'll like that much better.

May 18

“Losing Ground” By Jerry D. Ousley

Years ago, we owned a piece of land out in the country. A section of it had once been a cornfield that had grown up in weeds. At that time, we lived in a mobile home and after we had chosen the place on which to set it, we then marked out our yard. This was the part that would have to be planted in grass seed and then kept mowed after it grew up. We had a large front yard but the backyard wasn't nearly as large. Down below our home, before you went into the woods was an area that we hadn't claimed as "yard" but didn't have trees growing up in it. It was basically weeds. I decided one day that I was going to begin mowing that section and make our backyard bigger.

I did just that. Each time I mowed I made sure to go an extra couple of rounds cutting down those weeds and by the end of that summer we had claimed it nearly to the woods. The next summer I just resorted to keeping it mowed and it looked as good as the rest of the yard.

But there came a week when we had some extra things to do which didn't leave a lot of time for mowing. We decided that it wouldn't hurt to leave the back section alone for a week or two and so that's what we did. I began noticing it. It was growing at a much faster rate than the rest of the yard. After two weeks it had grown almost out of control, and we had to start all over again.

Did you ever feel like you were losing ground? You've fought and struggled to get to where you are and frankly, you're a bit proud of yourself for the accomplishment of goals in your life. You should be a bit proud of those things.

But then something happens. We think, "Well, it won't hurt anything to let it go just for a little while," and so we do. Soon we begin to notice ourselves. We aren't as happy as we once were, or things aren't going as well as they should. Then we remember what we have let go and we may have to fight to regain that ground.

It happens spiritually as well. I'm not even suggesting that you are falling away from God, just that you've let a couple of areas slip for a while. Sometimes we've just got to reclaim

that “land.” We’ve got to go out and rework it or mow it down again. We all have been there from time to time because we’re all just human.

It is good to know that God has us in His hand. I’m glad that I can be assured that God will not let go of us. The Bible tells us in 2 Corinthians 13:5, *“Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? - Unless indeed you are disqualified.”* That might sound like a strange verse of scripture. You may have attended a church all your life. It never ceased to fascinate me at the Billy Graham crusades how many people came forward who had never missed a Sunday of church and some even had taught in Sunday school, but yet they came forward to receive Christ once they realized that they had not made a commitment to Him and were disqualified.

We will always be losing ground if we are disqualified – not saved by the blood of Jesus Christ. But if we know beyond a doubt that Christ is in us, we may feel like we’ve lost some ground at times, but “weeds” can always be mowed again. Trust in Jesus today. Make sure that you have received Christ and know that you are qualified to enter the throne room of God. If so then get out the lawn mower and start getting rid of those “weeds.”

May 19

“Smoke House Blues” By Jerry D. Ousley

At fourteen anything you can get away with is “cool.” It’s a good thing that we lived in the country because if I could have sneaked out of the house to get with “friends” there’s no telling how much trouble I might have gotten into. So, like any other fourteen-year-old boy on a collision course with manhood, I tried everything I could get away with.

This time it was cigars. I had smoked a few cigarettes and felt I was now ready for the big time. I could just picture myself puffing away on a big stogie and somehow, I acquired one (though I don’t exactly recall how). I was strongly cautioned by one of the guys I hung around with to be careful and not inhale it like you would a cigarette. I felt I could handle it and so I took my stogie to the woods.

I lit the thing up and began to carefully puff on it. It smelled heavenly (I thought) and I really felt like “hot stuff” token’ on a stogie. I did however notice that there was a lot more smoke than what usually arose from a cigarette.

As I “toked” along I suddenly froze in my tracks. I was fairly well hidden from view of our house but I spotted my dad walking from the porch towards the storage building that lay just along the outskirts of the woods. I ducked down so he wouldn’t spot me. I felt pretty secure about not being seen, but was a little apprehensive about the big puff of smoke I had just taken off that -lo-o-o-n-g cigar. I couldn’t just let it out – That would be like sending up smoke signals from the top of a mountain. So, I just inhaled it. I should say that it almost inhaled me! Because I had been holding my breath, I couldn’t get it all down and so I wound up swallowing more than I inhaled. What now? Everything seemed okay so I concentrated on watching Dad. He found what he was looking for fairly quickly (thank God!) and was on his way back into the house. I let out a long sigh of relief along with what smoke I had been able to inhale.

As I stood to finish my cigar, I noticed that the world was moving around a little more than usual and either I was seeing double or the forest had sprouted a whole lot more trees during the past few minutes. Maybe I wasn’t okay after all. I put out the cigar because the way my stomach was starting to feel I knew I’d had enough for one evening.

This happened in 1970 and, believe it or not, most people had indoor plumbing at that time, except for us. We still had a “little shack out back” if you know what I mean. I made my way for the “outdoor gentlemen’s room,” shut the door and sat down not knowing what was going to happen next. I sat there for a few minutes, glad to be off my feet, knowing that I was turning blue, green and other shades of various colors. I was also wondering how I was going to get this one by my parents.

Then, suddenly it happened. At the risk of sounding rude and crude I let out a belch like I had never released before. As I did a thick cloud of smoke rolled out of my stomach and into the air. That did the trick! I felt much better. I reached for the half-smoked stogie in my pocket and deposited it post-haste in the toilet. I didn’t need any more of that!

Now this article is not to show disapproval of smoking, nor is it in reference to hiding things from your parents. It is, however a good example of what Jesus said in Matthew 7:18-23. He was talking about passing judgment upon others for what they put into their bodies instead of what was coming out of their hearts. Granted, I put it in and it also came out. But other than a short-lived belly ache I was okay. What Jesus was saying was that we get all hyped up about what should or should not be eaten, and so on and so forth. Jesus said that those things didn’t make a man unclean. But those things coming out of the heart can make us very ugly and unclean. So, let’s be cautious about what goes in but let’s not be so concerned about it that we forget about what’s coming out.

May 20

“I Never Saw a Thing” By Jerry D. Ousley

What is it about recliners, a good movie and men? I never really noticed it until I began to get older and have finally surmised that it happens around age 50. My son gave it a name. He called it “old man’s disease.”

Here’s the scenario. You pick out a good movie, set back in the recliner, and ten minutes after the previews, you fall asleep. Perhaps most of you reading this aren’t affected by it, but I’d be willing to say that a lot of you know what I’m talking about. I’ve come to the conclusion that it is something built into the recliner that acts like a mild sedative when taken with a movie.

We experienced an awkward moment not too long ago. My daughter had invited her boyfriend over (well he’s her husband now) to watch a movie with us. My wife had fixed a good meal, we had eaten well (which enhances the affects of the afore mention ailment) and we had sat down to watch the movie. I can’t remember what it was but as this story unfolds, I think you’ll figure out why.

My wife had stretched out on the couch, I was in my recliner and my daughter and her boyfriend (now husband) were sitting on the love seat (isn’t that a coincidence?). Anyway, not long into the movie my eyes began to grow heavier and heavier. In just a few minutes I was gone. “Oh well,” I thought as I yielded to slumber, “My wife and Megan can keep him company. They’re used to me falling asleep” and so I drifted into a peaceful bliss.

At the end of the movie (see I know there has to be something to this combination because I almost always wake up when the movie is going off. There’s got to be some kind of alarm or timer built in to that chair), I woke up, shook the sleep off expecting to hear a few jokes and wise cracks about my nap, but I was used to that by now so I didn’t mind. What shocked me the most was when I looked over at my daughter and her boyfriend (now husband) I discovered that she was leaning on his shoulder fast asleep herself. Then I looked over at my wife and realized that she was out like a light too. We had all fallen asleep leaving our daughter’s boyfriend (now husband) to watch the movie all by himself! What hosts we

were! He said he didn't mind but I hope all he heard was the movie and a few snores during the show.

I'm glad God doesn't do that too us. He never tires of hearing our prayers regardless how boring they might be (and I'll say that some of our prayers are pretty boring – especially to a God who's already “heard it all”).

On the night that our Lord Jesus was taken in the Garden of Gethsemane, He had asked His three closest disciples to wait for Him while He prayed. He returned only to find them asleep. He woke them up, then went away to pray again. When He returned, after the most agonizing prayer He had ever prayed, they were fast asleep again. I can't say anything negative about those guys because I'd probably have been the biggest duck in the puddle (or should I say the loudest snorer of the bunch. On second thought, if I'd have been with them, I'd probably have been the only one getting any sleep!).

Jesus forgave them of that. All three of them went on to be great Apostles for the kingdom, giving their lives for the sake of the cause. Jesus still forgives us of our slothfulness. It isn't an excuse or a license to do whatever we want, but I'm glad that He does forgive. In being like Him, I suppose we should take note of that and do some forgiving ourselves.

Got to go, they're getting ready for another flick and I'm already yawning.

May 21

“Just Cause” By Debbie Ousley

“We need you!!” Sometimes to some people that’s all it takes for them to buy into a project, program, or a cause. Everyone wants to feel needed. We must all believe that we are put on this earth for a purpose. What a terrible waste of a lifetime to feel as though we have not been needed.

But just to be a part of something out of need is not enough. We must believe in that cause for ourselves. I have just lately learned a very important lesson and that is, individuals are faithful to what appeals to them. If fishing and hunting appeal to you, you will rise up early, rain or shine, pay the price and do it! Or whatever it is that appeals to us. And if we are persuaded to participate in an activity that doesn’t appeal to us, we will have little or no dedication to that.

The Church cannot compete with the world’s system when it comes to entertainment. You see, those things appeal to the carnal man and he is who we want to cater to first. What makes me happy? What makes me feel good? What do I deserve? And so on.

It’s a struggle for youth leaders to keep their youth “pumped-up” enough to continue coming to the meetings. But it’s impossible to compete with all the virtual reality “stuff” that is offered to them on a constant basis, and only appeals to their carnal man. “There is nothing new under heaven.” I recently heard of an outing one of the churches had and those who were in charge were so excited about it. But I told Jerry, “Done that! Been there,” and then I thought of his mother who has also worked with kids for many years of her Christian life and, you know what? She’s done that and been there too; maybe not in such a big way but the same concept folks. Sorry.

The Church cannot compete and it’s never been intended for us to do so. Christ came not as a king with royalty, whistles, and bells (though He could have). His miracles were not to impress or awe the people, but to show His compassion and awesomeness given to Him by His Father. He was offering something that is very APPEALING once a person realizes their NEED for it. That need is freedom from a sin-state life imposed on all of us when mankind (Adam and Eve) failed the test. And, contrary to some people’s witness, that is exciting

enough. Does Jesus need us? No, but we need Him and a life filled with the adventures that Christ has for us is appealing enough if we don't limit Him.

May 22

“Who’s Your Daddy?” By Debbie Ousley

This article may not be too compelling to those who haven’t received Christ as their Lord and Savior, or don’t regard God as their Heavenly Father, and I pray it will not hinder them from coming into that truth for their lives. But on the other hand, it may appeal to some if they like a good fight, especially since they have already been declared the winner.

Jesus died not because of anything He ever did, but because of who He was and is. All through His life on Earth it was not the best kept secret that He, the carpenter’s son, was God in the flesh. The great scholars hated that He would even suggest such a “lie,” and their intentions were to get rid of this lunatic. You see if by chance Jesus was the Son of God it would diminish their power over the people.

Folks, whether we understand it or agree, that is still the case; the struggle for power over the people – Power of condemnation and keeping individuals bowed down with the guilt of sin and accusation all their lives.

Jesus is no coward. He went toe to toe with these ungodly men as He called them a generation of vipers, and declared to them that their father was Satan. Of course, this made Jesus very unpopular with them but it made Him real popular with the common man.

Those who believed that Messiah was coming, and those who believed the witness of His great love and power, received Jesus with open arms. For those who knew they could not keep every letter of the Law it was a time of rejoicing in the news that grace had arrived.

This is the part that may not seem very appealing, but should really encourage those who have or will have struggles (that’s a lot of Christians). I have come to understand that there are two reasons for my struggles concerning my Christian walk. One: I am pulling against a truth about myself and even though this struggle is very wearying it is for my good. It comes out of the love that my “Daddy” has for me. He is trying to teach me a lesson that will not only benefit me but also others. What father is not a teacher?

The other reason for our struggle may not be because of anything we've done, but because of who our "Daddy" is. If we think that this walk with the Lord is always going to be a stroll through the tulips then we have been fooled. But, of course, if you are no threat to Satan and the power struggle I mentioned earlier, it may be all roses for you.

Jesus told His disciples in John 15:18, *"If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you."* The word "world" is used as an epithet of Satan and can include inhabitants. He goes on to tell them that if you are of the world, you will be loved, but, *"You are not of this world because I have chosen you, therefore the world hates you."* Verse 20 reminds them about what He had told them concerning the servant not being greater than his Lord and if they persecuted Him, they would also persecute them.

I know and thank God that Christians in this country are being protected (for now) and we do not experience the kind of persecution other Christians endure in other countries. And I'm kind of ashamed at times how soft we are. Our struggles are more like a swarm of gnats that aggravate and continually keep us distracted from the real task at hand which is to be at our Father's business.

We will have struggles - real ones! This may seem a little hard, but too many of our struggles seem to come from within the Church. When I say "Church" I mean the whole. Why do you think that is? "Gnats" to distract us and rob us of our peace, energy and time; it takes seven positives to neutralize one negative. Look at all the time spent on "gnats" – Time that could be spent in prayer, reading the word of God, and encouraging those who are searching for the hope of Christ.

Our "Daddy," Father God, loves justice and He will have it for Himself and for His children. At times it may seem like it's a long time coming, but it is coming. Be strong and encouraged in knowing who your "Daddy" is. Try not to take everything personal. Your struggles may not be so much against you as they are who you are related to. We are sons and daughters of God.

May 23

“Spiritual Fitness” By Jerry D. Ousley

During my life there have been several periods when I thought, “I’ve got to get myself into physical shape.” It happens when I climb the stairs too many times and get out of breath. It happens when I bend over to pick something up and feel all the blood rushing to my face. It happens when my back hurts from doing a little bit of physical work. I know I’m not in good physical shape.

So, I resolve to begin riding the exercise bike so conveniently out of sight in our basement. That usually lasts a few days before I take a day off and forget to start up again. Or I’ll state that I’m going to begin walking every day until it rains and I just stop. It’s funny how one day of breaking the routine seems to be excuse enough to stop altogether.

I’ll cut back on eating for a while. Actually, I’ll do okay until craving strikes. Perhaps you’ve got more will-power than I have, but all I’ve got to do is tell myself that I’ve done a good job and deserve a little reward by eating a piece of chocolate cake or something. That’s all it takes! Boom, I’m right back to where I was.

We can slide through life out of shape and not being physically fit. It may cost us something later down the road but we’ll generally get through. However, when it comes to our spiritual condition it is a different matter entirely.

A lot of people may excuse themselves by saying something like, “I’ll get right with God someday,” or, “God understands my heart.” We can come up with excuses, can’t we? The truth is that God does understand our hearts. He does know what our spiritual condition is and whether we’re making excuses or we really mean it.

Some people think that going to church makes up for a poor spiritual condition. They may assume that because they give in the offering or volunteer to spend an afternoon here and there doing community work, and that it makes up for their lack of a relationship with God. But it doesn’t.

You see even though God does want us to do things for His Kingdom, those things can never make us spiritually fit. There's only one way to do that: Have a right relationship with God. There's an interesting portion of scripture in the Old Testament that kind of explains this: Micah 6:6-8 says, *"With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, Ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?"* Someone even wrote a song about this verse.

To be spiritually fit we must do these three things: live right. Living right doesn't save us but when put together with the last item it goes a long way. To live right means that we live to please God being kind to others and doing what we're supposed to do. Secondly, we are to love mercy. Having mercy means that we don't demand hard things on others even though we may have every right. Mercy is compassion. Mercy is a good definition of what we call the Golden Rule: "Do to others as you'd like for them to do to you." They might deserve worse but what if the shoe was on the other foot? How'd you like for them to react to you if the roles were reversed? Then we are to walk humbly with God. That requires a personal relationship. When we have come to Christ and seek Him daily in our lives, loving mercy and living justly aren't such hard chores. Our relationship with Jesus sets the pace for our program of spiritual fitness. Are you ready to exercise?

May 24

“Painting Old Tires” By Jerry D. Ousley

As a youngster I enjoyed visiting with my grandparents for a few weeks during the summer. It was a thrill to be there. However, after a couple of days a child by himself with two older folks tends to run out of things to do.

Grandma would always come to the rescue. Most of us have a few old cans of paint around that's left over after a job. Why we do that I really don't know because you can probably never quite match that color again. An inch or so of paint in the bottom of a bucket will usually harden up and we have to throw it out anyway.

But Grandma had different reasons for keeping that old paint. When I would get bored she would put a T-shirt of Grandpa's on me, give me a brush and turn me loose to "redecorate" her yard. Off I'd go painting anything in the yard my mind had a fancy to give a new coat of paint. Trees, tires turned flower beds, just about anything!

One particular year she had some old silver paint left over from, well I'm not really sure ... painting tin roofs maybe? Anyway, she had some silver. There was a tower in the front yard and I don't recall what it was used for but it was there. I started painting it with that silver paint but it didn't take long for me to reach as high as I could go.

What next? Over in the yard was an old tractor tire that they had turned into a flower bed. It already had a coat of white on it from the previous year but I thought it sure would look good painted silver. When I was finished, I stepped back and admired my work. It looked like a different tire and man did that silver paint make it sparkle!

But underneath that silver paint ... underneath that year-old coat of white paint ... remained an old tire that had been put to good use as a flower bed, but was still an old tire that had worn out its usefulness as an important part of a tractor.

We are like that old tire. The Bible tells us that man was made to worship his Creator. We allowed sin to enter our lives and so we were no longer fulfilling our original purpose and design.

We may make good use of our lives in other things. We may decide that we are going to change and be something else and make something of ourselves. But whatever we do with our lives if we aren't worshipping our Maker, God, then we are not doing what we were made to do.

That's why Jesus Christ came ... to give us a way to fulfill God's original plan for us. We can never change ourselves no matter how much "paint" we may put on the outside. We may appear to be very successful. But we aren't unless we are fulfilling our originally planned design. When Christ comes into our lives, He actually restores us and "rebuilds" us making us once again what we were meant to be. Accept Him today. Let Him make you a new creature in Christ. Then you won't be an old tire with a new coat of paint but a useful creation of God.

May 25

“The Art of Communication” By Jerry D. Ousley

In small towns it doesn't take long for news to travel. By the time the news is published the only reason to read about it is to be sure we have our facts straight (they have a way of getting stretched by word of mouth, don't they?).

We live in a world dependent on communication. In days gone by, it took time for news to travel from one coast to another. Today, with the aid of overnight delivery services, the internet, and fax machines, it is almost instantaneous. If time stands, the words "... Beam me up, Scotty . . ." somehow don't seem so farfetched.

The lack of communication is probably the greatest contributor to our rising divorce statistics and is a problem not only in our marriages but in many and most conflicting situations. When we don't communicate, we don't understand. When we don't understand we feel left out and begin to harbor ill feelings toward the other person and soon, all ties are broken.

There is no doubt, communication is very important. It is also very important in our personal Christian lives as well. We must communicate with God if we ever expect to get to know Him. We claim Him as Savior (through His Son, Jesus Christ), we say when we experience a personal relationship with Him that we have come to know Him ... but have we?

God wants to be friends with mankind. This appears over and over again in the Bible. Man is the one who drove the wedge, and continues to do so. We may say, "God let this happen to me ..." and begin to be angry with Him. Did He? We blame Him for a lot of things that happen in our world that is really our fault. For instance, and think about this, our home insurance policies sometimes exclude coverage for "acts of God" but if we believe the Bible, these tragedies are in the world because of our rebellion against God. From the very beginning, it was our ancestors (Adam and Eve) who disobeyed God and forced Him to curse the earth. It is us who continue to be disobedient to Him. So, these things shouldn't be called "Acts of God" but "Results of man."

God wants us to communicate with Him. In other words, spend time in prayer. Not in the vain repetitions that Jesus spoke out against, but honest, heart to heart talking with Him. Try it. You will not regret it, and I guarantee you will feel better about life and begin finding answers to your problems. It's all in the Art of Communication.

May 26

“The Ding-Ding Bowl” By Jerry D. Ousley

I read a book once by Art Linkletter entitled “Kids Say the Darndest Things.” Kids can come up with some extremely amusing and descriptive names for things. For instance, when we were kids Mom had this big shiny metal cereal bowl – at least that’s what we ate from it. The bowl was sort of bell shaped and when empty you could hold it up, tap your spoon against it and it made a wonderful sounding ring, at least to the ears of a kid. So, we appropriately named it “The Ding-Ding Bowl.”

Our dad had found it in one of his dump excursions. He brought it home and mom cleaned it up. We didn’t concern ourselves much with matching sets of table ware. Why if we had a more colorful plate than everyone else that just made it special. It wasn’t every household that could boast that they had a “Ding-Ding Bowl” so I felt like we were pretty fortunate! In our minds, because we had special treasures like this, we weren’t poor but indeed rich! I don’t think we really knew we were poor anyway.

Because it had such a special name it became the immediate favorite of all four of us. When it was breakfast time we would fight over “The Ding-Ding Bowl.” We all wanted it. It seems silly now because no matter what color or shape of a bowl, you basically use it for the same purpose. But whoever got to eat that day from the “Ding-Ding Bowl” was considered fortunate indeed.

Many times, it would be dirty and already in the dish drainer and so we had to settle for one of the regular bowls (I wonder if Mom did that on purpose to keep from hearing the squabble over that bowl?).

Kids fight over just about anything. We had another special at our house. It came in bottles of milk. Back then most milk came in a glass bottle. When you poured it a unique sound was made that went something like, “gulp, gulp.” Therefore, anytime a new bottle of milk was opened we appropriately fought over who was going to get ... “The Gulp, Gulp.” Who would have thought that you could make something special from a thing like that? Now if you really wanted to feel special you not only got the “ding-ding bowl” but (could we be so fortunate?) also the “gulp-gulp.”

But before we say something like, “those kids were sure strange,” let me remind you that adults can be pretty greedy over petty things too. After all, kids learn it from somewhere. In Mark 10:35-40 James and John, both sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus asking a big favor. They wanted to sit on the right and left hands of Jesus when He established His kingdom. In other words, they were asking to be His top two special and honored men. It would have been a very coveted position. But let’s face it; after all they were just chairs, weren’t they? Jesus didn’t grant their request of course.

But the thought occurred to me that we are always asking special favor for something. Maybe what we need is for every bowl to be a “Ding-Ding Bowl,” and every glass of milk to contain a “gulp, gulp.” Perhaps we should realize that the special chairs are not those on the right and left hands of Christ but the ones facing Him. In that way we can see Him with a clearer view as we sit at His feet and learn. It might be better in the long run to be in the crowd He is blessing, rather than to be seeking special favor – Hmmm. It just may be!

May 27

“My Little Girl” By Jerry D. Ousley

After her graduation we had a party for our daughter Megan. I had manned the grill kidding that my wife does the inside cooking while I do the outside cooking. She had worked very hard to make this day a very special and memorable one for Megan and I believe she succeeded. Before eating I was asked to “bless the food” and I was willing to do so. At the end of my prayer, I prayed a pun asking the Lord to not let the cook poison the guests and of course got a chuckle or two out of that. But what I really wanted to add to that pun was “Lord, don’t let the cook poison the guests, especially one particular young man who I won’t name but seems to spend more time with my little girl now than I do.” Of course, I was referring to her boyfriend (now husband) Zach. I told Zach about this and he got a good laugh out of it.

The point is that my little girl is all grown up now. I remember that little toddler of a girl who used to follow daddy around. She wanted to help me change the oil in the car and work on the house when something needed fixing. Sometimes if I was in a hurry, she would get in the way but it was really fun having her tag along.

Any time my wife would be sick on a Sunday morning (which wasn’t often) I’d try to be especially quiet so as not to awaken Megan. It never failed that I would be within minutes of leaving and Meg would be up wondering where daddy was going. “I want to go!” she’d say. How can you refuse a child the opportunity of going to church? So, I’d get her dressed in a hurry and off we’d go.

I miss that little hand that I held when she needed to know that her daddy was strong and would take care of her. I miss her snuggling in the bed between my wife and me. I miss the time I took her to a father-daughter dance when she was in the “Brownies.” It seems like you’re changing diapers, blink a couple of times and they’re graduating from high school and getting ready to go off to college. Where’d all the time go?

I wonder if it’s like that for God? I’m sure the time goes even faster for One to whom time is meaningless – a thousand years passes like a day (2 Peter 3:8). The fact is God loves

His children more than we can even imagine. I know it is hard to accept but He really does love us more than we love our own children.

But it works a little differently with God in that He is thrilled as we grow up. A child growing up means an “empty nest” for us. But for God it means that His children are merely getting closer to Him. That’s exciting.

Honestly it grieves Him when we don’t grow up because it means that we are stuck in our spiritual relationship. In our Christian experience growing simply means that we are learning more about our walk with our Heavenly Father. It means that we are taking steps toward home not away from it. As we grow, we can embrace our Lord and Savior even more instead of feeling shy about it and that’s worth more than all the snuggles and kisses in the world!

By the way, today is my grown-up little girl’s birthday.

May 28

“LOVE: A Powerful Witness” By Debbie Ousley

I *once* attended a meeting of the local Ministerial Association (because I know one of them) and this meeting was particularly interesting to me because the guest speakers were sharing information about “Healthy Youth.”

But as I sat and listened, a scripture just kept running through my mind, *“By this all know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (John 13:35). Jesus was talking to His disciples here; those who, when He had gone back to His Father, would be the leaders of all the churches to come. And I thought, “Yes! This message is a powerful and appropriate message for this group of men and women.”

As the spiritual leaders of our communities, we must, by the Lord’s command, love each other first. The word tells us that by this witness will all men (and I include women) know you are my disciples (leaders). A great and powerful thing happens when people see us really loving one another. It’s a ripple effect. Each church group is like a family (not the Hatfield’s and McCoy’s). We each have a personality and mission to be accomplished. We are many extended families with the same Father.

The music may be different, and prayers may be offered up differently. It’s kinda like the variety of personalities of the disciples but the same Master. Jesus said, “Boys, if you want a witness that tells everyone you belong to me, then you must first love one another.” Jesus was not talking about loving the unbelievers or whoever here, but He was telling them to love the ones they prayed with, ate with, laughed with, and cried with. You wouldn’t think that would be so difficult, but Jesus found it necessary to share it with them before He left.

If I’m not mistaken, the purpose and vision of a Ministerial Association is to bring the churches together and I applaud them for their success. With each collective service or event, it gives the different “church families” an opportunity to be what God wants them to be but fellowship as the “Big Family of God.”

As all the pastors first begin to worship together, support one another, pray for each other, be happy for each other's accomplishments, and hurt in their disappointments, there is a great witness that goes out.

I looked around at all the pastors that represented the "families" that morning and I had a deep appreciation for the sacrifice they had made just to be at this meeting. After working all week long, they hadn't gotten to sleep in like a lot of folks that morning. Instead, they had pulled themselves out of a warm bed to once again fulfill the responsibility of being the leader, and what a huge responsibility! But, oh! What a great opportunity! As their witness by word and deed says "I value and love these brothers and sisters," goes out to their individual church families and then out to the community, this witness will make such an impact in every area of our communities and into the whole world! It will dispel the world's message that says, "This is impossible!" And once again love will put it right back into Satan's face!

May 29

“Which Way Did They Go? Which Way Did They Go?”

By Debbie Ousley

A friend of mine told me a story about her grandson the other day that really snapped me back to reality. Her husband (Gramps) had taken the boy for a ride on his motorcycle when they came upon a car that had its flashers on. The little boy said, “Look Gramps, that car is turning both ways!”

It made sense to me; I suppose because the day she shared this story with me was the evening the church had its bean supper (serving the public) and others and myself were turning both ways at the same time and we were going in no productive direction. Don’t ch’a hate that when it happens? But maybe no one out there ever gets to going in two directions at the same time ... oh yeah!

When we do that, our destination is always the same:

101 Frustrated Street
Give-Me-A-Break City
I’m-So-Tired State (of mind)

I really admire those people who have it all together; those folks who know how to delegate, plan, keep focused and never get rattled (I haven’t met too many in my life time, but I admire them).

It behooves all of us to insist on keeping peace in the projects we undertake and peace within ourselves; no matter if the beans are burning or the banana pudding is running low. I believe when Jesus told people in John 14:27, *“Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”* That He left it for us but also to benefit those around us.

“Lord, help me to keep my head
When all those around me are losing theirs.

And don't let me be the one
Biting their heads off. Amen!"

May 30

“Snakes at the Front Door”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Some years ago, our daughter Megan and her cousin were not old enough to go on dates but were old enough (we felt) to be left at home alone for a couple of hours. My wife and I had gone to the church to work for a little while and were planning on being back soon. It seemed harmless to leave the girls alone during the daytime for just that short while.

When we got home, however, they met us running from the neighbor's house with a wild story about snakes. It seems that our cat had been acting strangely, like she was trying to get something at the front door of the house (which we never used). The girls, not really thinking anything about it, opened the door to see what was going on and there laid a rather large garter snake. We had placed a rug between the doors during the winter to keep the cold air from coming under the door and this snake had decided that it was a good place to spend the winter. At that time “spring had sprung” and so the snake was fully alert. They immediately slammed the door shut (and boy, am I glad. If that thing had gotten into the house, I would have had to put it up for sale and move).

The girls, after screaming for awhile, ran to our neighbor and she managed to chase the snake out from in under our door. But that isn't the end of the story.

On Sunday, the day after their incident, I noticed the cat standing guard at the front door again. I strongly suspected that the critter had returned. But I wasn't about to open the front door and take a chance on that thing getting into the house. Not on your life (or mine either. I know garter snakes aren't poisonous but they can still scare you to death! Did I mention how much I hate snakes?).

I went outside and around to the front to survey the situation. I could see a part of the old rug hanging out from under the storm door. So, I went to the garage where I found my large pair of channel locks. This gave me about 16” to reach for the rug without having to grab it with my hands; couldn't chance that snake coming out with me that close to it. I grabbed the rug with the channel locks and began to pull. Suddenly, as the rug was coming out, so did the snake. It rolled onto the steps leading to the front door, and before I had a chance to kill it with those handy channel locks, it crawled away (lucky snake ... or was it really lucky me?).

Well, the rug was out and the snake was out but what was to prevent it from coming back? I went to the garage to see what I could find to stop up the crack under the front storm door and by the time I came back that snake had crawled back up on the top step and was about to go under the door again! When it saw me off it went. I had found some Styrofoam pieces and began to put them in the crack under the door. As I looked around that snake just wasn't about to give up. It was trying to make its way back again! I stopped up that crack for sure and never saw the snake again (Thank God!).

But the incident made me to realize a very important truth about our homes. Just as that snake was lying in wait at our front door, so the devil puts "snakes" at our front doors to lay in wait for our family members. Oh, they are very subtle and take a form that may seem very innocent on the surface, but rest assured, their main goal is to entrap our children and destroy our marriages and homes.

You see, the home (not the house) is the nucleus of the Church. Church must begin at home or it will not work in public meeting. Nehemiah found this out. When he was sent by God to help rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (see Nehemiah 7:1-3), it was not an easy chore to get accomplished. They did it with the threat of attack at any moment. Once it was finished, he gave strict orders to not open the gates until the sun was up and hot and even then, to do it under heavy guard. At night they were to shut the gates, bar the door, and keep a look out for the enemy.

We would be wise to begin doing that today with our own homes. The devil wants us, our wives (or husbands), and our children. So, remember the snake at the door and don't let that rascal in your house. It'll be subtle and stubborn but if we seek God for our families and keep a keen look out at all times. A good, long pair of channel locks is pretty handy too.

May 31

“I’m A Cowboy Now” By Jerry D. Ousley

I always thought that I’d make a good cowboy. How I loved to watch a good western (and I still do)! John Wayne and Clint Eastwood knew how it was done! They were amongst my boyhood heroes and I felt like I could be just like them. If only I had a horse!

But I found out one day just how good on a horse I was. Well, it wasn’t quite a horse – it was a pony named Blackie – you guessed it, he was black. It was a Sunday afternoon and I had been invited over to a friend’s house after church. They had two horses and of course, Blackie. After dinner everyone decided it would be fun to go riding through the woods and I was invited. Alright! A chance to prove my cowboy abilities was at hand and I just knew I was going to be a natural – until I climbed aboard the blanket clad Blackie – no saddle. No problem; I felt I could ride as good as any Indian.

Off we went headed straight for the woods. My friend’s older brother was on the back of a fine mount and he rode with confidence. Next was my friend on another horse, and I brought up the rear with Blackie. But something was wrong. I knew to pull on the reins to go right, left, and to stop. That was no problem. But this crazy pony kept turning his head back toward me. What was he trying to do?

So, I called out to my friend, “Hey, what’s wrong with this thing? He keeps turning his head around toward me!”

“Oh,” he said, “just keep pulling on the reins. He likes to bite his rider.” Now they tell me!

So, I jerked the reins to the right and Blackie would follow all the way around, teeth clenched. Then I’d pull to the left and the same thing would happen. I spent the whole trip jerking on that pony trying to keep my legs intact.

But that wasn’t the end of the story. Noooo! We reached the edge of the woods and that psychotic pony headed straight for the nearest thicket he could find. What now? I caught

on very quickly. If he couldn't bite me off his back, he was going to try to knock me off. We went through trees, thorns and, you name it, we went through it.

I told the Lord real quick like, "God, if You'll get me back home, I won't brag about my cowboy abilities again! He did and I didn't.

God knows how to bring our pride to the surface doesn't He? It reminds me of a verse of scripture – Proverbs 11:2: "*When pride comes, then comes shame, but with the humble is wisdom.*" Sometimes wisdom is hard learned. God has a way of putting a "Blackie" in our lives to shame the pride right out of us.

So, the next time you find yourself in a situation where what you have bragged about is suddenly making your face turn red, just remember that God's giving us some more of that down to earth wisdom!

June 1

“Peace, Even Today” By Jerry D. Ousley

“This will be delivered by noon on Monday no exceptions. No one goes home until full arrangements have been made.” A rush order at work just had to be shipped. It was Friday and this was not the kind of pressure we needed to end the work week. To make a long story short we did get the order out on time. I suppose the trucking company made a great deal of profit hauling a special Saturday morning delivery to our customer. I could imagine the driver of that truck feeling like we did, because he had to work the weekend to make the delivery. I wonder if it was all worth it – really. I can just picture the final end customer getting his part and saying something like, “Thanks for getting it done so quickly but you know I’m not going to need this for another three weeks yet.”

We rush around trying to make a good impression to keep the money flowing in and I suppose that’s what makes our system work so well. I do wonder if giving up our peace is worth it. What good does millions and even billions of dollars do if we have no peace?

On my way home that evening as I tried to unwind from the tension of the day I thought of an incident my wife, our daughter, her friend, and myself experienced. We were driving through the country when we were privileged with a sight probably few see. Just about twenty feet from the road was a doe with her nursing fawn. It was so amazing we had to stop and watch for awhile. The doe looked at us in way that let us know that she knew we weren’t going to hurt her and just peacefully continued on with her business. I don’t think her fawn even realized we were there. It certainly brought a peaceful moment to my heart.

The calm of this scene in contrast to the day I’d just had, made me wonder why we struggle so much. God’s creatures just take it minute for minute and don’t seem in the least concerned. In Matthew 6, Jesus spoke of the lilies of the field, how they didn’t worry and still God took care of them. There’s a great truth to be learned by looking at situations and things in the light of how God takes care of nature.

We don’t all need to quit our jobs to bring this point home but we do need to take time to relax in the Lord and let Him fill us with peace that only He can bring in a time of quietness.

Even in the middle of all the confusion, rush and “hurry up and wait” philosophies we have created for ourselves, in God and only in God, we can have peace even today.

June 2

“What a Spot!”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Back in the days when I was selling insurance for the Indiana Prairie Farmer, I had an experience that I will never forget. I was in the country around Lawrenceburg, Indiana, and ran across a very attractive farmhouse. I had grown accustomed to looking things over before getting out of the car, especially looking for dogs. The cars were in the driveway, and the main door was open on the back porch. “No dogs in sight, great!”

I got out of the car, and headed to the porch, “So far so good.” I raised my hand to knock on the screen door when I looked down. There was a Doberman pincher, looking me right in the eye, with his upper lip turned up. I quickly surveyed the situation and discovered that there was no latch on this screen door. All the dog had to do was push on the door and it would come right open.

There was no one else in sight and there was no way I could begin to run to the car; I’d never make it! So, I just put my hand against the door and tried not to stare at the dog. I didn’t know how long it would take but I knew that I must stay right there until someone came to my rescue. Fortunately, it was just about five minutes before a man came from the barn and headed for my direction. I was so relieved to see him! I sure didn’t pressure him much about insurance. He had been my “policy” that day!

My situation reminds me of our own predicament with life. How often have we found ourselves in a similar situation in life? We think things are going great and everything is right when we suddenly find ourselves “holding the door against a Doberman pincher!” It seems that there is no way out and our only choice is to stand there. We get worried and worn but it’s the only way to survive. You know, the Bible tells us to do that very thing! Ephesians 6:13 says: “*Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.*” When we have done everything that we can, we are to stand and wait on our Hero, Jesus Christ, to come to our rescue.

Rest assured; He will show up in short order! If we have done all we can, and we are depending on Him, He will not let us down. We may be standing there asking, “Why don’t He

show up? What is taking Him so long?” But it is only for our good. If we give up and run, our enemy will certainly get us. But if we just stand, Jesus will come and make all things right!

June 3

“Summer Storms” By Jerry D. Ousley

Crash! B-b-b-b-oom! Then the rushing sound of a torrential downpour comes. These are the sounds of summer storms. They can blow up in an instant during a bright, sunny day. Sometimes they bring much needed rain and sometimes they bring disaster. The one thing they have in common is that they end.

My son and I had gone to a ball game at Cincinnati one summer. When he was younger, we tried at least once a year, to go and see the “Reds” play. This particular time we had decided to make a day of it, going early enough to stay a few hours at the zoo, then, after a casual lunch go to the ball park early and get our seats before the crowd got there.

It was hot. If I remember correctly when we got to the ballpark the temperature was around 102 degrees! But we “weathered” the heat and finally got to our seats. I don’t remember much about the game except that as it went on, the sky in the distance was getting darker and darker. By the time the game ended the storm was almost on top of us.

We hurried as fast as we could to get to the car. We had borrowed my dad’s 1991 Geo Metro. It was great on gas but we were soon to discover something else about it. We got to the edge of the parking lot and the rain began. Actually, it was more like the city of Cincinnati had decided to pour out an entire water tower over the stadium. And so, we ran drenched to the car.

We sat there for several minutes hoping that the rain would stop but it didn’t. By the time we made the nerve-racking trip through Cincinnati and got to Lawrenceburg, Indiana we were worn out from fighting traffic, trying to see in the rain and spectacular lightning, and we were ready to stop! We found out that the little car floated. As we drove through the torrential rain, we could actually feel the car lift to the top of the water on the road, especially if we were going too fast.

The rain did finally end and the lightning stopped except for occasional flashes in the distance. Everything was strangely calm after the storm. It reminded me of the time Jesus

calmed the storm. When all with Him in the boat thought that death was surely eminent, He stood, said, "Peace! Be still," and the terrible storm was done (see Mark 4:37-39).

It also reminded me of how "storms" come to us in life at the most inopportune times. We don't need that extra tension and trouble but it comes anyway. As surely as we can't stop the rain and the lightning, we can't stop the "storms of life" either. At best we can only hold on tight and ride them out.

But just like in the storm with the disciples, if we know Jesus as our personal Savior, He will do one of two things for us. He will either calm the storm, or calm us. We can get through these things. In fact, as a believer, the Bible tells us that all things work for our good (to those called according to His purpose – see Romans 8:28).

So, when the rain falls in life and the wind howls remember our Savior. He will get us through and it will work out for the best one way or another. Jesus is even Master of Summer Storms.

June 4

“Sometimes One Seed is Enough” By Debbie Ousley

Where I once worked there was an area outside the building with tables and shade (most of the day) where we could take our breaks. In a small crack between the building and the concrete slab, a tomato plant had, by choice, grown. Apparently, no certain person planted it there. It was the result of a discarded slice of tomato.

This plant, whether planted by chance or by nature, had become a community object. Most everyone now claimed this tomato plant as theirs. They referred to it, when they spoke about it, as “mine,” or made comments like, “Are you watering ‘my’ tomato plant?”

It was amazing how the plant had grown between two massive objects, the building and the concrete. I must admit though that the two tomatoes that had formed on the plant were not so healthy looking, but the plant did yield fruit. It had brought more fruit, however, than the two puny tomatoes. It had become an object of encouragement. Look how determined it was. The circumstance for the plant to grow was not favorable, but it made it anyway. Its success story to all the people’s lives that had seen it was an encouragement.

Most of us really like a good come-back story. Oh, there are those who would claim they are sappy and outwardly they don’t seem to be moved, but we never know what’s going on in the hearts of mankind. We see people everyday stretching their necks and looking in every direction trying to see God, when all the while He is right in front of us if we have an “eye to see.”

Nowadays mankind makes it so complicated to feel the presence of God in their lives. It begins with a one-on-one encounter; seeing, not with our natural eye but with the “spirit man.” It’s not by logic or trying to reason it out, but it’s by faith. “Blessed is the man (or woman) that hasn’t seen but still believes.” (Jesus)

We won’t ever see if we don’t want to. Mankind’s own free will is the strongest force in our being. It is amazing to me how God, by choice, imparted that free will into us from the beginning of time. The tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil was very much accessible to Adam and Eve. It was never out of reach. It was by choice.

Seeing the Lord’s wonderful and mighty works will never come by convincing, debate, or force. We choose by faith to see Him and once we have, it will give us an immovable desire to continue to see Him.

I don't believe we worship nature! The Word tells us not to worship the creation more than the Creator. As we see the beauty God has created, even mighty winds, lightning, and roaring seas, let's look beyond what we see with our eyes and see with our spirits.

June 5

“Where Your Treasure Is, There Will Your Heart Also Be”

By Debbie Ousley

The other evening, as I was going out, I stopped at the four-way stop sign on our street and was ready to proceed when a pickup truck just came speeding through. It's pretty common for cars to run this stop sign. We've even seen police cars slide through it before. But I had never seen anyone run it with other vehicles waiting to cross through.

This guy (and it was a male driver) just “put the pedal to the metal” and when I blew the horn, I suppose it was for my benefit only. What he did as he passed through made me laugh out loud. Now get this: As he passed, I blew the horn, and he turned his head so as not to look at me. It was as if he thought that if he didn't see me that made me not there. Or, if we didn't make eye contact, he wasn't accountable for his actions. I found that so funny! I guess I'm lucky he didn't give me some kind of hand jester. That would not have made me laugh.

You know guys, I may really seem strange to you, but that kind of behavior just blows me away, especially from adults. It's that attitude of “here I am, move out of my way, and for goodness-sake don't call me on my self-absorbed rudeness.”

One time, a man tried to flip a lit cigarette in my car window as he passed me, and I'm telling you the truth, I had done nothing to provoke him, but just to be there. Doesn't it kinda scare you how angry and mean some individuals are anymore? It does me. I had a boy tell me he fought just because he liked to fight. THAT'S NUTS!!! Do we live in a protected bubble? Is that why we don't understand this kind of thinking?

I know the Scripture tells us that Christians are in this world but not of it. But I would like to get in people's minds sometimes so that I might understand them better. I'm convinced their actions are not directed so much by their heads as it is their hearts.

At Christmas time all the church organizations collected food, toys and clothing for families (and I say this with caution), I implore those families that received so much from these kind-hearted organizations to not make just themselves their only charity of choice. While

employed with a government funded program, we collected from all the good-hearted people and, this is no lie, we would deliver to homes where the packages under their trees would extend almost to the front door. Not all, but way too many.

It's not the fault of the churches and other organizations, even though when asking from people we should be the best and wisest stewards we possibly can be. I believe it tears at God's heart when people abuse the kindness of others, and it angers Him when individuals will not be thankful because they are so predisposed due to the opportunity at hand. The United States is a generous country but our government may have arrived at a time when we are generous to a fault.

Disclosure: I ask that you not misinterpret these opinions. But as ones that say, "Receive if you have a need and be thankful for it. But don't receive if there's really not a need. Someone else may go without because of it."

June 6

“In Need of a Jack” By Jerry D. Ousley

“*W***hat** do I do now?” I thought. I was frustrated trying to make this bad situation work on my own. I needed help. I was driving our 18-passenger van on a country road between Elizabethtown, Indiana and Highway 31 when the tire decided to go flat. Well, being an inanimate object, it didn’t really make the decision but the hammer wedge it ran over did!

Anyway, I was stranded with a flat tire in a big, heavy vehicle. I had to drive a way until I could find a place to pull over. As you know a country road is just barely wide enough for two vehicles to pass but provides very few actual stopping places. Finally coming to an old cemetery, I was able to stop and sure enough it was flat (but only on one side).

I had a small pump that ran from the power socket in the dashboard and thought maybe I could pump it up enough to get to a garage. But it was several miles away and beginning to get late in the evening. When I got it pumped up about half way and heard air hissing I knew that plan would never work. So, I began to dig around the back of the van for the jack. This was going to have to be done the hard way.

I finally found it and began raising the screw jack. I soon found out that it was not high enough to get the vehicle off the ground. No matter where I put it and how high I cranked it, it just didn’t budge the van up. What was I going to do now? I had no recourse but to seek help. I had passed a house not too far back up the road; maybe he would have a good hydraulic jack I could borrow.

As I walked up the road, I thought of a story I had once heard about a man getting a flat in the middle of the night. He didn’t have a good jack either. As he hiked back up the road to the farmhouse he had passed, he kept thinking about how late it was and how angry the farmer was going to be when he woke him up to borrow a jack. The more he thought about it the angrier he got. By the time he had knocked on the farmhouse door and the farmer had answered, he was so mad he just told the farmer, “You can just keep your old jack!” and walked away.

I couldn't afford to be angry. I knocked on the door and I found out right away that I was going to be an inconvenience to this man. He had just finished a hard day's work and was sitting down to dinner when I interrupted everything. He was very gracious and had me accompany him out to his garage where he did find a good hydraulic jack. He even loaded it up in his truck, drove me back to my van and helped me get the tire changed. I offered him twenty bucks but he wouldn't hear of it. I appreciated his help very much and I'll never forget it.

The Bible says in Psalm 37:39: "*But the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in the time of trouble.*" I'm not saying that this man wouldn't have helped me had I not been a Christian but I'm sure glad that God was with me.

God is like that. He's never too busy to help us when we need it. It may not be in the way we think it should happen (I'd have liked it better if the air pump would have worked. It would've sure saved a lot of sweat and labor). But then, He knows which way will bring Him more glory. And that's the important thing.

June 7

“Running Hogs” By Jerry D. Ousley

Sometimes I hesitate telling some of the things I did as a kid growing up. I don't want to give kids of today any ideas. But then maybe if they'd pull some of the pranks we did, they wouldn't be in as much trouble today. We all pull pranks as kids (and some of us haven't grown up yet). I'm sure many of you have done things you wouldn't want your children to do, am I right? But I'll tell this on myself just to illustrate a point. Okay enough already; let's get down to business here.

We were “mighty hunters” in those days. My brother, cousin, and I would stalk all kinds of prey in the woods with our Daisy BB guns. This one particular hot day as we were walking up the road, we took notice of a rather large hog pen. We had passed it many times before but not with the glint in our eyes we had that day.

One of us pointed the trusty Daisy in the direction of a big hog and squeezed a round off. That hog jumped, danced, and did the “heeby-jeeby” all at once. Of course, we all laughed at the way that fat hog did her graceful jig. With that kind of entertainment going on how can you stop with just one shot?

Someone else said, “Hey, let me try that!” And before anyone had a chance to object another hog was doing the same thing. One thing led to another and well, we found ourselves in the hog pen (which went way back into the woods) chasing those hogs all over the place. It was a good thing we had plenty of ammunition because some of the really big ones started toward us, but only until they felt the fury of our BB's.

I'm sure we ran several pounds off those hogs that day and if the owner had known he wouldn't have appreciated it one bit. Here's the thing though, had those hogs united and withstood a few more “stings” they could have easily run off three skinny boys in a hurry.

That incident reminds me of how some of us Christians do the same thing. We just amble through life doing our own thing. The devil sticks temptation in front of our noses and instead of asking for help, appearing like we can't handle it, we run as fast as we can while the devil grins from ear to ear at the sight. He runs us poor just like we did those hogs that day.

But if we'd bind together, it could be a whole different story. In promising blessings to the nation Israel, God had told them that if they were obedient to Him and stood together that they would see the time when 100 men would put 10,000 of the enemy to flight. (Leviticus 26:8). In reference to the Church, He said that where two or three were gathered together in His name that He would be there in their midst (Matthew 18:20).

Think of it! When we stand together with Christ in our presence, we can send the devil and his cohorts running for their lives. The problem is that most people including today's Christians are so busy looking out for "number one" that coming together isn't even given a second thought. All we need to do is to put our petty differences aside and acknowledge others and their worth, knowing that we will need them to take up for us one day. Just think of what we could accomplish for the kingdom of God and for mankind. What d' ya say? Should we give it a try?

June 8

“Paying Attention” By Jerry D. Ousley

Have you ever wondered where the phrase came from: Paying attention? Of course, “paying” means we’ve had to fork over something in exchange for whatever it is we’re paying for and “attention” means that we are focused on something. So, I suppose the phrase means that we are giving something in exchange for attention or something like that.

I had an experience recently that brought this phrase home to me in a way that I won’t soon forget. I guess I tell too many things on myself and some of you who hear this will think I’m pretty well off my rocker; maybe I am. I was headed to Seymour the other day (that’s a town about twenty miles from where I live) and had to stop to get gas. There’s a station in the town of Crothersville, about five miles north of Austin, where I like to get my gas. I suppose we’ve all got our preferences but somehow it just seems to get better mileage and last longer than some of the other places. As long as it isn’t more than a penny or two higher, I’ll stop there. Anyway, I pulled up to the pumps, inserted my debit card and waited for approval. When the digital readout told me to lift the lever and begin pumping, I obediently followed the instructions.

About five dollars worth had been rang up on the pump when I realized that I had not lifted the lever for the regular which was \$3.06 but had mistakenly lifted the lever from the other end and was pumping in liquid gold at \$3.26! My little Neon didn’t need that rich stuff but I was already committed and so I finished filling the tank. I pretended like I had made this mistake intentionally, but folks let me assure you that it isn’t my standard practice to buy the most expensive fuel out there. I remember when you could get the premium stuff (then called “Ethel”) for only \$.35 per gallon and even then, I saved the extra five cents and stuck with regular. I do have to admit that my little Neon ran like she had just eaten filet mignon instead of hamburger but I don’t want her to get used to that stuff.

The fact of the matter is, had I been paying attention I wouldn’t have been paying for the premium I had just pumped into my tank. That let me know very quickly what it means to “pay attention.” If we don’t pay attention then we pay for not paying attention. Get it?

Isaiah 26:3 says, *“You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.”* The “You” in the verse is referring to God, so in essence the verse

is telling us “God will keep those who are paying attention to Him in perfect peace because they trust in Him.” Paying attention to God requires us to pray, worship, and know what He is telling us in His word. Reading between the lines we can also find that as we pay attention to Him, we aren’t concentrating on other things so we’ll be more apt to do what He’s telling us so we don’t fall into traps that we will regret later. It keeps us from committing sin, making wrong choices, and doing things we later wish we hadn’t. I’d say that’s a pretty good formula to keep us in perfect peace even when it seems the world is falling apart around us. We can be sure we’re in His will because we trust Him. It may or may not keep us from doing stupid things like pumping the wrong gas but it will keep us in tune with the Master.

June 9

“Showers of Blessing”

By Jerry D. Ousley

In the middle of a hot summer afternoon after a long period of no rain nothing is as welcomed as a calm, refreshing and soothing summer shower. When we were kids, it was always fun on those particular scorching hot afternoons to stand out in the rain and dance around. It was better than taking a shower in the house. It was different and somehow spontaneous. The stickiness of the heat on our skins was replaced by a refreshing coolness that changed our moods. Instead of being irritated and short tempered, fueled by the heat, we were now playful, happy and we felt like everything had changed. It was as if some magical potion was being poured down from the skies and we were fortunate enough to be emerged and bathed in it.

I guess I'm showing our “redneck” upbringing now but I remember that often in the summertime when these showers would pour down Dad and Mom would rush out in the rain with a bucket of soap and quickly wipe down the car and let the rain rinse it off. It was a free carwash! I guess in a way that was a blessing too.

Ezekiel 34:26 talks about these “showers of blessing.” It says, *“And I will make them and the places all round My hill a blessing; and I will cause showers to come down in their season; there shall be showers of blessing.”* If you read this entire chapter what you will discover is that God, through the prophet Ezekiel, was addressing the leadership of Israel in type. This message was aimed at the nation of Israel but is applicable to our own situation in the Church of today.

It talks about the leadership as shepherds over the flock. They were accused of feeding themselves while letting the flock go hungry. It says that they made clothing from the wool of the sheep and they filled themselves with mutton from the flock. But they wouldn't lift a finger to care for the flock. In essence they were merely raping the flock for what they could get. They were making themselves rich from the flock.

But it doesn't stop there. It goes on to say that the stronger sheep of the flock preyed on the weaker members, shoving them with their horns and pushing them out of their way. It

depicts a minority of weaker sheep being pushed around and abused not only by those who were to feed them and care for them but also their own peers who were stronger.

This is a very dangerous situation and it is happening in many congregations around the world. There seems to be a push to exploit the kingdom of God for personal gain. Without pointing an accusing finger, I want to tell you that if you have been a victim of abuse from within these false churches, God has not forgotten you. Don't blame God and don't hold it against Him. If you have been a victim, so has God. I want to tell you that He isn't going to take it much longer. Vengeance belongs to Him and when the time is right, He will execute it. God holds you in a special place in His heart and you will see justice.

June 10

“Which Hat Do I Wear Today?” By Debbie Ousley

*F*ather's Day is this Sunday! Don't forget to honor your father with a gift, card, or maybe his favorite meal. You know, our father's wear a lot of different hats and below are a few examples:

A BANKER: Giving loans with no interest in paying them back.

A LAWYER: Pleading their children's case to neighbors, family members, and teachers with a lot of objections.

A JUDGE: Pronouncing the sentencing, always wondering, “did the punishment fit the crime? Was I too hard or not hard enough?”

A COUNSELOR: Trying to understand and be sensitive when in reality thinking “that was a very dumb move!”

A FOOTBALL PLAYER: “Do I pass off to Mom? The clock is ticking and no matter what I do I'm gonna be called for ‘unnecessary roughness.’”

Seriously, being a father these days carries a lot more involvement than it used to, and rightly so. My Father's job description appeared to me to be the Provider, Disciplinarian, and Protector. But now-a-days, as it has been proven how important a father's influence is on his children, they are required to have more “hands on involvement.” And in reality, can a father sleep-walk through their children's growing years and then expect to be included in their “grown-up” years?

In studying the word of God, I see that father's have a big responsibility. Ephesians 3:14-15 tells me the very title of “Father” derives from our Heavenly Father – God. I've seen the job and I sure don't want it!

But I believe the most important responsibility a father has is to teach by example: How important it is to know, respect, and love the Heavenly Father. We've all noticed how a

father's interests quickly becomes his children's interests also, whether it is fishing, hunting, race cars, basketball, stamp collecting, or whatever.

Fathers, you do deserve honor and respect and a day set aside just for you. And when you show your Heavenly Father honor and respect in your life every day, your children will see how important that is to you and they will follow suit. This is not just a life lesson you are teaching them; it's a "Life-After-This-Life" lesson.

Happy Father's Day, Dad! We love you!

June 11

“My Way or No Way” By Debbie Ousley

“If I’d Had My Way”

A song written and sang by Janet Paschel

*If I’d had my way about it
I’d have danced in grassy fields and fragrant meadows
And risen in the morning just to hear the robin’s lovely melody,
I’d rested in wide spaces high above the hurting places
And found a cross that asked much less of me;
Never sailed in raging winds or troubled sea,
If you’d thought it best to leave it up to me.*

*If I’d had my way about it
I’d have only known your majesty and glory
And passed the cup of sorrow to somebody else more willing to receive
I’d written lovely phrases, inspiring lofty praises
And soared above my own humanity.
Wounded wouldn’t die, hearts wouldn’t bleed
If all along you’d left it up to me.*

*But If I’d had my way
I might have been wading through the river
When you wanted me to walk upon the sea.
And If I’d had my say
And all my wants and whims and wishes
You know how weak, how shallow I would be
If I’d had my way.*

The song talks about how easy we would make it on ourselves if the Lord would leave it up to us on the journey of life. It also talks about how we would miss some very important lessons by choosing the easier route.

We live in a day when it seems so important to have our way. I believe there is a degree of rebel in all of us and sometimes that is good, but nothing good has ever nor will ever come from us rebelling against God or those He has appointed to lead us.

Jesus Himself was considered a rebel by the religious leaders, but let us be reminded that He was coming against the "Law." Jesus came to usher in grace and put the traditions of old to death by His death and His resurrection. It was a "New Day" spoken about many, many times in the Old Testament.

A rebellious heart sows rebellion and it may start very small, maybe just disagreeing with the color of carpet in the hallway. But, as always, it is the "heart" of the matter that does the damage.

The Lord's way is so different than our way. He seemed to always choose those to lead that others didn't agree could handle the task. And He stuck with His decision no matter what. Moses wasn't allowed to enter the Promised Land and God knew He wouldn't way before they arrived because of an act of anger from Moses. But God did not replace him until what He ordained in Moses' life was competed.

David, a king who penned, in my opinion, one of the most inspiring books of the Bible was caught in adultery and a conspiracy to commit murder but God didn't replace him, as David repented and also paid the price for his terrible sin. God has no turning.

Both of these men and many more who failed during their leadership were counted as faithful and saved because of that. I am in no way suggesting that their sin was acceptable, I am only pointing out that what and who God has appointed is His way, not ours.

Grace is a wonderful thing. It is God's unmerited favor and I lean on it maybe more than all of you. But there is an area of serving and loving God we have made less important, that is very important and that is the fear of God. Fear that makes us respect and hold Him in high honor. Knowing He doesn't need our validation concerning His decisions but respecting them and knowing there will be consequences to pay if we don't.

Having my way isn't as important as God having His way because when He does it's always right for you, the Church, His kingdom, and me.

June 12

“Where We Live” By Debbie Ousley

“Mary Had a Little Lamb”

*Mary had a little Lamb
Its fleece was white as snow,
And everywhere that Mary went
The Lamb was sure to go.
He followed her to school each day
Twasn't even in the rule,
It made the children laugh and play
To have a Lamb at school.
And then the rules all changed one day,
Illegal it became,
To bring the Lamb of God to school,
Or even speak His name.
Everyday got worse and worse,
And days turned into years.
Instead of hearing children laugh,
We heard gunshots and tears.
What must we do to stop the crime,
That's in our schools today?
Let's let the Lamb of God come back to school,
And teach our kids to pray!
-Author Unknown*

I appreciate the words in this poem and I, like a lot of you, agree that God has a place in school. But folks, let's be honest about the whole situation. Teaching our kids to pray begins at home! I believe prayer and the act of it, are only results of the faith we have about it.

We can be dedicated to say a nice little “Grace” prayer before we eat and a “Now I lay me down to sleep,” before bed, but that is not enough. If we parents really knew how much

influence we have on our kids it would scare us to death. The responsibility of being parents only begins with the necessities like food, clothing and shelter. The eternal matters that will keep on surfacing after they have grown taller and smarter than us, is what counts. Kids are not dumb! They know passion and sensitivity when they see it, and they know hypocrisy when it raises its head over and over.

Prayer in school? I say "Amen." The Ten Commandments? Yes! But like so many issues of today the cry is, "Let someone else do it." And then when crime takes over in our schools and communities, we are so quick to blame, "It must be the Politicians' fault, or the teachers or even the Church." But what about where we live? You know the address ...

June 13

“Life’s Wet Dogs” By Jerry D. Ousley

As young teenagers in the tiny town of Azalia Indiana, we always managed to find something to do. One particularly very hot summer day my cousin, my younger brother, and I decided it was time to go swimming. The closest place was White River which ran just about a mile outside the little burg.

Of course, our parents forbid us to do such a thing without their supervision and we knew this. It was time for a plan. I was the oldest so it was up to me to come up with a fool-proof idea. I presented my thoughts to the other boys and they felt like it was a workable and believable scenario so we were on our way to our own version of a splashing theme park. No one would ever know.

In those days we spent a lot of time arrow-head hunting in the fields around Azalia. Because of the river the area was rich in lost and discarded Native American treasures. My cousin had come up with some pretty good finds. But today it was the excuse and not the thoughts of finding old Indian relics that taunted us to the fields. Our parents didn’t mind if we went looking for arrow-heads and so off we went.

Underneath our jeans we wore our swimming shorts. We didn’t want to lie so our plan was to go straight to the river and have our cool dip, then change our clothes and hunt arrow-heads until our hair dried. It was a good plan. Our parents would never know.

Now, my cousin had a dog named “Patch.” Patch was with him pretty much everywhere he went. So naturally Patch was with us when we went swimming. A cool dip in the river felt pretty good to him too. But while we were walking around in the fields looking for something to prove that we were actually there, the field across from us had the irrigation lines running. Patch got into it and got wet again. It was time for us to return home and in a worried voice my cousin said, “They’ll take one look at that wet dog and know we went swimming!”

Quick to think on my feet I calmly said, “Don’t worry. We’ll just tell the truth. The dog got into the irrigation. That’s the truth, isn’t it?” The other boys agreed and so we began walking home. There was a stand of trees just across from our house and we had decided to

hang our wet swimming shorts there until they could dry. Everything had fallen into place. We were going to get away with this.

As we walked up to the house my cousin's sister took one look at that wet dog and accused, "You've been swimming!" I was prepared and ready to speak but as I opened my mouth to explain about the irrigation my cousin blurted out "How'd you know!" We blew it!

Isn't life kind of like that situation sometimes? We think we've got it all together; the plan is falling into place and we just know it's all going to work out and then a "wet dog" comes into the picture. We try to work out the snags and think we have everything under control until that moment of truth when we find out we are blowing it big time.

Life can be full of "wet dogs." We try with everything in us to make things right just to have them blow up in our faces. That's why we so desperately need one to intervene for us. Many believe God exists but that He's just up there watching without a care about us. But God always sees and He knows about every "wet dog" in our lives. He longs to intervene but He wants His intervention to be something we want as well. All we've got to do is call on Him and He'll be right there. Sometimes to bail us out and explain our "wet dogs" and other times to give us strength to confess about our "wet dogs." But He'll always be there helping in the way that is best for us in our situation.

He cares about each one of us. Jesus said *"Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows."* (Matthew 10:29-31). He is watching and He cares. He'll be with us despite all of our "wet dogs."

June 14

“Mean As a Junk Yard Dog” By Jerry D. Ousley

O*ver* the years I have had several experiences with dogs. The particular situation I'm about to share with you happened a long time ago when I was a kid (I think I remember being a kid once).

I was filling in for a friend of mine on his paper route while he and his family were on vacation. The route was mainly in town so it wasn't a hard job except for one house. It was near the end of the route but what made this house so special was that they had a basset hound that made it a hobby to eat paper boys. He was always waiting for me and would send me racing down the street nipping at my tires as I peddled as fast as I possibly could.

Sometime during the middle of the week my bike went on the fritz so I had to “hoof it.” It happened to be during the week of Thanksgiving and so the paper was thick with all the holiday advertisements.

Things were going very well until I began getting closer to, you know where. I started looking about two houses up the street, scanning the yard, porch, and anywhere else I could for that dog but he was no place in sight. I very quietly opened the gate and tiptoed up to the porch. Carefully I laid the paper down then tiptoed back to the gate making sure it was shut behind me. Half-way to the next house I breathed a sigh of relieved that I had actually lived through this ordeal, when all of a sudden, I heard that unmistakable basset bark that had been burned into my brain that week.

I turned to look and sure enough that dog was running after me for all he was worth. The time had come for all good paper boys to take their stand. It was live or die and so I grabbed one of those thick Thanksgiving papers, raised it above my head and waited for the fight of the century to begin. When the dog was about five feet away from me, I let the paper fly through the air with all the strength a little skinny boy could muster. It struck the dog squarely between the eyes to my utter amazement. He yelped in pain, a far different sound than that of triumph I had heard during the beginning of the week.

The dog turned with his tail between legs and quickly fled back to the safety of his own yard and I'm pretty sure I saw him stagger a time or two as he went. I had beaten him! The rest of the week was a breeze! By the way that dog never bothered me again.

Life is a lot like that situation. The devil runs us every chance he can get, trying to make us flee in fright from his terrible bark. Often, he's successful. We just do what comes naturally, and run as fast as we can. What we fail to realize is that the devil is just like that dog. He'll chase us and the highlight of his day is getting the best of us.

What we need to learn is that the day is coming when we are going to have to take a stand against him or just give up and let him have us. When we choose to take a stand what we find out is that the power of Christ in us is stronger than the devil could ever stand up against. The Bible says, *"You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."* (1 John 4:4).

The devil will hurl all sorts of problems our way. What we've got to do is learn to deal with them but not by ourselves. When we know Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow Him to be just that to us, then we find out what the power of a Savior can do. Then we'll just see who's really "mean as a junk yard dog."

June 15

“Losing a Daughter” By Jerry D. Ousley

I *lost* my daughter. To more accurately define that statement, she got married. But it's one in the same. When I get home from work in the evening she's no longer around the house. Well, I suppose she wasn't there much anyway; young ladies who are in love and engaged can find plenty of reasons not to be at home. But I knew that she was coming home sometime that night. I miss listening for her to come in or waking up in the night to discover that the living room light has been turned off signaling that she was home.

It isn't like seeing your son get married. Jeremy “tied the knot” last September and I was happy for him. It was a new chapter in his life and I was glad that he had found the woman who fulfilled his dreams just as I had thirty years earlier. I'm happy for Megan too, but I've got to tell you that it isn't easy walking your daughter down that aisle getting ever closer to the guy who is taking her away from you. You are privileged to stand there between them for a few moments and you want it to stay that way but you can't. There comes a point all too soon in the wedding ceremony when you have to put her hand into his and walk away. Every muscle in your body is screaming, “Grab her and run back up that aisle!” or “I think I'll just stay here with them for a while thank-you,” but you can't. You've got to let go and sit down. You've got to let them fly away from you in order to keep their love.

Letting go is a big part of life. It's been modeled to us by God Himself. He had to let go of His only Son at Calvary. He had to stand back and allow His Son to die for the sin of mankind in order to save us. That wasn't easy, especially when He had all the power to just point his finger and loose Jesus from the cross. With a simple whisper He could have eradicated all those soldiers and enemies of Jesus. But He had to let go in order to save.

People say “you're not losing a daughter but gaining a son.” Zach is a good guy. I believe that he'll take care of her. I believe that he will provide for her. But that doesn't make it any easier. It seems like it was just yesterday when that golden haired little girl would curl up in my lap or snuggle close between my wife and I in the bed at night. I miss that little girl. But I have to believe that nothing but good will come from this. Allowing kids to grow up is much more difficult than taking care of them when they are small. God knows that better than any of us. He has spent every day since Adam and Eve allowing people to grow up. He's been

concerned about each and every one of them and He is concerned about you and me. He knows that there are different chapters in our lives – times of change that take us from one plateau to another. Often those times are very difficult for us. But even though He would much rather step in and do it for us or tell us that we should choose to do differently He steps back and lets us stand or fall on our own not because He wants to tell us, “I told you so,” but because He knows that we’ll learn from our successes and failures. Each of them makes us a different and better person if we will accept it. God allows times of change to groom us for what is coming next. He knows what those things are and I think He’d really like to tell us so that we can make the right choices but He knows that we need to work that out for ourselves.

Just like having your daughter get married and go off to live with someone else in a different place is difficult and brings sometimes unwanted change, so God allows us to turn the pages that lead to the next chapter in life on our own. But just like a mother and father who call and check up on their son or daughter even after they’ve grown up and made their own life-choices, so God keeps tabs of what is going on with us. If Jeremy or Megan called today telling us that they needed our help, we would be there as quickly as we could to help them even though they are now married adults making their own decisions. In like manner God is only a prayer away.

June 16

“Miracle Water”

By Jerry D. Ousley

After mowing the lawn on a hot, sunny afternoon I'm ready for a good cold drink of water. Have you ever had to have your water turned off? There's been several times over the years when we've had to do some do-it-yourselfer plumbing work. Since we only had shut-off valves at certain points in our house that meant that if you had to work on it where there wasn't a shut-off valve then you had no choice but to turn the whole system off. My luck, when I have to work on it it's usually in one of those places.

It doesn't take much for me to work up a sweat. As I do I get more and more thirsty. When you've got the water shut off that just isn't convenient. Oh, you can grab a coke or something and normally that's what I do. But inevitably I want nothing but good cold water once it is shut off. You know how that goes.

In Exodus 17 we read about a time when the children of Israel ran out of water. They were in the hot, dry desert and folks, to be frank that's a bad place to run out of water. They began to talk about Moses, complaining that he had brought them out of Egypt, a land of plenty, even though they were slaves, into this desert so they could die of thirst. It was bad enough, that when Moses took the situation to God, he said in so many words, "Lord, they're mad at me and I think they're going to stone me to death!"

Basically, God told Moses that there was nothing to worry about (I mean, why should anyone worry when they have God protecting them?) but to take the rod that had been used to part the Red Sea and go to a certain rock taking the leaders of Israel with him. Now that should have reminded the people of Israel about something very significant. It had only been a few days before when they had seen Moses with that rod. They were ready to stone him that time too because he had led them to the edge of the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army was closing in fast behind them. Moses, at the direction of God, had stretched that rod out towards the sea and the wind began to blow. It blew all night and the next morning there was a dry path between two enormous walls of water. The people of Israel walked across on dry land and then witnessed as Moses had once again stretched the rod out and the walls of water came crashing down on the pursuing Egyptian army. I think I would have been very respectful as he walked through camp holding that rod.

He went to the rock God had told him about along with the elders of the nation. As God had commanded him to do, he struck the rock with the rod and water began gushing out. Can you imagine that – Water from a rock! I want to point out that with all the men mentioned who had come out of Egypt along with the women, children and the mixed crowd that came out with them, it has been estimated that there were in excess of one million people there. That's a lot of water to get from a rock!

They appropriately named the place "Massah and Merribah" which means "tempted" and "contentious." The people quickly forgot the miracle of the Red Sea and when their thirst got the best of them, they yielded to temptation and became contentious.

But before we get too quick in judging them for it, let's remember some of the times we have yielded to temptation and become contentious ourselves. Are we guilty of complaining about things we shouldn't complain about? If we are, we might just find ourselves in a place with water gushing from a rock.

June 17

“Oil’s Well That Ends Well” By Jerry D. Ousley

Many years ago (too many in fact) I worked at a sawmill close to Deputy, Indiana. This was a small sawmill mind you, and they didn’t have all the up-to-date equipment so the work was a bit harder. The owner made ends meet the best he could and part of making ends meet was using a homemade loader (the tractor-like vehicle that was used to load and unload logs). Naturally it took constant maintenance on this loader to keep it going.

One day he had all of his employees (that was a total of two) helping him work on the hydraulics of the loader. It involved lifting the forks as high as they would go, out as far as they would go, and one guy holding a wrench on the outside while the other guy (that was me) stood under the forks in-between the fork assembly and the loader itself.

Everything was going well until the guy on the outside slipped with his wrench and knocked the hydraulic line off. If you know anything at all about hydraulic lines (I don’t know much but I do know – first hand – about this) when the line is off the pressure is released. What was up comes down and what was in flows back out. In other words, I found myself drenched in hydraulic oil while being slowly entrapped by those forks.

“HELP! Get me out of here!” I yelled. The owner and the other employee managed to lift the forks enough for me to make my escape; however, when they saw that nothing was broken and how well “lubricated” I had become, needless to say, I became the joke of the day! They correctly began to call me “Slick.”

I “slid” through the rest of the day amidst all the “oily” jokes and innuendos and managed to maintain my composure, even “slipping” by some of them. My pride was definitely gone and humility became my constant companion.

I am sure I needed that experience (hey I wouldn’t be telling you about this if it had never happened right?). God doesn’t let anything happen to us for just no reason at all. It all becomes a lesson designed just for us. I’m sure many of you could relate situations just as comical and just as unusual because God gives us all these assignments in humility. It makes

me feel very special sometimes that He cares so much for me that He allows these things to happen.

We serve a great God who definitely has a sense of humor. It sure makes for an interesting life. So, the next time a “strange ooze” begins to “coat” your day, “lubricate” your emotions with the knowledge that God’s word is true and nothing is going to happen that you really can’t handle within the will of God and you’ll get through it (read Romans 8:28 - if nothing else remember me covered from head to foot with oil, have a good laugh, and enjoy the rest of your day, my compliments!).

June 18

“Nothing Lasts Forever” By Debbie Ousley

One day, as I began the task of peeling and preparing fifteen pounds of potatoes for the “Shut-In Thanksgiving Dinner,” I thought to myself, “I wonder how many potatoes Mom peeled in her lifetime?” With her twelve children, my dad, and many times, “a few thrown in,” as extras, I’m sure fifteen pounds would have seemed like child’s play to her.

I ask your forgiveness if my sharing childhood memories bothers you, but my goal for these articles is to share something you might relate to and to challenge someone with real issues, or write about a subject you too might be thinking, “someone should say that.”

But, back to the article. My mind went to the time of the year when we would dig all those “hundred rows” of potatoes that Daddy had insisted on planting (well, maybe not a hundred, but it sure felt like it then). When we would finally get them out of the ground and in the cellar, it made for one big pile of potatoes. In my mind I would think, “We’ll never use all those spuds!” But I was never brave enough to speak it out loud where Dad could hear it.

During the winter Mom would hand me a large bucket or pan and tell me to go fill it up with potatoes. I’ve never denied being a little mean, so I’d pick the biggest potatoes I could find which filled the pan a lot faster. The only bad part of my plan was that it made more work for Mom because she would have to cut some of those potatoes into fourths before she could peel them. I regret that now.

But she “kinda” got her revenge later in the winter when that big pile of potatoes had melted down to no more than wrinkled, long sprouted, marble-sized “taters.” Then, when she told me to fill the pan, I do believe the pan was bigger, and I had better wear something warm because I was gonna be out there awhile.

You know what, friends? Nothing really lasts. It may seem like nothing can destroy it, but fire, wind, icebergs, disease, time, age, misunderstood words, hate, jealousy, and planes taken over by terrorists, can bring it down. One big mistake we make is thinking it will last forever (“They’ll be there forever!”)

Even though some people have taken a hard look at themselves and their relationship with Christ lately, I still see too many individuals with the same old attitude of, "He'll be there forever, and when I get ready to do something He'll just be so happy that I've finally decided I'm gonna acknowledge Him as the awesome and mighty God He is." Well, you know what? Christ IS forever and His love is on the long-term plan, that's right. But I just imagine there were some people in New York City on September 11, 2001 who were living their lives like they had forever.

Forever to ask forgiveness from Christ and family members; forever to start doing something with their lives besides getting what they want. I have recalled the tragedy of September 11th in this article and I am so sorry for those lives lost. But it's a tragedy even when one person passes from this life being fooled by the lie that tells them "This life is forever."

The scripture compares our lives to a vapor of smoke. It's there, and then it's gone. If an individual lives to be a hundred years old, it's still a short, short time compared to forever. **NO REGRETS!!!**

June 19

“What’s Wrong with This Picture?” By Debbie Ousley

I *was* recently following a car that had a temporary license plate on it and I thought to myself, “That ‘6’ (which was for the month of June when the plate ran out) looks really funny.” It didn’t take me long to realize why it looked unusually crooked and out of shape. When I read the date the license plate ran out it was the 31st. Guess what? There are not 31 days in the month of June, but there are 31 days in May the fifth month of the year. It was pretty obvious to me that someone had been playing around with their child’s black marker.

I wished them luck even though I realize it was a lie and I wondered if the officials would also catch on to their “art work” before the “31st of June?” Some people would say, “What did that hurt if maybe by desperation these folks needed another month to get the money together to make the vehicle legal?” And you know what? That’s not for me to say for them. Sometimes things are just none of our business. Sometimes it’s just better to say, “My name’s Bennett and I’m not in it!”

Oh, we as Christians who have knowledge of Christ’s character and standards, should always size things up by them and we can know what choices we should make, and make them. We are accountable because we know. We are not ignorant to the truth and I guess that’s why most of the New Testament is written for, guess who – Christians.

It is a known fact that to unlearn something is harder to accomplish than to learn something new for the first time. The Lord knew we who have come into the truth about our old, self-centered, prideful nature, would need a lot of instructions so as to learn about the selfless, loving, and honest nature of Him. It takes a lot of time. More often than not it takes a whole lifetime.

No one on this Earth appreciates Christ’s love and grace more than me. Maybe that’s because I realize that I need it a whole lot. I know that I or anyone else cannot work their way into His graces. It’s a gift. But grace is not a “way out.” It’s a “way in.”

It’s so nice to feel “warm and fuzzy” inside because of it, but getting to really know one’s self like Christ knows us, won’t always make us feel “warm and fuzzy.” Paul wrote, “*Oh what a*

wretched man I am” after he had come into Christ’s love and grace because he was seeing the natural man outside of Christ.

Just changing the number five to the number six to get by may work for at least another month, but it didn’t make it true. It only appeared to be. It takes more than a marker or even an eraser to change us from within. It takes more than approval of man or woman; it takes being challenged by our pastors and leaders and by our love for Christ, to deal with those truths about ourselves.

June 20

“Position - Parent” By Debbie Ousley

This was shared with me by a friend, a lady who took on this position.

JOB DESCRIPTION: Long term team players needed for challenging permanent work in an often-chaotic environment. Candidates must possess excellent communication skills and be willing to work flexible hours. Some overnight travel required, including trips to primitive camping sites and endless sports tournaments in faraway cities. Travel expenses not reimbursed.

RESPONSIBILITIES: This is for the rest of your life. Must be willing to be hated at least temporarily, until someone needs \$5 to go skating. Must be able to do small gadget repair, mysteriously sluggish toilets and stuck zippers. Must handle assembly and product safety testing of a half million cheap plastic toys and battery-operated devices. Must always hope for the best, but be prepared for the worst. Must assume 99% accountability for the quality of the end product. Responsibilities include floor maintenance and janitorial work throughout the facility.

WAGES AND COMPENSATION: You pay them, offering frequent raises and bonuses. A balloon payment is due when they turn 18 because of the assumption that college will help them become financially independent. When you die, you give them whatever is left. The oddest thing about this reverse-salary scheme is that you wish you could only do more!

BENEFITS: This job supplies limitless opportunities for personal growth, and free hugs for life, if you're dedicated to the job.

-Author Unknown

June 21

“How to Load a Hog” By Jerry D. Ousley

“I’ll head her off over here!” I yelled. It was one of the most frustrating things we had ever done. Who would have thought it would have been so hard to load a hog into a truck? But I’m getting ahead of myself so let’s back up and tell the whole story.

Dad had decided to raise a hog in order to ease the family grocery bill. It all sounded like a wonderful idea and I suppose I did enjoy those pork chops and hams. Really, it’s very inexpensive to raise a hog. We acquired our pig in the fall. After the farmers had harvested their fields, Dad got permission to glean them. You’d be surprised how much corn those combines miss. In a Saturday afternoon we had filled a pickup truck with corn – Enough to feed a single pig most of the winter. Then all those leftovers that have gone, shall we say, beyond reasonable leftover edibility, well, those pigs love that stuff!

All the while they are munching on the free corn and feasting on those prime leftovers, they are developing those delicious ham steaks and pork chops! When warm weather begins coming on just make sure they’ve got a muddy hole to lie in and you’d think that you had rented them a luxury suite at the Ritz!

Our hog was ready to be taken to the meat locker to be transformed into bacon, ham, sausage, and my personal favorite, pork chops! All we had to do was to get her loaded into the back of the truck. Dad had built special racks on the sides to keep the hog from climbing out. He had built a ramp on which the hog would make its ascent into the vehicle. Everything had been prepared to cause this task to go as smoothly as possible.

But there was a problem. We didn’t count on the hog not wanting to go up the ramp. We opened the gate and my brother and I were to stand on each side of it to keep the hog from jumping off. Dad climbed into the hog pen intending to gently prod her up the ramp. But after a couple of steps, she gave a grunt and jumped off the side so quickly my brother and I had no opportunity to stop her. Of course, five hundred pounds of pork coming straight at you isn’t exactly an incentive to hurl yourself in the path of a bolting hog!

Now she was running loose in our yard. We spent about two hours trying to run her back to the pen but all we were really succeeding in doing was running off those delectable pork chops! Finally, Dad said, "Jerry, go get Walter; he'll know what to do."

Our neighbor, Walter had raised his own hogs for a good many years so at this point his advice was much coveted (who am I kidding? Any advice would have been worth a try at this point!). Walter had a simple solution to our problem. He said, "Hang on a couple of minutes and I'll be over."

By the time I got back Dad and my brother had succeeded in getting the hog back into her pen but were panting for breath leaning up against the side of the truck. I relayed Walter's message and within minutes he was coming toward us carrying on old bucket. We couldn't figure what that was all about however he quickly showed us a simple but clever trick. Following his instruction, we managed to get the hog with her back towards the ramp and he said, "Stand out of the way now," and with those words, jammed the bucket over the hog's head. She immediately ran backwards up the ramp and to our amazement right into the back of the truck with all the grace of a Sumo wrestler turned ballet dancer. He had accomplished in five minutes what we weren't able to do in more than two hours! It was a trick burned indelibly into my brain.

Sometimes we struggle so hard to get it right with God. We make promises, take oaths, make resolutions and determine to change our lives only to meet failure after all our work. We become frustrated in our efforts to live a Godly life when we don't succeed. It happens to all of us at some point. It isn't that we are doomed to failure or that some law of life requires it. The only flawed ingredient is that we are human.

It's good to know that after we have struggled, planned, schemed, worked, and tried, that God has a simple plan that works. It is called "grace" and it is only found in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. He can take all our failed efforts and simply accomplish what we have spent a lifetime trying to do. Thank God that the bucket of Christ's grace can drive sin up the ramp and into the truck that will haul it away every time we ask for forgiveness (Romans 5:15)!

June 22

“Flirting with the Bite”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Our son, Jeremy, was about two. At that time, we lived in a mobile home about a mile outside of town. We had purchased some land and we loved it. The problem was that the land was low-lying and so mosquitoes were a big problem. It was during the hot summertime and we were in the habit of leaving the windows open at night with just the screens in them. This allowed the air to cool the house. It worked great except that these tiny predators loved our tender, young son.

However, we thought we had come up with a solution. We purchased one of those “bug-zapper” lights. That would eliminate those pesky creatures! Now, being the man of the house, I “knew” just how to set this contraption up. My wife trusted my knowledge (at the time anyway) and so she thought nothing of my method of assembly and setup. Who needs directions?

I put the thing together and that went pretty well. Where I went wrong was in my thinking about the process of just how this “bug-zapper” worked. I reasoned that the closer it was to our son’s window, the more mosquitoes it would kill. So, I set it up just a foot or two away from his window. Finally, our problem was solved. NOT!!!!

The next morning when we went in to check on him, we found that he had twice as many bites as what he had the previous night. Plus, many of those blood-sucking parasites were still swarming in his room. I couldn’t understand it. The light was still on and ever so often you could hear the “zzzt” sound of frying bugs. I didn’t get it. Until that is, one of my brother-in-laws explained to me that the idea was to place the light away from where you wanted to be. It would then draw the bugs to it and away from the desired point of relief. I sheepishly moved the light and what do you know, it worked!

As I remembered this story, I thought about people. We sometimes seem plagued by troubles, trials, false accusations, and persecutions. This can be expected from those who don’t know Christ as their personal Savior. However, it seems that our biggest problem doesn’t originate from unbelievers but from those we are supposed to love and who are supposed to love us.

Persecution from within the Church was never to be a problem. But the Bible has the answer to this. In Galatians 5:13-26, Paul addressed this very situation. In verse 15 of the passage, he basically says *“But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another.”* That doesn’t sound much like a Christian but unfortunately, it’s true. It’s become one of the devil’s greatest weapons against believers and the spreading of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When Believers spend their time defending themselves to other Christians instead of telling the Good News of Jesus Christ then we have wasted valuable Kingdom time. On the other hand, who wants to become a Christian if the bickering and fussing doesn’t change? You can have that and be completely lost in the world. Why try to live for God and still be surrounded by the same old problems? Can you blame them?

In verse 16 Paul gives the solution. He says, *“Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.”* We tend to think of lust as being sexual but its real definition is the desire of our body. It takes in sexual lust but also anything that we selfishly want. Our flesh wants to win out and when a brother in Christ has a conflict with us our flesh wants us to win in any way we can. And so, we resort to fighting instead of loving.

If we’re listening to the Holy Spirit in these situations then we can quickly resolve them. What happens instead is that we get the “bug-zapper” too close to the window and instead of walking in the Spirit we’re right in the middle of a swarm of blood-sucking pests. All too many Christians today try to live as close as they can and still be “Christian” instead of getting as close as they can to God.

We can live a life that’s not plagued by problems within the Church but it will take each of us making a conscious effort to live within the Spirit of God instead of the spirit of “mosquitoes” and it will take each of us realizing that we don’t stay where the trouble is. We don’t put ourselves in situations that we know will cause problems with other Christians.

To witness to the world requires us to take chances and be in the trenches of life. But when we get with our brothers and sisters in Christ we want to be as far from the “bug-zapper” as we can so that we can be protected not bitten.

June 23

“Hanging on For Your Life”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I've never been a big roller coaster fan. I don't know, I suppose I just like being in control of the situation and there isn't much of that on a roller coaster – especially those they are coming out with nowadays. On some you are hanging underneath the track with your feet dangling in the air. Others flip you all the way around with a series of terrifying loops and twists. Still others seem to take you to the moon and then jerk the floor out from under you. I just like knowing that if I want to be tied up in knots and rolled around like a cat does a ball that it's my choice and not the result of being catapulted all over the place by a manmade monstrosity.

Other people really like that stuff. My kids are two of them. Jeremy dearly loves roller coasters and has ridden about every one east of the Mississippi. His enthusiasm infected our daughter Megan and she's almost as bad if not worse than he is. There are people who make a hobby out of riding those wooden and steel beasts. They travel the country in their spare time and keep records of which coasters they have ridden and how many times. I'd have to keep records of how many I've ridden without getting sick.

Nevertheless, there was a time when my son convinced me to ride one with him. It was at King's Island near Cincinnati Ohio and if I remember correctly it was called "The Adventure Express."

"Come on Dad," he taunted, "It doesn't even go up high. It's just a ride through tunnels and trees – Kind of like an easy jungle excursion." He made it sound like a simple train ride. I thought about it and I surely didn't want to stunt my son's life experience by letting him think that his dad was a wimp so I agreed to ride it with him. It really didn't look too bad. But when they strapped me in with several tight-fitting belts, I got a weak, uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach that seemed to say, "If this was an easy ride, they would only need a simple lap belt. Face it mister, you're gonna die!"

I managed a forced laugh with my son as the coaster slowly pulled out of the station. It was only a second or two before the thing kicked into high gear. He was right. It didn't go up very high but it sure had the twists and quick turns. I don't know how you can jerk a

contraption like that around without it flying clean off the tracks! I know that if I hadn't been strapped in it would have slung me all the way to the other side of the park. I pretended to like it so he would be pleased but the truth be known I couldn't wait to get off that thing. When I finally did, I just knew that the way things were coming into focus that my eyes were bouncing up and down like rubber balls. Somehow, I lived through it.

Life has been compared to a roller coaster ride many times and it's a good comparison. I guess the point I'd like to make though is that I knew that at some point in time that coaster ride would come to an end. I didn't care much for being twisted, jerked and bounced all around while it was going on but I knew that eventually it would stop and I could climb out of that seat of death and plant my feet once again on good ole' terra-firma.

The Bible tells us that for those who put their trust in Christ everything that happens to them will work for their good (see Romans 8:28). It doesn't mean that every situation in which we find ourselves is necessarily God's will. We get out of His will quite often in fact. But it does mean that if we will allow Him to work in and through us that He will use every situation we get ourselves into including every incident of disobedience and every victory - to teach us. There will be an end to these things. When it does come to a finale then we have a choice: We can become bitter about it or we can learn from it. God wants us to learn from it. He wants that experience whether good or bad to become a part of our lives and make us into that person He has designed us to be.

So, hang on in your roller coaster ride. The end is just down the tracks. Whether you enjoy the ride or can't wait to get off, it will be over soon and God's will is waiting for you at the end.

June 24

“Taking Out the Trash” By Jerry D. Ousley

I get up each morning, get ready for the day, walk into the kitchen and there it is: The trash. Where does it all come from anyway? How can we accumulate so much garbage in a twenty-four-hour period? We have two trashcans behind the house and each morning I take the refuse from inside the house and stuff it into those two cans. By the end of the week, I begin to wonder, “How can I stuff in one more bag?”

I think about where it all comes from and surprisingly there are several sources. First of all, the mail takes its share of allotted space. Each day we put more paper that has been mailed to us in the trashcan than what I call “keepers.” The keepers consist of an occasional letter, perhaps a personal card of some kind, but mostly keepers are made up of bills that have to be paid. It makes you wonder why they are really “keepers” doesn’t it?

Then when we cook there is always a lot of stuff to throw away. Did you ever wonder why they do all that packaging? If you really think about it all those attractive printed labels, and extra plastic wrappings that immensely add to the cost of food all goes one place – We empty the contents and dump the packaging in the trash. It takes up a lot of room and we ultimately pay to get rid of it, so why should we be paying to get something that we are going to just throw away as soon as we use it? Only in America.

When we decide to clean out a drawer or corner of the room it is absolutely amazing how much stuff we have put off throwing away. We know we’ll never use it but for some strange reason we think that we should keep it for a while. When cleaning day comes it always gets thrown away along with the words, “What was I thinking when I saved this? I should have known that I’d never use it,” and in the can it goes.

In the town we live in they have what’s called “big trash week” once a year. During that week you can sit almost anything beside the road that’s legal to throw away and they’ll pick it up. It’s almost fun watching what people put out at the end of their driveways, but it’s even more fun to watch others drive by in their pickup trucks, going through all that stuff like they’re shopping for new clothes. The old saying goes, “One man’s junk is another man’s riches.” One year my dad set out an old microwave oven. Needless to say, it didn’t work. Before the

end of that day, it was gone. No big deal, Dad meant to throw it away so if someone could get some kind of benefit out of it, well, good for him! But the next day when he walked out to get the mail, lo and behold, the microwave was back. Whoever picked it up found out it didn't work and had the gall to return it.

Getting rid of trash can almost become an art. It takes skill to break those boxes down so as to get maximum fill in that big black bag. I pride myself on being able to break down and roll up those big pizza boxes into a 2" x 2" x 6" rectangle.

God takes out a lot of trash for us. He is the Master of dumping the junk. We all have things stashed away in the corners of our lives that are long overdue to be thrown out. Don't be fooled; even Christians poke things in corners that shouldn't be there. God has a way of illuminating those cobweb-covered secret things. It may embarrass us that they are there when we discover them, but that's one of the things Christ came to do for us – empty the trash!

June 25

“Tame That Snake . . .”

By Jerry D. Ousley

It was a beautiful sun-shiny, summer morning. It had rained a day or two before so the mud-puddles were full. That always made for interesting games to an eight-year-old. As I was pondering just exactly what lake or ocean this particular puddle would be that day, a friend strolled up and said, “Would you like to see my snake swim?” That captured my attention because, even though I was terrified by snakes I was also fascinated by them. “Okay,” I replied.

That was all the coaching my friend needed and, in a flash, he whipped a garter snake from his pocket. He said, “I tamed this snake myself. Just watch’em. He won’t even swim away from me.” He then placed the snake in the water and it sorta tried to swim but true to my friend’s word, it stayed close by him.

I was simply amazed. How could anyone tame a snake? Out of curiosity, this inquiring mind wanted to know and so I said, “Wow! How long did it take you to tame him like that?” “Not long,” he proudly grinned, “why, I just caught him this morning. You’ve just got to know how to do it.”

In mixed astonishment and disbelief, I said, “How’d you do it?” “Easy,” my friend said, “Com’on, I’ll show you!” With that he went running toward the patch of woods next to our house and so I followed.

As you entered the path to the woods, just a short distance in was a steep hill that fell into kind of a sinkhole. That path had been well worn with foot traffic, tricycles, bicycles, wagons and, well just about anything a kid could imagine with wheels. There at the top of the hill was a group of boys. They had discovered a nest of garter snakes and each one had at least one and some two or three. My friend shouted out to one of the other guys, “Hey, Jerry wants to know how we tamed our snakes. Could one of you guys show him?”

“Sure,” exclaimed a sandy-headed boy, “Com’on over here and I’ll show you.”

With that he promptly grabbed one of the slithering, tongue-licking creatures by the tail and enthusiastically began to whack its head against the tree. I stood there with my mouth open. There weren't any animal rights groups that I knew of then, but had they been present this group of boys would have "tamed" their last snake! No wonder it stayed where you put it. Who's going anywhere with a broken back and so many stars spinning around your head that your own little galaxy was orbiting all around you!

It occurred to me that the devil wants to "tame" Christians much in the same manner as these boys were "taming" their snakes. He wants to grab us up and whack us against the first tree he comes to. The Bible says, *"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour ..."* (1 Peter 5:8). The devil doesn't want to see anyone have victory in Jesus. He wants to keep us "in the dumps" with our heads spinning from all that has happened, whether it is health problems, family sicknesses, or false accusations. He keeps trying to "whack" you against life's trees. After all, if he can keep us busy on the defensive, then we don't have time to be on the offensive and win others to Christ. That's his plan. He knows whether we really love the Lord and whether he can shove us away from Him or not. When he knows that he cannot make us move from our belief and faith in the Lord, then he wants to keep us busy so we fail our mission.

But let's notice something about that passage of Scripture. It tells us to "keep our wits about us and be ready because the devil goes about LIKE a roaring lion, looking for those he can eat up." The word "like" is one of the keys to this passage. He wants us to think he is a roaring lion but actually he is a fake. You see, the Bible tells us that Jesus is the lion (see Revelation 5:5). We must realize just who the real lion is. The lion that roars the loudest is on our side!

So, the next time the "all mouth and no authority lion" tries to whack you against life's tree, call on the true lion – Jesus Christ – The Lion of Judah!

June 26

“One for All and All for One” By Debbie Ousley

I remember when in elementary school (which has already been determined was many moons ago) we had a lesson on “The Community System” we live in. The lesson taught us how our families were examples of the Community System as was our neighborhood schools, churches, and so on.

This made a lot of sense to me because of my being from a large family. Everything seemed to be a group effort in our home, from wash day (which really did take an entire day) to meal time. If anything, we probably lacked having individual space. But I don’t remember feeling like I was mistreated.

Being in a group has always made me feel comfortable. Team effort has always come easy for me and accomplishing a task as a group is very rewarding. But on the other hand, I find it hard to deal with “slackers” or individuals who want to take all the glory for a job well done by the team.

That’s why what I’m seeing now is very disturbing to me. Families who will not pull together and who are being pulled apart because one member thinks it’s all about their happiness and no one else’s. Let’s get real here, okay? Motorists who feel the road and its privilege to drive on it, is all about them can litter and beep their horns, give hand gestures and ride your bumper. Why? Because THEIR schedule and THEIR convenience say “it’s okay.” We are living in an “it’s all about me” era and what happens when we don’t get what WE think we deserve? Resentment, anger, and the end results are hurt and pain to someone.

God’s word to the nation of Israel was a word to a group. Jesus, when asked, “How do we pray?” didn’t say, “My Father which is in heaven,” but “Our Father.” Paul wrote many letters, to whom? Not individuals but whole churches. The exhortations and rebukes written to the seven churches in Revelation were to the group, not just to the pastors, deacons, and elders. They were to all.

Jesus didn’t choose one disciple but twelve. He spoke to multitudes of people and it’s awesome to me that they all could hear His words without one piece of amplifier equipment.

No one believes that our relationship with the Lord has to begin as an individual relationship more than myself, but folks, no one is an island. We all live in a Community System every day. It is about others and their rights, and about our respect for one another. And that respect begins in the smallest community system of all - our homes.

“No greater love has any man than that he lay down his life for a friend.” Can we lay down having our way and our wants for a friend? That question is not just for Mom or Dad but also for little Junior who needs to learn at an early age that the community system starts at home. And believe you me, they will demonstrate that lesson taught to them in other community systems.

June 27

“What’s Love Got to Do With it?” By Debbie Ousley

“Greater *love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.”*

(John 15:13). Jesus did lay down His very life for His friends, and in the following verse He tells us that whoever keeps His commandments are His friends.

Most people want to believe Jesus is their friend, and who wouldn’t want a friend like Jesus? He knows all the right people, He’s wealthy, He’s got a good retirement plan, a great vacation home (you know what I mean), He’s a counselor, physician, and a Prince (of peace). Jesus is all that!

Love is a mighty force, there’s no doubt about it. We’ve heard the statement or even said it ourselves, “I love you to death.” Well, that’s a little too much love, don’t’cha think? Sometimes we can’t cover our actions with that one word, “love.” There are a lot of other things that should come from our feelings for others.

We may say, “I love you,” believing that makes up for other areas we are failing in. How about loving me less and respecting my feelings, ideas, and opinions more? How about loving me less and being more considerate, thoughtful, and mindful of what would be best for the whole family?

Laying down one’s life could also mean putting aside what is good for, easier for, and more convenient for me so I can do what would be best for someone else. And you know what? It seems a lot easier to say, “I’d die for you, honey,” (because we really know we won’t have to do that) than to give up what we want.

As most of us believe, Jesus did lay down His life and not just to death but you know that great vacation home we mentioned earlier? He gave that up also for the time He spent here doing all He did so we can know the kind of love that “LOVES US TO LIFE!”

June 28

“The Bird”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Bammm! “What was that?” I asked. Of course, neither my wife nor my daughter knew anymore about what had just happened than I did. We had been sitting in the living room watching a show together on TV when we heard the noise. It was still daylight, around 5:30 PM or so. My mind began racing through sound associations and in a moment, I said, “It sounded like someone came in the door.” That would have been strange and unusual. We hadn’t seen a car pull into the driveway and if it had been an intruder in the few seconds that passed since the incident occurred there would have been time for him to be in the living room.

“I’ll go see,” I bravely said. I had no idea what to expect as I got up from my comfortable seat and started through the dining room into the kitchen where the door was. The storm door was closed but we had left the main entrance door open to allow sunlight in as we do many times. Would I see some stranger standing there? If so, what would he or she want? I must say that I was a little anxious as I rounded the corner. Who wouldn’t be?

I got into the kitchen and, to my relief, no one was there. There was no one standing outside the door either. What was that noise then? I walked to the door to survey the situation. As I looked out over the yard, I could see nothing out of the ordinary.

I was about to turn away and return to my comfortable chair when a movement caught my eye and I looked down to see what it was. There on the steps was a young robin, struggling just to stay upright. It was extremely disoriented and was flopping all over the steps. I quickly began to analyze what could have happened to this young bird. I could tell it wasn’t very old because it was still speckled on its breast, although it looked as big as any other robin.

Trying to make sense of it all I reasoned that the bird must have been flying around (maybe even showing off a bit because it had “mastered” the art of flying) and saw this large opening into the house. Not realizing that clear glass was there it flew full speed into the door, breaking its neck in the process. If the bird hadn’t had been so injured it would have been funny. But I couldn’t laugh as I witnessed the bird finally lay over on its back, gasp a few last breaths, and die right before my eyes. It stopped breathing and it stopped moving.

Now maybe I'm getting to be an "old softy" as I progress in years, but I shed a tear for that bird. I was sorry for it. It seemed such a waste that this beautiful creature had to end like this. I wanted to go out, scoop it up and make it all better so it could fly away and live its life as God intended. But there was nothing I could do to help the bird except wait until it died and dispose of its remains.

I knew that God had seen it fall. The Bible tells us that not one sparrow falls to the ground that God doesn't know about (see Matthew 10:29). I know this was a robin, but the scripture uses the sparrow because they are so plentiful and small. The point is that all of God's creatures are important to Him. If He cares so much about a sparrow, or a robin, how much more does he care for each man, woman, and child on the face of this planet? I believe He cares a lot!

June 29

“Walking in the Rain”

By Jerry D. Ousley

AS had been my practice for awhile, I struck out after dinner for my evening walk. It isn't a long walk, maybe a mile and a half give or take but it had been part of my own weight loss program and it did give me about twenty minutes each evening to reflect on the day.

It had been raining off and, on that day, but now the sun was peeking through the clouds. It was sprinkling just a little but with the sun shining as brightly as it was it couldn't last long, and so I struck out. As I started, I could see a rainbow up in the dark clouds to the east but, as I have said, golden rays of sunshine were coming from the west.

After a few blocks the sprinkles began to get larger and more frequent. Soon a nice little shower was coming down but, “It can't last long,” I kept telling myself. Besides, it was kind of cool walking in that gentle sprinkle. So, I kept walking. When I reached the half way mark of my walk it began to literally pour. The rays of sunshine from the west had disappeared and it was coming down hard. But now I was committed. It began to be a challenge. I was going to finish this walk, rain or not, and so I kept going. “Maybe it won't last long,” I told myself again.

Thankfully I had worn my water repellant jacket so my shirt underneath stayed dry. But the rest of me was soaked. As I continued trudging along, the walk in the rain was no longer “cool” but miserable. Streams of the cold rain ran down from my hair and into my face and eyes. My glasses were so rain covered that my vision was blurred. The challenge turned into a longing to just get finished and back into our nice warm house.

About three blocks from home a couple of teenage boys stopped and offered me a ride. I thought it was mighty nice of them to do that but with only three blocks to go I was going to finish what I started. And so, I did. I arrived home looking like a freshly bathed cat!

As I changed into some dry clothes, I realized that my twenty-minute walk represented so many of our lives today. How many of us are walking in the rain? We began our journey through life in a gentle sprinkle thinking, “Oh, I can handle this. It isn't bad at all.” And so, we

continued to go. But as life progressed the “rains” of difficulty get harder and harder until our pleasant journey has become a challenge to just make it.

I tell you today that God wants to take you into His warm, comfortable house, give you dry clothes and let you bask by His fire. It isn't His will for you to “just make it” in life. He wants to give us abundant life. That doesn't mean that we will always have plenty and great wealth. But it does mean that we don't have to keep on “walking in the rain.” Jesus said, “... *I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly*” (John 10:10). Isn't it time for you to “come out of the rain” of life? Come to Jesus Christ. He'll open His doors and grant you this abundant life.

By the way, the rain continued on into the evening and it did last long! So, it is with our lives. The “rain” may not stop naturally. That's why we need to come into God's house.

June 30

“The Gospel of a Little Boy’s Truck” By Jerry D. Ousley

G*randfathers* are extraordinary gifts from God, but if your grandfather is a grandpa, then you've got someone special! My Grandpa was that way. I loved spending a few weeks each summer with my grandparents, and this happened to be one of those summers I was with them.

Grandpa made his living running a chicken farm for another man (he was also a preacher). Please forgive the frankness in what follows but it is pertinent to the story. One of the necessary evils of a chicken farm is a place to put the dead chickens. For various reasons, almost daily there would be a few that died during the night.

I'm sure it wouldn't pass any health regulations by today's standards, but then, there was a wooded hollow some distance behind the chicken barns where those dead chickens were dumped. I was seldom allowed to go there, but on one particular occasion when I was helping out (probably more in the way than anything else) I got to ride to the dump with grandpa.

Apparently, others used this spot as a dumping ground also, and this heap of disposed items looked like a hall of treasures to my young eyes. Of course, I wasn't allowed to go rummaging through the garbage, but when I beheld one "nugget" in this "mountain of gold," my grandpa took the time to go dig it out of the rubble.

It was a complete semi car carrier! It was large, about two feet in length, and constructed from all metal. And, check this out, all the wheels were there! It did need some repair and a coat of paint, but my grandpa let me take it home.

I got busy banging out dents and applying life to this newfound treasure. When I finished it was one of the most beautiful objects my young eyes had ever beheld! I was proud as a boy could be of my "new" truck. One of my playmates tried to ridicule my truck because it had come from the dump - But it didn't work on me because it was now MY TRUCK!

As I thought on this situation it made me think of our relationship with our Lord, Jesus Christ. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, we are just like that truck. God finds us on

the refuse pile of the world and sees something in us that no one else would ever recognize. He redeems our souls, cleans us up, and puts a new man within us. His love surrounds us making us new creatures, or new creations in Him.

The world and the devil may come accusing from time to time, "Awe, you aren't anything ... look where you came from ..." to which God promptly replies, "He may have come from there but he's not there anymore!" God loves us, and wants to bathe us in the wonderful light of His love. All we have to do is to accept what He has done for us and receive His love, then love Him Back!

July 1

“Potential”

By Jerry D. Ousley

You've heard the old expression, “That person has a lot of potential.” I've known people who had a lot of potential. When I was in the US Army, I knew a lady who had a lot of potential. She outranked me by one rank; I was a spec 4 (equal to a corporal) and she was a spec 5 (equal to the first level of sergeant). She was sharp. She had the goods. She could do whatever she put her mind to do.

She gave a wonderful first impression. Her uniform was spotless and wrinkle free. Her shoes were so highly polished that they were like black mirrors. Upon first meeting her she greeted people with elegance and etiquette. As first impressions go, she was top notch.

However, after you got to know her, you found out that she was all show. She was good at telling others how a job should be done but she would never lift a finger to do it herself. If she had to do manual labor her temper would flair and the real person would come out. She had a lot of potential but potential doesn't go very far if one isn't willing to carry it through.

I knew another lady who had a lot of potential. Now don't get me wrong; it is entirely coincidental that I've decided to talk about two women. I don't have anything against women. This lady also had the goods. She had gone to college graduating with honors in computer science. She knew her stuff. She was good at what she knew. I say it that way because that's about the extent of her ability. She could do the work and she knew the right thing to do, she just wouldn't show up for work and consequently she did nothing.

Potential is only a good thing when it is realized. Potential means that we have the ability to do a job but if we don't actually do the job our potential isn't worth much. In order for potential to be realized something called good old elbow grease has to be thrown in as an ingredient of the recipe.

This also applies to our relationship with God. Inside every human being living on the face of this planet is the potential to be a good servant of Jesus Christ. I fully believe in salvation by grace. There is absolutely no way we can earn our way into Heaven. But God does have a mission in mind for each of us. While we were still in our mother's womb God

planned a path for our lives. But God won't make us do it. He will not force us down the path He has chosen for us. He will make the way and clear the path but we've got to choose to walk down it.

First of all, it takes preparation. God has given us the abilities to fulfill our mission. I believe that deep inside of us He has also given us the desire. But you very seldom see a first time natural. While it has rarely happened, most of us need to get ready for whatever our life-mission is. We need to become knowledgeable about what we are going to do. We need to be sure we are physically prepared to carry it out. We've got some getting ready to do.

Secondly it takes perspiration. 1 Corinthians 15:58 tells us that we can know that our labor for the Lord is not in vain. But we've got to do the work. We can't spend our time simply talking about it. We've got to put the sweat into it. We've got to do the labor.

Finally, we've got to persevere. The job isn't always going to be easy. But know that our trouble produces perseverance. Paul, in 2 Timothy 2:5 tells us, "*And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.*" In other words, if an athlete expects to win the prize, he's got to do it by the rules. He's got to persevere.

Potential is good. We need potential. But we've got to be in God's will and we've got to do what needs to be done to realize our own potential.

July 2

“The Big Catch” By Jerry D. Ousley

With a flick of the wrist the line was released from the reel attached to the fishing rod. As it flexed, the sun reflected brightly against its sleek finish. The bobber at the end of the line dropped with a plunk and a light splash into the lake and the sinkers took the hook to just the right depth in the water underneath. I was ready to catch the big one. I just knew it was going to be mine.

The wait began but it was going to be worth it when that big bass took a bite out of the bait carefully situated on the hook. A quick jerk of the pole and that fish would be pulled from the water and placed into my holding basket where it would abide alone until the next big one was pulled in.

But the wait got longer as the water lightly rippled along the bobber. A few paces down the shoreline the women were fishing as well. No worries there. The big fish knew that they were appointed for the hooks of the men. Oh, the ladies might get a few bites - maybe even catch a few small bluegills. But the big ones belonged to the men.

That may have been what I thought but it was a far cry from reality. After a long hot day, I had accomplished to get a few nibbles but nothing worth bragging about. Then it happened. My sister-in-law began to scream with joy. After a very sweet struggle she pulled in one of the biggest catfish I'd ever seen. It was humiliating. That fish must have gotten his directions mixed up! It must have thought it was on my line! But the fact of the matter was that it wasn't.

After Jesus had risen in John 21, Peter must have still been feeling like a failure. After his denial of the Lord how could he ever hope to have a part in the great work Jesus had come to accomplish? So, he spoke up one morning to the other disciples and said, "I'm going fishing." Remember he had been a fisherman before Jesus had called him. It was more than just a casual trip – he was going back to work. Several of the other disciples decided to accompany him. You can read the account for yourself in the first part of this chapter. The bottom line is that Jesus showed up and though He didn't speak the words again during this encounter I can't help but feel that this special meeting caused Peter to remember what Jesus

had told him and the others that were with him that day when He had said, “From now on you will be fishers of men” (see Matthew 4:19).

Sometimes we all feel like chucking it in and going back to the old way of life but that isn't what the Lord wants for us. Things can never be the same again because the Master has touched us. Today, remember what the Lord has spoken to your heart and cast your line or your net or whatever your gear of choice may be, into the lake of life and fulfill that change of occupation that all who come to Christ are commissioned with: To be fishers of men.

July 3

“Give Me Liberty” By Debbie Ousley

The difference between legalism and liberty is known by understanding that the reason behind the rule is more important than the rule itself. The Pharisees, in Jesus’ day, were a good example of legalism. They were always sure to dot the “I’s” and cross the “T’s” when it came to the “Law” (the rules). But Jesus told them that they were like cups, clean and shiny on the outside but pretty yucky on the inside.

So many of the scriptures tell us how important it is to keep things right in our hearts. You see God knows ALL things. He has “super x-ray” vision. He knows ugly things about each of us that we haven’t even come to grips with yet. But we will if we earnestly want to have a pure heart before Him and, man oh, it’s painful when the Lord reveals things about ourselves that shatter our self-image. It’s a hurt that can’t be rubbed unless of course, we apply a big dose of justification and then that only soothes us temporarily. If we really want to be mature and grown-up Christians it will only relieve the pain for a while.

Legalism is the “Law.” Liberty is doing the law because we understand the good that comes from it. *“Have no other gods before me”* – God. That law says, “Admire Me.” You see when we admire someone we want to be like that person. I see this a lot with our kids. They want to dress like that person, wear their shoes, talk like them and look like them. So what God is saying is, “If I am the One you admire and pattern yourself after, you will win.” Understanding the reason behind the rule – Liberty.

The Apostle Paul warns us not to worship the creation more than the Creator because if we do, we are making that tree or flower more important than the very God Who made it. PLEASE!!! And when we make obeying the rules or laws that God has given more important than the purpose behind them, we are saying that obeying is more important than the lesson He is trying to teach us. The Lord is the Ultimate Teacher.

The Big Ten (commandments) and Old Testament are the schoolmasters. They are the beginning of what Jesus brought when He was born and began His three-year mission trip. He tells us that He came to fulfill the Law – To help us better understand the reason behind it all and the benefits that come to everyone who does what it says.

It is so hard to serve the Lord out of sacrifice and it also gives man a lot of space to impose some of His own rules. How much easier it is to serve the Lord out of our love for Him.

When we understand the reasons for His rules then they really become more like instructions because we know it's good for everyone when we do them. It becomes love.

July 4

“Dependence Day” By Jerry D. Ousley

Another Independence Day has come. July the 4th means a lot of things to different people. To Americans, it is the day that we gained our freedom and became a Nation. To others, it could mean the birth of a child (a firecracker baby), or maybe the loss of a loved one.

It's good to celebrate independence because this means that we have been liberated from something. It's human nature to want to be free from anything that binds us up. Christians, for instance, can celebrate the date of their conversion, because they have become independent in the “Big Three” that bind them up: 1) Sin, 2) Death, and 3) The Law (of Moses is meant here). Jesus Christ gave us this independence by His own sacrifice. When we come to Him then He sets us free.

However, many Christians have not yet discovered their “Dependence Day.” This is also a landmark in our lives. It is the day that we discover that, even though we have been freed from the slavery of sin, the binding of the Law of Moses, and the fear and sting of death, that we can't make it on our own. Many have adapted the old song “Me and Jesus Got Our Own Thing Going” as their theme, and usually it becomes a statement to justify themselves because they have discovered that even though we have been made free from the “Big Three,” we still find ourselves yielding to them at times. So, we begin to justify our lack of self-discipline, and our failures (let's just call it what it is – SIN) by stating that “God Understands Me.”

Yes, God does understand us, but what is wrong is that we have once again gotten the “cart before the horse.” The Bible does tell us to work out our own salvation but we need to change that theme song to: “Jesus and Me Have Our Own Thing Going.” You see we can only begin to be free when we realize our utter dependence on Christ. Only by Him are we free and only by Him can we maintain that freedom. It takes work and perseverance but we can do it.

Today let's celebrate our “Dependence Day” by learning our great need for Christ as a total part of our lives. We can only be independent by becoming dependant on Him. He won't let us down and the freedom we find from becoming dependant on Him will be greater than

any independence we may find on our own. If you haven't yet, make this your very own dependence day.

July 5

“Out of the Mouth of Babes”

By Debbie Ousley

The following are a few responses from some of our kids at church after I encouraged them to put on paper their feelings concerning the attack on America. I'd like to say also to all the kids, "This is one event that you are NO WAY responsible for!" Adults will forever in history bear the burden of this tragedy and the outcome of the decisions made.

Once again, our kids find themselves "along for the ride" and as America has rediscovered the importance of seeking the almighty God, we must keep their welfare and future so very present in our minds that this would dispel the need for instant revenge. We must take the time needed to seek God for direction and actions taken. You see, we Americans have found ourselves forced to live one day at a time and at the mercy of the world leaders who we pray are seeking God like their lives (and many more – not just Americans) are depending on it!

1. "I feel sad and angry." - 8-year-old boy.
2. "I'm wondering why he hates Americans. Why doesn't the President go ahead and attack? I think they should get bombed." - 11-year-old boy.
3. "I feel frightened, worried; sad and mad all at once. It has worried me a lot because of the rumors about the draft. I don't want my half-brother to die." - 13-year-old girl.
4. "I feel very sad for all those families who died. If I could talk to the person who did this I would ask, 'why would you want to hurt those people? They did no harm to you.' America is not evil; I love America. God does too. 'God save us from getting hurt.'" - 9-year-old girl.
5. "I was sad when I first heard about it. Then they started talking about war breaking out and I got scared. But I prayed about it and I know now that everything will be all right. It will be God's will whatever may happen." - 15-year-old girl.

6. "What I feel is kind of confusing. I feel like things are going to turn out all right. I don't feel anger or fear but I'm sorry that so many people have lost their lives. I have faith in that He's (God) going to protect us and He's (God) going to speak to the leader's hearts and they will listen to Him. I just want His (God's) way." - 14-year-old girl.
7. "I'm scared of what is happening to America right now. What if the President threatens other countries to hand over all the terrorists? I'm also sad because so many people were killed. I'm angry because I know this won't be the last life lost to violence. I'm confused because I don't know why someone would be willing to die to harm someone else." - 18-year-old girl.

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with my eye."
Psalm 32:8

July 6

“Walking a Spiritual Tightrope” (Who Needs It) By Debbie Ousley

I hate to admit it, but I have a slight fear of heights. I'm not sure if it's a lack of confidence in my own stability or if this fear was imposed on me as a child, but it's real to me. Not looking down doesn't matter either because I know when I'm a hundred feet off the ground, whether I see where I'm at or not, because my stomach has already clued me in.

I admire my family members who can ride to the top of the Eiffel Tower at King's Island and I know I'm missing a beautiful scene by not joining them. But it's worth the loss just to keep both feet on the ground (and I usually find a bench to “park it in” while I wait).

To watch those individuals at the circus as they walk the tightrope really amazes me. They take each step with caution, swaying as they balance themselves and then perform a flip or some dramatic move just to grab the crowd's attention. I can't even imagine shaking in their shoes and have no aspirations of even doing so. Every move they make is an extreme and calculated maneuver. Their very lives depend upon it, and to make it even more stressful for them, is the fact that every eye is upon them. OH, THEY ARE GOOD!

The one thing these folks cannot lack as they climb the ladder up to their thin life line (too thin), is confidence. Confidence is a strong force in all our lives and it's way too complex to go into in this article. Exhilarating confidence can be viewed as an attitude, and the lack of it as low self-esteem, but those who find the right balance have found gold.

Christ had no problem with confidence ... why? Because He knew who He was. He said, “Listen, if you've seen me then you've seen my Father. I came not to do my own thing but to do what my Father has sent me to do.” Period! End of sentence! Christ was not thrown-off by those who called Him names, who doubted His actions, who questioned His decisions, or who didn't respect or have confidence in His relationship with His Father. Oh, I'm sure His feelings were hurt when His close friends failed Him and they ran when things got ugly, but His own confidence was not shaken. Why? Because He knew who He was. Christ did not walk a

tightrope when He was called out by the religious leaders, and He had no problem making a scene at the temple when it was necessary for Him to clean His Father's house.

"Who does He think He is?" were most likely thoughts of the on-lookers as Jesus turned over the tables and ran the moneychangers out with a whip. And that's the thought of a lot of people about others. But you know what? That's a real prideful statement or thought. In essence what is being said is, "I don't think they are smart enough, or spiritual enough, or they don't know the right people, or they are not qualified by MY standards to do that." SAYS WHO???!?

I'm not in any way minimizing the importance of letting our light shine before a lost world. But to have to walk a spiritual tightrope, guarding every word and move just puts us right back into a bondage Christ brought us out of by salvation. Does that not put us very close to the line of trying to please people and being what they think we SHOULD BE? If we are not mindful of what's happening in our lives, we'll find ourselves guilty of doing the same thing to someone else.

If you are an individual who is determined to keep your identity in Christ, you had better be prepared for a fight, because refusing to walk a spiritual tightrope and maintaining your confidence in Christ takes guts. I applaud those who refuse to sway and walk the tightrope as though every step they take their spiritual life depends on it. Jesus, the son of a carpenter, who people thought, "who does He think He is?" is my hero.

July 7

“Snow In July” By Jerry D. Ousley

So far this summer it has been what we may have expected it to be – Hot! It reminds us about the last couple of summers during which we had very pleasant temperatures except for only a few days. Now I don't want to complain. I am reminded of my words just a few months ago when snow was flying through the air and we longed for the heat of summer. But right now, I must confess, a snowball looks pretty good. We're never satisfied, are we?

Thinking about the cool temperatures reminds me of three big snows that I have experienced over the years. The first took place in 1976. I was barely out of my teens at the time and had gotten a job at the now closed US Shoe Factory in Crothersville, Indiana. It was a blizzard. In fact, not many people went to work that day. I thought it was great. But I had to see my girl. We were dating then and I couldn't rest until I checked on her. I would have just called but she didn't have a phone at that time. So, I bravely hoped in my car and ventured out onto those icy, snowy roads. I felt sort of like a brave knight fighting for the honor of my lady.

The second snow happened just two years later. We were married now and still working at the shoe factory. We only lived about a mile and a half from the factory but when I got up that morning to get ready to go to work a glance out the window revealed that it had snowed during the night and not just a little bit! In fact, I could just barely see our cars. The snow had drifted up to the windows. I could tell where they were because of their shapes. I didn't do anything but turn the lights back off and go back to bed. It was awful (I say with tongue in cheek because a good snow day home from work was just what I thought we needed).

There have been many snows since but I guess the worst of them took place just a couple of years ago. What a snow we had! I managed to get home from work that Thursday with vacation days the rest of the holiday weekend. But my wife was scheduled to work. We decided it would be best rather than trying to drive the twenty-mile trip from home to just get her a motel room. That way she'd only have around a mile to drive to work. Surely that wouldn't be as bad as trying to drive from home. That's what we did; but it back-fired big time. She called early that morning to inform us that she had been trying to dig the car out for a couple of hours using only a dust pan she had borrowed from the motel. Once again, the

knight reared up in me and I began working with everything I had to get the van out. I would daringly make the twenty-mile trip into Seymour and rescue my lady. I got stuck. Thank goodness for good neighbors! Mine had a snow blower and he generously began working on our driveway while I dug the van out. By the time I had finished so had he. It was a strange sight looking down that driveway. He had cut a path just wide enough for the van to get out with a thirty plus inch wall of snow on either side.

With his help I had gotten out. I went in the house to warm up and just then my wife called. She had managed to get out of the motel parking lot and had picked up her sister who was also stranded (by the way, her husband was trying to be a daring knight was well, but his four-wheel drive was now hung up in the snow). To say the least, she made the treacherous trip home and we lived happily ever after.

I'm feeling a little cooler now. But suddenly, once again, I am reminded of my words back when the chill was making my spine do the funky chicken and I'll just be thankful for the heat and the invention of air conditioning.

There is a spiritual application of this story however; those long cold and lonely winters do give way to warm summers. Yeah, there are some hot days but boy it's nice to be able to dress in cooler less bulky clothing, cook some good old hamburgers out on the grill and enjoy family time. Many of us may feel trapped in a long cold winter of life. But we can cheer up if we'll trust in the Lord because the winter is always followed by a summer.

So, let's think cool during these hot days but never forget the bitter cold winter we just came out of. Anyone ready for a trip to the DQ?

July 8

“The Blue Shovel” By Jerry D. Ousley

Most of us like to go back to our childhood from time to time and reminisce. Some of my fondest memories center around the summer days that I would spend on my grandparent's farm at Pekin, Indiana. My family lived in the Fort Wayne area at that time, so we didn't see Grandpa and Grandma much. But every summer, after school was out, I would get to spend about three weeks on the farm with them.

Now I might be a little prejudice in the matter, but I firmly believe that my grandpa and grandma were perfect pictures of just exactly what a grandpa and grandma should be. I suppose they ruined me because I could count on getting almost anything I wanted from them. Their home was peaceful and quiet and there were a lot of things a city boy could do on a farm.

I remember distinctly one summer day; I had been privileged to go to town with Grandpa to the little country store. I have no idea what he was going to the store for but I remember that when we walked in, my eyes fell on a little blue shovel that was just my size. Man, I wanted that shovel. I got Grandpa to walk over and admire it with me and dropped all the classic hints that my troubles would be over if I could just have that little blue shovel.

Apparently, he didn't have the money with him at the time because we left the store without the shovel. But I was confident that it was mine. For two days, all I could talk about was that little blue shovel (I can't imagine wanting something that represents so much hard labor now but I just had to have it then). My words were, "I know my grandpa will get me that little blue shovel."

I had an uncle still living at home at the time. He was a teenager then and he taunted and teased for two days about that shovel. But sure enough, after the two days were over, my grandpa came through and arrived home that afternoon presenting me that same little blue shovel I had so admired in that little country store. Man, was I proud of that shovel!

The message is very simple in this excerpt from my childhood. We have a heavenly Father who is more to us than even my beloved grandpa. He knows exactly what we need as

compared to what we think we need. He will provide for us. I know my family, even though we are far from rich, has never lacked and I am convinced it is reward for serving God Almighty.

Today, it may not be very popular to serve God, but this is one old-fashioned precept that has proven itself over and over again. We don't serve Him for the things He may bless us with. We serve Him because we love Him. But without doubt I believe when we put God first in our homes, and our lives, we will be blessed for it.

Take a lesson from the little blue shovel. God is like my grandpa, only better. He loves us. He is not just an awesome, fearful creature in the sky just waiting to hurl lightning bolts down on those who sin. He is a God of love. It says so in the Bible. Choose to serve Him today. You won't be any worse off for it and, as the old cliché' goes "It couldn't hurt." Who knows? You just might get a little blue shovel from it.

July 9

“The Assembling” By Jerry D. Ousley

Hebrews 10:25 says: *“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.”* Church leaders have used this verse of scripture for years to brow-beat people into attending church. We’ve had this idea that we have to grow our congregations as large as we can to make them successful. To accomplish this goal, we have used every tool and program possible to get people into our buildings. I’m not necessarily saying this is wrong. That depends on the spirit driving these congregations to make their churches grow. Every body of believers needs to seek God independently about this and make sure that they are in God’s will. But I’m not sure that we have explored every aspect of this verse.

The first and most important thing congregations need to do is to win souls to Jesus Christ. That is our number one job. If we aren’t telling others how to come to Christ then everything else we do is in vain. Of course, Christians need to grow and learn about God, His love for them and how He wants them to love Him back. But the salvation experience must come first.

There are many excellent pastors who have a heart to see people come to Jesus Christ and then grow in their personal relationship with God. These men and women have given their lives to the cause of pointing the souls of men in the right direction that will bring them peace and assure them of eternal life with God. They deserve to have people come into their congregations because frankly these are the people who can help other believers enter fellowship with God as He intended.

Another look at this verse of scripture reveals that Paul didn’t say “You’ve got to go to church to be a Christian.” He said that we shouldn’t abandon coming together as believers. He continued by saying that we should exhort, or teach and encourage each other more and more as we see the Day approaching. Paul knew the old adage that “there’s safety in numbers.” We are basically social creations and we need others in our lives. As we gather with other believers whether that is in a traditional church setting, a dinner, or meeting together in a living room, as we share our faith, our testimonies of what God has brought us through and revealed to us, we help each other grow. It’s not where we come together but simply

coming together. With today's technology we can come together in a lot of different ways including the internet. This touching of each other's lives is the important thing.

What is the "Day" Paul mentioned? He was referring to the Day when final things would begin to happen. All through scripture we are warned that in the last days there would be signs of Christ's return. I don't have time right now to go into all of those things but let's summarize it by saying that all the events Jesus talked about are happening right now. I know that there have always been wars and rumors of wars. There have always been disasters and hatred by men. But never before in history, have we seen all these signs coming together as quickly as we are seeing them right now. War is taking place. Rumbings of greater conflicts are on the horizon. The Earth is rapidly changing and we hear about global warming. We see stranger than normal droughts in some areas while other areas that have been normally dry are experiencing floods like never before. The wickedness in the hearts of people is worse every day. If there was ever a day believers need each other it is today. We need to come together like never before because the Day Paul spoke of is rapidly approaching.

Let's re-evaluate our assembling together. It's not a thing of filling up buildings and getting big offerings. It's not about constructing religious empires. It's not about whose congregation is the largest. It is about believers growing strong in the Lord and being ready and willing to serve Him so we can get more to believe and come to Him before that Day arrives. Please, make a point this week to assemble with believers, worshipping God in spirit and in truth, exhorting each other for all our sakes.

July 10

“The Breakfast of Champions” By Jerry D. Ousley

I love vacations, don't you? It's been a while since my wife and I have taken a trip alone. When we were first married, we did that probably more than we could really afford but it was fun. We'd just take off sometimes. We were young and as carefree as a young married couple could be, I guess. It kept our pockets empty but I will always believe that those were good bonding years for us.

Later the kids came along and we had all but forgotten what it was like to take a vacation that didn't include all the “children's attractions.” We love our kids and don't get me wrong; we wouldn't trade the times we've had with them for any amount of money. But as we neared the time when it would just be the two of us again well, we got a little nervous that we might be somewhat out of practice.

I remember one trip before the kids came along that we took with another couple. It was getting late one Saturday night and my wife, her sister, along with her husband and me, just decided we wanted to go to Mammoth Cave Park. We threw some clothes in our bags, jumped in the car, filled it up with gas, and off we went. We had no motel reservations but we never gave it a second thought.

We arrived fairly late that night and checked into a motel. You've got to know that rates then were only something like \$30.00 - \$40.00 per night for two couples. We pooled our money together and while it wasn't the best of accommodations it was a place to sleep and we were grateful to get it.

The next morning my brother-in-law, and I were up first. We went outside the motel and sat on the porch and just shot the bull for a little while. But the morning was wearing on and the ladies were still asleep. We started getting hungry. There was a restaurant just across the street and smelling the fried bacon and eggs didn't help the situation any.

We finally decided that we weren't going to miss breakfast so we slipped across the street and had us a mini-feast. When we got back the ladies were just getting up and we felt that they didn't have to know that we'd already eaten. After they got ready for the day, they

were also ready for breakfast. What were we going to do now? If they found out that we had already had breakfast we stood in danger of being accused of not waiting for them. It wasn't that we didn't want to dine with our wives or anything like that. So, we made a monumental decision and decided that we wouldn't tell them.

We went back across the street thinking that we'd just have coffee or something. But then, if we did that, they'd be suspicious. Neither of us had ever been known to turn down a good breakfast. There was no other recourse except to eat again. And we did. It was just as good the second time.

I can't remember if we made too many "under the table" jokes or just somehow let it slip, but we didn't get away with our deception for very long. We were caught and for some time after that we got reminded from time to time, of the day we had two breakfasts.

We can pull the wool over the eyes of people for a while, but we can never sneak one past God. Job 34:21 in "The Message" says of God, "*He has his eyes on every man and woman. He doesn't miss a trick.*" While eating two breakfasts behind your wife's back doesn't exactly make the top ten list of sins, the fact of the matter is that God sees everything, including what's going on in our hearts. But that's really a good thing. It isn't like we're trying to get away with anything behind God's back as much as God knows what's down that misguided path we might be taking. If we listen to Him, He might just save us some pain and heartache later. Think about it.

July 11

“Values”

By Jerry D. Ousley

The story is told of a lady on the sinking Titanic. She had been chosen as a passenger on one of the few remaining lifeboats. But before climbing on she thought of something and asked if she would be allowed to return to her cabin to get it before leaving. The person in charge of the lifeboat told her that if she left, she had to be back before the lifeboat was launched or she would forfeit her place on the craft.

She ran as best she could down the dangerously slanted deck of the sinking ship, through the casino where money had spilled in piles on the floor. She arrived to her cabin, dashed in and began digging through her belongings. She threw jewels and diamond studded necklaces on the floor looking for a specific item. Finally, she found what she had been looking for – three oranges. Putting them in her pockets she rushed back to the lifeboat and climbed aboard just as it was launching.

She realized that suddenly all the money, precious jewels and diamonds were worthless compared to the food she would need on that lifeboat until they were rescued. It's funny how our values change depending on what is needed the most. In our modern day of living, we price things according to need. It's called supply and demand. While I strongly disagree with raising the price of an item that is worth a certain amount, just because a lot of people want it, still it happens every day. We're willing to pay more for something when we need it.

In the Ohio Valley region of the United States, we get snow but not a lot of it compared to other areas in the country. When reports of a snow storm are coming people flock to the stores to buy the groceries and other necessities they need. You'd be surprised how valuable a snow shovel becomes when the threat of a big storm is predicted.

We have another prediction of a coming storm that looms in the horizon. It has been called many things such as the end of time, the Day of the Lord, and a host of other names. According to world events, if you are looking closely enough you can see the dark clouds way out in the distance. If you watch for a while, you may even see the sky flashing with lightning. It's coming just as surely as I'm speaking to you today.

In light of this coming world-wide storm, what kind of preparations are you making? Are you getting ready for it? What has suddenly shifted value for you? Do you still go on with your daily activities of making money, fulfilling desires and pleasures, or are you filling your heart with the word of God and seeking a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?

There are those who scoff at such an idea but it doesn't nullify it or make it any less true. That day is surely coming. I don't know if it will happen in a week, a month, a year or another century. Really know one knows that for certain. But it could begin tomorrow or even perhaps before the end of this day.

Regardless of when it begins, we aren't promised another day on this planet. As strong as we think we are, we're really very fragile creatures. As we drive down the highways our lives depend on the nuts and bolts that hold our vehicles together; or on the cautious driving of another person. We operate machinery that could suddenly become faulty and fly apart. We suspend ourselves from cables that we have made trusting that they won't break apart and let us fall. Yet those things happen daily and someone abruptly leaves this world.

While I really don't like painting such a picture of gloom and doom and I hope you live a long, rich and happy life, many of us won't. So where are our values? If we have placed ourselves into the hands of our loving Heavenly Father then when that day comes, we can know that we are ready to be with Him. It is a choice we all have to make. What's your choice? What are your values?

July 12

“Waiting to Exhale” By Debbie Ousley

The title has nothing to do with the movie (I’m not for sure what it’s even about), but I thought it appropriate for this article. As mothers, fathers, and also with so many grandparents raising their grandchildren now a days, I have found we become very good at holding our breath.

As our young ones go through each life experience, and more so after they become a certain age, we find that we can’t literally guide them through those experiences and it comes to a point when we just hold our breath to see if they make it through with no lasting marks.

Each new situation demands they either follow what we have imparted into them or they go off on their own to pay the consequences of their actions, as sad as it is for everyone sometimes. And you know what? No family is exempt!

We have never been parents to say, “Oh we can take our ease because we are Christians.” That kind of thinking has found many hearts broken and children’s lives ruined.

I have always said that adolescents and teenagers are “brain dead” (in jest), but after recently hearing a proven fact, it kind of confirmed what I had been thinking all along. That fact being this: That the part of our brain which enables us to consider the long-termed consequences for our actions doesn’t fully develop until our early twenties. That sure explained some of the dumb and dangerous tricks I pulled at that age! (Tricks, by the way, which are not spoken about in front of my own kids). That fact not only opened my eyes about me but my own children and all children. They really can’t help it.

Oh, they hear what we tell them, and all the warnings, but they just can’t get it. With this newly found information came even more responsibility to you know who? US! The grown-ups! As they kick, buck, and dig their heels in, we become more and more like the enemy, because we are forced to say “no” more often. They are no longer that little boy or girl who thought we had power over the rising of the sun, but now all we seem to do is shoot down all their great plans.

As parents, we learn the art of “holding our breath” early. It starts the day our “bundle of joy” is born. “Suzie, you look a little blue in the face!” “Oh, little Joy got chocked today for the first time.” You know what I mean? And on and on it goes, just waiting to exhale.

Here’s a piece of advice that might help you just as you’re about to take that big breath in. Say, “Lord, You’re bigger than this thing. Keep watch over them I pray.” In reality, wrinkles don’t come from aging but they come from our faces being all puffed-out from holding our breath, just waiting to exhale.

July 13

“Over-Drawn” By Debbie Ousley

*I*t doesn't feel so good to receive a notice informing us that we are over-drawn in our account. "How could that have happened?" we ask ourselves. "I'm sure I deposited enough funds in the bank to cover those checks," we are thinking, and it happens so quickly and unnoticed, but then we start getting those "cold checks."

It is the same when we realize we've over-drawn with our energy, time, and emotions. How did that happen? And by the time we see what has occurred, it's too late to stop the effects of it, until we start paying the penalty charges.

Just like our checking account we are required to deposit enough into our lives to cover what we use. We must deposit enough rest, enough spiritual nutrition, and enough "time-outs". Depleting one's account is not healthy – not to others or us.

Others who are also drawing from our account need to check the amount ever so often, and it wouldn't hurt for them to deposit a little extra sometimes so as to ensure the "balance" stays at a secure total.

Just like our bank account, it's whose name is on the account that is responsible for the stability and health of its credit line. For those who are natural givers-of-themselves, it is easy to just keep paying out and picking up the tab, but they find it hard to keep the deposit balanced with their withdrawals. But I don't guess it would be that impressive to be known as "The Last of the Big Spenders" if we have literally spent the very last of our resources.

It's so much easier to keep depositing enough than to over-draw and have to start a new account, or worse, deplete all we have and start drawing off of someone else's account all the time.

July 14

“Praying without Ceasing” By Jerry D. Ousley

I've got a bad habit. I talk to myself - a lot. I realize it's considered by some as borderline to insanity but I do it anyway. Sometimes my thoughts flow more freely when I think out loud. I've had people look at me strangely when working on a project that requires a lot of concentration. I suppose that strange look is brought on because the more I concentrate the more I talk to myself.

However, often when I'm speaking out loud, I am talking to someone. I'm talking to God. I know that because many times I'll start or end my sentence with "Lord." Now before you think I've fallen completely off the deep end, look at a single verse of scripture found in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, that very simply says, "*Pray without ceasing.*" That's the entire verse. It isn't out of context because where Paul put it in the scripture it's just kind of setting out there all by itself.

We could interpret that verse a couple of ways and I really don't think either of them is wrong. First of all, we could take it to mean that once we begin praying for something or someone that we shouldn't stop. I realize that there are those who teach that once we've taken a matter to the Lord that we should leave it there, believe God's going to answer and never mention it again. But folks if we really have compassion for someone or something it will stay on our minds. I think the Lord is pleased if we are concerned enough to keep talking to Him about it.

The second interpretation could well be that we pray all the time. I know that if we go around talking to God with all the proper intonations, speaking with large and loud words people will think us to be a bit strange to say the least. But we don't have to do it that way. Did you know that God can hear your thoughts? It's true. He even knows what you're going to say before you say it. Think that one through.

I also realize that if we went around praying out loud all the time that we wouldn't have time to concentrate on anything else. We'd be pretty poor workers if all we did was talk all the time. I don't think that's what Paul meant by this interpretation of that statement.

I do think that as we grow in Christ and as our relationship with God is aged with time, we can get to be old friends. I don't mean that in a disrespectful way at all. I believe God wants to be friends with us. I believe that we get to the point that unless we are specifically talking to another person our thoughts, including those some of us strange folks may speak out loud seemingly to ourselves, can be directed at God. During those times we gain knowledge, wisdom and well, sometimes we just get things worked out (or I do anyway).

I believe that God wants our prayer to be just as simple as that. He wants us to talk human; not some mumbo jumbo gibberish that doesn't really mean anything. It may sound good but it's worthless. God wants to know how we feel. He wants to get into our thoughts. He wants to permeate our total being. It can be praying without ceasing – praying without stopping. Isn't that a wonderful thought?

July 15

“The Final Word” By Jerry D. Ousley

Did you ever argue with your mother? I tried a few times when I was a kid. I want to say right off the bat that it isn't advisable to argue with a woman who carries a switch in her purse. Today a lot of folks would get all up in the air against a mother who would carry such a concealed weapon. They would try to say that it was abusive to take a limber, narrow sprout off a tree and hit a child with it. But let me tell you, she didn't have to use it – much anyway. It had a way of letting you know that she meant business and it taught me many a lesson. I want to add that I don't believe in abusing a child. However, if a few more mothers carried switches in their purses I'd say we'd have a lot more behaved children and a lot fewer delinquent children. That's my opinion anyway.

We knew that Mom had that switch in her purse. We also knew that we could talk back to her once or maybe twice and get away with it. But the third time she had a look that she could throw at you without saying a word and we knew that we were on the verge of crossing the line. If we did, the next thing we got was a warning and if we were stupid enough to press the issue the switch would come out of hiding and the game was over except for the weeping and wailing.

More often than not, the look was enough for me. That was it. It meant that “no” was the final answer and there weren't any “life-lines” to spend. That was it, finished, the end.

Getting the final word seems to be something that most of us think we've got to have. When people have an argument, whoever gets the final word feels like, in a sense, they have won. It doesn't seem to matter who's really right and who's really wrong, but who got to say the last thing. The final word has made or broken marriages. Stop and think about it . . . is it really that important who gets to say the last thing? The truth will eventually come out anyway.

In Revelation 3:14 Jesus identifies Himself as “The Amen.” We hear that word a lot in church. Sometimes people say it when the minister has said something profound or rip-tearing truthful. We hear it most often at the end of a prayer. What the word means literally is “let it be so.” It means let it be as has been spoken. It is the final word and Jesus identified Himself with it.

People in the world can argue all they want about whether Jesus Christ is real or not. Some claim Him to be merely a good teacher who was killed before His time, while others paint Him to be an imposter saying that the resurrection was all a big cover-up by His disciples. Even the Jewish leaders in Jesus' day claimed this.

But whether we want to believe it or not, Jesus will have the final word. He is the "Amen." He's going to show up some day, at God's appointed time and the world will stand back gasping at His appearance. It will be the final proof. All arguments will be resolved about the issue and false teachings will be refuted.

But His identity as the "Amen" is not only for the purpose of knowing who's right and who's wrong. He is also the final word on everything else too. He is the final word on sickness and disease. He's the final word on the temptations of the devil. He's also the final word on whether we can be saved or lost. He's got that. There's no sense arguing about it because He will have the last say. Frankly I'm glad for that so I'm going to stop and let the "Amen" have the final word.

July 16

“The Hatfield’s, McCoy’s and Obadiah” By Jerry D. Ousley

I've never completely understood the legendary feud of the Hatfield's and the McCoy's. It seems that the feud had something to do with making and selling moonshine although according to Wikipedia, there were bad feelings towards one of them who joined the Union Army instead of the Confederate Army. He was found murdered in a cave shortly after returning from war with a broken leg. That was never pinned on anyone.

Sometime later there was a dispute over a pig that each family claimed as theirs. Again, according to Wikipedia, the conflict was really over who owned the land the pig was on. Both parties claimed it as theirs. Later there were conflicts over women and other matters. This feud got started in 1873 and officially ended in 1891 – imagine eighteen years of hating each other. It really only ended when the US Government stepped in and arrested a bunch of them, most receiving life sentences with one being executed by hanging.

I can't imagine hatred for someone to the point that you want to kill them or see them dead. It just doesn't make sense to me. But then there have been many wars fought in this world because of hatred.

The Bible records an ongoing conflict between the descendents of two brothers, Jacob and Esau. The descendents of Jacob became the Israelites and those of Esau were called the Edomites. If you remember, way back in Genesis, Esau, who was a hunter, came in one day so hungry that he thought he was dying. His brother Jacob was fixing a pot of what we could call “split pea soup.” It smelled so good to Esau that he wanted a bowl at all costs. Jacob sold him a bowl for his birthright. That was big stuff in those days. It meant that he would not only get the larger portion of inheritance from His father, but also that he would get the family blessing and ultimately be considered the family leader. Esau reasoned that a birthright and a promise of the future was no good to a dying man and so he gave it up.

Even though much later Jacob and Esau worked things out between them, the descendants of Esau always carried a big grudge. The Book of Obadiah is all about that. It is a warning from God to the Edomites for their jealousy and hatred of the Israelites. Hatred for

others never works out to the good and will always cause pain, grief, heartache, misery and ultimately judgment.

We'd think that Christians would be past such feelings. In fact, and we've emphasized this many times over the years, according to Jesus our best witness of who we are is marked by our love for each other. But still today there are "feuds" going on even between Christian people and ministries. I've read about ministries that sue each other because one was supposed to have said something against the other. There are supposedly Christian people sitting in churches, both singing the praises of Christ the King, and won't even take a glance at each other.

Folks, this is not Christian love. How can we ever reach someone else for Christ with this kind of display going on? When it comes right down to it what we believe isn't even that important. According to the message of grace, we are saved not because we believe one way or are followers of this guy or that guy, but because of the free gift given by Jesus. It's free to everyone but Him. He paid a high price to give us this free gift. When we take that grace and put it together with hate we get nothing but a twisted mess. If we have been born again according to the word of God then we're ready for Heaven. What we believe might help us live a better life and get us there on a smoother path, but it doesn't save us.

We'd best be thinking about this. Loving each other sure beats standing before a judge (who could be God Almighty Himself) or swinging from a rope like one of the Hatfield's or McCoy's.

July 17

“Sometimes Quitting Is the Right Thing to Do” By Jerry D. Ousley

People quit a lot of things. I have seen people quit their jobs simply because their supervisor looked at them the wrong way. People quit things like smoking, drinking, cursing, and other stuff that is considered bad. Folks also quit things like sports activities, school, services, clubs, classes and going to church.

Some things that we quit can benefit us, while others are typically marks of failure. There will always be critics. Some will say, “It’s about time! They should have done that years ago,” while others will throw in their two cents with something like, “I knew they’d never last!”

There are times when things just happen to cause us to quit what we’re doing. I have known people (and you have too) who have been forced to quit their occupations because of their health, or take an early retirement because of changes in their job.

But mostly, people think it to be a bad thing when we quit. Others tend to push their noses into the air when they get around someone who has quit. Why do others do that when they can’t possibly understand the full situation?

When I was seventeen years old and a junior in high school, I decided one day to just quit. In my mind I envisioned going to work as a minister and working for the Lord. It seemed like the right thing to do and I thought, “Who’d question my decision for such a noble undertaking?” I didn’t realize all the training involved in the occupation. I was wrong about the decision. My parents allowed me to miss that first day but spent most of it talking to me about all the things that I would be excluded from. They also were quick to point out how tough it would be getting a job without at least a high school diploma. To make a long story short, I went back to school the next day.

Another time I quit a job. I had always wanted my own business but never realized how tough getting started could be. I was making some money but we were expecting our daughter. My wife was working but it was certain that there was going to be a time when she would be unable to work. Her job had been our primary income but now it was time for me to consider giving up my business and getting a steadier occupation. That was a good thing

because even though the business was beginning to make some money, it wasn't nearly enough to provide support for our family by itself. Quitting my business to go back to work for a company in order to provide for my family was the right thing to do.

The bottom line is that there are times when quitting is the right thing to do. 1 Corinthians 16:13 tells us to "quit like men." Of course, in this instance it is referring to being strong like men, but it is interesting that the old English language considered the word "quit" equivalent to being strong and courageous. Quitting in the right instance requires courage, and strength. There are times quitting is bad and there are times quitting is good. The trick is to know the difference. But then, when we are believers in Jesus Christ with His Holy Spirit inside of us, it makes all the difference.

July 18

“The Old Geezers Society” By Jerry D. Ousley

Since arriving on the far side of fifty I have noticed some things that I had heard about before but frankly just didn't think about much. One of those is the fact that very few companies today are really eager to hire people over fifty for management or decision-making positions. It seems that the trend is to hire them right out of college. Now, I'm certainly not against getting a good education. After all, we saw to it that our son went to a good college and he's now working a good job as an engineer and our daughter has graduated from high school and has taken some college courses since. I realize that it is important to be qualified to do a job and that these kids need a chance to prove themselves. But what about us old guys who maybe didn't finish college but have years of experience as their teacher?

I know of at least one local company rather large in size that has forced its “old timers” virtually into early retirement and replaced them with lean green college kids who don't have a clue about how their job applies to what they have learned. One excuse being given is that the guy over fifty only has fifteen to twenty years left in him while the college graduate has his or her entire life in front of them. Sure, this is true but wouldn't it be better to gradually bring in the “young bucks” to learn from the experience of the older person? It makes sense to me.

Besides, while there are many fine young people today, I have also observed that the general attitude is one of absolutely no loyalty to the company. They hire in today and in two weeks are gone while the older folks just keep on coming in and doing their job. It seems to me that one person who is steady and ready is worth much more than a new young person every two weeks.

God's philosophy was a far cry from that of our modern-day employers for the most part. For instance, Moses was eighty years old before God even considered using him to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. Not only did he accomplish that (with the Lord's help) at eighty years old but he brought the Children of Israel through the forty years of wandering around in the desert up to the brink of entering in to the Promised Land and had attained the age of one hundred and twenty by that time.

What about Abraham who fathered a child at the age of one hundred? How'd you like to be changing diapers leaning on a cane?

Then there was Caleb who was one of the original twelve spies entering the Promised Land the first time. Because he was one of two (Joshua was the other) who was ready to go in right away while the others wanted to run back to Egypt, he was allowed to take an inheritance in the Land of Promise. At eighty-five years old he chose as his inheritance a mountain. He didn't pick a level plain that wouldn't require much work but a mountain. He claimed that he was as strong at eighty-five as he had been at thirty-five.

Why did God use these men in their old age instead of picking some younger men who might have been stronger and had more spunk? The fact is that God knows when He's ready to use someone and when they are ready to be used. We might not get our best ideas until we're over-the-hill and God knows that. Don't ever let anyone tell you that you can't do something because of your age. When it comes to God, He'll let us know when He's finished with us whether we're part of the "Old Geezers Society" or not.

July 19

“Row, Row, Row Your Boat” By Debbie Ousley

The other evening, I was reading the Book of Jonah (it’s on page 1351 in my Bible but it may be different in yours). The Bible is so much different than any other reading because no matter how many times we may read the same verses something new will pop up in our spirits. It’s ALIVE!!!!

There were three revelations that came to me while reading the first chapter and I’d like to share a few thoughts with you concerning them. To better understand those thoughts, you may want to read it again. You may get some new insight to share with others.

As we know, Jonah was running from God’s instructions as he caught a slow boat to Tarshish “from the presence of the Lord.” The Lord sent a great storm – here’s the first point – but where was Jonah? While the mariners were shaking in their sandals, trying with everything in their power to save the ship and their lives, he was asleep! Jonah had gotten so used to the peace and presence of the Lord in his life that he slept while all the uproar was going on up above on deck which was a result of his disobedience to the Lord. Oh, there were good things that came to the other men from his disobedience but we’ll get to that later. Who was paying the price at that moment for Jonah’s rebellion? Not Jonah but those around him!

The second point that really got my attention was that even after Jonah had given the mariners the answer to their safety, which was to cast him overboard, they continued to try and save him from that fate. Now here are strangers to Jonah, hard, rugged men who, at that time, worshipped other gods, trying to save Jonah’s life. Boy! I’d like to have some of those guys in my life! Most individuals would have given Jonah up in a heartbeat. “Throw the bum overboard!”

Jonah knew what was causing the storm. He could have snuck up to the side rails and thrown himself into the sea. No one needed to know about his disobedience.

Third point: Sometimes the words need to be spoken to fully accomplish what the Lord has for everyone involved. The thought may be, “Oh, I’ll do something nice for that person,” after we’ve slandered their witness or not considered them in some way and that nice act will

cancel out the bad. But the words need to be spoken! It's like believing a big 16-ounce glass of water or a piece of fruit cancels out all the calories in a big slice of chocolate cake. It just doesn't.

Jonah had to stand before those men and admit that he had caused all their grief and in doing that, the men saw the awesomeness of God and how much God needed Jonah to be in obedience to Him. The words needed to be spoken.

Because Jonah spoke the words, the mariners "feared the Lord greatly, and offered a sacrifice unto Him, and made vows." Good things came to the strangers who rowed hard to save Jonah's life. Even in Jonah's disobedience the Lord used his words that needed to be spoken to build up His Kingdom. He's like that you know . . .

July 20

“Unsweetened Oatmeal” By Debbie Ousley

Almost every time I prepare oatmeal there is a memory that flashes in my mind. One summer morning when I was still small (well, young - I've never been small), Momma had fixed a big pan of oatmeal for breakfast and when I say big, I mean WASHTUB BIG, because we had a bunch of brothers and sisters.

I'm sure Mom was only happy to have oatmeal that morning so she wouldn't have to cook biscuits and gravy and all that stuff. But, as the oatmeal finished cooking, she went to the sugar canister only to find NO sugar (probably because we – or the other kids – had stolen it spoon by spoon to make sugar sandwiches. They were SWEET but didn't hold together very well)!

Mom “went off” on us for a while, but what I remember most of all was her disappointment. I went out with her when she dumped the cooked oatmeal because she knew we wouldn't eat it without sugar. That in itself was an act of mercy. She should have made us eat every bite, but she didn't. The disappointment came, I believe, because her efforts were in vain. She must have thought, “What do I prepare for them to eat now?” You've gotta remember that Pop Tarts, cereal, and Toaster Struddles for this “army” was not an option.

My Mom was the coolest Mom who ever lived (I'd fight anyone who said different). She could have gone out and killed a couple of chickens and had a breakfast fit for an “Old Country King” in a matter of minutes. I don't remember what we ate that morning but I know she did not let us go hungry (Oh yeah, she didn't have to worry about being without sugar for awhile, because when Momma “went off”, you didn't soon forget it.)

You might be asking, “What's the big deal? It was just a pan of cooked “horse feed!” But as I remember this story, I think about how Christ might see all His efforts toward us wasted at times. I think of how He has planned to prepare us to meet the need of spreading the “Good News” of His saving grace to others, and He gives us what we need through the word and the Holy Spirit to get the job done, then, POW! No sweetness!

I, more than anyone else, thank Him for not “dumping” us but instead, in His sovereign love says, “Okay, you can learn this one on your own. I’m here when you realize you need me. I’ve got all the time in this world and the one to come, but it’s for your own benefit that you be more like that ‘quick cook – one minute’ oatmeal than that ‘old fashioned kind’ (old man nature) that needs to cook and cook!”

July 21

“The Average Life” By Jerry D. Ousley

I live an average life. Just like most of you who are reading this, I get up each morning, Monday through Friday, get ready for work, put in my eight plus hours, come home, eat dinner (or supper – depending on who you are – I eat supper by the way), maybe catch a program or two on the tube and get ready for bed. In between these things I manage to fit in time to write these articles. Looking over these last few words it sounds like a very dull and boring life.

There’s something to be said for routine however. I don’t think we should be in such a routine that we panic when something throws us off but steady and dependable makes for a much calmer and more serene life. I know people who are always in an uproar. It wasn’t that many years ago when I was myself. My wife and I were so over-obligated that we almost felt guilty when we had an evening to relax. We somehow felt that we were being lazy.

I have learned a lot about life since we have “calmed down” and have had some time to get reacquainted again. I had almost forgotten how much I love my wife until recently. We spoke the words “I love you” regularly and gave each other the typical parting kiss but we had grown so busy that when we sat down to talk unless we talked about what we had to do and what was going on we really didn’t have much to talk about. That’s just tragic.

I’ve got to say that I have grown to love my average life. I’m not in the spotlight as much as I once was and there isn’t a great demand from others on me but I find that this breather is exactly what was needed to figure out just what should be maintained. Factories do that too you know. A factory that has a shutdown period of a week or so usually sets aside that time to do repairs and maintenance on their machinery. The equipment performs pretty much around the clock and parts begin to wear and tear. You really don’t know what all is wrong until you shut down and begin to check things over. It’s the same with our lives. We feel like the Energizer Bunny – we keep going and going but there will come a time when the “go-er” quits unless we get some maintenance done. The body will get sick and force us to rest, or we’ll get careless and break a leg or something but the outcome is the same – down time.

When we really take a close hard look at the Bible, what God was trying to tell us in the Old Testament and what Jesus reflected in the New Testament, it seems to me what we all really need to be doing is develop ourselves for an “average Christian life.” It requires us to spend alone time with God. It teaches us that we are to take the gospel to the world but we must first maintain our own relationship with the Maker. All too often we get the cart before the horse.

The way I see it, an average life is really the better life both physically and spiritually. It is one that allows us time to work, play, eat, sleep and rest, again physically and spiritually. Somehow, we have made ourselves believe that the harder we work for the Kingdom of God the more likely we are to please the King. That may be true in our physical lives but in the spiritual we’ve got to realize that, yes, we are under the yoke of God. Jesus defined it by saying, *“My yoke is easy, and My burden is light”* (Matthew 11:30). Seems to me like a steady average life. What do you think?

July 22

“Why is Everybody Always Pickin’ on Me?” By Jerry D. Ousley

Y*OU* are speeding down the road trying to make it to work on time. There is absolutely nothing behind you when suddenly a vehicle that is waiting to pull out from a side road decides it needs to be in front of you. They pull out, slowing you down, then after only a few hundred feet, turn their signal on and turn again. Why couldn't they have waited until you went by?

Once again, you are in a hurry and you, your wife, and child are out of the house and getting into the car. Your child says, “I have to go to the bathroom now.” So, you take your child back inside. Why didn't they go before you got out of the house and locked the door?

When these and multitudinous similar situations occur, it almost seems like someone's out to get you. Your stomach ties up in knots and you just know you aren't going to get where you are going or meet that deadline on time. It just seems that someone is always pickin' on you (to coin a phrase from a very old song about Charlie Brown – come on now, I know some of you remember what I'm talking about).

I am a firm believer, however, that nothing happens to us by chance. There is a Divine Creator who is God and He is constantly watching out for us. Let me further explain. In the incidents above how do we know that if we had been allowed to leave when we intended or to continue speeding down the road like we were that a car wasn't about to turn in front of us on up the road that could have become a fatal accident? Because we can't see into the future, we have no idea. But God knows.

“If that's the case, why then are there fatal accidents and other tragedies that could have been prevented by Divine intervention?” You may ask. That's a very valid question and frankly, I don't have a clue. All I know is that God does have a purpose for each and everything that He allows or disallows to happen to us. In many cases, we'll never understand or know the “whys” unless God chooses to reveal them to us. I don't have all the answers (I wish I did; I think).

We must also realize that God gives each person a free will. We make choices that affect the outcome of many situations. We can't blame our bad choices on God. And other people also have choices. A man chooses to drive drunk and ends up running over and killing a child. Was that God's will? I don't think so. It was the result of another person's bad choice. But even in these situations God will use them for our ultimate good. He knows better than anyone how to make lemonade from life's lemons.

The one thing I do feel led to tell you, though is that if we can ever get it into our heads that God is in control and we can accept that, we'd save ourselves a whole lot of money on ulcer medicines and headache pills. We worry way too much. I know, because I've been a victim just like you. We may be facing a very difficult situation and I know that many of you are right now. Take comfort in knowing that, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ and you have put your faith and confidence in Him, He really, really does have your particular situation in the palm of His hand. Sometimes it will end with a miracle and sometimes it may end in a tragedy, but whichever it is, know that when you weep, He weeps with you, and when you laugh, He laughs with you. He may have allowed this bad thing into your life not to punish but to strengthen. He knows each of our futures, the choices we will make depending on which way the circumstance is worked out, and so He allows it to go the way that is really the best for us.

Take comfort in this verse of scripture: "*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose*" (Romans 8:28).

July 23

“Selective Hearing” By Jerry D. Ousley

“I forgot about that.” Has that ever been your excuse for not remembering something? I have to admit this has happened to me a lot over the last thirty years. It seems to be more of a common problem among men than women. However, when you get right down to the heart of the matter, how many times did we really forget or did we just not listen well the first time? This isn’t an easy thing to own up to but I confess, I’ve done it too many times.

Some have labeled it “selective hearing.” In other words, just hearing what you choose to, or just listening enough to get it all twisted up. I can’t count how many times I have told a story wrong, or left out some very important details or added in simply because I didn’t listen well enough. I forget.

I suppose there are some things we legitimately forget. But I am confessing for me. Most of the time, had I listened well the first time, I probably wouldn’t have forgotten.

Selective hearing also applies to the word of God. A wise man once told me that you could prove anything with the Bible. And if you take it out of context or just quote partial verses, I suppose that is true. There have also been a lot of times that someone has said, “That’s in the Bible” and upon close examination, it was discovered that it wasn’t there. For instance, have you ever heard the one about the changing of the seasons? Many have quoted the Bible as saying that towards the end times you wouldn’t be able to tell one season from another. Not true. As a matter of fact, the Bible says, *“While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease.”* (Genesis 8:22).

The Bible only has one meaning. I know there are a lot of interpretations going around. Some believe it this way and some the other way. So, which one is right? The Bible is right, of course. The problem is that most of us read it with our preconceived and pre-learned thoughts in mind. What we should do is empty all those things from our heads, read it with prayer and allow the Holy Spirit to begin to teach us.

I know that I've had to change my beliefs many times over the years. This doesn't mean that I'm necessarily "wishy-washy" in what I believe, but that God showed me that I was wrong and so I either had to change what I believed or dismiss the truth from my mind. That would be dangerous because we are accountable for what God has taught us.

There are some simple rules for studying the word of God. First of all, always take it literally except where the Bible itself gives an interpretation of something figurative. For example, Jesus told many stories. After telling the story, He usually interpreted the meaning of it to His disciples. Remember that the Bible does not contradict itself. If it seems to, dig a little deeper. The truth will come out. Also remember that man wants to interpret it by His own reasoning and understanding. That just doesn't work because our finite minds cannot fathom the infinite. Man will take one extreme or the other. The truth usually comes to light somewhere between the two.

There is a wealth of knowledge and truth found in the pages of the Bible. Don't just dismiss it because people can't agree as to what it says and means. Listen to good teaching about the scripture, but always read it for yourself, pray about it, and let God make its wealth of teaching real to you through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Remember that "selective hearing," when it comes to God's word, could be detrimental to your spiritual health.

July 24

“The End” By Jerry D. Ousley

I've often spoke of my grandma and grandpa. As a child I loved visiting them on the chicken farm in Pekin, Indiana. I had a lot of good times there and those two people meant the world to me.

It was always sad when it came time to go. I hated leaving. Truth be known, even though I loved my mom and dad I'd probably lived with grandma and grandpa if they would have let me. I would always cry when it came time to go. But I'd also cry if they came to visit us when it came time for them to leave. It kind of makes me sound like a crybaby, doesn't it? I just didn't like seeing our visits end.

My grandpa died when I was only was only nine years old. I was visiting with them that summer when he passed away. I remember being at the funeral home in Salem, Indiana and seeing him lay there in that casket. I think I cried harder than I had ever cried before. I missed my grandpa and I didn't care that anyone knew about it.

In the year 2000 my grandma died. She was ninety-seven years old. I didn't cry many tears over grandma. But it wasn't because I didn't love her and it wasn't because I was trying to be a man or be strong. It was mostly because as an adult I better understood that she wasn't in that tired, frail body any more. I knew she was in Heaven with grandpa and I also knew that one day I'd see them both again. Even though it was the end it really wasn't the end.

They say "all good things must come to an end." I guess that's because our finite human minds can't understand anything that doesn't have a beginning or an end. But in God there really aren't any beginnings and endings; only a pause in life.

Endings can have great results. Take the Gospels for instance – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Even though all four of these books are about the life of Christ each one ends just a little differently. Matthew ends talking about the Resurrection. Mark ends talking about the Ascension of Jesus. Luke ends by speaking of the coming of the Holy Spirit. And John ends with encouragement about the second coming of Jesus. Aren't those great endings?

Without doubt, unless we are alive to witness the time when Jesus returns from Heaven to reap His harvest of believers still alive on this planet Earth, our day of end will come. We naturally fear the end. With my grandma, although she talked often of going to Heaven and from her words, I don't think that she could wait to get there, still there was a fear of dying – a fear of the end. We don't know exactly what's going to happen. We don't know if our end will be tragic or a quiet passing in the night.

The good thing is that the ending of the Gospels affect our ending. Because Jesus was resurrected from the dead, we too have the promise of resurrection. Our salvation is a type of the resurrection because we die to our old life and get an all-new life. That's the same with death. We leave this physical life for a greatly blessed and happy spiritual life with our Lord.

The ascension of Jesus was an important part of our ending because He promised that He would go away to prepare a place for us. He's getting it ready right now.

The coming of the Holy Spirit is important to our own ending because He is the One who will get us through it. He is our Comforter, our Guide and the One who'll carry us during the whole ordeal.

Finally, the second coming of Jesus is important to our end because we'll either be here waiting for Him to transform our physical into the spiritual or we'll be coming back with Him. I guess we could say that our end is really, without doubt only the beginning.

July 25

“The Perfect Body” By Jerry D. Ousley

Wouldn't we all like to have one (perfect body that is)? Of course, not everyone would agree as to exactly what a perfect body is, so, even if we could have one, whose definition would be used as the measure?

Jesus Christ does have one (or will have when the Church is finished growing). Paul talked about this in Ephesians 4:1-16 (you might want to read that sometime). In this portion of Scripture, Paul was speaking about the office gifts. Apparently, people had complained as to why they needed these guys (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers). Why couldn't they just get the word and grow for themselves? And, to an extent, we must do exactly that. But God has chosen to use voices in the Body of Christ to speak His word to us as well.

I believe in all the gifts given by God. I believe in the office gifts, the spiritual gifts, and the motivational gifts. I believe they are valid and intact yet today. Some have taught that these gifts were done away with (especially the spiritual gifts) based on 1 Corinthians 13:8-11. It talks about that which is perfect and says that when it comes then these things will be done away with.

Now, I agree that God's Church is perfect, and that the word of God is perfect. That goes without dispute. However, those who are a part of God's Church are not yet perfect. Show me a perfect Christian and I'll show you one who has already gone to Heaven.

I have built several computers over the years. In dealing and working with computers I have found that you can have every piece of hardware humming and working beautifully. All switches are switching, all drives reading, and all components communicating with each other perfectly. But if the software has flaws in it, your computer will not function properly. In fact, you may be ready to throw the thing out the window thinking it is a piece of junk. You may remember the picture of the stork standing over a computer with hammer raised. The caption said, “Hit any key to continue.” It can be very frustrating to say the least.

We are like that. Even though God has given us a perfect word, and placed us in His perfect Church, because we (the software) don't function correctly, it makes the perfect look very imperfect. We need all the help we can get to "grow up like Christ" (see Ephesians 4:13).

What we do need to do is listen to those whom God has chosen to use to teach, preach, and exhort His word, and then compare their words with what the Bible actually says. I always encourage people to check out what I'm saying and compare it to the word of God. If I'm wrong, then I need to be corrected.

Then why do we need those to speak to us about the word? Primarily to get us thinking and searching for ourselves. They will confirm what God has taught us from the word and when we see for ourselves, we will be assured in our hearts.

It's time God's people get back to the office gifts and other gifts that God has put into place to edify His Church. Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that we go wild with emotion. On the contrary, God's gifts, when we allow Him to use us instead of us using His gifts, will always be done orderly and accomplish the goal of bringing us closer to God.

You see, as with almost everything else taught and found in "The Church" today, there is a middle road. Some would say that these things are not for us today, while others seem to go "crazy" with them. But God puts balance to all things. That's what we need to find is the balance. It's there - In the word - If we'll just look for it.

July 26

“The Shepherd” Part 1 By Debbie Ousley

The shepherd pulled himself up from the hard ground trying to get his joints to move as he thought to himself, “I’m getting too old for this kind of work.” By now he had become used to sleeping with one eye opened but he knew that he’d never get used to the damp cold night air.

“All of that will soon change though,” he thought as he looked upward and felt the rays of the sun, he knew it would soon become so hot that he’d be praying for a cool breeze to refresh him.

The sheep were grazing quietly. They didn’t even know that he was awake. They seemed to be content just doing what sheep like to do. The night had been uneventful, no unwanted visitors, no new births, and no fights. All was well.

As he moved around his campsite and prepared a bite of breakfast, he tried to figure how many more days it would be before he drove the flock back homeward. It had been way too long.

He sat down to eat his food and without even thinking about it he began to count the sheep. Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, and one ... he stood to his feet hoping to get a better view, wishing they would stand still and quit mulling around as once again he counted, “Ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine ... “but no one hundredth sheep.

The stiff joints, his hunger, nor the hot sun seemed all that important now. He shaded his eyes looking way off into the distance, past the flock and the shadows made by the far-off mountain range. But no sheep.

His mind began to think of all the terrible things that could happen to his missing sheep. Perhaps he had slept sounder than his body had felt and a wolf had invaded his herd,

snatching the sheep from him. But there was no sign of that happening. Besides, the sheep would have let him know. They were never bashful when it came to wolves.

It must have just wandered off. So now what? Did he sit there and be glad it wasn't more than one and count his loss? Or did he hope the sheep would find its way back to the fold?

He knew that one lone sheep would not last long out there, wherever it was. Wolves would smell their next meal and its fate would not be a pretty one. "Man, why should I care?" he thought to himself. "That sheep had everything it needed right here; food, water, the security of the other sheep, and my protection. I've been a good shepherd! Why would it choose to wander off like that?" The anguished shepherd struggled within himself - but not for long. He knew full well what he must do.

He put a small pack together, surveyed his flock and started off to find the lost sheep. What about the ninety-nine others? Would they be safe? It was a chance he was willing to take for the sake of this one sheep.

July 27

“The Shepherd” (Conclusion) By Debbie Ousley

As the shepherd walked through the flock the sheep only moved enough to make a path for him to pass by. They had no fear of this man because they knew their shepherd. They had seen him, smelled him, and heard his voice many times as he would call to them, “Coo sheep coo,” and they followed him.

But back to his mission which was to find the one lost sheep that had wandered from his loving eye. Yes, it was true that the sheep were his livelihood. Yes, his goal was to save each of them. But this shepherd had come to love and care for each of them. He knew the one’s that were stubborn and those which were gentle and compliant to his every command.

This lost sheep happened to be one of the independent ones – always wanting to go his own way. Well, this time its independence had put its life in danger and made for one hot day for this shepherd.

He had walked all day long, following a trail of prints made by one lone sheep. He lost his footing on a rocky dry hill and tumbled to the bottom. As he surveyed the damage the pain from the gashes in his hands made by the jagged rocks could hardly compare to the deep puncture wound in his side inflicted by a stick he had encountered on his descent.

Hot, dirty and hurting, the shepherd tried to dismiss the thought of returning to the flock. “Could this one disobedient sheep be worth all this?” he thought to himself. If it were one of us, the answer would have been easy.

About that time, he heard a noise in a nearby thicket. Was it his lost sheep or the wolves that may have found it first? Moving quickly, he broke through the brush and as he did a thorn bush slowed his efforts. It wrapped around him from ankle to head and dug into every place the thorns touched him. He prayed, “God why is this so hard? Am I in this all alone this time?”

Finally, he was on the other side of the thicket and in all his pain he smiled to see that it was the lost sheep – the lost wandering sheep. The shepherd, bleeding and torn, didn't scold, beat, or curse at the sheep. Instead, he slowly walked over to it, picking it up in his arms and held it close to his chest. This good shepherd had no intentions of being mean to the lost sheep once he had found it. You see, this quest was not done in anger or revenge because of the sheep's disobedience but rather was done out of pure love and concern for it. If the shepherd had wanted the sheep to pay for its actions, he would have left it to the wolves.

CAST

The Good Shepherd - Jesus
The Wandering Sheep – You and me
The love of the Good Shepherd – Grace
Wolves – Sin in mankind without Grace

July 28

“The Hidden Person” By Jerry D. Ousley

Did you know that there is someone hiding inside of you? I've found this out over the years. In each of us there is a hidden person. They may be very beautiful and becoming on the outside. Their hair is always neat and clean; they wear the best of clothing; their makeup is always perfect or if it's a man he's always well-groomed, neatly shaven and stylish. But inside there is a very ugly person. We find that out when they begin to speak.

On the other hand, we may know someone who isn't neat in their appearance. Perhaps they don't take many pains in keeping up their hair or don't seem to care what type of clothing they wear. Maybe they're overweight and well, just plain out right ugly. But when they speak you hear a completely different person. You hear someone who is kind, gentle and loving.

The fact is we've got this thing about impressions. We tend to judge people by how they look or what they wear; how beautiful and petite they are. It's reflected in the commercials on television and the advertising on billboards. Everything is portrayed by the young, fit and beautiful. It's appealing to the eyes and they know that it will influence us to buy things. But who is that person really?

Before I stand in judgment of others, I have to confess that there have been times that things have come from inside of me that weren't so beautiful. Oh, don't get me wrong; I never use foul language or anything like that. But I've discovered that there are times when my own words have been cruel and cutting to someone else. I've had to repent over that. What has happened is that I've allowed that which is hidden in me to come to the surface; and it will. We may hide things deep in our hearts, but one day the time will come when what we really think comes out.

In 1 Peter 3, Peter was talking about the outward adorning. He wasn't condemning us for wanting to look nice. It isn't a sin to be presentable (I heard a preacher say one time that "some old barns need a good coat of paint"). After addressing a couple of things Peter wrote that instead of putting the greater emphasis on our outward adorning to, "*Rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God*" (verse 4).

The person who is hidden inside of us is really the most important. Others will look on our outward appearance and pass instant judgments – it's called first impressions. Sometimes we'll let it put blinders on us and we'll decide whether we like a person or not simply by the way they look. I've heard of people voting for a president because of the way they look. The fact is a very good-looking person could possibly be a very evil character in reality.

What do we look like on the inside? We can get a good idea by what comes out of us. If we are neglectful in helping those in need by saying something like, "They deserved what they got!" then maybe we don't look so good. If we are constantly letting doubt, deception and negative things come from our mouths then perhaps that's what we look like on the inside.

That hidden person is the individual who reflects what Jesus Christ has done for us. Our thoughts, words and deeds are like giant mirrors showing all who come into contact with us what we look like from the inside.

If it is ugly then we have the opportunity to let Jesus change us. It won't be easy but it can and must happen. So, what about it? Is there a "looker" and beautiful person hidden within us? If not, there can be.

July 29

‘Who’s Following Who?’ By Jerry D. Ousley

“Then the men of Israel took some of their provisions; but they did not ask counsel of the LORD. So Joshua made peace with them, and made a covenant with them to let them live; and the rulers of the congregation swore to them.” (Joshua 9:14-15)

The Gibeonites were actually Hivites living in the land promised to Israel. They were one of the nations Israel was to dispel and completely destroy. They had hatched a plan in hopes of living. They put on old clothing and old shoes and packed old torn wineskins as well as moldy bread and pretended that they had been on a very long journey to meet up with Israel. They told the Israeli’s that when they left their shoes were almost new and the bread was fresh out of the oven.

Israel took them at their word and made a pact with them. It wasn’t long however that they found out how they had been deceived by the Gibeonites. They could not destroy them because they had given their word. Instead, they made them wood cutters and water carriers for the tabernacle.

But then they had to protect the Gibeonites from the rest of the nations of the land. God used this in Israel’s favor because it helped them to destroy the rest of the inhabitants of the land a little more quickly. But they were reminded constantly of their mistake with the Gibeonites living in their land.

Many years later Saul took it upon himself while he was king to correct this problem (read 2 Samuel 21:1-6). He killed some of the Gibeonites. Under David’s rule Israel suffered a three-year famine for Saul’s actions which broke their pact with the Gibeonites. Israel had to pay with seven lives from among the descendants of Saul.

The reason Israel failed in this incident is that they didn’t seek God in the matter but left the decision up to reason. They didn’t pray about it. There was a time in my own life when I took it upon myself to quit my job and begin a tent ministry. I’ll tell you more about that another time but for now I’ll let you know that I failed miserably because even though it may have been a good idea, God hadn’t told me to do it.

Just because something is good doesn't mean that God wants that for our individual life or congregation. Praise God that He blesses others in a certain way and instructs them to do it but that doesn't mean He wants everyone to duplicate it. If we aren't careful what we have done is just followed suit taking the easy way instead of following God. We've got to be careful that we aren't giving God directions instead of taking directions. We've got to do what God has told us to do even if it may seem a little different from what others are doing. We've got to follow God, not just fall in behind what everyone else is doing. So, who's following who?

July 30

“The Bones of Elisha”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I've always wondered what it would be like to see someone who has died raised back to life. It happened several times in the Bible. I've heard of instances where it has happened today but I've never witnessed such an event.

When my grandmother died, I wished that she would come back to life. I remember walking past her casket with her body laying there. I remember thinking to myself, "I've got enough faith to command that she come back to life." Then I remembered that she was ninety-seven years old, and had lived a very good life for the Lord. I also remembered how much she longed for Heaven. She was there now. Then the thought occurred to me, "Son, if you were successful in bringing her back to life, she'd beat you silly for doing it. She's where she has always wanted to be." I let the matter alone.

In 2 Kings 13:20-21, we read about an incident involving the bones of Elisha. He was a great prophet of God. The Lord had used him in many miraculous things. He had died and they had buried him.

Sometime later another man had died. In those days Israel had been plagued by raiding bands from the nation of Moab. As the man's friends were preparing to bury him, they saw the raiding bands of Moab coming. In their haste to finish their job and hide from the Moabites they spied Elisha's tomb and thought, "We'll just put him in there for now and get out of here." So that's what they did. They put the dead man in the tomb of Elisha. But they got a surprise. When the dead man's bones touched the bones of Elisha he was instantly brought back to life! Imagine that! The Bible doesn't record what happened next but I'd say they went ahead and got out of there and their once dead buddy went with them.

There is a lesson in this for us. We may not go around raising the dead to life but as believers in Jesus Christ we do have that opportunity in a spiritual sense each and every day of our lives. Our number one job as Christians is to make more Christians. We are to be living our lives in such a way that people know who we are. They should see our love for other Christians which, according to the Book of John and the words of Jesus, is the main witness

and identification that we are believers. They should see our work ethics, our morals, and how we treat others and it should be a testimony without words for the Lord Jesus Christ.

When they do, eventually they will come to us and want to know how to get what we have. What an open door we then stand before. We haven't had to push the gospel on them but they have come seeking the Good News of Jesus Christ. We can tell them what God has done for us and show them how they can receive salvation for themselves. It's a lot like touching the bones of Elisha. We have the opportunity to bring them back to life.

Oh, I know that they are walking around, breathing, eating, working and doing things only the living can do. But spiritually they are walking dead men. They need to be revived in a way that only the Holy Spirit of God can revive them. When we are being the witnesses for the Lord that we are supposed to be, we can't help but let it show. Our lives are a dead giveaway as to who we are. Elisha brought that man back to life without speaking a word. He couldn't – He was dead himself! But the power of God was so strong in him that when the dead man's body touched him, it changed the dead man into a living man. Seek God, give yourself fully to Him and you'll find that as people touch your life, they will start coming to life themselves!

July 31

“The Right Way” By Jerry D. Ousley

After graduating from AIT in the US Army I was stationed in Washington DC. My wife and I had been married for about five years but had been apart for almost three months due to training. Towards the end of AIT, she and my son were able to join me. We had been living in a camper on a base mobile home park. I had a couple of weeks leave coming and so, knowing what city we were going to be living in for a while, we headed back to Indiana for a visit and to gather our belongings. On the way however, we thought it would be best to have an apartment lined up so we'd have somewhere to stay when we came back.

Okay, here's the picture: We were driving in the city (remember, we're from "small-town" Indiana), in a very large Chrysler pulling a twenty-five-foot camper. We were trying to find the Army base by following a map. We had the address and thought we knew where we were going. We found ourselves driving right through the heart of the city in all the traffic pulling this big rig and if people didn't notice that we were definitely from out of town it was only because they were blind. For a moment there I knew how Jed Clampet must have felt.

We finally found a place to pull over after endless twisting and turning and discovered that the reason we hadn't found the base was that there were two sets of lettered streets (as opposed to numbered streets – instead of 12th, 13th, and 14th, they were "L", "M", and "N"). We were on the wrong side of town!

Have you ever been lost? I mean with the feeling that you don't know where you are and you have no idea of how to get out? I don't tell too many people about this but I got lost in Elizabethtown Indiana once. As a kid I had been through there many times. Now a good forty years later I had decided to take a shortcut through the tiny berg of Elizabethtown. I confidently drove the country road into town knowing I was going to save all kinds of time. I have always had a good feeling about my sense of direction. Even in the Washington DC incident I was able to pull over and figure out where I had made my mistake, get turned around and find where I was going. But as I headed into Elizabethtown getting lost in such a tiny place was the furthest thing from my mind. In E-Town the street layout is all centered around a square in the middle with a road leading out on each side. I just knew I had taken the correct

road but I suddenly found myself in the middle of nowhere on a gravel road. “When did they dig up the pavement and turn this into a gravel road?” I thought. I knew something was wrong.

I turned around, headed back and when I got to the square there were no signs pointing to the right way. It was an overcast day so I couldn’t see the position of the sun and suddenly I had no idea of which way to go. It was not only an embarrassing moment but also one that struck fear in my heart. How was I going to get out? To make a long story short I did stumble onto the right road without asking for directions (that’s a “man thing” by the way) but it left me with a thought much deeper than, “I’ll never do that again.”

You see we are all traveling through life. Most of us think we know where we are going but all of us will at one point in our lives realize that we are hopelessly lost. A fear grips our hearts and we suddenly feel all alone in a strange place. How can we get out? How can we be saved from our problem? In the middle of the fear and confusion Jesus Christ points the way and lets us know that He is the only way out of our helpless situation.

At that point we have a choice. We can continue traveling in the way we have been going, wandering aimlessly through life or we can go His way, choose His road, and find what we have been missing for so long. John 3:16 says, *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* It could just as easily read, *“God loved lost man so much that He sent His only Son to be the way, so that whoever was lost could go His way and be delivered from his plight.”*

We have a choice set before us: Follow His way into life, or live lost forever. It’s our choice - our decision. When your life seems lost in a familiar place just go His way – the right way.

August 1

“The Witness” By Debbie Ousley

“YOU swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“I do.”

“Just the truth, not what you think, suspect or conjure up in your mind.”

“Just the facts, sir.”

“Now tell us what you saw.”

“Well, the red car sped down the street, swerved and hit the green car parked in front of the bank. I believe the driver was drunk.”

“No! No; just what you saw please.”

John 13:35 says, *“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”* The witness – Love for one another. Don’t you think it’s kind of interesting that Jesus spoke these words to His followers? The very men who had witnessed all He had done, from blessing the little children to casting out demons; Jesus, the very example of love. You would think it would go without saying.

I heard a song on the radio the other day and the question was asked, “When will the world see that we need Jesus?” And the answer was: “When they see us loving one another.”

Lately I have seen individuals judging other people’s witness out of the condition of their own heart. And when I say that I mean that the act or witness has been done out of a good heart, but others will judge that action from what’s in their heart: Suspicion, doubt, and, let’s be straight, dirt.

The other day I was reminded of a hard truth, one valuable enough to share with you. Matthew 7:2 tells us with what degree we judge others that’s the degree we will be judged.

WOW! In other words, what goes around comes around. You know what? Every time I am reminded of that, it sits me back on my heels and then takes me to my knees.

When Jesus cleansed the temple, chasing out the moneychangers we can only imagine how He was judged for His actions, and that very statement, "We can only imagine," is what dilutes and rips away at another person's witness. You might be saying, "Well, that wasn't the appropriate manner in which Jesus should have handled that situation." Hey, even in that outburst of righteous indignation (which is something we need to see more of from Christians – getting angry and taking a stand against sin) He did it in love. The love and respect He had for His Father's house and even the love He had for those misguided, greedy, opportunists who needed a reality check concerning the respect and honor for God and His place of worship. With what merit do you want others to receive your witness? Well, with that same merit we ought to receive theirs.

Respect and confidence, two important words that must go hand in hand with "loving one another." And as you might be thinking right now, "But I don't have respect and confidence in so and so." Guess what!!!!????

August 2

“Seeing is Believing” By Debbie Ousley

*I*n Psalm 78 we find instructions to not hide those praise-worthy deeds of God from our children. We are to tell them to the next generation so they can pass it on to their children, and so on. Why? So that they might set their hope in God and not forget His works, but also keep His commandments. Many times, after God had shown up and performed a miracle, He would instruct the people to make a monument at that place.

Why? So that when the children would see it and ask about it, the adults could share with them the exciting details of that event like, how God had parted the waters, or how He had won the battle.

What if we fail to tell just one generation of those mighty praise-worthy deeds of God? What if in our predisposed condition this generation doesn't hear how God not only did those great and mighty deeds then, but what if they have no great and mighty deeds to tell their children about now?

We don't really need to spice up the stories of God's great and mighty deeds. They are exciting enough if we believe them. Steven Spielberg has nothing on God.

I have presented this question to myself as I do to the church of America. What praise-worthy deeds are our children going to tell their children? What will they recall to them as an eyewitness to that great and mighty day? There's a line in an old song that says, "I was there when it happened, and I guess I ought to know." Nothing makes an impact on our lives more than when we experience it. We see it, we feel it, we smell it, and it touches us. No one can rip it from us. No one can make us doubt it happened because it touched us. See??!!!

If the churches of America doesn't overcome the "fear factor" of losing butts out of their pews and coins out of their collection plates and start looking for the "sameness" in each other (the true love of Christ) instead of picking each other to pieces because of their differences, our children may have very few new praise-worthy deeds to pass on to their children; just old ones from how many generations ago?

The “old days” have been to teach just like the Old Testament is our “School Master.” But the “now” days are to encourage us and ignite us so that we can see the great and mighty deeds of a living, mighty God NOW!!!

August 3

“Dog Days and Pond Scum”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I've heard of the “Dog Days” of summer all my life and you probably have too. I knew what period they were talking about but just didn't really know what it meant, or referred to. So, I “Googled” it. What I found out was that it was the period from late July until early September in the Northern Hemisphere of the world when the sun was hot. I sometimes think that with the humidity and heat that we can have in Southern Indiana it makes us the center of the “Dog Days” territory.

It also mentioned stagnation. When I read that my mind immediately saw a pond that was covered with the greenish brown scum that gets on them during hot weather. That pond scum has always been very detestable to me. It looks repulsive and has always been the factor that made me decide to never have a pond. However, you can put chemicals in the water that will kill the pond scum and keep it looking fresh and nice. This process will keep a pond looking very inviting to a young swimmer on a hot summer day or to a fisherman just waiting to cast in a line.

If we aren't careful, our lives will go through periods of “dog days.” These are periods when we feel like “maybe it just isn't worth getting up this morning,” or “is it worth all the trouble I'm putting into this thing?” Have you ever felt that way? I'm sure you have. It is these “dog days” of life that may cause us to do things we wouldn't normally do or act in a way we really don't want to but do anyway because of the “blahs” we're feeling.

We all go through the hot dry periods in life. When we see someone going through such a time maybe our first reaction is that they remind us of pond scum. But we need to recognize when it is happening in our lives as well as in the lives of others. None of us want to remind others of pond scum in the “dog days” of life. But sometimes we just can't help the feelings and situations influencing us. Understanding what is happening is the first step. When we know what's going on then we can look for the way to treat it.

These periods can happen because our time in life is growing late and we suddenly realize that all those dreams we had in our youth are only still dreams and we get depressed. Or perhaps we're just tired of the same old “hum-drum” life that we've been living. Whatever

brings these spiritual “dog days” on, the solution can always be found in the freshness of God. Looking to Him for strength and encouragement always brings new life and the “chemical treatment” needed to cure our “pond scum.” He will let us know that even though we haven’t fulfilled our dreams it’s never too late and if we look back on life, perhaps we haven’t done so badly after all. Whichever the case, trust in God and He’ll help you so that you don’t develop “pond scum” and experience the “dog days” of life.

August 4

“Corn-Starched Clothes”

By Jerry D. Ousley

So far in my life I've been in four different foundries. Because of the nature of the business, foundries are normally extremely hot and extremely dirty. If you stop and think about all the heat it takes to melt metal, then it stands to reason that they are going to be hot. Because of the process a foundry is naturally very dirty. All four of the foundries I've been in were no exception, all but one. I don't know how they kept it so clean but I was in a foundry in Etowah, Tennessee taking a tour and walked through with white tennis shoes on. Amazingly when I finished the tour my tennis shoes were still white!

Three of the four foundries I was in were related to the job I was doing at the time. But one of them was actually my place of employment. I was in college and for two summers worked in a foundry to earn college money. The foundry always shut down for two weeks during the middle of July for maintenance. That was generally when workers took their vacation if they had vacation time coming. If not they either took it off without pay or they volunteered to work. Being only part-time I had no vacation days. I couldn't afford two whole weeks without pay so I volunteered to work. The foundry didn't pour metal during that time but cleaned and did maintenance on the machinery. I got stuck with a lot of odd-jobs.

One day they put me to unloading fifty-pound bags of corn starch. I guess they used it somehow in making cores for the castings. It was hot. It was in the middle of July and was probably in excess of ninety degrees outside. It was probably a hundred degrees or more in the foundry. But these bags were on a rail car. That metal car was probably ten to fifteen degrees or better higher than in the foundry. Carrying fifty-pound sacks of corn starch off that rail car, and stacking them on skids in the foundry was hard and hot work. I began to sweat to say the least. My clothes were wringing wet with sweat. I don't know if some of those bags of corn starch had burst or if they just naturally leaked, but corn starch was everywhere. It was lying on the floor of the rail car; it was all over the bags and by moving those bags around it was even floating in the air. It began mixing with the sweat in my clothes. You've heard the saying, "You could stand those pants in the corner?" Well, that day I literally fulfilled that statement. By the time I got home from work, my clothes were so stiff you really could stand them up in the corner. Not just my pants but my shirt and socks as well. We could have put them together and stood them up in the garden as a scare-crow without having to put a stake

in the ground to hold them up! They were dirty, soiled and full of corn starch. They definitely needed to be washed.

What kind of clothes do you like? Our clothing can make a statement about who we are. For instance, many jobs require a uniform that tells others that they are a doctor, a nurse, a fireman, a police officer or a soldier. Many factories require uniforms identifying those who work there.

Whatever kind of clothing we wear it gets dirty, dingy and smelly after a while. We've got to wash those clothes. Did you know that the Bible talks about clothes? Isaiah 61:10 speaks of the garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness. These are the garments given us by God for our soul once we come to Him. They are spiritual garments that tell who we are and who we are associated with. Our spiritual clothing without coming to the Lord is soiled, dingy and smelly. They desperately need to be changed.

When Jesus Christ comes into our lives, He gives us the garments of salvation. Our robe of righteousness is no longer defined by our own righteousness (which is no more than filthy rags) but by that of Jesus Christ. He has given us His righteousness and now those who have come to Him take on a whole new wardrobe. So, what are you wearing?

August 5

“Fast Pitch Softball” By Jerry D. Ousley

I always liked baseball and softball. In fact, when I was younger, I was pretty good at the game (or at least I thought I was). As a kid (before I wore glasses) we'd play softball during gym class. I don't know how I saw the ball but usually I could get at least a base hit.

I was now fifty-one. We'd gone to a fun park with our kids and their spouses. We had a great time and my wife and I had acted our age all day. We watched the “kids” ride go-carts, we'd played a game of putt-putt golf with them and now it was time for the batting cages. I thought I'd show off my ball skills which I just knew I still had even though I was over the hill. Fifty-one isn't that far over the hill.

I looked over the cages. Our son and daughter's husband had picked slow pitch softball. “Man,” I thought, “Anybody can hit slow pitch.” I wanted to strut my stuff and so I headed for the cage labeled “Fast Pitch Softball.” How fast could fast pitch softball be? I went for it.

I'm a “lefty” and the token machine was on the right side. I pumped in my tokens and took my place waiting for the first pitch. I waited and waited. I began to feel like an idiot standing there so I walked across the base line to check the token machine. Perhaps I hadn't pushed the right button. While I was standing there the first ball swooshed by - Okay it seemed to be working now so I walked back across the baseline to my position but before I could get into my batting stance another ball swooshed by. Man, that was a bit faster than I had anticipated. I noticed a kid about 8 or so standing behind me watching. The pressure was on and I had to show this kid how good I was. I struck at the next one. Okay I was ready now. Swoosh – crack! I hit that sucker and the speed it was traveling made the aluminum bat ring, stinging my hands, but it soared out there. I had it now. I missed the next pitch but it was the one after that which told the tale. I managed to get a piece of it but the ball went down right against my ankle and it bounced around like one of those little metal marbles in a pinball machine – all over my foot! I thought this was a “soft ball?” Let me tell you, there was nothing soft about that ball. I knew I was hurt but I still had more pitches coming and I wasn't about to act like a fifty-one-year-old baby. I didn't hit another ball but I stayed until they stopped

coming. Truthfully, I was glad when it was over and I walked on a badly bruised foot that I nursed and petted for two whole weeks.

I realized that life is a lot like fast pitch softball. We can swing high or low and we miss the ball. We can swing early or late in life and that sucker will streak right by us. We can get a piece of it and get hurt if we aren't careful. But let me tell you that it only takes one hit to feel good about life, especially if that hit is in favor of Jesus Christ. He wants to make the difference in our lives. He wants to help us hit the ball.

Now we can refuse His help and maybe get by for a while. But we'll never really hit that home run pitch. If we want to do well in the game we've got to play by the rules. We can slam one home run hit after another but if we don't wait our turn at the bases we run in vain and we're ultimately out. If we keep striking at the ball and only getting hold of air we're soon going to be out. But we can choose to be on His side – on His team – in His league – and we'll be assured of wins even when we lose (that takes a bit of thought but look that pitch over and it will make sense). With Christ we can know that when the game is done and we've gotten our last hit we'll go out with a grand slam.

August 6

“The Great American Getaway” By Jerry D. Ousley

“Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, “I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU NOR FORSAKE YOU.”” (Hebrews 13:5).

It is summer; the weather is warm, and sometimes downright hot! It is vacation time for most of us. Vacations are wonderful, aren't they? Human beings are of the nature that requires them to attempt the Great Escape at least once each year. We hope that you don't experience a vacation such as appeared on a movie of a few years ago entitled "National Lampoons Vacation." Everything that could go wrong did.

Rather, when you go on your vacation, I sincerely pray that you will receive God's Divine protection and that you have the rest and relaxation you deserve and desire.

Vacations are times we get away from the hustle and bustle of a busy work schedule, and escape, for a time, the endless list of jobs and repairs that await you at home. Whether we travel far or near, the idea of leaving it all behind becomes "vacation." It leaves us refreshed (or at least that's the idea) when we are able to get away for a time.

But we've got to remember that a vacation is one thing that God does not afford Himself the luxury. And we should be so thankful and grateful that He doesn't take a vacation. I know if I was in His shoes, with all the problems of this world to look after, and all the people that need attention, I would probably need a two-week vacation at least twice a month!

God never takes a vacation. He doesn't need one because He is GOD! He is always there to hear our every complaint and cry and aren't we glad?! We take God's big listening ear for granted all too often. Yet, He has never let us down.

He certainly has every right to simply turn His back upon all that goes on in this world, but happy we should be that He doesn't. He is always there to comfort, listen, and bless His children. For this reason, it amazes me that everyone in the world is not a Christian.

Yet, despite the wickedness that sometimes comes from His own children, He speaks that precious promise given in the text: *".. I will never leave you, nor forsake you."* No insurance policy, no police department, no government can claim such a promise! He will always be there no matter what situations we experience, despite what may come our way, He is there!

Let's all be reminded of this as we experience this summer. Have a good time! Enjoy yourself! But don't forget God, for He certainly hasn't forgotten you.

August 7

“The Water” By Jerry D. Ousley

AS I am writing this, I am in a motel room looking out over the Gulf of Mexico. Yes, I am on vacation. Isn't it wonderful to be able to “get away from it all” and see the wondrous beauty that God has made? (It doesn't hurt to have a little R&R either!).

Looking at the ocean has always taken my breath away. I mean, to think about such a large body of water that can be fun, exciting, useful, but also deadly, stretching out as far as my natural eye can see is just remarkable to me.

While I am enjoying this vacation immensely, I am not alone. Of course, my family is with me, but I am also surrounded by multitudes all basically with the same goal in mind: To put us in different atmospheres than we are normally in, and have some fun and relaxation. The ocean seems to provide that at least for me.

In the Bible, water is mentioned many times, and some of those references are prophetic, referring to the “seas” of humanity. While the water can be all the things I have mentioned above (fun, exciting, useful, and deadly) so can humanity. Most people in this world want the same thing: A good, wholesome, and peaceful life; one that is marked by prosperity (which has many different degrees), yet one that is fulfilling.

Out on the “seas of humanity” there can be great times. These are times that we enjoy one another's company and complement each other. But, as with everything, there will be bad times also. The ocean can be treacherous when a storm sets in. So can life.

The one thing that can bring it all into harmony is the love of God. Through knowing Jesus Christ as our personal Savior, regardless if our sea is calm and inviting, prosperous, or life threatening, He provides the “vessel” in which we can be safe in all situations and circumstances. Even when our very existence is threatened, we can have hope in Jesus Christ.

Great hurricanes and typhoons come in from the oceans. They cause terror and destruction to all who are in their paths. They threaten our very lives if we can't get out of their

way. Life is like that too. Many of you hearing my voice today long for the calm of the storm. Just a moment's relief would be so welcomed. I want you to know today that God is that calm you need. He may or may not make your storm go away. He knows what is best for us in our unique situations. But hear this: He will give us the calm we need even in the middle of a raging and terrible life storm if we will only trust Him. If we will simply look to Him, we can find the peace we need. It may require something of us. It may mean that we've got some changes to make. But know that if we are obedient to what God is telling us in our hearts, He will make it all better.

I'm going to enjoy my ocean now. I hope you do too.

August 8

“Show Me the Money?”

By Debbie Ousley

The story we have labeled “The Prodigal Son” found in Luke 15 tells how the younger of two sons decided it was time for him to go and see the world. As the father finally gave in to the son’s demands, I believe it was not an easy decision for him, but parents know there are times when we must let go.

I recall a time in my son, Jeremy’s, life when I received a very definite message that has since given me so much peace about him and my daughter, Megan’s destiny. Jeremy was planning a trip to France with his class and even though I had worked over time and saved to make this trip possible for him, I was worried. That’s a long way away!

I was praying and pondering (maybe even stewing) about the event that was soon approaching and it happened, you know what I mean? It was not an audible voice but it was a message that set me back in my spirit, and it was this: “Debbie, I’m Jeremy’s God too.” It was a truth that said to me, “Who do you think you are? I’ve heard every prayer you have prayed for him, but I’ve also heard every prayer he has prayed. He and I also have a relationship.”

You know what? At that point I realized that I, as his care-giver, was only a small part of his destiny. It was time that I recognized and appreciated that my Heavenly Father had a great interest, and always did, in the lives of my children.

It’s hard to let go of those we have invested so much in, but there comes a time when our children’s relationship with Father God is theirs and no one else’s.

As the father gave his son his part of the inheritance, he did not send him out with just the money. I believe the father sent him out with all that he had imparted into him during his growing up years. Ultimately, that is why the son eventually returned to him. As the old man would talk to him about integrity and working hard, the boy would shuffle his feet in the dirt and think, “Put it to music.” As the father told the great and mighty stories of Moses and Elijah, the son might have thought, “Oh no! Not another story about the good ole’ days!” It might have seemed that the son was not listening, and it might have seemed even to the father that there

was no hope for this son. But as we find later, when the son found himself in a bad way, he did remember those lessons his father had taught him in word and deed.

Jeremy did not take his trip as a rebellious teen but as a young man who wanted to see the world. And when he returned, he was really never the same. This adventure had opened him up to a great big world and it only confirmed to him that he knew a great big God.

I have and will always be in prayer for, not just my kids, but all kids. As we send them out in this big world (that will eat them up), we must send them out with more than the money, education, and the idea that it's all up to them to make it. We must impart into them the most important lesson of all which is that God has to be their God too.

August 9

“The Unfinished Project” By Debbie Ousley

As she entered the room the first scene to catch her eye was the half-crocheted afghan lying on the arm of the chair.

There were all his books spread out on the table, along with reference books and scrap pieces of paper with thoughts he had jotted down, all waiting to be put together for his next message.

A pair of muddy shoes was setting outside the door, the hoe leaning against the house as it waited to finish the job started today.

CD's, schoolbooks, magazines, clothes and shoes that had never made it to their proper places because the photo album with each picture and its caption written under it so as not to forget that special moment had been the top priority for the day.

There was the quilt still in the quilting frames that was almost finished. That's the quilt I want, that unfinished project that had meant so much to her that she was investing time and attention to it. This was the unfinished project that was going to bring a sense of accomplishment and had motivated her to action.

I believe it is a great testimony to our lives to leave a few unfinished projects when it comes our time to depart from this life, don't you? Unfinished because we were busy doing something – busy at life ...

August 10

“Time Rolls On” By Jerry D. Ousley

The other day I was anticipating going to lunch at a specific “quick serve delicacies” restaurant (in other words, a fast-food joint). I knew that I had some coupons in my wallet and it was in the middle of the week so I could use the break in the price. I pulled them from my wallet and started looking at the wonderful selections that I was going to save money on when I noticed the expiration date. I was a month too late, and so my trash can received another deposit.

I couldn't believe that this month had come and gone. We were just getting used to the idea that we were in a new decade/century/millennium when I checked the calendar and saw that the year was already ten months gone and that we were on a collision course with the twelfth! Wow!

I remember when I was a kid growing up, my parents used to comment on how quickly the year was going by and I just couldn't understand it because it seemed like a very long time to me. They would say, “You'll understand some day; the older you get the faster it goes by.” I thought, “A year is a year, isn't it?” But now I understand.

James 4:14 tells us that life is like a vapor that appears for a short time and then vanishes. The other morning two of my neighbors were burning trash and it just filled the whole neighborhood with a thick smoky-fog. It was something, because just a couple of hundred feet away, as I drove off in the car, it was completely clear. A half hour later even around our own yard it was completely gone. It was a vapor that was there for a short while and then just dissipated into the air.

Life is very similar to that. Oh sure, our life span may be eighty plus years, but when we view it in reverse we wonder just where it all went.

We spend most of our lives accumulating things, with the hopes of having all our debts paid off so that someday, after the children have grown and gone their own ways, we can retire and enjoy life. Many times, it just doesn't seem to work out that way. So, we find ourselves aged, often sick, and feeling like “life just isn't fair.”

The key is to begin accumulating treasure in Heaven. No, we can't send part of our weekly paycheck into an account up there, but we accumulate by doing what God wants us to do here. Spending our lives doing the will of God not only accumulates in our Heavenly account, but it also causes us to be well thought of here on Earth.

The other day I was in the barber shop awaiting my turn in the chair when the barber remarked that his morning had been so busy that he hadn't even had time to make himself a cup of coffee. A little later a man came in and the barber made the same statement to him. He in turn responded by saying, "I'll run down and get you a cup." It pleased the barber that this man was willing to do this for him. While the man was gone, the barber said, "That guy is one of the richest men in the county, but he's just as plain as an old shoe."

Then the Lord spoke to my heart and said, "You should have been the one doing that." This man was well thought of and very successful not just because of the business he was in, but also because he made himself a servant to people. That is what God wants us to do. As we become servants to people, they respond to us in positive ways. The reason most of us are average is because we aren't willing to be servants. But just as Jesus said, "*to be great we must become a servant.*" It certainly will make that look back on life a little less difficult to view, and maybe if it is full, then we won't be wondering, "Where did it all go?"

August 11

“The Easier Automated Life” By Jerry D. Ousley

In this modern age of auto-everything, life is certainly grand. I mean, fifty years ago who would have thought you could send an instant message, fax a document, or send a picture over your digital phone? Fifty years ago, you were considered “high tech” if you had a television set! That was the day of forty-fives and record albums. Now we listen to music on MP3’s that we have downloaded from the Internet and play on a palm-size device that holds hundreds of songs.

It has certainly made life much easier, hasn’t it? I mean in 1954 it took hours to crunch numbers to calculate all the measurements needed to design a building. Now that process is finished in seconds with the help of a computer. Fifty years ago, cooking a meal on a range took hours of preparation. Today, most of those processes are either done with a microwave or have been incorporated in the processing of the food before it was purchased.

Yes, we have certainly devised some time saving devices. But what have we done with all that spare time? To most people today spare time is what can be gleaned from a good night’s sleep. There is no spare time! We have filled it up with other things. I have said many times that God has graced us with only twenty-four hours in a day and seven days in a week. If we had thirty-six-hour days and eight-day weeks we’d just fill that time up too! We’d literally work ourselves to death. God is good!

One day at work we had mega problems with the computer system. It was frustrating to put it mildly. Everyone was frantic because they couldn’t get their work done. I thought I’d just manually call in a few purchase orders and put them in the computer later. I took my list of what I needed to buy for the company and assigned purchase order numbers to them, but when it was time to make the calls, I realized all the phone numbers were, you guessed it, in the computer! I suppose that old bulky rolodex isn’t quite obsolete yet. I like computers but I don’t like being helpless without them!

There’s nothing wrong with modern conveniences. The bottom line is that even though we may get things done quicker than ever before, people basically have not changed throughout history. The Bible tells us that there is a time for everything (Ecclesiastes 3:1-9). It

looks as if God's word is right again. We try to make time for everything by doing a little thing we have termed "multi-tasking" which is a technical term that means we try to do too many things at the same time. How much simpler would life be if we did everything in its own time?

August 12

“The Simple Fix” By Jerry D. Ousley

“Gurgle, gurgle, pop, pop,” was the sound coming from the drain in our kitchen.

We have a sump pump in our basement which was very quiet this past summer given all the dry weather we had (as well as many of you). But so far this winter it has been very wet and with the leaks (which we thought we had fixed), the trickling water down there keeps the sump pump busy. The problem is that when it kicks off and all the water left in the pipes flows back down through the pump this horrific noise comes back up through the sink. It's loud and annoying if you aren't used to it. My wife and I had gotten used to it with just the two of us at home, but when company comes it is embarrassing. Sometimes it is funny to see the looks on their faces when this offensive sound comes bursting forth from the pipes but then their look turns from surprise to one that says, “Can't you get that fixed?”

I have tried several things over the past few years to alleviate the situation but none have turned out to be successful. This led me to the final fix. I had been dreading it because - well I just don't enjoy reaching over my head and sawing plastic pipe in two. Even though you're expecting it you're never prepared for that cold, yucky water that has who knows how many germs floating around in it, to come pouring out on you once you've cut through the pipe. But I was determined once and for all to get rid of that offensive sound. I surveyed the situation and made my plan of where to re-route the drain from the sump pump and made my trip to the hardware store to get what I needed. This was going to be relatively simple or so I thought.

I began cutting pipe. I managed to fix the line where the sump drain had joined with the sink drain. Now all I had to do was to move the sump drain further down the line. This should do the trick. Running pipe through several curves I finally got it to the section where it would re-enter the drain system. I made my cuts, put in the “T” and got it all glued together. This was not easy work mind you for an overweight, under-exercised man. I was tired and frankly glad the job was done. But it wasn't. When I plugged in the pump it leaked to say the least. There was only one thing to do – cut out that joint and re-do it. I did. To make a long story short it still leaked. It meant another trip to the hardware store and cutting out that joint one more time. I did and finally after three hours the water flowed without leaking. Great! But there was just one problem. The noise had not disappeared. It was still there.

Feeling like I had done all that work for nothing I put the tools away and went back upstairs. Looking into the sink it dawned on me to simply put the drain plugs in. I did and guess what? Yep; the noise all but disappeared. Problem solved. I wished I had tried that three hours ago!

There are times when we go the long route to get somewhere. We fail to see the simple fixes and insist on doing things the hard way only to have to come back to the simple fix that we should have done to begin with.

It's the same with our souls. We try to live up to a standard that is impossible. We want to please God and we live as best as we can. We try to give generously hoping God will credit it against our account. Don't get me wrong, He does see all those good works that we do. But none of them will fix our souls. What we need to do is see the simple fix to begin with. Now it might be a simple fix to us but it cost the very life of Jesus Christ – the Son of God. He sacrificed Himself in our place. It was a very costly fix but by it He made it possible for each and every human soul to have salvation if we will only turn to Him, admit our sin, and accept Him as our Savior. The Bible tells us, *“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”* (Romans 6:23). We work hard to live a clean moral life. Again, don't get me wrong; we need more morals in this world. But without Christ we are working hard to be paid with death. But if we'll accept Christ as our Savior, accept His free gift of grace, and let Him guide in the fixes of life, then we can enjoy the simple fix and save ourselves a whole lot of work.

August 13

“What About the Birds?”

By Jerry D. Ousley

We were watching a newscast a couple of years ago and our President was speaking on National Television about a very important subject concerning the experimentation on human brain cells from unborn embryo. But that is not the issue I want to address today. While that is a very important subject, and I do have my opinion on it, what struck me the most about the speech was the birds. If you watched the telecast and noticed, the whole time our President was giving his speech, in the window behind him you could see about a half dozen birds just flying around, carefree as could be.

They didn't care that the man who held the highest office in our land was giving a very important speech. They didn't care that millions of people were watching and could see their antics. All that concerned them was the moment. All that was on their little minds was to catch another bug or worm for food and fly away.

Jesus spoke about the birds in just such a way in Matthew 6:26 – *“Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”* The birds don't farm and they don't store food away. They just live for the moment, take care of their hatchlings and do their thing. They live from day to day, dependant, whether they know it or not, on the Heavenly Father. Then Jesus said, *“Are you not of more value than they?”* Of course we are. God gave us a living soul.

Now, I'm not even remotely suggesting here that we all quit our jobs and just sit back and say, “If God wants these bills paid, then He's going to have to give me the money!” No, that wouldn't get us very far. What God does want us to do is after we have done our part, then instead of worrying or fretting, to just wait on Him.

The next time you get down with worry and concern, even though you have done everything humanly possible for you to do, just remember the birds in Jesus' story, and the birds behind the President. Somehow, if we truly trust in God and do His will, we'll get by.

August 14

“Spending the Day with the Blahs”

By Jerry D. Ousley

*I*f you're like me occasionally you'll get up not feeling like facing the day. You don't really feel sick but something has just got you weighed down. I had a day like that recently. I wasn't discouraged in the Lord and as mentioned before I wasn't sick. I just didn't feel like facing the day. It didn't keep me from going to work although I have to confess that my whole heart wasn't in what I was doing. Still, we pressed forward.

“The Blahs” is a layman's medical term and it may be linked with a mild depression. It isn't a serious condition unless it continues for a long period of time. It can be triggered by a number of things including a fight with your spouse, trouble with children, trouble on the job, or being too close on money. But this mild, brief case is completely curable. For instance, my day of the blahs was cured by a couple of over-the-counter pain killers before bed followed by a wonderful night's sleep. The next morning, I felt like going out and conquering the world.

We all have days like that; we just wish we had stayed in bed or taken the day off. We can't explain what it is but it's there. It doesn't mean that we've lost our victory in Christ. We're still fighting battles, just not quite as hard as we were before. Life goes on (and on days like this it goes on and on and on). Our common enemy, the devil, would like to take advantage of our blah days attempting to make us believe that something is wrong with us spiritually. He will tell us that we aren't where we should be with the Lord, or that what we attempt to do for our God is useless and that He doesn't really care about us. He may even suggest to us that we've lost our salvation or that we weren't really saved to begin with. Our enemy is an opportunist. He will jump on any little thing he can to discourage and defeat us.

What we need to understand is that our victory in Christ, our labor in the gospel and our relationship with our Lord doesn't depend on how we feel. Even though a touch from the Master can affect our emotions in many ways our emotional response does not define our place or stance in the Body of Christ. In fact, a surer sign of victory in Jesus is not marked by everything going our way or by the world's definition of success. It is actually found to be stronger in how we handle the everyday situations that include problems, tribulations and trials.

The next time you find yourself with a bad case of the blahs or caught in the middle of a situation that seems impossible just remember that Paul said, *“Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”* (2 Corinthians 12:10). I call these great statements of faith “positive negatives.” Paul was saying that when he endured these things that in his weakness, he became strong, not because of himself but because of Christ in him. We can say the same thing. When we go through these things that tend to make us weak emotionally and sometimes physically, we can be strong not because we are some kind of super-giant Christian but simply because of Christ in us. He becomes our strength. He alone is our victory in every circumstance. When we know this then we are armed with a weapon so mighty that the devil has to slink away and stop whispering all those accusations in our ears. It is a weapon that will get us through the blahs.

August 15

“Seize the Moments” By Debbie Ousley

*Said the sparrow to the robin,
"I would really like to know;
Why these anxious human beings
Rush around and hurry so?"
'Said the robin to the sparrow,
"I guess that it must be,
That they have no Heavenly Father
Who watches over them like you and me."
Author Unknown*

This is one of my favorite poems and it was brought back to my memory this past Friday. As I ran to the car to keep from getting soaked by all that “sun shine” we’ve been having lately, I looked down our lane and saw a bird in one of the mud puddles the “sun shine” was creating. The bird was not only enjoying the water falling from the sky but also the muddy water from its private bath, splashing and throwing water all over itself, not caring about anything at that moment.

I thought to myself, “How long has it been since you have felt that care-free?” I know that if I’d been caught sitting in a mud puddle in the rain, it wouldn’t be long before the padded truck would arrive and the “White Coats” would invite me to go visit at their house. But I can’t help but believe that we all need more “mud puddle” experiences in our lives.

I know the bird’s concern would have changed drastically if a big old tomcat would have entered the picture. But why is it that way too many situations in our lives seem to be the survival, life-or-death kind instead of the carefree “mud puddle” ones?

Jesus told us that He had come to give us life more abundantly. Maybe not so much in material things but in extreme experiences that will teach us and enrich our lives, if we see them. But how can we see them if our days are spent in a blur?

Most people who have had close encounters with death become changed individuals. Their priorities are turned 180 degrees. Why? Because they see all this “stuff” that seems so important really is not as important as the people and the free “stuff” that God offers.

“Life is not measured by the breath we take, but by the moments that take away our breath.” We don’t need to spend money to hang from a “big rubber band” or jump out of a plane to experience a breath-taking moment. All we really need to do is to slow down and see God’s extreme, awesomeness and be bold enough to go where most men and women these days, fear to go. And that is to open up to others.

August 16

“The Title”

By Debbie Ousley

T*O* hold a “title” can be very impressive, can’t it? But with a title also comes responsibilities. To have a title a person must first fulfill the qualification to hold that title (unless you “father” your own company). “Father” – A begetter of offspring; a man who gives perennial care, protector and provider.

Luke was a young man who played Little League. Now, Luke was short and stout and sat on the bench most of the time. But it just so happened that his team won the tournament that year. When the trophies were handed out, he got a shiny trophy as all of the team members did. At first, Luke felt really good about the victory. But, as he thought about it, he realized the trophy he held in his hand was because of someone else’s efforts and hard work. Oh, he was a part of the winning team, but that was the only reason he had received the prize. He held the title of “Champ”, but as bad as he might have wanted to be a champ, he had not fulfilled the qualifications to hold the title.

I like being a mother, but I have to be honest with you, the responsibilities of being a mother sure out-weighs the honor of being one. It’s kind of like the man who said, “I’ve seen the boss’s job, and I don’t want it.”

Having the title of “Christian” is also a big responsibility. There are some awfully big shoes to fill in that title “Christian – Christ-Like.” It’s impossible if we try to do it on our own. Christ knew that too. That’s why that, when He left out of here, He sent the Comforter, not so we would get comfortable but so that we would not be alone in our Christian walk. And when that “walk” has ended on this Earth, and we get our trophies it will be because of the Holy Spirit and also because we have done our part to fulfill the qualifications that entitle us to that TITLE.

August 17

“Pondering in Your Heart” By Jerry D. Ousley

Back in my salesman days I was talking with a fellow. He was just a “country boy” and even though I’d never say that he didn’t have much sense (because I’ve found out that farmers and most country boys have more sense than many college graduates) his interests were everywhere but on what I was trying to sell him. I knew that this would be a good deal for him and that if the need ever arose, he’d be glad he bought this insurance policy from me but it was just hard for him to think about letting go precious money earned by the sweat of his brow for a promise only if he ever needed it.

If he did need it then he’d be glad he bought it; but if he never used it then he’d feel like he had wasted his money. I understood that and still do. I don’t know many people who can afford to throw good, hard-earned cash away for a mere promise on paper.

After a long pause I felt like someone needed to break the ice so I asked the man, “Well, what do you think?” He looked me straight in the eye and responded, “Don’t rush me; I’m a ponderin’ on it.”

When I hear that word, “ponder” I most often think of Luke 2:19 and the words of the Bible regarding Mary, the mother of Jesus. After the miraculous birth of the baby Jesus, the visit by the shepherds and the song they had heard from the angels, the Bible tells us, “*But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.*” She didn’t brag about them telling of all her good fortune. She didn’t go around saying, “Guess what? I’m the mother of the Messiah!” No, she didn’t do these things. Instead, she humbly thought about them not just in her head but deep within her heart – her very soul and being.

You know, as I think about this it occurs to me that this is exactly what we need to do too. It is a miracle that the God who created the universe and everything inanimate and living in it, would love the human race so much that He would come to Earth in the form of Jesus Christ, His Son, be born as a little baby, live a poor life teaching and healing the sick, only to be persecuted by the religious leaders of the human race, and ultimately executed by one of the most cruel methods ever devised by man, then be resurrected, paying for our sin and

becoming the victor over it, only because He loves us. We are honored, blessed, and humbled that this Almighty and one true God would care so much for us.

We should think about this. We need to ponder on it. But we need to go farther than just to think about it. We need to put it into our hearts – the very being of our souls. We need to realize that there is a spiritual aspect to people where most of us have only scratched the surface. We need to put this in our hearts and think deeply about it in our very spirits.

If more people would ponder to this degree regarding God and His Kingdom, what a difference it would make in this world. What would it be like if more people would seek after the one true God? We'll probably never know in this world because the god of it (Satan – the devil) has it in his very clutches. He thinks that he's in control right now, and it does seem that way. With all the wickedness that goes on it serves as a pretty good indicator of what most people ponder on.

But it's all surface related. In reality God almighty is in control. The devil has played right into His hand and unwittingly has become a tool used to fulfill the purpose of God. The day will come (not in this present world but the one that is coming) when men will ponder spiritually. We can do it now but only after we've come to the Lord in salvation. So, are you "ponderin'" on it?

August 18

“The Call of Many and Few” By Jerry D. Ousley

I remember back in the eighties applying for a certain job. In those days jobs weren't easy to find and when a company advertised that they were interviewing for a position, whether people had the qualifications or not, they showed up. I had a job at the time but I wasn't satisfied with it and I wasn't really making much money at it. A position became available with a prominent company. It was one noted for easy work and big pay. Everyone I knew wanted to work at this place and when someone was fortunate enough to land a job there, they felt like they were riding high in the saddle and they had finally made it to the big time.

Actually, there were several positions open that day and literally thousands of people had showed up for that handful of jobs. There were a lot of disappointed people because even though many had responded to the call for employment, only a handful was chosen. I was one of those not chosen.

In Matthew 22 Jesus had been telling the story about a king who had thrown a big wedding party for his son. A lot of the guests that had been invited refused to come stating that they basically had more important things to do. The king was furious and so, determined to fill up the house with wedding guests, he sent his servants out to invite anyone they could find who wanted to come.

However, I suppose that even though these newly invited guests were just common people, being dressed for the wedding was still a requirement. When the king came in to see the crowd of people, he saw a man there who didn't have on the proper attire. The king walked up to the man and asked him why he hadn't come dressed for the wedding and Jesus said that the man was speechless – he couldn't think of anything to say, which also meant that he didn't have a good excuse. Because of it the king had him thrown out. Jesus actually stated that the man was bound hand and foot, taken from the party and thrown into outer darkness where there was weeping and gnashing of teeth. This treatment sounds a bit extreme for someone who didn't show up dressed for the occasion, but Jesus was using it to illustrate what happens to one who doesn't come properly attired to the invitation of Heaven.

He ended the story by saying, *“For many are called, but few are chosen”* (verse 14). That illustration of Jesus is exactly how salvation into the Kingdom of God is today. The invitation is for all. Jesus died to save every man, woman, boy and girl who ever lived, who lives today, and who will ever live. The invitation is for “who ever will.” Many congregations boast of large crowds of people but in reality, not all of those people are part of the Kingdom of God. There are many who go through the motions, who have a form of worship, and who are faithful to be in the building each and every Sunday (or Saturday; whichever day you have chosen to worship). They have been called. But only a few in comparison to the population of the world will be chosen.

Does this mean that God didn’t extend salvation to all? No, not for one instant; everyone has an equal opportunity to become a member of the Kingdom of Heaven. But even though our buildings may be packed and full, not everyone is appropriately and properly attired for the occasion. I’m not talking about what kind of clothes you wear to church, but I am saying that we must put on the wedding garment. We have to be dressed in the robe of righteousness that can only be received one way. This robe was purchased with the very blood of Jesus Christ. We can only receive it by coming to Him in true repentance and salvation. We can’t be good enough to win it. We can’t attend church enough to be worthy of it. We can only get it by realizing we are sinners and that we are detestable in the eyes of God, then repent and allow the blood of Jesus Christ to cleanse us from all sin. When we do this then we are counted among the chosen.

There will be millions in Heaven. The Bible speaks in the Book of Revelation of a crowd that no man can number. But in comparison to all the people who have ever, or will ever walk on the face of this planet, it’s a small number indeed. Many are called, but only a few are chosen. You have been called. Will you dress for the occasion or just show up in any old thing? Remember, this is the greatest honor you will ever receive. Make sure you put on the wedding garment and you will be one of the chosen.

August 19

“What Was That?!” By Jerry D. Ousley

We were on our way to drop our daughter off at church, when we saw this animal lying in the middle of the road. When I say the middle, I mean it was directly on the yellow line in the MIDDLE. Now, I don't normally pay that much attention to "road kill" but this creature looked different. It wasn't your typical skunk, opossum or raccoon. My daughter immediately identified it as a monkey. I don't believe it was a monkey, but it was something.

We cracked a few jokes about some Southern Indiana hicks not knowing what it was so he just made "road kill" out of it. We completed our mission by dropping her off and then began the return trip home. Now the journey wasn't that far; maybe 10 miles, so it didn't take that long. But when I came back to the place in the road where our strange animal had been laying it wasn't in the same position as it had been before. It wasn't in the middle but at the side of the road. How did that happen?

If that wasn't strange enough, about forty-five minutes later, my wife and I came back. I had mentioned the strange animal to her and was in the process of looking for it, explaining how it had strangely moved from the middle to the side of the road, but, believe it or not, it was now nowhere to be found. Strange, huh?

Was this animal just pretending to be dead and getting up and moving around when nothing was coming? Not likely. Had it been attached to a string and some prankster was moving it around to fool motorists? Possibly it was some kind of rare animal and someone stopped to get it for its skin ... (Perhaps our daughter was right – Maybe it was a monkey? I dunno!).

I can't explain it but someone out there knows the truth! It did remind me, however, of situations we get ourselves into. I'm talking about those of us who hide the truth about something we may have done to save face. I've done it. You don't want anyone to think badly of you because "you're supposed to be a Christian." It's even tougher when you're the minister or pastor. But let me assure you, we are all human.

It's tough to own up to something we've done or said especially when we know it will make us look bad, and so we pretend to be ignorant of the situation (pretending to be dead in the middle of the road) and then we side-step the issue (moving to the side of the road when no one's looking), and finally just slip away when the heat is off (disappearing completely). It may seem like we got away with it but God knows and we never completely get away with anything.

This stems from the belief that we're supposed to be perfect and do absolutely no wrong. Isn't that what the Bible says? Jesus did say, *"Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."* (Matthew 5:48). That's pretty strong. I don't know a single person on the face of the earth who is as perfect and righteous as God is, do you? How can we be perfect when we are all the time making mistakes? That's why so many people act like "dead monkeys" in the middle of the road. They aren't perfect but they must pretend to be or else they have violated a command from Christ.

However, let's look at another scripture. *"My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."* (1 John 2:1). Now we're getting somewhere. John realized that it was impossible in this flesh to be perfect as God is perfect. Jesus was telling us that without His provision of grace and without being covered by His blood, the only way we could even hope to be righteous was to be like God.

John was telling us that we're not supposed to sin, and, yes, we should strive to be as much like God as we can be, but when we fail (and we probably will) we have Jesus Christ as our advocate to the Father – our "go-between" who is ever making intercession (pleading our case) for us. We aren't to abuse that privilege of salvation, but we can fall upon His grace and mercy.

So, the next time you do wrong, and want to act like a "monkey in the middle of the road" (or whatever it was) remember that we can own up to our faults and stand justified in Christ!

August 20

“The Down Stairs Also Lead Up” By Jerry D. Ousley

Most of us have very limited memories of our early childhood and I am no different. For the most part, all we have to rely on for information about our life from birth to about three years is what those who were around us then can remember. That could be kind of scary in a way since many of us are gullible people.

However, I do remember one episode from my early years. I don't know exactly how old I was but it was such a frightening experience to a youngster that it was forever burned into the cells of my memory banks. From what my parents have told me, we lived in the state of Michigan at the time, and probably in the state of poverty too. Whether it was a house or an apartment I'm not sure, but I do remember that it had a stairway inside. I was upstairs getting ready to come down when some unknown force caused me to stumble and so I began my descent. An average stairway may not seem very high or steep to us adults, but for a small child it was like looking down from the Empire State Building and it seemed my descent would never end.

Of course, I was crying and probably had the breath knocked out of me. An accident like this can be very dangerous but hurt feelings and being scared into the next century was about all I suffered. But I thought the world had come to an end. Mom was immediately there to comfort me and check me out for serious damages. But soon all was well.

This incident is relative to life for most of us. At some point in our lives, we all take a tumble of some kind: Emotional, mental, or even physical. It all can be boiled down to spiritual. You see, anything that happens to us affects us spiritually. It either encourages us or discourages us. We either feel good inside or like a hound dog on a short chain six inches out of reach of the biggest bone we ever saw in our lives.

These events that take place are like that stairway. They lead up and down. When something happens in our lives that cause us to fall down the stairs, it seems things will never be the same again. And they won't. Every experience we have in life becomes one of teaching.

We should view those experiences in that light. All too often we let ourselves become devastated with small and large tragedies and recovery seems hopeless and impossible. But God made us in such a way that nothing is really impossible. We can accomplish what we desire if we set our minds to it and keep on going. It's when we give up, that we become failures.

When we fall down the stairs, we must determine to go back to the top and start again. Often that is impossible without God. But when we turn our situation over to Him, look to Him for our strength and guidance, and do what His word has told us to do, then we can go back up the downstairs. We can succeed with His help.

The Bible tells us that God owns the cattle of a thousand hills. One man has said that God owns the cattle but sometimes if we want one, we've got to go up and drive it down ourselves. God is ever present to help us, but we've got to let Him know we need help by asking. When we do this, He will make a way. It may not be exactly as we pictured, but it will turn out for our best in the end.

August 21

“Twice Done Jobs” By Jerry D. Ousley

I want to say right from the start, “I am not a painter.” I don’t like painting, I don’t do a good job painting, and therefore a brush should never enter my hands. That would be my choice anyway. However, we don’t always get our way because there are just some necessary jobs that have to be done.

This was one of them. Our bathroom ceiling needed painting very badly. The old paint had begun to chip and it looked horrible. So, it became one of my “Saturday Projects.”

I think we are pretty typical of most families and if so then you have several partial gallons of paint setting around in storage just like we do. My wife and daughter were going out to do some shopping with her sister, and I thought that with them gone it would be a perfect time to get the job done. She had mentioned the extra paint so we wouldn’t have to invest in yet another partial gallon to add to the collection so when she said, “There’s plenty of paint in the basement, don’t buy anymore,” I assumed that she meant the color was up to me.

Our bathroom is white with blue trim and has a dark green speckled carpet. Those colors look very nice together. I got a tarp from the garage and covered the floor being careful to remove all the bottles of shampoo and whatever else the ladies used to make themselves beautiful, and climbed the ladder to scrap off all the old loose paint chips first. I then carefully cleaned all of that mess up and went to the basement to pick out some paint.

White would have been the best choice but the only bucket that felt like it had enough in it (I had no idea how much paint it would take to do the job), turned out to be sort of a lavender or light purple. “You know,” I thought, “I believe that will work well with the color combination we already have.” And so, feeling very proud of myself and my choice of colors I stirred the paint up and very carefully and meticulously began to paint the ceiling.

When I was finished, I carefully cleaned up the mess thinking, “My wife will be proud of me.” She wasn’t. Apparently lavender or light purple was not a good choice for our bathroom ceiling. I guess I got a little hot about it because I had worked so hard but I also knew that if I didn’t fix it then she would, and I would much rather have her approval than her scorn. So, I

committed myself to fix my mess the next day. We did have some white and after painting it the first time I knew it didn't take nearly as much paint as I had thought it would so when I opened the can of white, I knew there was more than enough to redo the job and so I did. I have to admit, it does look much nicer than it did in lavender.

We humans find ourselves redoing a lot of jobs, sometimes because we didn't do a good job to begin with; other times because we just made a mistake or left something out. It happens and it's part of life.

I am so very glad, however, that God doesn't have to redo His work. Creation, even in its fallen state, beautifully reflects the thoughtfulness God put into everything He made including man.

I'm also very glad that our Lord, Jesus Christ only had to do His job once. His sacrifice on Calvary was good enough that no sacrifice was ever required again to pay for man's sin. It was more than adequate the first time. His sacrifice covers all the sin of the world if we'll just accept what He has done and apply it to our lives. What do you think?

By the way, if you need help painting, well, I'm reluctantly willing but "I wouldn't ask me if I were you ..."

August 22

“Thankful To Be Living in America” By Debbie Ousley

Luke 17:12 tells how Jesus came into a village and there He met ten men who were lepers. Leprosy is a terrible disease and those who have it are separated from all other people. The story says that the men stood afar off but they lifted voices and cried mercy from Jesus. Jesus saw them, instructed them to go to the priests and show themselves (He required them to do something), and as they went, the men were healed.

The story goes on to say that one man, realizing he was healed, turned back to Jesus and with a loud voice glorified God. Jesus asked, “Hey weren’t there ten men healed? Where are the other nine?” Jesus referred to this man as a “stranger” because he was from another nationality. He wasn’t a Jew or one that Jesus expected to acknowledge or understand what a great thing that had been done for him. But he was THANKFUL!

Could America be like the nine men who received their healing and went on their merry way? Then, being busy making up all the time they had lost being with their families and businesses, getting on with their lives with no thought or thanksgiving to God of how He has blessed this country.

But you know, we have a great number of “strangers” coming into our country who are seeing the greatness of God’s hand on America. It is the “Land of Promise” for them, and they are thankful to have the opportunity for a better life.

Jesus didn’t take back the other men’s healing. He doesn’t take back something He gives us. We usually throw it away, or lose it if it gets gone.

August 23

“That Ain’t no Lady, That’s My Wife” By Debbie Ousley

What constitutes a woman to be called a “lady?” Is it the way she walks, dresses, talks? Or is it her bloodline, manners, and education? Some of you may recall the old line that said, “That ain’t no lady that’s my wife!”

We can know we don’t consider ourselves to be a “lady” when the cashier tries to get our attention by saying, “Lady, lady! Hey lady, you forgot your change,” and we just keep on walking. Or when someone asks all the “ladies” in the room to “please stand up” and you need a few seconds to consider it.

There was a dog called “Lady” in a Walt Disney movie and she seemed dainty, and well mannered (for a dog). She belonged to a wealthy family, was pampered and seemed to be “lady-like” I guess.

A teacher in a sixth-grade class informed all the “tom-boys” that they would act like ladies and you would have thought she had called them a bad name. “Lady!” Yuck! So, being a “lady” isn’t important to all of the female species.

I know I have met a few women in my life I considered “ladies.” And, yes, some of them were well educated, well dressed and had great manners. But unlike some women with these traits, they were approachable. They did not find the need to flaunt their attributes. It was amazing because, even though I knew they had the “right stuff” they made me feel comfortable. “Like, wow, man! You really want to hear my thoughts on the matter? Can I share anything that you might consider valuable? YES!”

I have also known women that wore bibbed-overalls, had little education, and worked as hard as their men, but were “ladies.” And once again it was their humility, their sincerity, and their genuineness that made me look at them with awe and an instant respect was formed for them. It was how they drew me into themselves, not how they held me off at arm’s length with an attitude that said, “Don’t touch or don’t even think about it.”

For myself, I have concluded that “Lady” is not so much a title as it is a condition. Oh, the outer wrapping is nice, but the prize is always what is inside and it’s not as important to be called one as it is to be considered one.

August 24

“The House” By Jerry D. Ousley

“This is the coolest house ever!” We had been living in a rented apartment in Kendallville, Indiana. Dad and Mom had purchased a house just a few blocks away from the complex where we had lived. I don’t remember what they paid for the house but it was a real “fixer-upper.” The outside wasn’t so bad, but on the inside, it had been gutted. The drywall had huge gaping holes in it – to the point that you could actually walk from room to room without ever going through a door. But to kids it was the neatest place in the world. It was fun going through the walls! Today we’d think we were being punished for something bad in our lives if we lived like that.

There weren’t enough fans to go around and we didn’t really know what air conditioning was then. We’d put a screen in the window and let Mother Nature cool us with her gentle breezes. The house was really hot because if I remember correctly the drywall was even gone from the ceiling. That of course allowed even more heat into the house.

At first, while Dad spent his every spare second making this place comfortable and livable, we piled our toys in a big heap outside the door and covered them with a tarp or something. Again, we didn’t view this as a hardship or as being poor because it only meant that our toys were at our fingertips. How many other kids do you know that had their own toy pile right by the door and didn’t have to worry about their mother screaming, “Put up your toys!” They were already put up.

We had tricycles and a pedal car and we wore a path in the yard that extended all the way around the house. During the summer we’d spend our days playing in that yard and the woods beside our house. If it had rained some very nice mud puddles formed in front where we could float boats and have all kinds of imaginary fun. When it was dry, we’d raise the dust racing around the house on our path. To us life was great at our “new” house.

Many viewed it as a dump. Oh, that’s not to say that Mom didn’t keep it cleaned. She did. And as Dad finished a room, things were properly put away and organized. It took several months but soon Dad finished the inside and you couldn’t tell that it had been in such bad shape. To tell the truth I have a lot of fine memories about that house and go back there

sometimes in my mind. As a child it was hard to understand why they had to do so much work on it. It was very unique the way it was. But it had to be done. It had to be finished so as to keep out some of that smothering heat in the summer and the cold windy blasts in the winter.

That house reminds me of how many choose to live their lives today. While they would never think of living in a house like we started with, the house of their souls is in just as bad a shape if not worse. Many live their lives like a house full of holes that are in dire need of patching up.

It doesn't seem that way to them because it's fun. Why fix something that seems to be working? But is it really working? In reality they are living their lives in a dump and don't even realize it. But things can be patched up. 1 Corinthians 5:17 tells us that if we have come to Christ then we are a new creation and the old things have been done away with making room for all new things. That's what Christ wants to do for each and every one of us. He wants to recreate us into a brand-new person. We may still look the same to the natural eye but when He comes into our lives, we are made over again from the inside out. He patches the holes that have been caused by the vandals of the soul. He reworks the ceilings that have been broken through and fills them with new insulation to keep out the intruding weather that brings harm to the soul.

We may think that our old house is a lot of fun. We may enjoy the chaos of our spiritual selves, or at least we think we do. But that's only because we have never experienced the newness of life that only Jesus Christ can give. He offers it to each of us today. All we have to do is to accept it. How about it? Need some new drywall in your life? Try Jesus.

August 25

“Watching the Fish” By Jerry D. Ousley

I was sitting in front of my computer searching for what to write about this week when it happened. The screen saver activated itself and suddenly there were three very lifelike fish swimming around on my screen. There’s something about that screensaver that just sort of relaxes me. Watching those fish, even though they aren’t real, allows my mind to just wander like those replicas of the scaly finned creatures invading my computer.

To add a realistic touch the bubbles from the artificial filter of the artificial tank add a rhythmic, almost hypnotic atmosphere to the whole scene. You almost hate to move the mouse or hit a key wiping away the moment returning you to the work at hand.

Screensavers were meant to do exactly what their name says: Save your screen. In the ancient days of the computer (at least twenty years ago) if you left your computer monitor on it would burn an image into the screen that could be seen forever-after regardless what you were working on. Screensavers were invented to keep images moving around on the screen disallowing them to forever imprint your monitor.

Most modern monitors have eliminated this problem but still the screensaver remains. Some sport falling leaves or snowflakes drifting to the ground. Many people have purchased programs that will allow you to take your favorite pictures and display them for a few seconds before moving on to the next one. I’ve seen racecars, the sinking of the Titanic, popular cartoon characters and on and on. At one time I had one that featured the Tasmanian devil whirling across the screen then stopping and smiling with his head and mouth larger than the rest of his body.

You can find a screensaver with almost any theme that meets your fancy. Some have spent several dollars to obtain their favorite images floating across their screen while some have downloaded hundreds of “freebies.”

Life is like that too. While most of us would love to put our lives on hold and just be a bird aimlessly floating and circling in the sky, or a fish swimming randomly in the still water. The fast-paced pressure of most of our lives makes inactivity look very appealing.

Sometimes God turns screensavers on in our lives. We don't know the meaning of downtime these days. We feel like we are "Energizer Bunnies" and just keep going and going even when our bodies are telling us to shut down for a while. It doesn't help when our place of employment keeps feeding us things like, "Give the company 110%," "You can always do better," "Give your best for the team." While these things all sound good and may instill motivation they are really only saying one thing: "Push yourself to the maximum and when you get there then do some more."

When we don't "turn on the screensaver" for a time, God has a way of turning it on for us. It can come with a bout of the flu, a broken bone or any number of other things that will put us flat on our backs.

So, the next time the tension is beginning to take its toll, remember that vacation time you've been putting off and take some "screensaver time." You're going to get it one way or another anyway. Why do you think God established a day of rest to begin with?

August 26

“This is not where I Wanted to Go”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I tell a lot of stories about when I was in the Army, but I guess everyone who has had that experience has a lot of stories to tell. This happened during basic training. Another soldier and I had an appointment to fill out some paperwork across the base. This was at Fort Dix, New Jersey. The office we were to go to was on the other side of the base and was too far to walk. They had a bus system on the base that cost maybe fifty cents a person to ride and the other soldier and I were at the bus stop waiting for the next one to come along.

All of a sudden two guys in a military pickup truck stopped and asked where we were going. We paid attention to what this guy was saying because he had sergeant stripes on his shirt and we were mere privates. The sergeant told us to hop in the back of the pickup and he and his buddy would take us to our desired destination. At first, we argued that we didn't want to inconvenience them and that we would just wait for the bus. But the sergeant insisted so we counted it to our luck that we'd get there sooner and save fifty cents apiece in the process.

However, the pickup truck kept going deeper and deeper into the base and the surroundings became more and more remote. Was this some kind of short cut to the office or something? Then, right smack dab in the middle of nowhere they pulled over and stopped. The sergeant very cordially stuck his head out the window and said, "We'll be glad to take you to the office you need to get to but it's going to cost you five bucks apiece." Now we were in trouble. I guess I should say that I was in trouble because the other soldier only had fifty cents (or at least that's what he said). It cost me ten dollars to get to the office that would have cost us a total of one dollar had we waited on the bus. To top it off, as the pickup truck pulled up to the office, we saw the bus just pulling away. We had saved no time at all and it had cost me ten bucks!

Sometimes we find ourselves going somewhere we didn't want to go. In 2 Kings 6 we read about a whole army who arrived in a place they didn't want to go. In a nut shell, the king of Syria had been trying to place his army in position to attack Israel. God was revealing this to the Prophet Elisha who was relaying this information to the king of Israel. The king of Israel would send men to that place and when the Assyrians got there Israel was waiting on them. When the king of Assyria found out that Elisha the Prophet was the culprit revealing his secret

plans, he sent his army to find Elisha. One morning the servant of Elisha stepped outside, and the town where they were staying was surrounded by the Syrian army. God, at Elisha's prayer, revealed the fiery army of God surrounding them when his servant told him about it.

However, again in answer to Elisha's prayer, God made the Syrian army blind and Elisha led them right into the capital city of Israel. When they realized where they were they also realized that they had lost and no one had fired a shot! This was not where they wanted to go.

Sometimes God allows us to go places we don't really want to go. Those places aren't always physical locations but are places of experience in our lives. It could be many things but it is a place in your life you'd rather not be. When God allows this there is always room in that place for Him to be glorified. He will open our eyes and reveal His own great army that surrounds and protects us. It requires us to have a bit of faith. It may require us to extend ourselves in an area we never intended. But when we go there with God and extend ourselves at His bidding, giving up to Him, it may not be where we wanted to go, but you can be sure that it will turn out for the best in the end.

August 27

“The Potter’s Field”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Do you remember those art classes in school when you had to make something from clay? I remember making an ash tray for my dad once (he smoked then but hasn’t for many years now). It was a lot of fun molding and rubbing that clay to get it into just the right shape. But I’m no artist. When that thing was finished it looked like a lumpy little dish. It wasn’t geometrically correct. One side was higher than the other and I wouldn’t have wanted to use it to make a perfect circle, that’s for sure!

Matthew 27:5-10 tells us the story of Judas after his betrayal of Jesus. He was full of deep remorse and regret. Somehow, in his mind, he felt that they would put Jesus in jail at best. I’m not denying that he was “The son of perdition,” the Bible tells us this. But he was still a man. After he realized that they were going to kill Jesus he returned to the Jewish leaders and tried to return the thirty pieces of silver he received for “selling Jesus out.” Of course, they had Jesus where they wanted Him and there was no way they were going to back out of this deal.

The Bible tells us that Judas cast the money down, then promptly went out and hung himself. This was a negative reaction to his sorrow; instead of repenting, he ended his life in sin.

The point I really want to make, however, is this: The priests took the thirty pieces of silver and bought the potter’s field with it designating it as a place to bury the poor. It was called “The field of blood.” It is really interesting that hundreds of years before Zechariah had prophesied this very thing to happen. Hear the words of Zechariah 11:12-13: *“Then I said to them, ‘If it is agreeable to you, give me my wages; and if not, refrain.’ So they weighed out for my wages thirty pieces of silver. And the LORD said to me, ‘Throw it to the potter—that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD for the potter.”* WOW! Talk about prophecy being fulfilled!

The cool point about this is that in Jeremiah 18 the potter is compared to God, molding and remaking vessels of clay. We are compared to those vessels. Jesus paid the terrible price for sin so that we could be thrown to the potter and there be remade into something

beautiful for God. Regardless of how wealthy we are or how poor we are, as far as this world is concerned, we are all poor when compared to God. Our poor souls can never measure up to His holy and righteous standards. We are all in a hopeless situation without the shed blood of Jesus Christ. I'm sorry He had to die for our sin. But I'm glad He loved us so much that He allowed Himself to be sold for thirty pieces of silver and paid the price for our sin on the cross. I'm glad He is the Master Potter and we can be thrown to Him and become new creations in Christ.

All it takes is for us to yield ourselves to Him. Allow Him to have His way in our lives and live by His word. When we do, it will simply amaze you as to what God will and can do for your life. Submit to the Potter today!

August 28

“What’s it To You?” By Jerry D. Ousley

In John 21, Jesus had risen and Peter and some of the disciples had gone fishing, Jesus had appeared to them on the shore and instructed them to make the great catch, then they came to shore and had a fish dinner. After dinner was over, Jesus began speaking to Peter. Peter was still feeling guilty for denying his Lord, just as Jesus had predicted that he would do. So, Jesus broke the ice by asking Peter if he really loved Him. He did this three times (remember, Peter had denied Jesus three times). Peter responded that he did indeed love Jesus, all three times. It was uncomfortable for Peter, but it did throw things into the open.

Then Jesus did something else. He told Peter that he would be bound later in life, for the sake of Christ. Peter had told Jesus, shortly before the crucifixion that he was ready to die for Him. But now, when Jesus told him that he would one day be a captive for Christ, he pointed to John (the one identified as “he who Jesus loved”), and basically said, “Well, Lord, if I’ve got to do this, what about this guy?” Jesus told him in so many words, “It’s none of your business, Peter. If I choose that he never die, what is that to you?” Now, John did die eventually, but because of this statement, it was rumored that he was going to live forever. But that would never have happened if the rest of the disciples had kept to their own business.

Isn’t it a lot like that today? We’re so concerned that the other guy is going to get more than us, or ahead of us, that we feel we’ve been treated unfairly. It’s during these times that we “stick our nose where it doesn’t belong.” That action usually gets us into trouble. Just think how much less trouble we’d have today if we’d all just do our own jobs and mind our own business! After all, each of us has more to contend with than we need already, so why insist on taking on everyone else’s problems too?

God has a work for each of us to do. Whether you realize it or not, God has a plan for your life. Many of us, however, are so caught up in what everyone else is doing, if we aren’t careful, we’ll miss His plan for ourselves. Don’t miss out on God’s perfect plan for you ... seek Him about it. Chances are, you already know what it is in your heart. Act on God’s plan for your life, and let’s all have shorter noses.

August 29

“Some Good News” By Debbie Ousley

I believe when you hear good news you should be willing to share it as quickly, or even faster, than we do bad news. So, this week I am sharing some good news that I heard recently.

Psalm 2

“Finding Refuge in a World of War”

To find refuge in a world of war I must know the truth. These truths I must see: Verses 1-3 we live in a rebellious world. *“Let us tear the fetters apart and cast away their cords from us.”* There is a referring to the Lord and His anointed sayings.

The second truth I must see is that the Lord is a Sovereign LORD (verses 4-5). God used nations to judge nations. Verse 4 tells us that He who sits in the Heavens will laugh at those who believe all their strategies and planning can affect the outcome of His appointed plan.

The third truth that I must see is that God is a victorious King (verses 6-9). Verse 7 tells me that God decreed the Lord uses His Son, and today had begotten Him. He would give the nations to Him as an inheritance. In Psalm 29:11 it tells us that He will give strength to His people and bless His people with peace.

So, what must I do to find refuge in a world of war? Verse 11 – Worship the Lord with reverence and rejoice with trembling. I must worship or serve God with respect knowing He, like verse 4 tells us, knows the outcome already.

I must kiss, or surrender, to Him (verse 12). I must have an honest and transparent relationship daily with Him knowing and loving Him because of, not what my pastor or anyone else has told me. I must claim my blessing (verse 12) and trust Him.

We, as Christians, cannot look at this war through the eyes of the media or the government, but we must look at it through the eyes of God, His word, how He has proven

Himself in the past and His promises. We will be no good to those who are fearful or even angry if we don't take our instructions from a Sovereign and victorious Lord.

Our refuge is and never has been in the government. It bothers me when events take place and the first thing that happens is that we are called to patriotism and not prayer. And please don't misunderstand me. I am proud to be American, but I do not bleed red, white, and blue. Can we for a moment believe that God is going to teach this great nation of ours (and it's only great because He has blessed it to be) a few lessons in this war too?

Could it be that we have put our trust in something besides Him for way too long and He is calling us back to Him? Could it be that for us to find refuge in a world of war each individual must seek the truth for himself and not rely on anyone else?

My responsibility during this war time is to pray, not just a passing prayer, but take time to pray. Trust and seek peace for myself and also my fellow man, and support any way I can. I must encourage the children and those who need it.

Our refuge is not in the president, our mighty weaponry, or strategies but in the Lord God Almighty Who already knows the outcome of this war. He wants us to trust Him and have a fear, or reverence, for Him.

If all should fail you where is your refuge? God's desire is that we serve Him out of our love for Him, not out of fear. He is our refuge!

August 30

“A Blank Page” By Debbie Ousley

Anyone who has ever done any writing knows that a blank page can be a very scary sight and that, so many times, getting started is the hardest part. But once the old ball point pen connects with the thoughts, things really get going. I have been told that I don't know when to stop after that happens, so for me, getting started and stopping is hard. I admire individuals who can listen and then, when they speak what they know, it sums up all the “flap” others have put out (in a lot fewer words).

I love to hear stories told by those who are my elders; stories of their childhood and experiences of the “Good old days.” I love to hear little children tell stories and see their faces when they get excited or can't think of the perfect word that describes their feelings.

I don't like hearing a lot of details, for example, how many minutes, a lot of figures, or big words I don't understand. Sometimes, and I hope I'm not alone in this, I'd just like to hear the heart of the thing, you know?

Everyone has a story. No one I've ever met was a blank page. We are wonderfully and marvelously made by a God who knows we will all have a “story.” He wants us to live so that every page has Him included on it somewhere, preferably not after “the end” but somewhere at the top, next to the title.

I love to hear people's stories as long as there's not a lot of whining. I realize that we've all got a few pages reserved for “pity parties” and we probably deserve one or two. That too is a part of our “story.”

I really like “comeback” stories, especially when the Lord gets credit for them. The small amount we can read about Jesus' “story” in the Bible seems so little compared to His thirty-three years of life on this Earth, but what a story! Can you see yourself in some of Jesus' “story?”

It's amazing how certain situations, actions and attitudes of Jesus appeal to certain individuals more than others. For example, those individuals who have mercy, mercy, and

more mercy for people love it when Jesus shows mercy. Teachers love it when He teaches, givers can relate when He gives. Myself, I like it when He gives attitude to the religious leaders. It was no wonder they wanted to silence Him. They were the ones He went toe to toe with, mostly because of their stiff necks and pious religious hearts and self-serving motives.

Jesus: The greatest come-back story ever!

A blank page can be scary to a person who can't think of a way to start, and filling the blank pages of our own life's story can be scary, but not so much when we accept and respect others and know our Author, the Lord of hosts, is also theirs if they include Him and His plan in their story.

August 31

“The Keys”

By Jerry D. Ousley

When I pulled my keychain out of my pocket the other day to adjust it (because it had knotted up and was pressing hard against my leg) I looked at all those keys and wondered, “Do I really need all of these?” So, I began to go through them. There’s the garage key, the riding mower key, the house key, the key to our safe box, the key to the locking gas cap, three different keys for doors at work, the key to my car and the key to the van my wife drives. Then there were a few keys I couldn’t for the life of me remember what they went to.

I thought about those keys for a while and wondered when I had last used them. I couldn’t remember. So, I decided that since I didn’t know what lock they would open that I would just put them in the bottom of the drawer where my underclothes were kept. That seemed to be a great idea. So, I headed for the bedroom with my keychain in hand intending to remove those keys from the ring and put them in the drawer.

But when I opened the drawer and dug down to the bottom, I discovered a whole pile of keys that had placed there over the years (most likely from a scenario very much like this one). I didn’t know what all those keys went to either. Worst yet, I had forgotten that they were there. I sure hadn’t needed those keys! Maybe I didn’t need these either. Well, there was no use in putting them in the drawer too so I wound up just putting the bulky key ring back into my pocket. I don’t know what they are for but someday I may figure it out and when I do, I’ll have them ready.

The Bible talks about keys too. Listen to the words of Revelation 1:18: *“I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.”* Here’s another one: *“And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* (Matthew 16:19). Both of these instances are the words of Jesus Christ regarding keys.

First of all, He said that He had the keys of Hades (many times we call this place Hell) and death. He can open and close the doors to both of these places. We often think of Hades as being under the control of the devil but in reality, the devil is not there and doesn’t want to

go there. But he will. Just read the last couple of chapters of the Bible. It tells us that he will. Jesus has those keys. I think it makes a lot of sense to be friends with and serve the guy who holds those keys. Serving Him will ensure that the right doors are opened for us.

In the second verse He tells us that He has the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and that He will give them to us. What was that? Yep, He will entrust you and me with the very important keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. There's a lot of power in holding a key. It means that the door that is locked can be opened. Now we could talk about the words of Jesus when He said that whatever we bind in Heaven will be bound up and whatever we loose on earth will be loosed in Heaven but that is subject matter for another time. Right now, I want you to think about those keys. You see we'd like to put the responsibility of where we'll spend eternity back on the Lord. But the Lord has put that responsibility squarely into our hands. If He has given us the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven then we can choose to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But if we choose to put those keys in the bottom of our underwear drawer then we might as well stand in front of the door of Hell and Death and wait for the Lord to unlock it for us. But we don't have to do that. All we've got to do is go to the Lord in prayer, ask His forgiveness for our sin, and that my friends, is the key to the Kingdom of Heaven. The door unlocks and we can enter in insuring us of an eternal home in God's Kingdom. The responsibility is ours. We decide where we are going to spend eternity. All we've got to do is to use those keys.

September 1

“Weekends” By Jerry D. Ousley

I've just got one thing to say about them ... THANK GOD!

Don't get me wrong, I do have a pretty good job, most of the time. And I am thankful for the provision it makes for our family, but after five days (and I know some of you work six), I'm ready for a couple of days of "R & R."

What happens, however, is that we usually cram as much as we can get into a weekend and it seems that we just got up on Saturday and already it's time to get ready to return to work on Monday. I know that there are twenty-four hours in each Saturday and Sunday, just like on Monday through Friday, but it flies, doesn't it?

Weekends are the days we try to get some chores finished around home that we've been putting off, go shopping, try to visit a little, get together with family, go to church, and in between try to get some rest.

We all need rest. Despite the fact that many of us go at it like we are super men and women, we aren't. God set the example for us in Genesis by creating the heavens and the earth in six days, then resting on the seventh. We all need at least one day to do nothing but rest and do those casual things that bring relaxation and recuperation to us. That's why we have weekends.

The next coming weekend, try to get some rest. Try not to schedule so many things into it that you have to get back to work to get some rest. God wants you to be healthy and alert and ready to go when He calls on you for service. We can do service for God, hold down a job and get things done at home too if we allow ourselves time to do it all.

I know it's hard. I'm as guilty as the next guy. But we must realize, what good are we to God or other people if we begrudge everything we do? I know what I'm talking about because I used to do that exact thing. I'm really trying hard to not do that anymore. Sometimes I succeed and sometimes I don't. I'm sure you can relate.

So, I'm going to stop now because I've got to leave some time to enjoy this wonderful weekend that God has given us. I hope you can too.

September 2

“The Last Foot Race”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I'll never forget my last foot race. I always thought I was pretty fast, but I learned, as so many have, that there is always someone else faster. It was a very nice summer day and my nephew had been practicing for the cross-country team. I always admired those guys because right at the tail end of summer and just before the school year began, you'd see them, often several in a group, running along the highways getting in shape for competition.

Anyway, as I said, my nephew had been putting in some practice time. On this particular Sunday afternoon, he had just been running up and down the lane where my parents lived. We had all gathered over for dinner. I watched as my nephew ran time after time up and down that lane and I figured he had to be getting exhausted. It was then that it popped into my mind to ask him to race me. I surely had the edge after he had made so many trips. I could show him that the master still had it in him.

So, I challenged him to a race. This would be interesting seeing an older guy run against a youngster. I had run against the boys many times when they were younger and they could never catch me. I'd show 'em. So, we lined up. I gazed over at his long legs. Funny, I didn't remember him being that tall. "Go!" shouted whoever it was that had been chosen to start the race, and with that I was off to what I felt was sure victory.

Did you ever see a dog run with his tail tucked between his legs after being defeated? Well, after just a few paces, that was me. My nephew, even though tired from making so many trips up and down the lane already, caught a second wind from somewhere and, even though I started out ahead of him, it was only a few paces before I was looking at his back as he passed, then pulled away from me. I never felt so old in all my life.

Of course he was down, back, and sitting on the porch catching his breath by the time I returned to the finish line. I still haven't lived that one down. That day, I had to face the reality that we lose speed with age.

It made me think though, about the race we run as a believer in Jesus Christ. Speaking of this very thing Paul wrote in Philippians 3:14, *"I press toward the goal for the prize of the*

upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” The only difference is who we are competing against. We are not competing against other Christians to see who can get there first, or who can win with the most honors. Our race is against the devil, the lusts of this world and against our very flesh.

Paul said that he “pressed” toward the mark. It didn’t matter who was in front or who was behind – Just getting to the finish line. All who make it there were equal winners of the prize we’re running for, which is eternal life in Jesus Christ, and all who run with patience and endurance pressing on regardless of pain, circumstances, or status, will win. On the other side of the finish line is the prize – The upward calling of God in Christ Jesus!

That upward calling is to son-ship. It is becoming joint-heirs with Jesus Christ Himself. It is winning the race against those enemies who would daunt us along the way to just give in, give up, and quit. Don’t do it. The prize is just ahead on the other side of the finish line. You can do it! You can run it! Don’t stop now. Feel that second wind kicking in. The Holy Spirit will help you.

We may lose some foot races here on Earth, against some teenagers in their prime, but in the race for life, hold to the promise of Christ. It doesn’t matter how old or how weary the journey may make you. Just press on toward the mark!

September 3

“What a Ride!” By Jerry D. Ousley

A few years ago, our family was at King’s Island. My son, who is a roller coaster freak, convinced me to ride the “Adventure Express.” “It’s a baby ride, Dad; come on you can do it!” Upon hearing the words “baby ride” I thought, “Well, maybe I could handle that.” And so, I agreed.

That was my first mistake. My second was when I was given one last chance to not ride it, but I was a man. I could take it. The ride jerked and jumped and bumped to such a degree that, well, let’s just say that when I got off, it was my last ride on the “Adventure Express.”

But I thought, “Man that is just like living the Christian life.” We have given a misconception. When I say “we” I’m referring to the church of today. In an effort to win people to Christ, we paint this picture that once you come to Christ everything is going to be “rosy.” Not so. As a matter of fact, in some cases our troubles are just beginning.

Now, I’m not trying to discourage people from becoming Christians. Being saved is still the most exciting and wonderful life a person could ever live. The truth of the matter is that God created us to serve Him and when we come to Him in obedience to His word, then we are just fulfilling the spiritual desire that is in each and every one of us. Whether we admit it or not, it does not alter that truth.

There can be persecution when we come to Christ. Those of us who are fortunate enough to be citizens of the United States, at this time, may only experience some discomfort from people. But in other parts of the world, coming to Christ means being cast out of their society, demeaned, imprisoned, and sometimes executed. So just because someone becomes a Christian doesn’t always mean that our days are going to go perfectly for the rest of our lives.

Part of this is because God chose to leave us in the flesh. Even though He has made a new creation inside of us, we are still housed in this body of flesh, and still subjected to fleshly desires. It becomes a battle to overcome the flesh. But even this is good for us because it teaches us to rely on God rather than our own instincts.

The other great thing is that, as we learn to depend on God and learn to trust Him, we become stronger in spiritual things. Let's face it, regardless how old or young we are when we come to Christ, we have spent our entire lives living by the flesh. That habit is hard to break. God knows this and that's exactly why He allows us to face those temptations and trials. He knows we are going to occasionally give in and sin. That's why He has given us the gift of grace, so that if we do sin, we can immediately ask for forgiveness and go on.

No other religion on the face of the earth teaches or allows this great and wonderful benefit. That's why being a Christian is not just a religion, but a way of life.

True, everything isn't going to go perfectly. Yes, we are going to stumble and fall occasionally. It's a fact that we may experience persecution, lose friends, and maybe have loved ones turn against us. But it is equally true that no other life affords the benefits of being a Christian. What other life promises that we can live forever? What other life offers peace even in the midst of tribulation? What other life can extend understanding and love from the One worshipped? Is there any better offer out there? I think not.

September 4

“The Race to the Finish” By Jerry D. Ousley

“Go!” And we were off and running. It was an unusually warm day in early June at Fort Dix in New Jersey. I was there for basic training. Because of the heat our drill sergeants decided to run some races and do a few exercises instead of the normal two mile run and full calisthenics. But, before we began the race, the drill sergeant barked “Whoever finishes last has to drop and give me twenty-five!” Now who in their right mind wants to do twenty-five pushups after running as hard as they can to win a race? Certainly not me! So, I had to do my best. I had one thing going against me though. I was twenty-eight years old, which is very young, except when you’re racing against eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds. I just had to win!

Almost as soon as the race began, I realized there was no way I was going to win, so I thought, “As long as I don’t finish last.” I was sure I wasn’t going to be last because I could hear the dog chain of at least one guy behind me, but it sounded like he was gaining on me, so I really poured the steam on.

There! I got across the finish line, dripping in sweat but knowing that at least I didn’t have to fall down and do those twenty-five pushups! I was just starting to feel sorry for the poor guy behind me when the sergeant yelled “Get down and give me twenty-five Ousley!” I was amazed and started to come to my defense. The nerve of this sergeant anyway! I turned to point to the guy behind me, and as I did, something rubbed against my back. In utter embarrassment, I realized that my own dog tags had worked their way around my neck. I was racing against myself! And I lost big time!

Since then, I have found myself racing against myself many times, only not in a foot race but in the race of life. I find myself pushing and shoving to do it all just like I can pull my shirt apart and reveal a big “S” or something. What I usually accomplish is to get myself frustrated and begin snapping at my family as if it’s their fault. During these times (usually after I’ve made an idiot out of myself), I have to stop and take inventory and pull “me” back into control.

We all are running a race. It's the human race. I'm not speaking of nationality or skin color but the race against life. The Bible says "*Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize?*" (1Corinthians 9:24). What this verse is talking about is not a race against each other, but a race against life and the devil. We don't have to worry about beating each other, but beating this world. Don't get caught in life with trailing dog tags, but make things right with God. He's the only way to win this race.

September 5

“A Fine Line” By Debbie Ousley

In this area a lot of individuals pride themselves at being good “horse traders,” which, most of the time, doesn’t have anything to do with horses. My question to you is, “Where is the line between ‘horse trader’ and ‘horse thief?’” When we are selling an item is it good “horse trading” to withhold a flaw concerning that item, or have we crossed over into “horse thievery?”

When we find someone in a hard place for money and they are forced to sell their prized possessions, is it good “horse trading” to give them a fraction of the value of that item or, once again, are we really taking instead of buying? Those who need to ask themselves these questions with a pure and honest heart are Christians. What witness will our dealings leave?

My Dad, who trusted very few people, once bought an old van from a preacher who has since passed away. He bought the van with little inspection, which was very much out of character for him. The preacher sold him the van with high reviews concerning its dependability and worth but, guess what? It turned out to be a pile of junk.

My Dad was not a “church-goer” and I believe it was because it was from whom he had bought the van, was the reason he was “taken.” “Horse trader” or “horse thief?” He had trusted the man. He was angry, but he was also disappointed.

I am thankful all men and women of God are not like this preacher, because his actions left an impression that did not reflect the integrity of God.

Proverbs 11:1 says, *“A false balance is abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is His delight.”*

September 6

“A Trip to the Cave” By Debbie Ousley

From the time mankind broke true fellowship with God in the Garden until the present, we are all trying to get back to the place where we can hear from God. If you would indulge me for a moment, I'd like to share with you how I believe the Lord sees us at times. Prayer 101, 102, 103, and we're up and gone.

To hear from God either by reading His word, feeling His presence as we pray, or seeing Him in this beautiful world we live in, we must be still. Believe it or not, the Lord is not on our time table. It's my belief that situations change in our lives when we truly acknowledge Him. I mean really acknowledge Him.

1 Kings 18 tells us that Elijah had been used in a mighty way to prove that God is a God to be reckoned with. Then, in Chapter 19, as Elijah ran from the scene because he felt threatened by Jezebel, he found himself in a cave. But God came on the scene – not with a great wind, nor an earthquake, or a fire, but in a small, still voice. Hearing God's voice dispelled the pity Elijah was feeling. Hearing God's voice brought Elijah from hopelessness to happiness.

How long has it been since you've been to the cave? How long since you were still enough to hear a whisper? Psalm 46:10 says, *“Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.”* We must do our part first and that is to be still and acknowledge God.

As I pray for individuals these days, I pray that they will see the Lord as their Savior, Healer, Deliverer, and their resource for whatever need they have. We must acknowledge Him for ourselves before things start to change.

September 7

“Hard Labor” By Jerry D. Ousley

This is Labor Day weekend. Most of us get three days off (and we are very grateful, I might add). When we think of “labor” we think of a variety of things. Mothers probably think of what it was like to give birth. I’ll never forget the birth of our “firstborn.” He is now twenty-four years old, but that night is vivid in my mind. I thought my wife had lost hers. However, I had no idea what she was going through right then. Here lay this wonderful woman; the love of my life, but now a look of sheer and utter anger was on her face. Many things were said that night, one of which was, “This is all your fault!” Of course, I was thoroughly confused, and didn’t understand. I do now more than I did then. It is such pain and agony that giving birth is truly a “labor of love.”

Others, when they think of labor, think of their jobs. Some jobs are hard manual labor and some are labor of the mind. Most jobs fall somewhere in between these.

Still others may think of all the work that has to be done around the house. I don’t think I have to tell you how much “labor” that can be.

For mankind, labor began the day that Adam yielded to Eve by doing what he really had wanted to do all along, and took a bite of that forbidden fruit. Because of their sin, God was forced to keep His word and had to put curses on man, woman, the Earth, and the serpent. One of the curses put on man was that he would spend the rest of his days earning his living by the sweat of his brow. In other words, he was sentenced to life at hard labor.

We have spent all these centuries inventing ways to make that labor easier, and really, we have been quite successful at it. We don’t work nearly as hard physically as we once did. For instance, just a few years ago this article would have been typed on a typewriter. Trying to get that right without making mistakes was indeed a tough job. But now, I just type it up on my computer screen and when I’m done, I click on the menu to tell the program to correct my spelling, and, “poof!” It looks like I know what I’m doing.

But even though we have done quite a good job at coming up with ideas and inventions to get us out of work, overall, because of the mental strains, we still put just as much exertion

on our bodies if not more. All of our inventions eventually wear out or break and need to be fixed which can be very frustrating and expensive. Because of the extra time we have made with our conveniences, we have to fill that time up with something and we usually make even more to do for ourselves. So, the curse still stands.

There is one more topic of labor I'd like to mention. That is the labor of Christ. While hanging on the cross for six hours, He experienced in that short time, what all the labor in the world felt like. He was giving birth – Not to a child but to a Church. He was making the way for all who will come to be freed from the curse of death.

He experienced the labor of death. All the excruciating pain, the thirst, and the feeling of life bleeding from His body, He felt during those six hours. I can't even imagine any labor being as hard as what He had during that "six-hour" shift. But because He went through it, He paved the way for each of us to gain victory by coming to Him. Yes, our day will most likely come when we will have to face death, in our appointed time. But with Christ on our side, no matter what takes us out, we can have the final victory over it. We have this victory because death for the Christian may involve physical pain, but the hopelessness of eternal life is gone forever. We have a great hope in Christ. Our bodies may die, but the real "us" will live forever. And all we have to do to have this hope is to allow Jesus to become our Lord, Master, and Savior by just accepting Him, repenting of our sin and disobedience, and then believing on Him.

This Labor Day, whether you are using it to catch up on "labor" at home, or whether you're taking a break from it and having a cookout, take time to reflect on the "Labor of Christ." Make sure you have accepted His "Labor of Love" into your life. You won't regret that labor and the pay is phenomenal!

September 8

“White Birch” By Jerry D. Ousley

When we were pastors, we leased a building to accommodate our growing crowd. The problem with this building was that it had several steps to climb before going in to the main entrance so we decided that we needed to build a handicapped ramp before winter set in, and we figured we should stain it with a preserving treatment. A brother in our church suggested “golden maple.” It sounded very pretty, and so I set out for the hardware store to buy the beautiful stain that would put the finishing touch on our ramp.

However, when I got there, they didn’t mix such a color as “golden maple.” As a resourceful pastor, I decided to pick the color closest to it and so make a reasonable compromise. I found a color that looked to be similar to “golden maple” and asked the attendant to mix it for me.

But, right beside it was a color that just leaped out before my eyes. It was the most wonderful color I could imagine. It was “clear white birch.” I could just see in my mind how unusually beautiful our ramp would look in that color. So, as the attendant was leaving to get the components, he needed to mix the color, I took it upon myself to blurt out, “no, make that white birch!” There, I had done it. Because it was a mixed color it was un-returnable, and so, it was done. I just knew that everybody would thank me when they saw that wonderful color on our ramp.

The day came for the brother in the church to paint the ramp and as he did, he wondered because it just didn’t seem quite right. However, being the faithful church member he was, he went to his task and finished his job. All the while he wondered about the color, but it was what the pastor wanted and so he completed his work.

When my wife and I pulled up in front of the building for the first time after it had been painted, she gasped, “What is that!” - Or some such statement. I was beginning to sweat a little when I realized that my beautiful “brain-storm” had become a twisted nightmare. It just didn’t look like the sample I had seen. I don’t know if it was because it was applied to treated lumber or what the reason was but it was far from beautiful. Later on, my wife took it upon herself to put a second coat on and really, it did make a difference!

The situation reminded me of a common experience that has happened to all of us. How often have we had thoughts about God that seemed to be the right thing to do? Maybe it was a decision in life that we just knew would be the right thing, but it turned out to be sourer than buttermilk. It just didn't work out like we had imagined.

We have all made our life-bombs that have blown up in our faces. Yet, God put in place a plan to cover all of our sins, mistakes, and errors. It is called the plan of salvation. The blood of His Son, Jesus Christ, covers all our sin when we call out to Him, and repent. Thank God for the stain of Christ's blood that can cover any of our "brain-storms" that turn out bad. He is our covering, even when life looks like "white birch."

September 9

“The Talking Donkey” By Jerry D. Ousley

A *very* interesting story is told in Numbers 22. You’ve got to read it sometime. Basically, what happened was that Balak, king of the country of Moab, saw the Israelites approaching on their way to the land promised them by God. The king sent messengers to a prophet by the name of Balaam to try to persuade him to come and place a curse on the Israelites on his behalf. He offered many riches and a place of honor if he would do it.

Now, Balaam really wanted those things promised by the king and so, even though God had told him not to go, Balaam thought he had a loophole in God’s instructions. God had said he could go if the messengers from Balak insisted. So, the next morning, without any further coaxing from the messengers, Balaam rose up early and was ready to go.

As they began their journey, Balaam’s donkey was given a spiritual perception that Balaam didn’t possess. Three times the donkey swerved to save Balaam’s life from an angel standing in the road with a sword, the first time simply going off into the field at the side, the second, scraping Balaam’s foot against a wall, and the third, just sitting down in the middle of the road.

Balaam was extremely angry at his beast of burden and he beat her each time. After the third beating was when it happened. God allowed a miracle and the donkey was given the ability to talk! She asked him why he had beaten her on three different occasions when all she was trying to do was save his life. Then Balaam was able to see the angel standing in the way, sword drawn, ready to slay him.

The thing that strikes me the most about this situation was Balaam’s lack of perception when the donkey talked. I mean, come on here, I believe God can work any miracle He wants to, but it isn’t just every day that a donkey has something worthwhile to say, don’t you agree? Instead, Balaam proceeded to argue with his “ride.”

I’m convinced that his greed and stubbornness was what blinded him in the first place. All he could see at that time was himself in a luxurious palace with plenty to spend and servants ready to pamper him at his every bidding. He wasn’t seeing the real picture and had

it not been for his donkey having more spiritual insight than he had, he'd probably been dead by now.

We don't hear of too many "talking donkeys" these days, but we can sometimes find ourselves in the exact situation as Balaam if we aren't careful. We have this dream (fondly called "The American Dream") of being well off in a life of comfort. We've worked for it; we live in the richest country in the world, and we deserve it (don't we?).

Many of us find ourselves in one situation or another because of our stubbornness and blindness to reality. Some of us are facing the slayer called debt in our financial situation which is sometimes so delicately balanced, that the slightest puff of wind could send us toppling. Others are facing similar dilemmas because of relationships with people, marriages, friendships, and on and on it can go.

What we need to do is to get a hold of ourselves and realize that the problems, though perceived in the natural, are really spiritual. We need to take a quick spiritual inventory and put the checks and balances in place. We need to repent of any sin in our lives, renew ourselves with God and begin listening to those "talking donkeys" God sends our way to save us from our own sin.

You may not have an actual "talking donkey" (please, if anyone out there does, I'd sure like to see it!) but I'm certain there are other things that are happening that might be just as strange and unusual. Don't let it take a "talking donkey" to get your attention.

"He-haaaaaa."

September 10

“The Maze” By Jerry D. Ousley

Although there were many hardships in the United States Army there were also some very interesting experiences. My challenge to “Be all that you can be” took form as a Chaplain’s Assistant. It was a more relaxed assignment than one might think, being stationed in our Nation’s capital, Washington DC. But it also had its challenges.

Working in a chapel office entailed many duties including typing, cleaning up after services and a host of other things. It isn’t as glorious as it might sound because chaplains can be pretty demanding people. You may think of them as being kind, loving, gentle, and patient, but you find out just how human they are when you work directly for them.

One day I was instructed to take the chapel sedan and deliver some papers to a certain place in the Pentagon. I was both nervous and excited thinking about this historic but also very official building. I had never been there up to that time so I had no idea, except for the written instructions, of where I was going.

The Pentagon not only has five sides but also several different depths. I can tell you that once you enter the building you really want to know where you are and where you’re going because it all looks alike.

I always prided myself on my sense of direction and I was determined that I would mentally mark the exact path taken in and just do it in reverse coming out. That’s exactly what I did. I took my time and marked each turn, even counting the number of steps between turns. This was going to be a piece of cake!

I got to my destination, delivered the papers then upon dismissal began my journey out. I was completely confident that I would be out of there and back to the chapel in record time.

“Wait a minute; didn’t I pass that picture a while ago?” I began to get worried, but I kept going. “Well, I don’t remember that table at all.” I had to face it; I had made all the right turns in reverse but I definitely wasn’t going out the way I came in.

Then I remembered that this was one of the highest security buildings in the city of Washington, DC. I couldn't act suspicious or I might find myself surrounded by guards. That would not help my time in getting back to the chapel. It also wouldn't help my already bruised ego. They had to be going behind me and moving the furniture around after I had gone in. I knew that I had returned the same way I went in. As a matter of fact, to this day I still think that I did.

I kept walking until I came to a door that led outside. I thought that my chances of figuring out where I was would be much better on the outside than the inside, and so I made my exit. At least walking on the outside of the building would eventually get me on the side where the parking lot was. There were only five sides so I had to get there soon. When I came out, I was looking at a helicopter sitting on the launch pad. As it turned out I only had to walk around two sides before I got to the parking lot. I still don't know how I had managed to go the wrong way, but apparently, I did. By this time, I was simply thankful to get out of there.

Even though we may not like to admit it, we all lose our way at times. We may think we know exactly where we are going but suddenly, we realize that we are in the wrong hallway, or going down a road and we have no idea where it is leading us. Life is like that. When our spiritual life takes those turns it's good to know that turning to Christ is always the right thing to do. Jesus said in John 14:6 that He was the way, the truth, and the life. When we get lost in life, He can show us the way. When we suddenly don't know the truth, He is the truth. And when we think we are in the jaws of death, He is the life.

September 11

“Wait and Trust”

By Jerry D. Ousley

We Americans don't like to wait and we often have a hard time with trust. We don't like to wait on our food. We have created a vast complex of fast foods. We invented drive-through windows so that we can pick up our food and never leave our cars. It's even become popular to have drive-through windows at drug stores and banks. We expect to drive up to that window and “get-er-done” nearly without even having to stop. We'd like to just roll on through.

The other day I stopped at a local fast-food place to pick up our supper. I was in a hurry and wanted to go through the drive-through, but when I arrived, I saw that the line at the window had more cars in it than were sitting in the parking lot. I guess there were others who had the same idea we had that day.

I found out that it was quicker to just park, get out of the car and go inside than it was to go through the drive-through. After I got my food and went back to the car, I noticed that some of the automobiles that were in line when I went in were still in line when I came out. It makes you wonder sometimes which way is the fastest doesn't it?

After seeing some of the news programs on TV it is becoming more difficult to trust people as well. They have depicted horror stories of what some restaurant workers do to people's food before it is served. We won't go into that today because, well, I'd just rather thank the Lord for my food and not think about the process it's gone through before I get it. You don't see those aspects of it advertised in those delectable commercials.

The Old Testament is full of examples of waiting on and trusting in God. Particularly with the kings of Judah and Israel, we see many instances where the leaders of their respective countries did wait and trust in God, and were rewarded for it, as well as those who didn't wait and trust in God, and suffered for it.

King Asa was one of them. He stands out because he did both. You'd think that after experiencing the blessing of waiting on and trusting in God, he'd do it over and over again. But he didn't. We read first of how Judah was faced with a million-man army from Ethiopia. Asa

sought God about it, waited for His answer and trusted in that answer and consequently won an historic battle. It was miraculous.

But several years later he was confronted by their sister nation of Israel. They had a much smaller army. I can't imagine what was going through his mind. You'd think he'd remember the great victory God had given him against the Ethiopians. Instead, he called on, and paid the armies of Egypt and Syria to help him. It blew up in his face and he suffered greatly because of it. Israel defeated Judah and they had to give up all their riches because of it. We're quick to criticize but often we are guilty of the same thing.

There is great benefit to waiting on God and trusting in Him. In Isaiah 30:18 we read, "*Blessed are all those who wait for Him.*" The chapter goes on to list some of the ways we are blessed. Verse 19 says, "*You shall weep no more.*" Verse 21 says, "*Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it.'*" This indicates that we'll be given Divine guidance. And verse 29 tells us that we will have a song, telling us that we will find happiness. Good things come to those who wait and trust in God. It isn't always easy. If it were, King Asa would never have put his trust in man. We're tempted to do it ourselves and in our own way. But as hard as waiting can be, wait on God. Don't move without His answer. When He gives it then trust Him. He won't let you down and, in the end, things will turn out alright.

September 12

“The Wonderful World of Computers” By Jerry D. Ousley

If you know me very well, you also know that when you talk with me very long, the discussion will eventually wind up being something about computers. I suppose I am a true “computer nerd.” Ever since I got my very first Texas Instruments “TI99/4A” I was bitten by the bug and think, eat, and sleep computers.

I love tinkering with them. I’ve built them from scratch, installed new hardware, and loaded and learned a lot of software. If you cut me very deep, you’ll probably find circuitry.

Computers have opened up the world of communications, entertainment and business. Information becomes instant. It is all so very amazing to me, and they have certainly come a long way in the last few years.

I guess that the problem with computers is that people become so dependent on them that when they fail, we become helpless. Look at the Y2K scare we just went through a few years ago.

My wife and I reserved a motel room once and when we arrived, we found that the room just wasn’t what we really wanted. We went to the clerk on duty that evening to see if we could switch rooms. He did verify that other rooms were available. But when he began to look through the computer, he found that he didn’t have the access to switch the room. Because he couldn’t get into the computer to do it, he was helpless. Now stop and think about it, all he had to do was switch the room (it didn’t cost anymore than the one we had), make a note of it and the next morning when the manager came in, just have him or her make the transaction in the computer; sounds simple enough. But because he was helpless to do it himself in the computer, no matter what we did or said made any difference. We were stuck.

We tend to forget that the computer is not a human being. It is merely a very sophisticated machine that, at least to date requires some kind of operator to give it instructions. We are not (at least for now) controlled by it unless we let it control us. We forget that sometimes. As much as I like computers, they don’t have much common sense.

I suppose people are like that, aren't we? We tend to let schedules, circumstances, emotions, and all those other things control our lives, while we just follow along. If things get out of "kilter" or a bit of flexibility is required, we sometimes go all to pieces.

The devil would like for us to believe that about our souls as well. He would like to make us think that we have no control over what makes us do the things we do. That's one reason why crime is so often blamed on someone else or something else. People aren't willing to take the blame for their action. But we must face the fact that the devil can only make us do what we allow him to make us do. Especially as Christians, we have the final say. We aren't machines that look at zeros and ones and just follows instructions, but we are a creation of God, given a free will to make a choice between good and evil.

We must "program" our minds to do good. The natural default is choosing evil. But we can choose the good. It first takes making a commitment to God through Jesus Christ. So, what are your "memory banks" telling you to do today? Are you going to keep on bogging down your "hard drive" with things that will just slow you down and make you "lockup?" Or are you going to "purge" yourself with the blood of Christ and run freely in Him? We are at the "keyboard" of life, and what is "input" is up to us. Search for that good "data" and "download" all you can ...

September 13

“What Are You Having for Lunch?” By Jerry D. Ousley

I read a story some time ago about three men who were high-rise construction workers. At 12:00 Noon each day these men sat on the edge of the twentieth story of the building they were working on and ate their lunch together. One man was from Ireland, the second from Mexico, and the third was a blond American.

As each opened his lunch bucket they began to talk. The Irishman said, “Corned-beef and cabbage again! If I get this for my lunch one more time I’m going to jump from this building and take my life!”

Then the Mexican gentleman opened his lunch. He said, “Tacos again! If I get tacos one more day, I’m going to follow you off this building!”

The blond American then opened his lunch and said, “A bologna sandwich again! If I get this one more time, well I’m with you fellows!”

The next day at lunchtime the same three sat down and sure enough, the Irishman had Corned-beef and cabbage, so off the building he went. The Mexican opened his lunch, and there they were: tacos again, so he followed the Irishman, jumping to his death. The blond American opened his lunch and as usual, he had a bologna sandwich. So, true to his word, he jumped too.

A few days later at the funerals of these men, their wives were talking and consoling each other and the wife of the Irishman said, “If I’d only known he was so tired of corned-beef and cabbage I’d never have fixed it for him again.” Likewise, the Mexican wife said, “Had I only known he was so tired of tacos, I’d have fixed an enchilada or something.” The blond American’s wife saw that the other two wives were waiting for her to respond, and she said, “Well don’t look at me! He fixed his own lunch!”

We are all a lot like that blond American. When it comes to our souls, “we fix our own lunch.” We are responsible for where we will spend eternity. Most people want to place that

responsibility on God, but God, through His Son, Jesus Christ, made the way for us to make the choice.

He paid the price and penalty for our sin. All we have to do to be forgiven and prepare for Heaven is to accept that free gift of grace. We ask Him to forgive us, allow Him to cleanse us, and then we begin to live for Him. When we do, then He "saves us" from our sin.

But the choice is ours. Are we like the blond American who wasn't willing to accept the blame for his own laziness? Or are we going to accept the responsibility for our souls? We decide where we are going to spend eternity, whether Heaven or Hell. The choice is ours. Romans 6:23 says, *"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."*

So, what are you having for lunch?

September 14

“Turning Fifty” By Jerry D. Ousley

A few years ago, I turned fifty. This potentially traumatic experience is not quite as bad for men as it may be for women, but it does impose some questions in our already extremely occupied minds. For most of us it means that we have lived better than half our lives. Most people refer to turning fifty as officially being over the hill. I tell people, “I’m not over the hill, just sticking my head up to have a look around at the other side.”

It can be distressing to many men however. My wife told me that when her dad was around that age that he sort of “wacked-out” for a year or two, letting his hair grow longer and just doing unusual things. I think many men think about all the dreams and plans they had made that haven’t been fulfilled yet and they wonder where the time is all going. They have an over-compensation for that and so they seem to get a little “strange” for awhile. It’s like putting on your first size forty pair of pants after you’ve squeezed into a thirty-eight for ten years. You feel guilty because of your larger waist line but the extra room feels so good and you get confused between the two opposing emotions.

Turning fifty can be very difficult. We are now just a few years away from retirement and that’s scary. We’ve dreamed about it all our lives, made plans, saved money in anticipation of it, but then it seemed a lifetime away – now it’s knocking at our door. Fifteen to twenty years sounded like an eternity when we were twenty-five, but at fifty we look back at how quickly the time has passed and it seems only a blink away.

Most of us aren’t as energetic as we were at say, thirty-five. Over the last fifteen years we just kind of ignored the increasing aches and pains and passed them off. But now they seem to be closing in. Why is that? And what is the thing about hair now? We used to have hairy chests, thick hair on our heads and maybe even a wonderful beard or mustache on our faces. Now we are thinning on top, have hair on our stomachs, our backs, and our ears. Where did all that come from?

In our minds we still feel that little boy peeking out ever-so-often. It’s hard to imagine being the strong man we thought our fathers were, yet here we are! We are now the ones

looked up to as “grandpa” and the family leaders. We’re supposed to have all this wisdom from living a long life but inside it doesn’t feel that way.

There are good things about it too. I’ve found that most people (except for my wife – she’s wise to the scheme) are willing to accept forgetful errors and doing stupid things when you say, “Hey I’m fifty now, what do you expect?” It’s almost fun to see what you can get away with just because you’ve turned “fifty.”

In reality getting older does come with greater responsibility. People do look to us for guidance, decisions, and knowledge. But we don’t have to be “old sticks in the mud” either. After fifty we need to look even more seriously to God in prayer, for wisdom, and to know how we will lead by example. This nation needs more men over fifty who can demonstrate the moral standards that are needed in this country. Are we ready to take that place? Are we determined to let the next generation see that we can be strong for Christ? If you’re with me raise a liver-spotted hand in the air!

September 15

“Going Home” By Debbie Ousley

The other day, at work, this young man and I were hoping not to work overtime and I stated that I would like to go home. His response kinda shocked me as he said that he really didn't want to go home, he just wanted off work. He went on to say that he didn't like his home and stated why. If I had to go home to the same situation he did, I wouldn't want to go there either.

It's sad, to me, that individual's homes can't be a place of refuge. Mine is. I'd rather be home as anywhere. It's a place I can relax and find peace in a world that's not peaceful. But my house (four walls and a roof) is not my home, just like the church building is not God's Church. Our homes are made up of those in that house (four walls and a roof). It's the kind of atmosphere we insist on dwelling there. If we, or any family member, bring confusion and conflict to our home it is what everyone in those four walls and a roof must live with. That's our home.

Jeremy and his wife came in for the long weekend and it was a compliment when they really just wanted to stay home. Megan is off in France somewhere (at this writing) with her classmates and it would hurt me if she didn't want to come home.

There's an old saying that states, "Home is where the heart is" and I'm hoping that no matter where my family may be that their hope is to get back home where they remember peace, love and the presence of a living Lord.

As we survey the damage to the houses that the recent storms caused, I know it will be those individuals who live in those houses that will maintain their homes. They will be the ones who bind together and they will be thankful that their loved ones are safe, because their being together is what really makes a home.

September 16

“Daily Allowance” By Debbie Ousley

2 Kings 25:27-30

In this story we find that King Jehoiachin had been in prison for many years, but as Evil-Merodach came into power he showed favor toward Jehoiachin. He not only released him from prison but Jehoiachin was a guest at the king’s table for the remainder of his life. Verse thirty says that Jehoiachin’s allowance was continually by the king everyday a portion for the rest of his life.

As I read this story, I realized that King Jehoiachin represents me and you – in prison, bondage of sin, King Evil-Merodach’s act of kindness represents Jesus’ act of mercy. The daily allowance represents His continual grace and His presence in our lives by the Holy Spirit.

So many times, we don’t draw on His love and power day by day. We live too much in the “tomorrows.”

We see in Exodus 16 how God sent manna to the children of Israel daily except the sixth day when they would gather twice as much because of the day of rest. But what happened to the manna when they gathered more than they were supposed to? It rotted!

Could it be that when we look so far ahead, we allow blessings that God gives us and opportunities to be a blessing not because we are not drawing on His DAILY allowance, acknowledging Him in our lives for that day? Matthew 6:34 tells us not to be anxious about tomorrow for tomorrow will have worries and anxieties of its own, sufficient for each day is its own trouble. Boy, can we all relate to that?

*“Change not thyself with the weight of a year,
“Child of the Master, faithful and Dear,
“Choose not the cross for the coming week,
“For this is more than He bids thee seek.
“Bend not thine arms for tomorrows load,
“Thou mayest leave that to thy gracious God.*

*“Daily, only, ’ He says to thee,
“Take up thy cross and follow me.”
(Author Unknown)*

Like Jehoiachin’s daily allowance, we have a grace sufficient for this day.

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September 17

“Tests”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Life is full of tests. I suppose tests are necessary to gage our level of knowledge and skill about a subject or task in life. But that doesn't make them any more pleasant.

I remember a couple of tests I took in school. One in particular was very interesting. The subject was Government and the teacher of this class was considered one of the strictest in the school. It was Christmas time and he decided to give a multiple-choice test. Only, instead of all the answers being one of a, b, c, or d, he used other letters. One answer could have been chosen from an array of l, m, n, or o, while the next array may have been e, f, g, and h. The first half of the day, if you got a 100% on the test, the answers spelled out “M E R R Y C H R I S T M A S S E N I O R S.” However, because people have a way of “spreading the word,” the second half of the day the answers were reversed so it spelled the same thing only backwards. I can't even remember how many people failed that test because they just wrote “Merry Christmas Seniors” instead of looking at the questions.

When I was in Bible College, I remember studying for a test in one of the hardest subjects that year. It was “The History of Christian Education” (To be honest, this class seemed a lot like Government with all the dates and stuff). I thought I had this test pinned down. As a matter of fact, many of the other students looked to me to help them study on this test. Only, I spent all the time looking at the answers to see if they got them right and wound up not having any time to study on my own or have someone else drill me. When actually taking the test, I realized that, although I had helped many others to get a good grade, I knew very few of the answers myself and I scored a “D” on the test. No one else could believe it because I had helped them study.

In both of these cases there was potential for failure. We have a lot of tests in life too. Some we pass with flying colors. Some seem so simple and the answers so obvious that they become “no-brainers” to us. Others are so difficult that we are set up for failure from the start (or so it may seem).

Tests by man may or may not be reliable measures of who we are. Man's definitions and God's definitions are, many times, opposite. For instance, man's test of success would be

measured in great sums of money, possessions, or fame. Man considers these people as successful. In other words, they passed the test.

On the other hand, God's measure for success is someone who is completely obedient to Him, regardless of wealth or poverty, fame or obscurity and so on. Just because a congregation is two thousand to ten thousand in size, even though marked as a tremendous success by man, does not constitute success to God. On the contrary, a successful congregation to God is measured in lives that are touched, changed, saved and obedient to His will regardless the size.

So, it is in life. The tests that face us ever day come to better others, and, as a result, better ourselves spiritually. God gives tests. There are several instances in the Bible that tell us that God tested someone. I want to finish by saying that when we are tested by God, He is not interested in seeing if we can pass or not. We serve a God who already knows everything about us. He knows before we are tested whether or not we will pass. But we don't. We can say what we think we'd do in a situation but we don't know for sure until we actually face that situation. But God does. When He tests us, it is for our benefit, not His. He is not trying to see if we measure up or not. He is merely allowing us to know where our successes lie, and what we need to work on. In that light, tests aren't so bad.

September 18

“The Measure” By Jerry D. Ousley

“*Cheeseburger* and fries . . . will that be all sir?”

“Yeah, I believe that’ll do it.”

“Thank you, sir, that’ll be \$3.52. Please pull around.”

As I went to the window to pay for lunch all I had was a ten. I handed the girl the ten, waited, and she gave me back more change than what I had given her. She had given me change for a twenty.

I had been low on money and my first temptation was to praise God for a financial blessing, but I knew that it was totally wrong. “Ma’am, I’m sorry, this is too much change. I only gave you ten.”

“Thank you, sir. There was a twenty laying here from the last customer and I wasn’t sure which bill you had given me.”

Now, this is not to make me look all righteous and holy for in myself I’m not. Remember, my first thought was to take this as a blessing instead of a test. So, even though I did the right thing, my first reaction was totally wrong.

Jesus said, *“Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you.”* (Luke 6:38). More often than not, in our present time, we “do unto others before they do unto us.”

However, if we really want to receive from God, then we must learn to first give. I’m not talking necessarily about money. When we use the word “give” in the Church these days, money is the first thing we think about. “What’s that preacher trying to get out of my wallet now?” Giving to God involves much more than money.

He wants us to give of ourselves, our time, our honesty, our support, our love, and, well, the list just goes on and on. We could sum it all up by saying that God wants us to give our best to Him. That’s kind of hard to do sometimes. We want to fluff it off and just give a little of ourselves. But God wants us all.

When we learn to give our all to God, then the Bible tells us that we will receive back, good measure, pressed down, and running over! Wow! I know many of us could use that!

But Jesus also went on to say that with the same measure we use, we will be given to. In other words, in the same proportion as what we give, we will receive. I can't give with a teaspoon and expect back from a shovel.

When we learn to give God's way, then we will all be better blessed people. That goes for our salvation experience as well. When we really love someone, we just can't seem to stop giving to them. And when we do that, we usually receive love back in the same proportion. It's the same with giving to God (which, by the way, is done more often than not, by giving to the needs of others). The more we give of our love, the more we will be loved.

Let's learn to give of ourselves to others God's way; whad'ya say?

September 19

“Whispers from the Rooftop”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I've never been good at reading lips or hearing whispers. If someone whispered something in my ear all I managed to hear was “shhhwspspsp.” I couldn't understand what was being said. And those moving lips from across the room ... well, by the time I'd make it over to the person to figure out what they were trying to tell me it would be old news.

Once in a youth group we tried an experiment. My wife started something in the ear of the person next to her and each one was to whisper it in the ear of the person next to them until it got all the way back around to the last person. What started out as “I wonder how this will turn out when it goes around,” turned into something like “I know how this will turn out when it hits the ground!”

I've gotten into more trouble trying to rely on what I heard whispered or what I tried to read from someone's lips. I'll get it wrong nearly every time. If you want me to know something private, you'd be better off to write it down, get it to me and make me promise to tear it up and swallow it rather than whisper it or lip it.

But there is a whisper that I'm pretty good at sometimes and that is the whisper of the Holy Spirit in my heart. I don't have to rely on my aging senses of hearing and sight to get that one. God will tell us things if we'll just listen to Him. The problem is that it is hard to get us still enough to hear His whisper.

When we do learn to hear what He is saying an entirely new world is opened to us. He will give us advice we never dreamed of receiving. He will clarify those things that are so mysterious to us. He will warn us when we are about to make the wrong decision about events in our lives. But we've got to learn to listen.

Jesus said in Matthew 10:27, *“Whatever I tell you in the dark, speak in the light; and what you hear in the ear, preach on the housetops.”* You see, most of the time what God speaks to us spiritually is worth telling others. He gives us advice that we'd pay thousands of dollars for from a counselor. Sometimes we need a good Christian counselor, but a good

Christian counselor will tell you to listen to God. There will come a time when we need to take that good, sound advice from the Lord and share it with others.

The Holy Spirit will reveal things to us about ourselves that will not only make us a better person, but when shared at His direction will be solid gold to people. What He tells us in the dark – the dimly light places in our lives, we are to tell in the light. That means that the good advice He has given us during the times of our trials and the bad times, will be worth sharing when things are better and we've got a bit of experience under our belts; we've learned our lesson. Then we can share them when our spirits are back in the light – we've conquered our situation.

What He tells us in secret we should one day be able to preach from the housetops for all to understand and benefit from. If God does it for an insignificant nobody like me, He'll certainly do it for you too. I've had a lot of dark times during which God has whispered to me. There have been a lot of times I needed His counsel in secret. So now it's time for me to get out the ladder and climb up on the roof. Care to join me?

September 20

“The Plan” By Jerry D. Ousley

I waded through the water like a runner in slow motion as I made my way over to the place my cousins and my brother and sister were playing. The sun warmed my bare back as drips of water trickled down my spine, but then a gentle breeze brought chill bumps as the cool water splashed across my chest.

Mom and Dad had taken us swimming on this unusually pleasant afternoon. They had invited my uncle and his family to tag along which just gave us more kids to play with. None of us really knew how to swim but we had a great time pretending that we did as we splashed each other and played tag near the edge.

It was a pond of sorts – really the remains of an old rock quarry that had long since been abandoned and allowed to fill with water. We had been warned not to go out too far in fear of falling off the edge of an underwater cliff that was located just a short way out in the pond.

Both our dads swam out in the deeper water as our mothers sat on the beach talking about whatever mothers talk about.

After a couple of hours my mother called out to Dad, “Let’s think about heading home, honey.” It always seemed that mothers were the first to spoil the fun. But then, men can be “grown up children” at times. They were having just about as much fun as the kids were. Mom continued, “It’ll be getting dark soon and if we don’t get home, we’ll be having a late dinner. I don’t look forward to doing dishes at midnight.”

With that dad and my uncle, began swimming out of the water and said to us, “Come on kids, let’s go,” as if it were their idea.

We followed with the usual grumbles and complaints. I don’t think children are ever ready to go when the time comes. As we came up from the water we were lost in the folds of towels and engaged in normal horseplay as our parents began packing up the lawn chairs and coolers.

The car was parked back up by the road and we had to walk a short distance down a path to get to the pond, and so we began the trek back up the path single file. Suddenly I had a terrific vision of an idea. Since I was at the end of the line waiting for everyone to get up the path, I had time for one more splash in the water. I remember some twinge of a sense inside of me that said, “No,” but, hey, that could have been what I knew Mom would have to say about it.

So, I shouted out, “I’m going to take one more quick jump in the water!” I heard some “No’s” echoing from the group and I’m not really sure who said it but I was pretty positive that Mom’s voice was in there somewhere, but it was too late because I had already gotten my feet wet. As the water sloshed around my feet, that funny “tingling” surged in my mind again and I could almost feel the little “prickles” on the back of my neck, but I was having too much fun to pay attention to it. I waded a short distance out into the water, then turned to start back when suddenly the surface under my feet disappeared. I was running but going down instead of back to the bank. As my head went under the water my arms were involuntarily flung aloft.

I tried to look around but my eyes no longer saw trees and sunshine. All I could see was a murky mass. I tried to breath but instead of a breath of air I felt this pressure against my chest and air bubbles went up in front of my face on their way to the surface.

My decision to go back into the water didn’t stun my family because they were used to eight-year-old pranks. Besides, what harm could be done if I got my feet a little wetter? Who was to know what was going to happen?

Just as I thought my life was all over, I was being pulled from the clutches of my watery coffin. I gasped several times and began coughing, but I was okay. My uncle, had been walking in front of me. I don’t know if he was watching me as I went back to the pond or if he heard me gasp when I went under. What I do know is that he pulled me out.

Was it fate, or was it more that drew him to rescue me from death? What was that strange tingling that I had felt running through my body, telling me “No?” Now I know what it was. It was none other than the Spirit of God warning me not to do it. And when I did, He got the attention of my uncle. God had a plan just as He does for each of us. Sometimes that plan means its time to go to Heaven, and sometimes it works as a warning to get our attention. I know that God had a hand in pulling me out of that pond.

Someday I’ll get into a situation where He won’t pull me out but will let me sink because it will be my time. But for now, I’ll be grateful that His timing and His plan is always the one most perfect.

September 21

“What’s to Come of This Generation?” By Jerry D. Ousley

“What’s with kids today?” I’ve said it and if I were a betting man, I’d say you have too. It can get very frustrating sometimes, can’t it? I mean, it just seems like they don’t care about anything, and don’t want to accept responsibility for their actions.

About a year or so ago, I was standing in line at the Dairy Queen. I thought I’d caught a lucky break because there was only one person at one line and the other two lines were completely open. I thought, “Wow! This will be quick, no line to stand in!” So, I stepped right up to that empty window and waited, and waited, and waited. There was only one young lady serving at the other window. By the time her customer was done, another had stepped into line and before long several were standing there. I didn’t want to appear foolish and surely someone would have told me “This window is closed.” In a moment, two young men came from the back. One began to help the young lady and the other, much to my surprise opened another window, leaving me standing, still waiting. Needless to say, my patience was wearing mighty thin by now. But when one of the young men just began staring at me, well that was the straw that broke the camel’s back and I stormed away making sure that they knew I was angry.

I made some kind of a remark about kids. But I realized that we are guilty, when we do this, of putting them all in a “box” so to speak. The truth of the matter is that most young people today are not like that and we have a tendency to categorize. Our parents did it too, didn’t they? What we really need to realize is that there are indeed problem kids today but there are also some very good kids out there.

Instead of throwing them all in a box and discarding them, we need to begin investing in our good kids. I don’t mean to give them a “free ride” when I use the term “invest” however. Investing in youth takes a lot more than money. It takes spending time with them to have fun, and includes instruction and guidance.

What’s this generation coming too? It really depends on us, doesn’t it? How we shape them will reveal the answer to where they’re going. In a way it’s really not up to them but it’s up to us. That kind of puts a whole new light on the topic, doesn’t it?

September 22

“The Danger of Standing in One Place Too Long” By Jerry D. Ousley

It was a very nice sun-shiny afternoon perfect for a ball game. A bunch of friends and I headed to the ball field for a good old-fashioned game of softball. I’ve never been that good at the game but I used to love to play it. I mean, how much better can it get being with a good group of guys out on a field in a little game of competition?

I was playing in the outfield which is where I usually played since I wasn’t that good at catching. Anyway, I guess I had drifted off into a nice relaxing daydream when all of a sudden, I heard someone shout, “Heads up Ousley! It’s coming your way!” It startled me. Not that many balls ever came my way and to be honest about it I was glad. Shaking my head for a moment in order to slip out of the daydream and back into reality I said something like, “Huh?” That fraction of a second was all that was needed. Had I been paying attention and watching the ball I might have been able to raise my mitt and make a spectacular catch without even running around trying to figure out if I was under the ball or not. But I didn’t. Instead about half a second after I had asked, “Huh” I felt a sharp thud on my head. I’m not sure who named the softball but let me tell you that it isn’t true to its name – when it comes out of the sky and thuds on your head it isn’t soft at all. That ball bounced off my head and hit the ground. With stars in my eyes, I managed to pick up the ball and throw it and hoped I’d thrown it in the right direction. It didn’t really matter because right about then I was struggling really hard to stand up. I guess I had stood in the same place too long.

Ephesians 6:13 tells us that after we’ve done everything in our power, to stand. It’s talking about standing firm on the truth of God. There’s nothing wrong in standing still in a case like that. But all too often Christians arrive at a place in their experience with the Lord where they seem to simply stop. While we need to stand still allowing the Lord to do His work in our lives we should never be satisfied to stand still in our Christian experience.

In Matthew 8 Jesus told the story of the sower. In Biblical times they planted seed by walking along with a big bag on their shoulders, grabbing a handful of seed and scattering it across the field. In this process some seed fell on stony ground and could not take root. Some fell on the path where the ground was hard and beaten down and the birds swooped down and ate it. Some seed fell in the weeds where it began to grow but soon the weeds and

thorns choked it out. But some fell on good ground, took root and grew to produce an abundant crop. Later in that chapter Jesus explained the meaning of the story.

If we are like the seed that falls on the path, in the weeds or on stony ground we may do well for a while but soon we've been in the wrong place too long and we will cease to grow. We've got to make sure we let the word of God be planted in the good soil of our hearts so that it will not only thrive and begin growing but never stop growing. I don't believe that we ever graduate from God's school just because we've been a Christian for a number of years. We never stop learning and growing in Jesus Christ.

I've often thought about the river Jordan. It originates from the mountains in the northern part of Israel. As it flows it meets other streams and soon turns into a large river with a bountiful crop of plant life and animal life along its banks. It flows through the Sea of Galilee abounding with fish and life. It flows out of the Sea of Galilee still going south. But in the southern part of Israel, it empties out into the Dead Sea also called the Salt Sea. That is one of the lowest points on the Earth. It goes no farther. The Dead Sea has very little life in it and is so salty that you can just lay down in it and float. It has many mineral deposits but very little life. That's because the water has stopped moving. It is a good example of our experience with Christ. As long as our relationship with the Lord keeps moving, we also yield life all around us. Our witness is strong drawing men and women to the gospel. But when we stop, we too begin to stagnate. Don't stand in one place too long and don't let your experience with Jesus Christ stop in a Dead Sea. Instead keep on moving, growing, and going in the Lord and your life will be an abundant life - I guarantee it.

September 23

“What a Small World ...”

By Jerry D. Ousley

We used to have a cat named “Fluffy.” Our daughter just had to have a pet of her own (after all, at that time, our son had several pets. At one time we had a dog, a cat, a hamster, two tanks of fish, and a hermit crab. What a zoo!). So, a lady from our church, who had many, many cats, donated a kitten to daughter. This kitten was not a gentle creature. The first two days we had her we kept her in the bathroom because she was terrified to be anywhere close to a human. We didn’t keep her outside because we were afraid that she’d run away.

We eventually made friends with this tiny feline tigress and she came to know and trust us (but never fully). Time passed. There seemed to be no need to let the cat outside and so she grew up thinking that our house was the entire world. A few times we did take her out and she was so terrified that all she could do was run back to the door. She wanted out. She would sit in the window and long to be outside, but when the opportunity came, she was just too scared. She became a literal “scardy-cat!”

Anyway, it made me think about what we do to ourselves at times. We lock ourselves up in our own little “worlds,” never venturing outside the walls we have built. It is safe behind our walls. Why should we ever venture out?

But the day will come and we will be terrified. How many of us are afraid to drive in the “big city” just because we are uncertain? I know I have been there before. But if we want to experience new things then we must overcome our fears and explore the unknown.

We do the same thing spiritually. We build walls – walls that keep us safe and secure. We can get to the point where we are afraid to hear new things from God’s word because it makes us feel uncomfortable. It can cause us to be afraid.

In reality it challenges us to move up a step closer to our God. You see, we may stop growing physically, but we never stop growing spiritually until we get to Heaven. Everyday marks a new time of growth. It is painful sometimes because it requires us to be critical of ourselves. It causes us to admit that we have been wrong and sometimes to even admit we

have been in sin. But it is also exciting and refreshing because, when we look at it with the right attitude, the change that God places upon us is always for our good. We become stronger, more stable and more spiritually mature.

Be willing to experience the newness of God's word. You won't regret it for a minute!

September 24

“My Little World” By Debbie Ousley

*I*t's so safe to live in our own little world whether it's any one of a number of close by towns, or wherever, and just believe that's all there is to this world. That's one of the reasons I love to travel because it brings me back to the reality of how many people live on this planet with ME. As human beings we have a tendency to regress back to our child-like belief that "it's all about us."

As I'm out in the world I have come to see a sobering truth and that is this: There are a great number of individuals who are needy. Not needy in material things like food, clothes, and housing, but emotionally and spiritually. I have seen also that a lot of people won't allow themselves to get close to other individuals because they are concerned that they might be expected to try and meet that need. I see individuals who need validation and encouragement and a voice that says to them, "You can make it." I have, many times in my life, come to a truth as I see Jesus and acknowledge Him as my refuge and strength each time. And that is that I will not allow circumstances, other individuals, actions, or my own tendency to depression, make me a victim. It is our own choice no matter what the situation, whether we become a victim or be victorious. The Lord has given us all the truth and ability we need even though it may be a process. Victory will come if we continue to believe and be a little stubborn.

As we "see" the needs in others we can testify with true convictions because we ourselves have experienced it, and everyone knows it means so much more to us when we've been there and survived.

Even though my mother had issues like all of us and was a little woman in stature, her life taught me something that has saved me from allowing myself to stay a victim. She was stubborn! It seemed that she was like a cat (though she disliked them a lot). She always landed on her feet.

With her heavy load she would, with time, return to her spunky self. When we were younger, I saw her dance when it seemed she had little to dance about. She would sing when all the circumstances said she should be crying. Even in her illness she ran four of us (grown adults) out of her house (and we went gladly!). She seemed to spit in the eye of adversities,

and in this time of stress and pressures this would be one of the most valuable lessons we could leave with our children.

Don't allow yourselves to be overwhelmed because when you do you have allowed your situation to be over you instead of you being over it. Be a little stubborn and be willing to make life-changing decisions as you pray for direction for your life and God's plan for your destiny. It's a big world. He made it and He wants you to be victorious.

September 25

“The Never-Ending Message” By Debbie Ousley

Acts 5:27-39

*G*amaliel, a Pharisee and teacher of the law who was highly esteemed by all the people, addressed the council. “Take care in regard to what you purpose to do concerning Peter and the Apostles.” He reminded them of Theudas who ASSERTED HIMSELF, but when he was killed his four hundred followers were scattered and brought to nothing.

And remember Judas, who led an uprising and drew away a popular following AFTER HIMSELF? He also died and all his adherents were scattered.

But about Peter’s and the Apostles’ message concerning Jesus he suggested they stand off from them. He continued to say that if this doctrine or purpose or understanding or movement be of human origin it will fail and come to nothing. He also advised them that if it was of God, they would not be able to stop, overthrow, or destroy it. He finally warned them that they might even find themselves fighting against God!

Enough said ...

September 26

“War”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Did you ever play the card game, “War?” Probably most of us have. It’s quite a simple game really. You just deal all the cards out; each player lays down the top card of the pile in his possession and the highest card wins. The winner gets to keep the other cards that were involved in the round and you just keep playing like that until one player has all the cards. However, when two players both have the same card as their high card in a round, that is war. You lay two cards face down and turn up the next. The higher of that round again, keeps all the cards. So, conceivably you could have all the aces and kings, and still lose when several “wars” occur.

That’s the same way to fight a war. However, in real life, a war is never really won. One side may be stronger and defeat the other side, but the loss of life and property really takes a toll that never fully experiences recovery. Someone will always hold a bitter grudge over the death and destruction. More often than not, the innocent pay the price. There are times that war cannot be avoided, but it is always a tragedy.

There is another war waging that has been going on since the beginning of mankind. I’m speaking of the war over the soul of man. You see even in our physical wars ultimately it is all about the same thing. Good versus evil; the bad against the good. It is all spiritual to a degree.

Again, it’s very simple. God, in His infinite love, wants us to come to Him in salvation and be freed from sin through Christ. The devil, on the other hand, has sealed his fate and can never hope for anything but punishment in Hell, and so wants to drag every creation of God down with him. It’s the classic battle over our souls. Ephesians 6:12 tells us that we really aren’t doing battle with those we can see, touch, and hear but with a realm of evil that cannot be distinguished naturally. It is a spiritual battle.

When we realize this and identify the real enemy, then we can begin to win some victories. Half the battle strategy is to know everything you can about the enemy; his weaknesses and strengths. We can know the devil’s weaknesses and strengths if we just

study the Bible. They are revealed there. But when we don't know, then we don't know how to fight.

You'd better believe that the devil knows our weaknesses and strengths. That's why he always attacks us where we are the weakest. He will never try to get you through your strengths because he knows he can't win. But if he can subtly get to your weaknesses without you knowing he's there, then he's got a chance.

How can we defeat such a powerful foe? In ourselves we can't. But in Christ we can. The Bible tells us that we who are called of the Lord can do all things through Christ who gives us strength (Philippians 4:13). The Bible tells us that we can resist the devil and he will run from us (James 4:7). It is also a strategic move to flee sometimes (1 Corinthians 6:18; 1 Corinthians 10:14; 1 Timothy 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22). When we face up to a temptation to which we are extremely weak, it's better to run than to be faced with yielding to the devil.

Yes, we are in a war for our very souls. It is one we can win, but only through and by the power of Christ Jesus. You can win. You can defeat your real enemy, the devil. Read the passages we mentioned. Believe them and gain strength. This war has been won already. We've just got to win in the battle skirmishes that arise until the official word has been declared. If you depend on Jesus, YOU WIN.

September 27

“What We Need, What We Want, and What We Get” By Jerry D. Ousley

We've got this month by the tail! Yes sir, things are going to be financially better beginning this month! Up until now we have been “living from pay check to pay check” and it sure isn't any fun. Last month we just over did it a little. One of the kids had to have some dental work, my brother and his family came to visit for a few days, we had two birthdays to buy for and with all of this along with our regular monthly obligations we just tried to do a little too much.

But this month will be different. Let me see now, we have the house payment to take care of; we've got to pay that. Oh yes, I can't forget the car payment! We've got to have transportation so that we can get to work in order to earn money for next month. And oh, there's the phone bill – Got to have the communication lines open. Then there's the Internet Access bill. Today email is essential. Then there are all the utility bills – got to have heat and light!

Let me see, we have to budget enough for groceries – got to eat you know! It would also be nice to go out a couple of times this month so we'll slip that into the budget too.

Cars won't run on air so we'll have to save enough to buy gasoline. After all, besides driving to work, we don't go out too much. We deserve a little extra “traveling money.”

Well, let's tally everything up here and see what we've got. Hmm ... Well, it looks like it might be another one of those months. We're going to be able to meet all of our obligations with a little extra but there won't be much.

We can be thankful though. There are a lot of people who aren't as fortunate as we are. Some in this world will lie down tonight in the streets, not having a decent meal in days. Thousands of people suffer from malnutrition and many die every day. There are people all over the world who don't have an adequate roof over their heads and their only transportation is the two feet furnished by the Almighty.

It's so easy in this fast-paced world we've made for ourselves, to push the needy out of our minds and forget about the less fortunate. Perhaps some of us are a little selfish and others simply turn our heads away from these needs. But that doesn't make them go away or solve their problems. Part of God's plan is for us to do what we can about these situations.

With these thoughts in mind, the words of the Bible become richer with meaning and a bit more acceptable when it tells us to be content with what we have (Philippians 4:11; Hebrews 13:5) and being satisfied with food and clothing (I Timothy 6:8).

How often are we unhappy when we don't have exactly what we "think" we need? What do we really need? We need food to live, clothes to wear, and shelter over our heads (and the Bible doesn't actually list shelter as a need). Anything more than that is luxury.

God has granted a lot of luxury to us in "The Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave." But we have grossly abused that, being more of a land of unsatisfied people. We get, and we want; we want and we get, but we are never filled up. It's time we stop and take inventory of what we have and ask ourselves if we really need it all. Can we get by with what we have? Can we get by with less?

I'm not saying that we should completely stop our way of life and retire to a monastery, but maybe we should ask ourselves if we are really doing our part to help those less fortunate than ourselves. Maybe we need to examine the words of the Apostle Paul again about being content in whatever state we are in. We don't have to stop our lives, never trying to better them, but we must learn to be content with what we have. The scripture vividly portrays this in the words of Jesus found in Matthew 6:26, 28-29 regarding the lilies of the field.

These are powerful words that make us wonder, and maybe feel a little ashamed. I know that for some of us times have been tough. But here we are! We've made it through another day, and some of those problems weren't as big as we thought they were. If we rely on God, and do our best, He has a way of making everything work out. I firmly believe that we have to try. We can't simply sit down with the attitude that "what will be, will be." But after we've done our part, God will "put the cherry on the sundae."

We'll try to make our money stretch farther next month. But, despite what comes, I have a feeling that things are going to work out all right.

September 28

“Will You Read Me A Book?” By Jerry D. Ousley

One hot summer evening our almost-three-year-old son, Jeremy, came prancing from his room, as he had done many times before, with a children’s book in hand. My wife and I were sitting in the living room, contemplating our day as the evening dwindled to a close.

“Mommy, will you read me a book?” He had already determined that she would.

I sat quietly and listened as she began. The book was a collection of short, four-to-five-line stories and was designed to teach children the alphabet. At the end of each story a picture identified each word that began with the letter under current study.

“Apple, arm, ant – what letter is this?” She asked. He missed it.

“Bat, boy ball ...” another miss.

As the menagerie of letters continued, my mind wandered from the story material to the sincere patience my wife exercised in her effort to hold the mind of our young son on learning his alphabet. When he missed a letter (and he missed most of them), she would devotedly repeat the words and then tell him the letter. Confidently he would repeat exactly what she said.

“Fox, foot, feather ...”

“F!” he proclaimed. Hey, he got one! They now moved on with more enthusiasm. Maybe he would get the next one too.

“Girl, game, grandfather ...” he missed again.

Still they moved unfalteringly along. Why was she so patient with him? It had to be that wonderful thing called “A Mother’s Love.” It was that caring, undying desire to provide the very best she could for her offspring.

His little eyes beamed with excitement. I suppose he was eagerly waiting for Mommy to finish the story so he could tell her what the next letter was.

“Man, Mary, moon ...” he didn’t get this one either. But it didn’t seem to discourage him at all. They simply continued after Mommy had given him the correct answer.

Children are like that. They seem to have a simple, yet enduring love for their parents and a trust that is uncanny. You punish them and they cry for awhile, and then come running back into your arms like nothing ever happened. We grownups can learn something from that.

“Snake, sun, scissors ...”

“Sssss ...” He got another one and his face was glowing brightly with a sense of self-fulfillment. This reminds me of our relationship with God. Regardless of how often we “miss” He patiently plunges on, endeavoring to teach us of Himself and His ways.

All too often we become bound and sometimes lost in our doctrines and dogmas. But if we will allow Him, He will patiently unwind the tangled mess and show us the right way. The longsuffering mother of a child is a good illustration of the relationship God wants to have with us. I suppose one could say that the parental relationship is a model of God’s great love for mankind. Undoubtedly, He must punish us at times. He realizes that sometimes the hard-learned lesson is one not so easily forgotten.

Since we are comparing God to the parent, it is only fitting that we compare ourselves to the child. In fact, the Bible tells us to become as a child (see Matthew 18:3). So maybe, while we are teaching them, we can take the time to learn from them as well. We need some lessons in humility, patience, endurance, and love.

“X-ray, xylophone, zebra ...” they finished. With a smile of satisfaction, he returned his book to his room. He had grown just a tiny bit, and had moved a little closer to knowing his alphabet.

We too should feel that satisfaction when, after a struggle in our quest for knowledge about our Creator, we finish another chapter. We have grown just a little and are progressively, steadily getting closer to that thing we strive for – A fulfilling fellowship with our Lord.

The little sandy-haired boy emerged again from his room, book in hand. “Daddy, will you read me a book?”

September 29

“What Page Was That On?” By Jerry D. Ousley

For years I played the guitar in church. For many of those years I was the only musician in the church “band” and so the congregation got used to just me and the guitar. My wife was leading the hymns that day and being just a little mischievous she set me up; she had gone around to the entire congregation and told them that when she announced the page and song that they were really going to go to another page and a different song.

“Let’s turn to page 405 and sing ‘Amazing Grace,’” she announced. Of course, I obediently turned there and hit the starting chord. I began to sing the announced song as she and the rest of the congregation began to sing a completely different song. Wow! What a shock! I was bum-fuzzled and began struggling to maintain. After all, sometimes I don’t hear so well.

When the congregation stopped singing and began laughing, I suspected a “snake in the wood pile.” Naturally, it was all in fun and when I was let in on the joke, I turned a little red, and began laughing at myself.

Life takes some funny twists and turns like that too, doesn’t it? How many times have we found ourselves in situations where things weren’t exactly as they seemed? Maybe it hasn’t happened as often to you, but I can tell you, God has sure used these types of situations to knock me back down to a humbler attitude more often than I’d like to admit.

All too often, these times are embarrassing and cause some of us to become angry and feel belittle. Sometimes they are much more serious than my situation and can cause us to go into depression. It can cause us to become so angry that we harbor un-forgiveness within ourselves.

Depression, anger, hatred, envy, un-forgiveness, worry ... and on and on the list goes, are all negative human emotions that can begin to decay and destroy us inside. These feelings can (and do) cause sickness and emotional disorder. In a “preacher’s” terms, they become the devil’s tools to destroy our relationship with God Himself.

It isn't wrong to get mad. As a matter of fact, the Bible tells us to be angry without sin (Ephesians 4:26). It also tells us not to let the sun go down on our wrath. In other words, if someone makes you mad, before you begin harboring all these negative emotions in your heart where they take seed and start to grow, come to a peaceable solution before the day is over. That way you can go to bed and sleep much better.

Now, I realize that in our society, this is a lot easier said than done. But we can make it happen if we really want to. Even if the other party refuses to come to peaceable terms, we can know that we have done all in our power to resolve the situation, and, at least "on our side of the fence" all is well. It's not the easiest thing to do, but I will guarantee you that after the first time or two, it will get easier.

To be a "peacemaker" as Jesus instructed us doesn't mean that we don't ever get mad. It just means that we admit when we are wrong, be quick to forgive when we aren't, and be willing to make peace as soon as possible. You'll be glad you did!

September 30

“When We Don’t Understand ...”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I don't understand. It is hard if not near impossible for our human minds to comprehend why God allows suffering, pain, and persecution to happen to His people. For instance, why did God allow the first Christians to be so persecuted tortured, and killed? You'd think that He would have showered those first Christians with such protection, joy, and happiness that they would never have a reason to doubt their experience. But He didn't.

I don't understand why God's people were allowed to be hunted and forced to go into hiding during the Middle Ages (and in some countries of the world, yet today). What possible good could come from that? But it happens just the same.

I don't understand why an elderly man or woman who has served God for many years would have to spend their twilight days struggling to decide whether they should buy groceries for the month or refill much needed medicine to keep down the pain. But it happens.

I don't understand why God would allow an innocent child to be physically or sexually abused (or both). What have they ever done to deserve that kind of treatment? Why make the innocent suffer? But everyday some child pays for the sins of a parent or a demonically influenced individual.

Men have spent lifetimes studying the word of God and the sciences trying to find the answers to such questions. Just when they think they have discovered an answer something new takes place that forces them to discard their research and begin all over again. I'm no theologian, but I have spent most of my life searching the scriptures, learning, and absorbing knowledge. I have discovered many truths in that time. But what I have discovered about the things I don't understand is that we may never understand because we reason with our finite minds while God acts in the infinite. How can the finite even hope to understand the infinite? We can't.

Things happen that make us angry and confused. We can't help those feelings because we are human. But God isn't. I want to say that God is not responsible for these bad things. He may not have stopped them from happening but that is only because He has given

a free will to each man, woman, boy and girl. He will not violate that free will because if He did then free will would cease to exist. Sometimes people use their free will to violate the rights of others. When this happens, you can be sure that the devil is behind it, even though the one he is influencing still has to yield to that influence.

I also want to say one other thing. Since God is infinite it means that He simultaneously exists in the past, present and future. He sees the ultimate good for each of us when we are blinded by what has been and what is. God doesn't cause the bad things and it isn't His will that they happen, but because of His infinite knowledge He always makes them work for our best – even the worst of things. We can rest in this knowledge and be assured that when the horrible and terrible are upon us or someone we know, God will use even those situations for the greater good, if not in this life, then in our eternal life to come. He is God!

October 1

“God’s Ways”
(Based on a true story)
By Jerry D. Ousley

As the morning sun pierced through the thin slits of the blinds covering the window, Charlie (a random named picked for this story), squinted his eyes as he turned his back as much as he could away from the source of light. But he could not fall back to sleep. His mind began to wander. He got up and stumbled to the bathroom to do his morning duty, and then fell back onto the bed. As sleep continued to flee, he reached for a bottle sitting on the nightstand beside his bed and knocked over the lamp in the process. Without giving a second thought he half-sat up in the bed, took the cap from the bottle of vodka and turned it up taking two or three large gulps. Coughing down the last mouthful he had taken, his thoughts continued running wildly.

It was Sunday morning and for some reason his mind took him on a journey of the past to a happier time. He was clean shaven and getting dressed to go to church. As he was putting the finishing touches on his tie his wife emerged through the door, “The kids are ready, honey, just let us know when it’s time to go.” They got in the car and drove off on the bright sunshiny day, singing as they went. What had happened to those days? It seemed like another life – another person ago.

He couldn’t even really remember what had happened. It was blurrier than looking through the clear spirits swirling in the bottle that once again found its way to his lips. If he continued as he had done for the last - he couldn’t remember how many Sundays - he would be drunk before noon in attempt to chase away these demons of the past that continually rehearsed his past before his eyes.

For a couple of years his wife continued the tradition they had established, taking the children on to church, always asking him if he wanted to go with them. He had become quite the inventor of excuses in those days. But when he began drinking there were times his temper got away from him. He couldn’t explain why – it just happened. His beautiful wife had taken to wearing a lot of makeup on Sunday morning to hide the results of his anger from Saturday night.

One Sunday morning he woke up to a soundless house. He made his way down to the kitchen where he found a note on the table that simply said, "We can't take this anymore. We are gone and will not be back. Don't bother looking for us because you will never find us. Even if you do, we will not come back. I do love you, but I have grown to hate what has happened to you. Doreen." That had been five years ago.

He finished the contents of the bottle, and then did something this morning different than what he normally did. He got dressed in the best clothes he had. They were wrinkled with no hope of ironing them out even if he had an iron, but it was the best he could do for now. With a slight stumble to his step as a result of the vodka he had finished off earlier, he made his way down the street, block after block until finally he stopped in front of the church he and his family had attended.

He listened intently to the service, at least as much as he could hear through the doors from outside. The singing resounded in his ears and even though muffled, the tune of the song was familiar and he sang along with them in his heart. The message seemed to be tailored just for him and when the invitation was given, he fell to his knees, oblivious of anyone who may be watching and renewed his heart with the God of Heaven.

Charlie waited outside the church until all had left, then slipped in to speak with the pastor. He told him the whole story and the pastor prayed with him again. The next Sunday Charlie sat inside the church and sang aloud like he never had before. He wasn't sure if he was on key or not but it felt good to stretch his lungs to His re-found Lord and Savior. He felt alive again and his hope had been restored.

I met Charlie a few weeks later. The church I attended had embarked on a major reconstruction project and it happened that Charlie made his living as an independent contractor. Our pastor had contacted him to help us with a part of the project that our own men couldn't do and Charlie, now eager to do anything to serve his new Master, jumped at the opportunity to do it on his own time and free of charge.

Over the next couple of weeks, I got to know the man and learned of his tragedy - turned victory. But his voice still reflected a troubled heart. He talked often about his family and, at times, seemed on the brink of falling into depression. He told me that he was being sorely tempted to return to the bottle once again but had so far resisted. We prayed with him and knew that his own church body was lifting him up as well.

A few days after this Charlie was on his way to the paying construction site where he and his crew had been working for several weeks. He had to go over a railroad crossing that was located just a few hundred feet from the site. It had become every day and routine by now. His crew members that had already arrived and, accustomed to Charlie being late for one reason or another, saw him approaching the tracks. A train moaned in the distance which they had also grown accustomed. Several trains passed there daily while they worked. They thought nothing of it. But then one of the guys noticed Charlie's truck. It slowed as it came to

the tracks as if he was going to wait for the train to pass by. But then it crept up on the tracks and was smashed by the oncoming train. Charlie was instantly killed.

No one knew for sure what had happened but the examining doctors suspected that he had experienced a heart attack just as he was approaching the tracks. As he went unconscious from the pain, his vehicle eased up onto the tracks and was hit by the train.

Many questioned God about this. It seemed that the man was just beginning to get it all back together. Why now? With his construction skills he could have done great things for the Kingdom of God, not just here but anywhere in the world. Wouldn't it have made more sense if God would have called him into missions building or perhaps putting up medical centers in other impoverished countries? But God chose to take Charlie. Maybe God knew that he was near falling and just couldn't take it anymore. Countless questions could be asked but we'll never know their answers on this side of Heaven. The Bible tells us in Romans 11:33 that God's ways are beyond finding out. He has a plan that may seem contradictory to ours but is perfect for what He has in mind.

We don't understand and it's all because we try to bring God's thinking in line with our own. But He is thinking on a much higher plateau than we are. His plans and actions are not based just on what the circumstances are now but, on the past, present and future all at the same time.

One day, when Christ returns, we'll understand the "whys" we have harbored inside of us. Until then, it is futile to try to figure it all out. We never will. But then, just like Charlie knows now, we'll hear it firsthand and we will understand God's ways.

October 2

“Justice for All!” By Debbie Ousley

The other day this comment was made to me, “Take your integrity to the bank and see if that will pay the bills.” The comment was made because of an injustice being allowed at my work place and I had commented on it.

Justice: Do we have anyone fighting for it anymore? It’s just not very popular to stand up and say, “That’s not right.” It is so much easier to go with the flow and allow things to stay the same. But when did policy take precedence over justice? When did “my way” become more important than fair play, and mutual respect for one another?

We teach our kids about justice and fair play hoping it will be a part of their life, but when they get in the “real world” they see no one playing by the rule - The Golden Rule. In the Old Testament the word “justice” is more often accompanied by the word “judgment.” Oh, I know that word has been feared for years. But if we know our actions and intentions are pure, we have no cause to fear, especially if we know that God is the judge.

It’s really easy to judge a situation and know if justice is being applied there, if we want what’s right for everyone. Proverbs 21:3 tells me that to do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice. Maybe that’s why it is not so accepted by the world today.

I encourage those who fight for justice to continue and not get weary. It may not make you the most popular person with men, but when we don’t do anything, we have in reality done something.

October 3

“Standing Up to the Bully”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I // never forget a time when I had to stand up to a bully. It wasn't easy. Now you've got to know that when I was in high school, I was considered one of the biggest nerds in my class. When I graduated, I only weighed around 125 pounds (you'd never know it to see me now).

At the time this particular event took place I was in the eighth grade. A group of boys surrounded "the bully." He had taken metal shop that day and somehow had smuggled a steel bar from the class. It was about twelve inches long and around one and a half inches in diameter.

We had to make a bus change before going home and as I got off the first bus and was making my way to the one that would take me home, I spotted "the bully" pushing around my cousin with that steel bar. The group of boys around him laughed and acted tough. Something in this nerdy body rose up and I went to my cousin's defense. "Leave him alone!" I demanded. I accomplished what I started out to do but now all the attention was on me. Oops!

"Who do you think you are," the bully retorted. Fright replaced anger but I couldn't afford to let it show so I said something like, "Why don't you pick on someone your own size." The bully was heavyset. That was the wrong thing to say. He began to poke at me with that steel bar and so I bravely (or stupidly) grabbed the end of it. He got even angrier. "You think you're tough kid?" He taunted. I knew that if it came to a fight I was "dead meat." I bought some time by saying, "You wouldn't be so tough yourself if you didn't have that bar in your hand."

That backfired too. I heard one of his cohorts say, "He's right. Put down the bar and let him have it." The bully handed the bar to one of the other boys and I began to pray for my life. I know God heard my prayer because I'm alive to talk about it today. About that time the bus driver came from the other side of the bus and asked, "What's going on here?" His presence sent the bully and his gang somewhere (I didn't know where but frankly I didn't care – I was off the hook). I immediately got on the bus. That was a close one.

It reminds me of our own situations today. There are times that I get myself into situations with the “bullies of life” and they threaten my very existence. I’m sure some of you can relate. We have Christian brothers and sisters all over the world that are right at this moment facing the bully. He wants to wipe them out. Some of you have shared your situations with me and I know that the bully is striking again.

The Bible says in Ephesians 6:13, *“Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.”* In other words, even after we have put on the entire armor for defense and attack and we are ready to do spiritual battle, there are times we are still up against insurmountable odds and our only defense and strategy is to stand. We wait upon Divine help.

I heard a story several years ago that illustrates this. A bully had plagued a young boy. He had been forced several times to surrender his lunch money. His older brother found out about it and told him that he had to stand up to the bully. Even though the boy knew he didn’t stand a chance he took his brother’s advice. The next day, just as in the last few days, the bully showed up and demanded his lunch money. This time, even though he shook with fear, he stood up for himself and told the bully “No.” The bully made moves that let the boy know that he was in for a beating. But just then the bully looked beyond the boy and simply walked away. What the boy didn’t know was that his big brother had been hiding in the bushes and at that moment stepped out behind his brother. The bully didn’t stand a chance.

We are in that exact situation. The devil wants to “bully” us. In ourselves we are no match for him. But the Bible tells us that when we find ourselves in those situations to stand. As we plant ourselves firmly, our big brother, Jesus, steps up behind us and we stand in His shadow. The devil is no match for Him and he leaves us alone.

So, the next time the “bully” shows up, no matter how bleak the situation and even though we are no match for our enemy, stand firm in what we know from God because our “Big Brother” is never far away.

October 4

“Seasons”

By Jerry D. Ousley

*F*all is here and another winter is quickly approaching. This time of year is full of wonderful colors and the crisp mornings are nice after the long hot summer. Soon the cold will have our unsatisfied hearts longing again for the heat and we forget that only weeks ago we thought a cold winter day would be a refreshing change. Seasons come and go; each one is different even though they always have and always will follow each other – at least until the Lord returns and brings change to this world.

However, the change of seasons brings on a whole new set of problems and jobs we must do. There are fallen leaves to dispose of, air conditioners to cover, storm windows to install, and a host of other things required to get ready for winter. The good news is that it will be a few months before we have to do that thankless job of mowing again.

Winters can sometimes become very long, cold, and dismal. Some people literally get “cabin fever.” There are those who long to be out in the yard, or at the park doing “outdoorsy” things and the weather just doesn’t permit it. It can bring depression for some if we don’t realize that change is necessary and the hope of summer will come once again.

God made the seasons to remind us of the seasons in life. Spring, summer, fall, and winter - Each unique, each with its own characteristics. Life also has springs, summers, falls, and winters. These are periods of change that bring pleasure and complication. Life is like that. God gives us life here on earth so that we can take advantage of opportunities to serve Him. Sometimes situations can become overwhelming but even these times are to teach us about Him and His will for our lives. The fall represents harvest in our lives while winter signals the time of a long-needed rest. Spring will surely come because we all get weary of resting and long to be productive, and once again it is time for planting and the excitement of blooming flowers and new life. The summer brings work and pleasure to us but we can only take so much and so the seasons continue. God gave us the cycles of life for our own good. Our lives reflect constant change that can sometimes be devastating unless we are looking for what He has for us. It is for our own good if we’ll just take the time to see it – and enjoy it.

Take advantage of the changing seasons of life. By doing this, your own life will be enriched instead of miserable. We can be happy people by enjoying God in the seasons of Earth as well as the seasons of life.

October 5

“No Remedy” By Jerry D. Ousley

Remedies can be pretty important. My grandmother used to have a lot of old home remedies. For instance, if you got a splinter in your finger, she would cut up a potato, and wrap it in a bandage around your finger and within a day or so it would draw that splinter out. Or if you had a boil, she'd cut up some other vegetable, or go out in the yard and pick something that I had no idea what to call except a weed, and she would prepare that and wrap the area with it and it would make the boil come to a head.

I don't know where she learned all those old home remedies. She's with Jesus now and I've waited too late, but I sure wish I would have asked her about them and written them down because a good part of those old home remedies really worked, and they were a whole lot cheaper than going to the doctor and then paying through the nose for a prescription that might take a week to do the same thing. Don't get me wrong; I'm not slamming the medical profession but folks, these days we've got to save our hard-earned cash any way we can!

In 2 Chronicles 36:15-16 the Bible says, *“And the LORD God of their fathers sent warnings to them by His messengers, rising up early and sending them, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, despised His words, and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, till there was no remedy.”* This passage of scripture is speaking of the latter days of the kings of Judah. Some of them had been good and wise kings guiding the people to love and worship God. But some of them had been very wicked kings and had led the people into sin and idol worship. The last few kings of Judah had fallen into this last category.

God had been very patient with Judah and had given them every chance to turn from their ways. He had sent the prophets to warn them but the people had hated them, made fun of them and called them liars. Time after time God gave them one chance after another until finally, He had no choice. The Bible says that His wrath arose against His people until there was no remedy – in other words, there was no other way to fix it. As punishment God allowed the Chaldeans to overrun the nation and carry them into captivity. The majestic temple was

robbed of all valuable material, and then burned to the ground along with the entire city of Jerusalem. Because of their sin, this holy city lay in ruins.

The good part about this story is that after seventy years God brought up people who once again had a vision for Him. They were allowed by Divine providence to return to Judah, rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem and once again begin to worship God.

There are times in our lives when it seems we have caused God to turn His back on us once too often. You know what? We serve a merciful and loving God. We often hear of the unpardonable sin. Do you know what the unpardonable sin really is? It is turning our backs on God. It is denying Him after we have experienced Him. It is refusing salvation offered by the grace of His Son, Jesus Christ. If we die refusing to be saved, we cannot be pardoned. There is no remedy.

Some people believe that they have angered God to the point that they have no chances left. But folks even before grace, God extended grace. The only way that He will completely refuse us is if we just plain turn our backs on Him and refuse His grace. Even when it may seem that there is no remedy, as long as we have life, we have the hope of a remedy.

October 6

“What’s Going Through Your Mind?”

By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*here’s a story about John who was driving home late one night. Needing to get home and the hour growing later and later, John decided to take a short-cut through the country. It was no big deal; he had taken it many times before. But as his eyes grew heavier and heavier, he didn’t see the loose board lying in the road and he ran smack-dab over it. A few yards further down the road his tire went flat and the vehicle ground to a halt.

That was all John needed – A flat tire in the wee hours of the morning. He longed for sleep and didn’t really want to have to deal with this right now, but the tire wasn’t going to change itself. He climbed out of the driver’s seat, unlocked the trunk and began getting the things he would need to change the tire. He had a spare thank goodness, and he found the tire tool but where was the jack? Then he remembered putting it in his wife’s car about a month ago saying that he would feel better knowing that she had one and that he would pick up another for his trunk. You know what they say about good intentions ... Anyway, John had forgotten about that and so there he was, stranded on that country road with no jack.

It dawned on him that he had passed a farmhouse about a half a mile back up the road so he began walking there. As he did, he got to thinking about the time. Certainly, that farmer would have been in bed hours ago. It was in the middle of the night and he was going to have to wake that farmer up. Even though John knew absolutely nothing about farming he had it in his mind that farmers went to bed and got up with the chickens. He knew this farmer was not going to be happy with him at all. The longer he walked the more he thought about waking up that farmer. The more he thought about how angry that farmer was going to be the angrier he got himself. It wasn’t his fault – not completely anyway – that he had a flat and no jack. Who knows, maybe that piece of wood with the nail in it fell off the back of that farmer’s truck.

By the time he reached the front door of the farmhouse all the dogs were barking. He was boiling mad. He knocked a few times and waited, again getting angrier by the minute. Finally, he heard someone coming to the door and the porch light went on. The door creaked open and there stood the farmer in his bed clothes. John was so mad at the fact that this farmer was going to be mad at him that he simply said, “You can just keep your old jack!” And

he huffed off leaving a bewildered farmer scratching his head, standing in the doorway in his night clothes wondering what that was all about.

Philippians 4:8 says, *“Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things.”* Sometimes we just think the worst about things. Instead of looking for the good all we can see is the bad. We live in a negative society and sometimes even for Christians it’s just hard to not let it rub off on us. I’ve seen people start a new job with the best of intentions and a having a good positive attitude. After listening to all the gripe sessions that went on throughout the day, by the end of the day they had as bad an attitude as everyone else. It rubs off if we aren’t careful.

But Paul tells us to think on the good things; those things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely and have a good report. Think on those things that have virtue and are praiseworthy. These are the things to think on. If we do, we won’t be yelling at a farmer in the middle of the night telling him to keep his old jack.

October 7

“What’s In a Name?”

By Jerry D. Ousley

With a last name like “Ousley” you get a whole lot of variations of pronunciations and a lot of kidding (by the way it is pronounced “Ows-ley” just for the record). Especially when you are a “kid” you encounter the onslaught of name-puns. I was called everything you could probably imagine. Now, I know there are many other long, hard-to-pronounce last names out there, and you have certainly taken your share of puns in life. I know you can identify with what I’m talking about.

My Dad brought on one particular last name-pun. His first name is Maryland (just like the state) and so when he put up a new mailbox in front of our house, he bought stick-on letters to spell out our last name. He decided to just put the first letter of his first name and our last name on the box like this: “M Ousley” however, he didn’t leave enough room between his first initial and last name so it came out: “MOUSLEY.” It didn’t help the situation because all the boys in our family had to wear burr haircuts (which weren’t very popular in our childhood days) and our ears sort of stuck out like a mouse. You can figure out the rest.

We could all probably tell funny stories of how our names have been made fun of. I suppose as long as there are last names there will puns and jokes. But as a believer in Jesus Christ, we bear a name that has also been made fun of, ridiculed, and persecuted. It is “Christian.” We don’t get a lot of persecution in this country (although we have been labeled as “weak minded” by government officials at times). We are called “old-fashioned” because we believe in the morals outlined in the Bible. In parts of the world, now more than ever, people who have chosen to believe in Christ and have become Christians, do so in jeopardy of their lives.

But I want to tell you this, taking on the name “Christian” will forever be the best decision and choice you ever made. It is worth being ridiculed, mocked, and persecuted, if necessary, to have the peace, joy, and soundness of mind that comes along with that name.

You can make fun of Ousley all you want. I usually tell people that I don’t care what you call me, just as long as you don’t call me “late-for-supper.” But I am proud to bear the name “CHRISTIAN.”

October 8

“Warning! Danger Ahead!”

By Debbie Ousley

I once visited the Crothersville Elementary School not knowing for sure what door to enter to get me to the Elementary Office. I just picked one that looked good. Halfway down the hall I met a young student that I guessed to have been around eight years old. I stopped and asked him if he knew where the Elementary Office was. He was somewhat reluctant to talk to me (his parents had taught him well about talking to strangers) but he finally said, “You don’t want to go down this hall and turn left.” My first thought was that perhaps that area was still under construction, so I asked him, “why?” And his answer revealed a whole lot to me about this young man. He replied, “That’s where the principal’s office is!”

I want to make something real plain here. I am in no way making fun of this young man, even though the rest of the day I smiled every time I thought about our encounter. I don’t know his name and I wish I did because this young man has a friend in me. Anyone who will try to safe guard me from danger is my friend.

Of course, we know there was no real danger, but this young student, even though he didn’t know me, was willing to steer me away from the potential of it. I’m not sure if he knew the way to the principal’s office because he had made a few trips there, but you know what? That doesn’t even matter to me because what I do know about him is he is a caring young man.

It is so hard for us to see good in people. I have found that those kids who are the most rowdy and mischievous have the best hearts. They are, for the most part, always for the underdog – maybe because they can relate. They are the most generous and would give you the shirt off their back. They will, if you can get them to stand still long enough and open their hearts up to you, have some very wise and insightful opinions about situations. They demand justice and will become loud at times if they see injustice by those from whom they expect more from.

I’m so glad (you can’t even know how much) that the Lord loves the whole package. He tries many times by the word of God, by ministers, by His Spirit, and others to warn us not to

“go down the hall and turn left.” Not because He wants to dictate our every turn, but because He sees danger ahead. He is our friend.

I thank my unknown friend for his warning, but most of all, I thank him for his heart. Kids are God’s people.

October 9

“When The Boss Is Away ...” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

I'm looking forward to the next few days. The President and Vice President of the company I work for are both going on vacation. By the way, they are father and son and they not only hold these offices but they are the bosses. Yes sir, it looks like a nice quiet week to me. Oh, I get along with both of them well enough but they sure know how to keep everyone extremely busy.

It isn't that I don't want to do my job either. I basically like my job. There are times when it can be very difficult, but I suppose that if it always went smoothly, they would really have no need for me. I'm not trying to get out of work. The fact of the matter is there are several projects that I've been asked to do that I just can't seem to find the time for. I'm hoping that I'll be able to get to those things next week while they're on vacation.

I suppose I'll probably wind up working harder than if they were here. I don't want to “fluff off” only for them to return and find nothing done. That wouldn't be a good Christian witness, now, would it?

People like for the boss to be gone. But when I think back to past years when they were both away during the same week, there were a lot of decisions that needed to be made that just didn't get made. It's a crazy world – You want them to be gone except for when you need them to make those difficult decisions that someone has to make. We humans are never satisfied.

I'm glad it isn't like that with our Lord. Yes, He died on the cross, was resurrected, and then ascended back into Heaven. Physically, He's not here and hasn't been for a long, long time. Still, He's here. He said Himself in Matthew 28:20, *“I am with you always, even unto the end of the age.”* What a statement! Not one person on the face of this Earth could make such a claim. I want to be there for my kids and my wife, but the fact of the matter is, I can't be in more than one place at one time. If you've figured out how to do this, please let me know!

We can't always be there. The people we need can't always be there. But God is always there. Because of Who He is, He's always there for every man, woman, and child on this planet, all the time at the same time!

I know that there are moments when it seems He isn't there. But just take a minute to stop, and look for Him. You'll find Him if you seek Him because He made a promise. Yep, He's there!

October 10

“Working Believers” By Jerry D. Ousley

Early one morning there was a knock at our door. I was in the process of getting ready for work so I was up. When I opened the door, the man standing there caused instant anger to well up inside of me. You see, when we were first married this man and his family had begged and borrowed us nearly into poverty. It was the late seventies and between the two of us we managed to bring home a whopping \$125.00 per week. This man (who was a relative by marriage only) had managed to borrow money from us nearly every week. Oh, he'd return the next week and pay it back but then, almost in the same breath, would borrow it again with interest. In other words, he wanted more. Folks, I'm not kidding, it got to the point that I dreaded to see pay day come!

There he stood in the doorway. “Jerry, my car has quit and I can't get to work.” He had managed to find a job in a town about twenty-five miles away. It was a decent job and to be honest he was now making as much money as we were put together. “I need to go to work. Can I borrow your car?” We had two cars and we were working at the same place so I couldn't refuse him. Besides, we had to keep this guy working or he was going to put us in the “Poor House.” I reluctantly agreed and of course he needed the better car. But then he asked something else. “Jerry, I don't have gas money. Can I borrow some until Friday?” I sighed, looked in my wallet, and all I had left was five dollars. It was early in the week and that had to last me until Friday. “All I've got is five dollars for the week,” I responded, expecting him to say something like, “Oh, I'll get it somewhere else.” At least that's what I would have said. But his answer was, “That'll be enough.” We wound up loaning our better car to this guy and my last five dollars. Somehow, we made it through the week and we didn't see our car again for about three months. When we did get it back, he was, of course, unemployed again. That's another story for another time.

This man claimed to be a believer in Jesus Christ and according to the word I am not allowed to judge. But the Bible does give us the right to be “fruit inspectors.” He would say, “Christian people are supposed to share and help one another.” But he never helped anyone else as far as I know. He was always the one in need. Later on, he and his wife divorced and I thought that I was finally rid of this man. But guess what; now his son has grown up and has

proudly stepped into his father's shoes. I think maybe God has placed these guys in our lives to give us patience or something.

The fact is that Christians need to take care of business. I have known some believers who have come to the Lord with the idea that since God is the Great Provider that they can just quit their jobs and sit their back-ends at home and the Lord will take care of them. Listen to the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, *"For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat."* God expects us to work. As you read the Bible, you'll discover that God expects more work, better quality work, and diligent work from believers. We are to be examples in the work place. We are to be model employees. Our supervisors, bosses, and fellow workers should see us as the example.

I always thought that God would choose to use me in full-time service for Him. Not that I shouldn't work but that I should be able to spend all of my time working for Him. He has never allowed me that. He has seen to it that I have a good job and has given me health to work every day.

I also want to say that I know there are many who want to work but because of economic hardships, factories closing down, jobs moving overseas and so forth, they have lost their jobs. From the emails I have received from some of you I know you want to work. You want to provide for your families. To you I say, be patient, seek other employment and wait on God. He knows your heart and if you remain faithful to Him, He will not let you down.

But if you are one of those lazy, slothful Christians, then the message from God is that you need to seek the Lord to change your heart. Get out there and start looking for gainful employment or you might just find yourself wondering where your next meal is going to come from.

October 11

“The Donkey and the Lamb”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I've talked about donkeys before. Though they are creatures of burden they can also be very comical and stubborn. But donkeys have been an important part of the Bible. We've talked about Balaam and his donkey. The Lord allowed it to speak to him and literally saved his life. It was a donkey that carried Mary, the mother of Jesus, into Bethlehem on the evening of His birth. It was also a donkey that carried Jesus into Jerusalem the week before He was crucified. That's the time we call the "Triumphal Entry" during which people spread out palm leaves and their outer garments and cried "Hosanna to the King!"

But the donkey also presented a unique problem to Jews. In the Law of Moses God had told them that the first-born of every animal and everything they owned belonged to Him. They were to bring it to the temple to be sacrificed to God. But even though the donkey was commonly used, it was considered an unclean animal (in other words, it wasn't to be eaten by man and was not considered as a fit sacrifice to God). So, what were they supposed to do?

In Exodus 34:20 the Bible tells us that God told Moses that they were given a choice when it came to the firstborn of a donkey; they could either break its neck, killing it, or they could substitute a lamb as a sacrifice in its place and it would then be allowed to live. A donkey was a very useful creature to not only the Jews but nearly everyone in that day and age, and still is a valuable beast of burden in many countries today. They are a sure-footed creature and can carry a man down a mountain without slipping a foot. It made sense to save them alive. So many Jewish men brought an innocent little lamb to the temple, killed it and sacrificed it to God in order to keep his scrawny donkey.

This example is representative of the spiritual problem of mankind. I don't mean to insult anyone with this but the donkey represents man. We have sinned and deserve to die. But we aren't worthy to be sacrificed to God. We are unclean in our sin. God doesn't want us as we are. We are not a worthy sacrifice. That only leaves one choice: When we die, we go to hell. We aren't worthy of anything else and there is no other solution.

EXCEPT: There is a way. A lamb can be sacrificed in our place. However, it can't be just any old lamb. It cannot have a single blemish. It has to be perfect in every way.

The Bible tells us that Jesus is the Lamb of God. In John 1:29, John the Baptist had been doing his thing down by the river. He looked up and saw Jesus coming. He said, *"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* What a profound statement. It was not only profound but prophetic. Jesus Christ, by His own choice, being the Son of God, chose to be born as a human being and come into this life. He was born sinless. He was a man without blemish. He alone was worthy to die in our place.

Because He loved us so much, He allowed Himself to be sacrificed on the cross becoming the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Now there is a way. All we must do to escape the fate of hell is to come to Jesus Christ. We accept the fact that He was sacrificed in our place. We acknowledge that we need Him and that there is no other way. Then we believe upon Him, what He has done, and know that He alone can be our Savior. It requires us to take on a new nature and become new creations in Jesus Christ. It is a choice we make. We can have our necks broken as a donkey or we can let Jesus become our sacrifice and take away our sin. So, what will it be; donkey or lamb?

October 12

“The Love of the Lord” By Jerry D. Ousley

When we were first married, we agreed that if either of us ever found someone we loved more, we'd immediately share it with each other first. This didn't mean that it wouldn't hurt or that we wouldn't be angry or feel cheated, but it did mean that we respected each other enough that we wouldn't be sneaking around behind the other's backs. You know what; after thirty-nine years of marriage, we've never had to live up to those words. We had been faithful to each other. I trusted my wife with everything in me.

This isn't to say that we haven't had our share of problems over the years. You show me someone who has never had a marital problem or disagreement and I'll show you a couple who just got married yesterday (wait a minute, in this day and age I'd be safer to say earlier this afternoon).

When you love someone, for them to cheat on you hurts like pulling your arm off. It feels like part of you has been lost. And in reality, it has. That other person, especially in a Christian marriage, has literally become a part of you. It hurts deeply. God told us way back in Genesis that Adam said of Eve that she was bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.

In Hosea 3 God told the prophet to do something very strange. It seems out of character for God. But He had a good reason for doing it. God told Hosea to find a woman who was already in an adulterous relationship and take her for his wife. Think about that; Hosea, by God's direction was to find a woman who was fooling around with a married man, and take her for his wife. Talk about trust issues! It seems out of character for God to tell His prophet to do such a thing.

The point of God's instruction was that this was exactly what Israel was doing to Him. He had called her out of bondage in Egypt. He had worked mighty miracles to get her to the land of promise. He had protected her, promised her wealth, honor, and a good life if only she would worship Him and be obedient to His law. That seems easy enough, doesn't it? But Israel could not do it. All during her history Israel would serve God for a short while then would fall into idolatry. God would let them conquer an enemy nation and they would take the false

gods of that nation and begin worshipping them. That just doesn't make much sense to me. But it happened.

It came to the point that God eventually allowed Israel to be taken once again into bondage by the Babylonians for a period of seventy years. But even then, God loved her so much that He brought her back home during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. That's the love of God.

Did you know that He loves each of us just as much as that? God will allow us to sin against Him, even though it breaks His heart, and when we come crawling back to Him asking for forgiveness, He will forgive. He does it because He loves us.

I don't say these things to encourage you to go out and do whatever you want to do saying very nonchalantly, "It doesn't matter because God will forgive me." Talk about taking God for granted! Sometimes we do sin. Perhaps we really don't want to. Maybe we just got caught up in the moment, or temptation just seemed too great and we gave in. We don't want to be guilty of taking God for granted. But folks, He really does love us. He really will do all in His power to keep us. We serve a God who loves to a degree that our human heart cannot possibly and completely understand. The next time you're tempted to sin try to remember how much God loves you. Perhaps it will give you strength to resist that temptation. But if you don't, if you cave, don't ever fail to come back to Him. That's the love of the Lord!

October 13

“The Magnificent Seven” By Jerry D. Ousley

Miracles are extraordinary events that cannot be explained by our natural senses and thinking. I’ve experienced a few in my life but I know that many people and perhaps some of you can testify to much more than I can. One that happened to me took place when I was in high school. I had a large cyst raise up on my neck. I’ve told about this before but I’d like to share it again.

This cyst was about the size of a small egg. It was diagnosed and my parents were told that it would be a simple operation to remove it. We had the operation. Apparently, some kind of liquid was still in the area, so the surgeon left a small drain tube right in the middle of the stitches to allow the stuff to drain out. Eventually the drain tube was removed but instead of sewing the hole up they allowed it to heal naturally.

I thought it was all over. But several weeks later, after the drain hole had healed, my neck began to swell up again. It would get about as large as it was before until the pressure would force open the weakened area where the drain had been, and then (yuck) all this fluid would come out. Over the course of nearly a year this took place over and over again.

My parents finally convinced me to allow them to take me to another doctor to find out what was going on. In a nut shell he said that apparently the surgery didn’t get it all and that if I didn’t have a second surgery that this process would go on the rest of my life. I didn’t want that but I didn’t want my parents to go through the expense of another surgery (by the way, you’d think surgery would come with some kind of guarantee like other things we purchase, wouldn’t you?).

I went to the Lord about it and prayed. In short, the place broke open one more time allowing all the liquid to drain out and guess what ... it healed up and never happened again. I’d say that was a miracle.

In the book of John seven wonderful miracles of Jesus were recorded that illustrate some truths about Him. First of all, we see in John 2:1-11 that He changed water into wine. In chapter 4 He healed the son of an officer. The great thing about this one was that the boy

wasn't even in the presence of Jesus but a whole town away. In chapter 5 He healed a man who had been lame for thirty-eight years. And in chapter 6 He fed a large multitude of people with only five barley loaves and two small fish. All these show us just who Jesus is: The very Son of God!

Then in John 6 we read about Jesus, walking on the water. In chapter 9 He healed a man who had been born blind, and in chapter 11 He brought Lazarus back to life after he had been dead for three days. These all demonstrate His power over nature.

These are indeed mighty miracles. I'm sure that most of us have a few situations in our lives, whether sickness and disease, or circumstances where we could use some power over nature, in which we would welcome a miracle. I believe that Jesus still works miracles today. I believe that He has and wants to do great things for His people.

But you know, each and every day we experience miracles we may know nothing about. For instance, we get behind a slow-moving vehicle that aggravates the heck out of us. We fuss and carry on about it impatiently trying to find an opening in the traffic that will allow us to pass. But did you ever consider that the seconds or minutes we've been delayed behind that slow-poke may have saved us from a terrible accident on up the road? Every day I believe that God protects us from things we think nothing about. The magnificent seven miracles in the Gospel of John were mighty and show us that Jesus Christ is the very Son of God and that He has power over all situations, circumstances and even nature itself. But He also has power over the unseen, the unexpected and blind areas of everyday life, and those belong up there with the magnificent too.

October 14

“She’s too Proud to Fly” By Debbie Ousley

The other day when driving down the lane to take Megan to school, a morning dove was right in our way, so we couldn’t pull out on the street. I have never seen one of these doves (unless it had been injured) ever look like it wasn’t favoring you by its being in your presence. Its dignity and grace gives out a profound message that says, “I have it all together,” with its head held high, sleek and petite, seemingly putting on airs for its partner.

This morning, we didn’t really have the time to appreciate its natural character and as we approached it in the car, it just STROLLED OFF out of our path and into the yard. It showed no sense of danger or urgency as if it was determined not to get its feathers ruffled about the situation.

Megan, being put out with its arrogance said, “Look at her (I don’t know how she knew it was female)! She’s too proud to fly!” The comment hit me so funny, it had made my day.

The ending to this story came only two mornings later, when again we were on our way to school. But this morning, as we proceeded down the lane, a new character had entered the picture. Our neighbor’s big white CAT! He was crouched down behind our recyclable container and I don’t even need to tell you what his intense attention was zoomed in on. And guess what? That morning dove, whether it was the one we had seen a couple of mornings before or not, WAS NOT TOO PROUD TO FLY!

Apparently, this dove knew a truth that we adults have to learn the hard way. Proverbs 16:18 says, “*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*” The big difference is that most of the time we survive. But if this dove had insisted on maintaining its pride, it would not have gotten a chance to learn another lesson.

October 15

“Why is Sex Outside of Marriage Wrong?” By Jerry D. Ousley

Marriage is a very sacred thing. There are many things God has reserved just for this relationship and sexual intercourse is one of them. Now, I know this subject may offend many, especially in the day and age in which we live, but it needs to be said.

In today's world, we are told to just “do it” without thinking and without remorse. We try to blame feelings of guilt on what we have been taught by previous generations and upon Judeo-Christian morals. However, if each one will be honest with themselves, that guilt is there.

God has a reason for limiting one man and one woman to a lifetime together, and sexual relations within God's confines is a very beautiful and wonderful thing, not because of the physical contact but because of all that goes on inside of the individual because of it.

In the very first book of the Bible, Genesis we are told how that God made the first woman from one of man's ribs. There is so much teaching that can come from just that, but to stay on the subject at hand let me just share two verses with you: “*And Adam said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called Woman because she was taken out of man.’ Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*” (Genesis 2:23-24). Do you see the bonding that takes place in this? The man and the woman become as one person. I believe that when the Bible says that we are made in the image of God, that it really takes both a man and a woman together in a true love relationship that endures for life to really see the example of God. It takes this couple together and the qualities of both to make the image of God.

Jesus said, “*For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.*” (Matthew 19:5). So, this idea is not just in the Old Testament, but also the New Testament.

There is a transfer of love, loyalty, and security that is passed between a couple who have chosen to bind themselves as one. This is why those who are involved in prostitution, pornography, and other sexual activities outside of marriage feel “dirty,” lost, confused, and

lonely. They have in fact transferred what is a very binding relationship to another individual who has no intention of taking the relationship any farther. This causes all kinds of problems in individuals and is reflected in today's society. The looser our morals, the more confused people become. According to God and echoed in the words of Jesus Christ, it has been meant from the beginning to be a lifetime relationship between a man and a woman.

So, what of those who have been victims of bad relationships and immoral sexual activity? That is the good thing about Jesus Christ. Ask forgiveness and start fresh today. When we realize our sin, all we must do is confess that sin. Jesus will cleanse us from it and give us a fresh start. You can make today the first day of the rest of your life by relying upon Jesus for forgiveness, then lean heavy on Him to maintain that relationship. Spend much time in prayer. Then allow Him to put you with that mate that will change and fulfill you for the rest of your life.

October 16

“Hey Buddy” By Debbie Ousley

“Is that your nose or a banana?”

The other day I was reminded of a scene played out by our now deceased miniature dachshund named “Casey.” I don’t mean to speak evil of the dead, but this little dog was a D-O-G! He brought some pleasure to our lives, more so to Jeremy, our son, because Casey was a present given to him just before Megan was born. Bad move! Because of the new arrival and all the extra duties that came with her, I didn’t have the time needed to properly train the four-legged baby.

Casey was cute, but not enough. He was stubborn and pretty lazy, unless he had gotten off his chain and was running through the yard to get in the neighbor’s trash or any other smelly stuff he could find, and that’s what did him in – his last escape.

A few years ago, while we were living out in the country, Casey was in the front yard when a big hound dog walked, or maybe I should say, hobbled up (he had a leg missing). Now get the picture, okay? Casey, standing an inch off the ground, 2-1/2 feet long (mostly nose and tail), barking and yapping. Hound dog, standing 2-1/2 feet (on one side) off the ground, weighing in at about sixty or seventy pounds with a mouth like a pit bull.

Then, Casey goes at him! He’s nipping, barking, nipping, smelling, barking and he’s dancing around (and I imagine his nips felt like a bumble bee to the tough old hound dog). This old “gentleman” could have swallowed Casey whole and asked for milk to wash him down. Meanwhile, Jeremy and I are yelling at Casey to run for his life, thinking any minute that the hound dog was going to perform a disappearing act on him. But to our surprise, he started running (the hound dog) as fast as he was able to go with just three legs. That’s right! Casey had run him out of our (his) yard. Jeremy and I surmised that it had to be the territorial thing.

We could hardly live with Casey and his fat head after that, that is, until one day a pinching bug attached itself to his long nose. Casey had poked where he now wished he hadn’t. This “big” little dog was now whining, begging, slinging his head, and doing a little bit of running himself, trying to get free from this pain at the end of his nose.

Casey had gotten into someone else's territory, and was learning a painful lesson. I guess the moral of this story is "It's okay to run so as to fight another day, but to stick your nose where it doesn't belong will almost always cause you pain in some kind of way."

P.S. We did free Casey from the pinching bug and we were freed from Casey's ATTITUDE.

October 17

“The Shadow” By Jerry D. Ousley

When our kids were younger, we used to play a game that I’m sure many of you have played with your own children. It usually took place at bedtime and with the room dark we’d turn on a flashlight or perhaps a dim nightlight and make shadows with our hands. It was fun trying to form rabbits and frogs, deer and other creatures by twisting and moving our fingers. The kids always tried to make them too and with some help they would succeed in getting close.

While playing in the shadows can be fun, we know the shadow is only a dim image of what is real. The shadows can hold looming monsters or delightful and playful creatures. Often it is what is perceived in our minds and in a way reflects our joys, ambitions and fears.

In Hebrews 10:1 the writer talks about shadows. He says, *“For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect.”* It’s of course referring to the old sacrificial system of the Jews under the Law of Moses. Each year they would perform sacrifices for the nation to cleanse of sin and rebellion. During the course of the year the people would bring sacrifices for their own personal sins and disobedience. The writer of the Hebrews (who some think is Paul while others believe to be another writer) was well versed and educated in the Law of Moses. They understood all the regulations and rituals.

But he also knew that all these things were merely types, symbols and representations of what God really planned not only for the Jewish Nation but for the entirety of mankind. It had always been God’s plan to send His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to be the final sacrifice for sin. He became the sacrifice of sacrifices. He was the only perfect man and the only one fit to pay the price for our sin and rebellion against God.

The writer of Hebrews knew that this sacrificial system of the Jews was only a shadow of what was to come. It was in type to show what Jesus Christ came to do to “buy back” the soul of man. Even though these rituals were kept religiously each year they could never ever

make the people perfect; it was only a temporary appeasement. It was only good until they yielded themselves to temptation once again and then the process had to be repeated.

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ – allowing self to be slain on the cruel Roman cross – spilling His blood as the “Lamb Who takes away the sin of the world” – became the final sacrifice. Because Jesus was sinless and perfect, when we come to Him confessing that we have sinned, acknowledging that we are helpless to save ourselves, and without excuse we ask Him to forgive us, then believe in our hearts to the point that we are willing to now become His, He will save us.

He saves us from the curse of sin placed on the world so long ago. He saves us from the penalty of sin which is eternal death. He saves us from our own helpless, sinful condition. He actually takes away our shame, our guilt and our sin. In place of all this He makes us new, gives us a fresh start and new life in Him.

I remember as a child the day my father got saved. Before that his skin always had a dark look. Oh, he was a good man. He was good to his family. But he was not a Christian. That night he intended to respond to the call of Christ. He had gone with us to a church service with that intent in his mind. He went to the altar and without regret gave his life to Jesus Christ. I will never forget the new look on his face when he returned to his seat. His face looked brighter. It was a reflection of the work God had done in his life. The shadows were gone and now the real man had emerged. Are you ready to stop living in the shadows?

October 18

“The Square Gospel” By Jerry D. Ousley

I have never been able to draw a perfect circle or a perfect square. My circles usually come out sort of shaped like an egg; sometimes upright and sometimes on their sides. My squares are usually more rectangular in shape and sometimes in other shapes that have names I'm not familiar with. Don't get me wrong, my squares normally have four sides but to say that they are a true square, well that issue is still out for debate.

Did you know that the gospel could be compared to a square? In the King James Version of the Bible there are several places where the word is interpreted as foursquare meaning that it has four equal sides. In reality it is more than a square and really a cube. Most of the furnishings of the tabernacle were in this shape. Even the great city that is coming after our Lord returns is compared to this shape; Revelation 21:16 talks about this Holy City that will come down from Heaven saying, *“The city is laid out as a square; its length is as great as its breadth. And he measured the city with a reed: Twelve thousand furlongs. Its length, breadth, and height are equal.”* Some of you may already know this but a furlong is defined as one eighth of a mile. If you divide twelve thousand by eight you get fifteen hundred – miles that is. We have some very large cities in this world today but none of them stretch out for fifteen hundred miles. To illustrate, this defines the coming city of God to be equal to stretching from New York to Florida and an equal distance in the other direction. But it doesn't stop there, because the height is equal to the length and breadth. Can you imagine a cube-shaped city that large?

Our lives should also be lived by the “Square Gospel” principal. First of all, we must have length. Our spiritual length represents what we are reaching for. As believers in Christ Jesus, we need to reach out in our lives. We should never be satisfied with being in one spiritual place all the time. Our goals need to be far-reaching but they must be influenced by God. He will give us goals that we can obtain, that reach way past what we thought we could do. This isn't to encourage us in over-taxing ourselves with busy work but to know that God has a future for each of us. When we come to Christ it doesn't mean that our life is over but that it is just beginning. He will allow us to accomplish things that we never thought possible.

Then we need to have breadth. Our length and breadth will be equal if we are in God's perfect will. Our breadth could be defined as including others in the goals God has set for us. Just as Jesus reached out on the cross and loved others even in His dying moments so we must reach out to others. The gospel – the Good News that Christ died to save us – should always be a part of our lives not only as we reach out to God but also as we reach out to those who surround us.

Our lives must also have depth. Our depth could be defined as our being "rooted and grounded" in the faith. We must reach deep. A tree will stretch its roots into the vastness of the earth bringing moisture and nourishment from the depths. So, our spiritual selves should be firmly planted and reach deep. As we do we become more firmly planted and the storms of life cannot send us toppling over. We bend and sway under the winds of life but because of our depth we will not fall. We will stand firm in Christ Jesus.

Finally, we must have height. We reach up to the heavens as we reach up to God. We look up to Him. Our outlook is a positive one. Even though bad things may come to us we have the eternal promise and hope of one day being a citizen of that New Jerusalem – the largest city this world will ever see. As we shape ourselves with the "Square Gospel" we will be assured of a very nice place to live in that fifteen-hundred-mile cube-shaped city of God. So, are you square?

October 19

“In Memory Of” By Debbie Ousley

This quote is often used when donating or writing a memorial statement about those we love and have passed on. There is a time when we all remember them. To most of us it is been a joyous time.

Remembering is a good and bad experience. But I am glad for my memories. I have often encouraged others to make memories and it is my hope they were good ones. But let's get real; we all have bad memories too. It's funny though, how those memories just kinda drift way back into our memory banks when someone we love has passed on.

I'm not one that believes we preach people into Heaven after they have passed – Our lives speak for themselves. I'm also glad for grace that Christ gave to us. This is the grace that Christ gave to us. This is the grace that changes our lives, hearts, and actions.

It's strange how unpleasant things become funny to us after time has passed. My Mom would 'pop' me every time I used these words, "I don't care." At the time it was no way funny. But now it is. Almost every time I speak them now, I remember her lightning bolt response.

When we would pull some bone-head stunt my dad would say, "Use your head for more than a hat rack." It wasn't pleasant at the time but it's amusing now.

Too many individuals want to dwell on their bad experiences and use them as stumbling blocks. They will insist on staying a victim because of them. I know we all have a story, we all might have battle scars, but it's time we give it up and use them as stepping stones to better our lives, and not just our lives but those around us.

As we remember Christ's birth, I'm hoping it's not just a memory that is boxed away with decorations. Christ's birth is not just a memory but an earth-shaking event that even unnerved Satan and his imps.

His birth is not just something we remember once a year but it is to be lived every day. His birth, ministry, death, and resurrection forever changed both this Earth and Heaven to

come. It's forever changing lives in this country but more so in foreign countries, maybe because the people in those countries believe it for their lives today and not just an event to be remembered once a year.

October 20

“A Dog Named Caesar” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

*E*very boy should have a dog. Mom and Dad had three boys and a girl, but only one dog. But he was dog enough for all of us. I've never really figured out just what kind of a dog he was, a pure breed of some sort - Purely mixed that is. He was white with black patches and a couple of tan patches here and there. We, of course, thought he was the smartest dog in the world and we called him Caesar.

Every dog has his own set of tricks that he is noted for. Caesar's tricks were different from those of any other dog. He could do a few of the usual, like shake his paw, and, well, let me see . . . I guess that was about all of the usual.

He did have one trick that I never saw any other dog do. It wasn't so much of a trick as it was a mischievous act. You see, we also had a cat named Blackie. Blackie was a tom cat and pretty much liked to be left alone, especially by Caesar. However, when he'd take a notion, Caesar would just begin pestering Blackie to no end. Blackie would take it until he just couldn't handle it anymore, and then out popped the claws. It looked like Caesar was in for a fight. Then that mutt would just simply turn around with his back to the cat and let Blackie dig into his back all he wanted to! Caesar had learned how useful a cat's claws could be when a good back scratch was in order!

Watching that dog get his back scratches always brought joy and laughter to us. You just don't see a dog do that everyday.

But thinking about it now reminds me of people. You see, Caesar knew how to get what he wanted, and he spared no cat's feelings trying to get it. Aren't we like that too? It seems today that many people are only concerned about themselves. And I suppose that has been programmed into us by statements like "If you don't look out for yourself no one else is going to ..." or "If you want anything in life you've got to get it for yourself ..." or maybe even "You've only got one life; it's up to you to make out of it what you want ..."

The responsibility has been placed squarely upon the individual, and when we listen to those words often enough, we tend to get the message, and no one else matters. Let's look out for number one and let everyone else do the same.

That's just not quite true though, is it? All of us have times when we deeply need someone else to give us attention and love. But if we haven't loved, when our time comes there may not be anyone there for us. That's the thing about love. To make it grow and come back to us we've got to give it away.

There was no love lost between that dog and cat. The cat only became useful to the dog when he needed a back scratch. But people who do others like that will soon find themselves alone and unloved.

"But, that's the code of our society ..." you may argue. If we are to survive, we must break that code. Jesus Christ came to give us a new code - A code He called "love." He said to love your neighbor as yourself. He said to even love your enemies. He said that if someone hit you on one cheek, turn the other to him. Man! What a world we would have if people would stop talking about love and start showing it! Don't you agree?

Let's quit acting like dogs and cats that only know what they want for an instant. Let's look to God for the answers to life and let His love go forth from us to each other. It will work, you'll see.

October 21

“The Other Woman”

Part 1

By Debbie Ousley

Deborah, what a woman! She was a prophetess sitting under a palm tree, judging Israel. No way! Not a woman!! Yes, way – A spokesperson of God and for God, not only the ecstasy of enthusiasm, but also the calm wisdom of that Spirit who informs that the Law dwelt in her.

She sent for Barak to remind him of God’s command to go to Mount Tabor with ten thousand men to finally do away with King Jabin and his general, Sisera. Barak must have seen Deborah’s confidence in God’s word when he announced, “I’m not going if you don’t go.” Even then Deborah spoke a prophecy to Barak as she told him he would not get the glory for this victory but that the Lord would turn Sesera’s life over into the hand of a woman, but not to Deborah; to the other woman.

As always, God came through just like He always does. He confused a terrified Sisera and his army. When Sesera’s fight plan failed him, he took flight. Running for his life he came upon a tent, and at the tent he met the other woman.

Jael bid him into a safe place (he thought). Tired from the battle and his 5K run, he asked for a cool drink of water but Jael gave him a cup of warm milk instead and put a rug on him, then waited. The wait wasn’t a long one. Sisera soon fell into a deep sleep, and that’s when Jael literally “lowered the hammer on him.” She took a tent pin and drove it into his temple, thereby finishing what God had started.

Some might say, “What a terrible act of treachery and murder!” But in Judges 5 we find the song Deborah wrote, blessing Jael above the women in the tent.

It’s always amazing to me how God will use individuals to get the job done. Please don’t misunderstand me, I am now way suggesting that anyone to take up the hammer. But what might have happened if Jael wasn’t able to handle the unpleasantness of her act? Why had the Lord given Deborah the “word” that Sisera’s life would be turned over to a woman?

I'm sure Jael would like to be remembered as Deborah is, not as the other woman, not as the woman who drove a tent pin through a man's head, but I for one am glad she did if it accomplished God's perfect plan. (Judges 4, 5:24-26).

October 22

“The Other Woman” Part 2 By Debbie Ousley

Today I would like to share with you my thoughts concerning another woman by the name of Hagar. Hagar was the Egyptian maid of Sarai, whose husband, Abram had been promised by God to have a son in his old age. God promised Abram that his descendants would be like numbers of stars (Genesis 15:5).

But, hey, Sarai’s biological clock was running down. So, she had a plan and because trust and patience was not her strong suit, she gave Hagar to Abram as his second wife (so as to have an heir – Genesis 16:1-40).

When Sarai realized that Hagar was going to have a baby, guess what? She got jealous and wanted Hagar to go away. Sarai dealt severely with Hagar and she ran away. Then the angel of the Lord found Hagar and told her to go back to Sarai and submit to her (boy that was asking a lot). But wait, there’s more. The angel of the Lord told Hagar that her son’s name should be Ishmael, which means, “God hears.” Sometimes we need someone to remind us “Ishmael,” “God hears,” don’t we? Hagar did return to Sarai, she did have a son, and she did name him “Ishmael” (Genesis 17).

Now, guess what? God always keeps His promises and when Abram was ninety-nine, He showed up. He changed Abram’s name to “Abraham” and Sarai’s name to “Sarah” and He blessed Sarah with a son at ninety years old and his name was to be “Isaac.”

He blessed Ishmael and promised to make him fruitful, the father of twelve princes and a great nation. Now we will fast forward to the birth of Isaac when Abraham was one hundred years old.

But what about Hagar? Well, this is my thought, but I believe Hagar loved Abraham like any woman loves her husband. I think because of what God had spoken to her by the spring, she believed she was a vital part of this story. After Isaac was born things changed. Sarah

saw Ishmael mocking Isaac and it angered her. She again wanted all this to just go away and apparently this was to be (Genesis 21:12-13).

So, here's the picture: Abraham, a loaf of bread, a bottle of water, Ishmael, Hagar, and the road. Hagar had to feel like she had been kicked to the curve. The water soon ran out and they were lost in the wilderness. Hagar knows they are about to die so she places Ishmael under a shrub and goes a distance so as not to see him dying. She found herself crying and God heard (Ishmael). He told her to take the child and support him with her hand (remember my promise to make him a great nation?).

Sometimes we get hurt and disappointed and we want to take the promises that God made to us, maybe years ago, and put them under a shrub to die. But we need to rise up and make those promises known. When we do, we will, as Hagar did (Genesis 21:19) open our eyes and see a well of water – A life giving resource! The Lord is our well of living water and He brings life.

Hagar's resources had run out before she saw God's. She had no man, no country, no one, and maybe that's how we've got to find ourselves before we will truly trust the Lord.

October 23

“Noticing the Important Things”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Our house has an upstairs. At one time it was our son's bedroom but after he left home to create a life for himself in Cleveland, Ohio it became my office. In the summer, even with central air it gets hot up there so we purchased a good window air conditioner years ago. Each summer I put it in the window and each winter I take it out. About four years ago when I took it out, I noticed that the storm window wasn't there anymore and so I just shut the main window and left it be. Over the years the rain, snow, sleet and other forces of nature began taking a toll on the window frame and now a good part of it needs to be replaced.

We're getting ready to have our son-in-law come in and give us an estimate on replacing the frame and while we were talking about it the thought occurred to me that four years ago I must have taken the storm window out so it had to be somewhere in the house. I set out on a mission to find it. I looked behind all the shelves, beds, and chests but there was no sign of it. Then it dawned on me that at one time I had put some parts to a window in the closet built around the eaves of the house. This closet is only about three feet high so I cleaned a path and crawled through it looking for a storm window that would fit into the small window frame. I did find a screen and not wanting to come out of that painful crawl space empty-handed (remember I'm overweight and over the hill) I brought the screen out with me. I didn't have the slightest idea of how that would keep the elements out in the winter but I brought it out anyway just in case so I wouldn't have to crawl back in there to get it.

I got out of the closet, replaced the items I had taken out so I'd fit in there, and went over to the window. Yep, the screen definitely went to that frame. But where in the world was the storm window? As I took a closer look, I heard the "stupid bell" go off in my head (that's the bell that sounds when you suddenly realize you've done something stupid). My eyes fell on the release levers of the storm window and when I pushed them in the storm window slid down into place. It had been there all along but because I hadn't noticed it, we now needed to replace our window frame . . . duh!

This experience reminded me of the story in Genesis 21 about Hagar and Ishmael. Although they hadn't done anything nearly as stupid as I had done, still they found themselves in a situation where they hadn't noticed a very important part of nature. You can read the

whole story for yourself but in a nut shell the pair had been booted out of the household of Abraham due to a particularly strained relationship. Abraham had sent them away with a container of water so apparently, they had been in the wilderness for a number of days. The water had run out and they found themselves so distraught by the beating down sun that Ishmael was already near death and Hagar, his mother, was desperate. She didn't want her son to die. She did the only thing she could do in that situation and cried out to the God she had heard Abraham talk about so often. The Bible says that God heard them and opened Hagar's eyes. That's when she saw a well of water and they were saved. The point I'd like to make is that the well of water had been there all along. They just hadn't noticed it. After prayer God allowed them to see the obvious.

It's the same in many life situations today. You've heard the old saying, "You can't see the forest for the trees." Often, we find ourselves in these very situations when the answer is obvious but we are so upset, torn up and frantic that we can only see the need and our own desperate situation and can't see the obvious. When we turn to God with our whole lives and cry out to Him then he will open our eyes to the answer that is already there. He will help us to notice the important things.

October 24

“Attitude Adjustment” By Jerry D. Ousley

I talk a lot about dogs. I suppose that’s because in my life I’ve had several experiences with dogs. I really don’t understand why because I normally get along with dogs. I like animals and wouldn’t hurt one unless I was defending myself or starving to death.

At this particular time in my life, I was trying to make a living selling insurance. I mentioned in another incident some weeks ago that because of dogs my practice, when cold calling, was to pull up in the driveway, blow the horn and wait to see if someone appeared. I’d ask if it was safe to get out and then would proceed to speak to the individual. On this day I followed my usual routine. The house was fairly close to the driveway. A lady appeared at the door and I opened mine and stepped out of the car so she could hear me better (it’s kind of hard to hear someone screaming through a window cracked down a little). I identified who I was then asked her if she had a few minutes. Now folks, I really wasn’t a pushy salesman and that’s probably why I didn’t succeed in the insurance business. But more than likely she had her belly full of salesmen, and in mid-sentence she interrupted me by saying, “I don’t want any! Just leave.” We had been taught that you need to ask at least three times before quitting so I started to say something else when she said, “Go away or I’m going to let my dogs loose on you!”

That was all I needed to hear. I had made my way around to the front of the car by this time and when she said that I said, “Okay ma’am; I understand; I’m going.” I turned to go back to the car when all of a sudden, I heard several dogs barking and growling all at once. I guess she didn’t believe me, or she had a hair trigger or something because when I looked around there were three – count them – three white spitz tearing off the porch in my direction. I didn’t waste a second because about all the time I had was a very few seconds. As I was climbing into the car one of those dogs actually tried to jump through the two-inch opening in the window where I had rolled it down. Those dogs had attitude! I think the lady did too.

In Matthew 5:1-12 Jesus talks about what we have called the Beatitudes. We could very properly call them be-attitudes (or attitudes to be). He listed things like “the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, those pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted and those who are reviled. These

are good qualities all of which can be part of either a good or bad attitude. Charles Dickens, in his book, "A Tale of Two Cities" basically tells the story of two people, one rich and one poor, both living in the same city. But depending on your point of perspective even though they both lived in the same city it was really two cities, each person seeing it from their own situation. We could tell the tale of two worlds just as easily. The condition of our own world is governed by one of two perspectives: A good attitude or a bad attitude. Our attitude affects our lives, our jobs, our families and our own Christian experience. In every situation the best or the worst is determined often by our attitude in that circumstance. A good attitude can make the "best of times" out of any given situation. Without doubt a good attitude makes for a happier Christian life.

Just what is an attitude? It is, of course, how we evaluate our daily experience. It has been called the "advance man" of our true selves. Our reaction, whether one of fitful anger, or on the completely opposite extreme, of joy even in bad times, is determined by how we really feel inside. What's in will come out. Our attitude is more honest and consistent than the words we speak. Our attitude can be our best friend or our worst enemy. It will either draw people to us or repel them. Our attitude is never content until it is expressed. It is the record keeper of our past, the spokes-person of our present and the foreteller of our future. So where is your attitude?

October 25

“Attitudes and What Happens to Us”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Sometimes I guess I have a bad attitude about things. For instance, politics is one that gets me going every time. I just can't understand why our government has to make things so difficult. Another one is our economy. There are some very simple solutions to our problems, at least in my opinion, but I can't get anyone to listen to me (that can actually make a difference anyway). However, after I've let off some steam, I realize that there's not much I can do to change things and I get myself straightened up and do what I can in my own little world.

It's funny how attitudes are infectious. Over the years I've worked for several different companies and the one thing I've noticed is how people's attitudes are affected by others around them. A new person can start a job with a good attitude making a pledge to himself that he's going to do his very best for the company. He or she will start off like a herd of wild horses, doing a great job, being very conscientious about their work. They are generally happy with things, that is until it's time for the first break. As they begin getting acquainted with other employees, they begin to pick up on what's wrong with the company. After break they think about what they've heard, still determined to do a good job and then before long it's lunchtime.

During lunch they will normally get together with the same people they met during break. That makes sense because we're all basically social creatures and don't want to be loners. That's when they get an entire half hour to find out the woes of the boss, the management and the overall problems with the company. Their attitude begins to change.

After a few more hours it's time for the last break and by then they've found out that it wasn't such a good thing going to work for this company. The attitudes of their fellow employees have done rubbed off on them and by quitting time they are no different in attitude than the ones that have been there for years. In fact, if another new employee begins work tomorrow, they may be the one infecting them with their new found bad attitude.

In Matthew 5:1-12 Jesus talked about attitudes. He listed several attitudes we can express in various situations. Our attitudes can determine what happens to us. In the

example above that same new employee could have refused to listen to the bad attitudes of the older employees. It may have meant that he or she would have needed to search harder to find friends but at least it wouldn't have infected them to the point that they shared the same bad attitudes as the others.

Listen to the story of the two buckets: "There has never been a life as disappointing as mine" said the empty bucket as it approached the well. "I never come away from the well full but what I return empty." "There has never been such a happy life as mine," said the full bucket as it left the well. "I never come to the well empty but what I go away again full."

Our attitude can often be the only difference between success and failure. I heard another story about a man who made his living selling hotdogs. Day after day he stood on the same corner downtown in the big city and sold his hotdogs. In fact, he made enough money that when it was time for his son to go to college, he was able to put him through four years and come out not owing a dime.

One day his college grad son came to visit with him. He told him, "Dad, don't you know that times are hard right now? Everything has gone up in price. How can you hope to make money selling hotdogs for the same price as you have all these years? You've got to increase the price and purchase a cheaper brand of hotdogs. You can get day old buns for a lot less than what you are paying, and there are cheaper condiments on the market. You might also want to consider selling them only three days each week instead of six."

The man thought about this. He didn't want to cheat his customers but his son had graduated from college so he must know what he's talking about. He took his son's advice. Within two months business had gotten so bad that he had to close up. He spoke with his son and told him, "Son, I'm glad you had that talk with me. You know things are bad; so bad that I had to stop selling hotdogs. I'm going to have to find other work."

It was all in the attitude. As long as he loved what he was doing and took pride in his work he made money. But when he raised prices for less quality he went out of business. So, how is your attitude affecting what happens to you?

October 26

“Problems to Blessings” By Jerry D. Ousley

Show me a person who has absolutely no problems at all and I'll show you someone who isn't from this planet. We all have problems. When I was in the US Army, during basic training I developed an ulcer. It caused me to bleed from my rectum, to the point that according to the doctors, I lost half of the blood in my body. This caused me to have to spend about three weeks in an army hospital as well as taking two weeks leave at home. It delayed my training. It was supposed to be six weeks and I had counted each and every day waiting the time when my family would be allowed to join me. I was homesick for them and couldn't wait to get this period of my life over. Now it had been delayed. It cost me three weeks of back training and I just don't know if I could have taken it or not if it hadn't been for those couple of weeks I was allowed to go home.

Finally, it was over and my period of AIT began. This was a period of intense training for the field of service I had chosen to work in. I was three or four weeks behind those I had been with before I developed the ulcer. To say the least I was feeling sorry for myself. It was a problem I couldn't understand.

As my classmates drew close to the finish of their own AIT training the drill sergeants began handing out permanent duty assignments. These would be the places where they would go in order to fulfill at least two years of their obligation. Most of them were sent to South Korea. At that time, it was still considered to be a “hot-spot” and soldiers were not allowed to take their families with them. I realized that had I not developed that ulcer and lost those three or four weeks I would have been with them. As it turned out, my delay allowed me to be stationed in Washington DC for the remainder of my own service obligation. That was definitely a problem turned into a blessing.

I could have tried to get a medical discharge when I developed the ulcer but to be honest, up until that period in my life there weren't many things I had finished and I was determined to honorably complete what I had started. God knew that I couldn't take two years away from my family and He also honored my determination and interceded with an ulcer. What do you know about that?

In Matthew 5:1-12 Jesus listed the Beatitudes. If we read them through what we discover is that on the surface these are all problems. How can being poor in spirit be a blessing? How can a person who is so broken-hearted that they mourn consider that to be a blessing? How can being meek be a blessing? How can having such a hunger and thirst for righteousness because of our own destitution, be considered to be a blessing? How can being merciful, pure in heart or a peacemaker, all of which require us to give up of ourselves, be a blessing? And how can being persecuted and reviled be a blessing? It seems like a contradiction of words. They are what I call negative/positives and they are found all through the New Testament. They are situations which require us to do what may seem to be an unnatural human reaction or trait. But Jesus tells us that they will become a blessing. How? Because Jesus will take our sacrifice, our giving up of ourselves, and our self-humbling and use them to make us better.

This doesn't mean that the Lord has caused these problems. I firmly believe that problems, difficulties and trials all come from the devil. He wants to destroy us and he will bring all sorts of things against us. But if we give up of ourselves, we are actually moving into a position in which God can take control of the situation. He will turn our difficulties into blessings. He will take our lemons and squeeze out lemonade. He will make our problems turn into blessings!

October 27

“Be Separate” By Jerry D. Ousley

W*hy* do Christians have to be so different? I've been in a lot of situations over the years in which I could have just kept my mouth shut and no one would know the difference. I wouldn't have come out looking like a total idiot, my reputation would be intact, no one would think badly of me and the world could just go on spinning. But then I still would have to live with myself and the knowledge about whatever the situation might have been.

One that vividly stands out in my mind occurred when I was trying to find out what was wrong with our car. It just wasn't running right. It had a definite miss in the firing of the engine and folks that's pretty much the extent of what I can tell you about it.

I thought it needed spark plugs so I went down to our local Wal-Mart superstore to get a set. Now this was an older model car. To be specific it was a 1972 Chevy Impala. It had a full eight cylinders and a 400 cubic inch small block engine. The only way I remember that is because that engine had become rare and several people had driven it into my brain that we really had something there. This did pose a problem however; you couldn't find parts just anywhere. I looked the make and model of our car up in the book that was supposed to tell us what spark plugs to use; only they didn't have a set. I had brought one of the old plugs with me so I pulled it out of my pocket, picked the number closest to the recommended part number, and pulled out the new plug to compare it to the old one. They didn't look all that different except for the length; the new one was slightly shorter than the old one. "How could that make much difference?" I thought, and so I convinced myself that these would work. I walked out of the store proud of myself for saving all that money and time, went home and put the new plugs in the car.

In the process I broke one of the new plugs and not wanting to go back out or admit my error, I just popped one of the better-looking old ones back in. I guess I don't have to tell you that it now ran worse than before. About that time a couple of my brother-in-laws showed up. Now these boys were probably ranked way up close to the top when it came to backyard mechanics in Southern Indiana. But when I told them I had just put in new plugs and it still ran as rough as it did before they just couldn't seem to figure it out. One of them called his brother who was even better than they were. When he arrived, I felt like a total idiot standing in the

company of three great mechanics. To make a long story short this last guy began taking plugs out and found my error. But I didn't want to look stupid so when they asked where I got the plugs I told them Wal-Mart. "That explains it," said one of them. "You can't get good reliable parts from Wal-Mart!" That let me off the hook with them but not with myself. Later that day I had to call each of them, admit my foolishness and apologize for lying to them. My Christian-influenced conscience wouldn't let me get away with it.

In 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 Paul talks about being separate as a believer in Jesus Christ. We are not to be "yoked" together with unbelievers. Many have tried to put definitions on just what being "yoked together" means but the simple and immediate picture that comes to my mind is that of beasts pulling a plow. A job has to be done and you don't want to put two animals together that either can't get along or will cause one to work harder than the other. You just don't get the job done. Being a Christian requires us to live by a different set of rules than the rest of the world. Contrary to popular opinion you cannot separate being a Believer from being a businessman. Christ must permeate every part of our lives if we really want to be in His will. We want to take some time to talk about this. We don't want to get into areas that are none of our business but we do want to tell you what the Bible says about the subject. We can be separate and still make a living – if we want too!

October 28

“Why Should I Be Separate?”

By Jerry D. Ousley

The last time we told you the story about how I completely allowed three men to believe a lie. In my haste I had purchased the wrong spark plugs for our car and I let them assume that the department store where I had purchased them was to blame. It made me feel like I knew a little something about cars. Have you ever gotten into a similar situation and you told a little “white” lie just to make yourself look better but then when you thought about it you really didn’t know why it was so important? I’d say I’m not alone in this.

After the men left, my heart got heavy as lead. I knew what I had done was wrong but now it was time to own up to the problem. These men had already left. I could have gone down to the auto parts store and just purchased the right spark plugs and no one would have been the wiser. Besides, at that time I was a pastor and how would it look for a pastor to be caught up in a lie? What made it worse was that one of these guys attended services where I was pastor. How could I preach my sermon about love, honesty and so forth with him staring me right in the eye? That’s the way I reasoned. But it didn’t take that lead heart out of my chest.

There was only one thing to do and so, scared as a rabbit in a dog pen, I picked up the phone and began dialing. I had to call all three of those guys and confess my sin. Only afterwards did heaviness go away. It didn’t matter then how I looked; I knew I had done the right thing. You know what? It proved to be a witness to those men. It showed them that Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven. I realize that most people wouldn’t have even given such a petty incident a second thought but God used my sin and repentance as a witness to these men.

We have to be separate. The very name “Christian” means “like Christ” or “Christ follower.” In every situation we need to ask ourselves what Jesus would have done and then be like Him. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 6 that we are to come out of the world and be separate. Just what does that mean?

First of all, we’ve got to be very careful what partnerships we make as citizens of Heaven living on Earth. We have to make a living just like everyone else. We fall in love and

get married, raise children and have family responsibilities just like other people. Our life partnerships in marriage and in business must be done in a manner that will reflect Jesus Christ. Jesus said in John 15:19 that we are in the world but not of the world. It may be hard at times. It may not even seem fair. But it is something that we must do in order to witness Christ not only in our words, but also in our actions (which according to the old saying, speaks louder than words).

Being unequally yoked in marriage and in business poses a very difficult set of problems. I'm not at all saying that it can't work but just that we have to be extra careful and extra cautious in life. It is much easier if we are equally yoked.

In 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 Paul asked five questions that we should all ask ourselves before we ever make an unequal yoke – a business or marital relationship with someone who is not a Christian. Those five questions were, (1) “What fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness?” (2) “What communion has light with darkness?” (3) “What concord has Christ with Belial?” (4) “What part has a believer with an infidel?” and (5) “What agreement has the temple of God with idols?” In essence these all have to do with our Christian witness, our duty to reflect Christ in business and really in every aspect of our lives. Jesus wants us in this world so that we can be a light that will draw unbelievers to Him. We can't just go live on an island away from the rest of the world. But we do have an obligation to God to effectively represent Him. There's a balance just like in everything else. We can be separate in a crowd of witnesses, and so we are.

October 29

“The Advantage of Being Separate”

By Jerry D. Ousley

In Daniel 1 we read the story of how he and his friends came to be in Babylon. Because of her sin, God had allowed Israel to be conquered and taken captive by these ungodly people. Daniel and his companions, whom we know better by the names of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednigo, weren't just average young men. Apparently, they were recognized as having above ordinary abilities and so the King of Babylon had them put in a special class to learn the Chaldean language and be put to service in the sciences and astrology.

They had a lot of promise. They could have taken the easy road and just followed orders completely and they would have gone far in life (which they did anyway with a few bumps along the way). They loved God. They knew the Law and they could not conform to this new world even though God had jerked them up and planted them here. There had to be a way that they could be witnesses to their captors without conforming.

They were given the best of food. Delicacies were set before them. They could eat steak and the finest of foods. The only problem was that they knew this food was not clean by the standards of the Law of Moses, and they also knew that it had been sacrificed to idols before it had been given to them to eat.

Daniel asked their keeper if they could be excused from eating this food and be given something a little plainer. The keeper was afraid that they wouldn't look as fit and trim as the rest of the men and was frankly worried about his own skin and how he would look to the king. Daniel presented a proposal to him. He said that if they would be allowed to eat only pulse (which was like water-soaked bread) and drink only water for ten days, that after that, their keeper could compare them to the others and decide then. It sounded feasible to the keeper and so for the next ten days pulse and water was all Daniel and his three companions had to eat and drink. Miracle of miracles – after ten days they were in better shape than all the others. Was there some kind of magic in the pulse and water that this keeper didn't know about? No, it was only that God honored Daniel and his companions for being obedient to what they knew was right even in the worst of situations.

While being separate may be uncomfortable at times it does have its benefits. I can imagine that there were times that the pulse nearly made them sick especially when they observed the other men eating steak and potatoes. It had to be a great temptation to just give in. But they didn't and God honored them for it.

We may not like what it takes to be separated to God sometimes. It may require us to be put into situations which are not fair or maybe even degrading. But God will not stick us out in left-field and just leave us hanging. He will honor our struggle to be separate. He will give us final honor.

Some of you are struggling right now with a situation in your lives that requires a decision. It may not seem fair of God to put you in the position you feel that you are in. You know the right thing to do in your heart, but it is an uphill battle. I feel compelled to tell you right now to hold to your guns. Don't allow yourself to be swayed. Make the right choice. Honor God with your life and with your decision to be separate from the world. If you do I guarantee that God will not let you down. That's the advantage of being separate. Even when it seems unfair and that all odds are against you, God will be there with you each and every step of the way. He will turn your bad situation into something good for the Kingdom if you'll just do what He's telling you in your heart. Go ahead, you can do it!

October 30

“Look Like a Christian” By Jerry D. Ousley

When I get up in the morning and take that first glance in the mirror, I’m reminded of one of those zombie shows. I don’t like what I see. My hair is all messed up and sticking out in so many different directions that I’m not sure which is the right one. Instead of a deep brown it is now grayer and whiter. I look down and where I once had a decent six-pack (well, maybe a three-pack) I now have a keg. There are more wrinkles in my face, and what’s with these brown spots all over my hands? Over the years I’ve grown old, fat and ugly. I do what I can with what I’ve got to work with, you know?

Anyway, we hear a lot of talk about what a Christian should look like. We are representatives of Jesus Christ and we want to do our best. Some think a Christian should look one way while others go to the exact opposite extreme. Years ago, I went to a new barbershop. The one I normally went to was closed that day and I needed a haircut. This man was a Christian but attended one of the churches in town that was noted for how they thought a Christian should look. He found out that I was a pastor in the course of our conversation and he didn’t particularly think my hair style was befitting of a preacher. He went on and on about it and even though I had told him how I wanted my hair to look he took the liberty of giving me what he called was a nice preacher haircut. I never went there again.

We’ve been talking about being separate from the world. Many have tried to put definitions on scripture as to what they think it means. There are several passages of scripture that address the appearance of a believer. For instance, 1 Peter 3:3 says, *“Do not let your adorning be merely outward – arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel;”* This verse didn’t say we couldn’t do these things, just don’t let them be how people perceive us. If we say we shouldn’t fix our hair, or wear gold then are we to assume that we shouldn’t wear clothes as well? I think not. The passage goes on to say in verse 4, *“Rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.”*

I’ve come to know that we spend a lot of time trying to make believers portray a certain look on the outside. Just what should a Christian look like? It’s not in our preferred style of clothing or how we wear our hair or what we look like on the outside. If Christians would spend

more time on how a Christian should really look instead of on these petty things, we'd accomplish a whole lot more for the Kingdom of God.

What we've got to realize is that the mirror of the Christian is not one stuck on the wall into which we gaze but rather it is located inside of us. We look at the qualities of the fruit of the spirit. We seek that hidden person of the heart. We long for that incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit. Then we can begin to see what a Christian looks like.

I do think that when we want to look like a Christian that those inward things will spill out but it will be because we want to rather than because someone suggested that this is the way it must be.

When we look at the mirror of our hearts and seek God, we find that a Christian defines his or her looks by a good attitude, a smile, a desire to help and a yearning to see others find peace with God rather than wearing a pre-defined uniform of style. This will define how a Christian is separate in appearance. How does a Christian look? Take a peek in your spiritual mirror.

October 31

“Act Like a Christian” By Jerry D. Ousley

We've been talking about being separate as a believer in Jesus Christ. When we were kids, we'd get told a lot to "act right." What our parents meant was that we were to behave ourselves, be polite and mannerly and respectful of adults. My Dad told me a story once about a little boy. Visitors had come to their house and the father was introducing the family. He called little "Johnny" and when the visitor complimented him the boy's father said, "Johnny what are you supposed to say?" Expecting Johnny to say, "Thank you," they were startled when the boy said, "Give me a nickel." It was a very awkward situation for the father but the visitor courteously and promptly pulled a shiny nickel from his pocket and gave it to the boy.

With a faltering in his voice and a bead of sweat on his brow the father once again looked at his son and said, "Johnny, now what do you say to the nice gentleman?" This time Johnny would have to pick up on it and respond with a "Thank you." Instead, Johnny said, "Give me another one!"

We've been given freedom in Christ Jesus and I really get tired of people who keep trying to tell Christians how they are supposed to look and how they are supposed to act. To be honest with you this has been one of the most hindering aspects to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The world hates Christians because they have come to associate being a Christian with being an American. That's because our mission workers have tried to implant our American values on other cultures instead of true Christian values. Now don't get me wrong; I am very thankful for the great work missionaries of the past have done. Many have come to the Lord all over the world because of their sacrifice and witness. But when it comes to values, they just didn't know any better. Once again men have twisted the scripture putting their own definitions on what the Bible says.

So just how should a Christian who is called to be separate from the world act? The Bible has a lot to say about it really. First of all, we are to reflect Christ. One of the great examples is one in God's creation. The moon is a great reflector. While it is smaller than the Earth it gives us light in the night. But it has no shining capability of its own. It's really just a big ball of dirt and dust hanging in space and spinning around the earth. But it does reflect the

sun. As the sun floods the moon with its light it bounces off and gives light to the Earth. It is merely a reflector of the sun.

In like manner we are reflectors of the Son – the Son of God that is. We have no glory in ourselves. We don't shine because we are now a Christian. But we do reflect the light of Jesus Christ. Just like the moon we give light to a dark world but it is only the reflection of the light of our Lord.

We should also have an unearthly joy about us. 1 Peter 1:8 suggests that we have a joy that we can't put into words and is full of the glory of God. That's the exact opposite of a lot of Christians these days. We see them going around with a frown on their faces singing, "Woe, Despair and Agony on Me!" But the Bible tells us that we should be full of joy. Let me tell you, that's addictive and also very contagious!

We are honest because God in us cannot tell a lie and we aren't out to get the almighty dollar. We make a living but it is not our taskmaster. And we are to love. We are to love God, our neighbor as ourselves, our brothers and sisters in Christ and even our enemies.

Now that's how a Christian is to act. Sort a makes you want to be one, doesn't it?

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November 1

“Winning At Any Cost”

By Debbie Ousley

People, these days, are talking about extreme sports and while I’m not sure I completely understand it all, I do know that extreme sports are not new. When at home, as a youngster, we participated in all kinds of dangerous sports such as swinging on grape vines (over sink holes), loading as many as we could on an old car hood and taking the slope (which was a whole lot more fun than dragging it back up the hill), and swimming in creeks and ponds where snakes lived, and yes, they would get “grumpy.”

But I remember one instance when my sister and I found some arrows and decided we’d play an extreme sport. I will apologize to all my family before I tell this story because this was just dumb, okay? The object of the game, and get this, was to drop an arrow towards one another’s bare foot. The one who got the closest without hitting the foot won, but if you hit the foot you lost!! Well, technically, I won but it wasn’t because Josie got the closest. I know it was dumb, but was it any dumber than some stunts we see on TV? And these people get air time! I won but I really lost and I’ll never forget Josie’s face when she saw that arrow sticking straight up out of my foot. But I don’t guess it was any funnier than mine.

Sometimes when we must win at any cost we really lose. Oh, there may not be any blood, but folks, there are always wounds, ya know what I’m saying? “I’ll never ask them to forgive me!” “I will have the last word.” Or manipulating others by withholding words of encouragement and talking nasty about them until no one else will encourage them.

Winning at any cost usually does cost something. We may walk away with the trophy (meaning, I got what I wanted all along) but at what cost?

Not too long ago I saw this elderly couple at the grocery store in the meat department. The lady had picked up this package of chicken breast and had showed it to her partner. He shot her a look that would kill, put the chicken breast back in the freezer case, then went over and picked up a whole chicken and put it in their cart. I’m sorry folks, but who do you think cooked that chicken? The man got his way, but at what cost? I’m sure “Mom” would have cooked those chicken breasts with more love for him if only he hadn’t wanted to win.

When Christ drew His last breath that day on Golgotha's hill, I can almost hear the hearts of those who instigated His death. "There ... it is done. We've won and all this nonsense can be over." They hadn't even flinched at His beating, shed no tears or had any regret, because they had to win at any cost. They had to be right.

Who among us has caused death to someone, a ministry, love that someone had for us, someone's future, their dreams, or their respect for us, just because we had to win? "Please don't let us be too pious and holy to not replay situations in all our lives where winning was all that mattered."

November 2

“A Balanced Diet for Believers”

Part 1 – The Word

By Jerry D. Ousley

I've never been good at balanced diets. I suppose that's why I'm overweight today. It's not that I don't want to do the right things but folks I just like food. Okay I know I'd probably be better off if I'd eat right. But for some twisted reason I just can't seem to justify living a longer life if I can't have any fun with it. I can't help it; sometimes I've got to run out and find a place where I can get a trans-fat fix, you know? By the way that's getting harder and harder to do these days.

I've had to pay for some of those splurges. There have been times I've battled upset stomachs, heartburn, and a host of other things that I probably shouldn't mention in public. My wife tells me that I've got a cast iron stomach. But I know that cast iron rusts very easily and one of these days I'll have to start watching what I eat. It's just hard to do when the sight of those foods I love so dearly are blinding me. I suppose I do watch what I eat to a degree; I watch it as I put it in my mouth.

As I said, I'll probably have a debt to pay someday but right now I'm enjoying every minute of it. They say I'll feel better if I'd balance my diet but I can't imagine feeling any better than I do right now.

However, when it comes to spiritual things a balanced diet is essential. If we want to grow in Jesus Christ, it is imperative that we partake of a balanced diet. A balanced spiritual diet consists of a three-course feast of the spirit.

In Matthew 4 Jesus had climbed a mountain and fasted for forty days. The devil, being the deviously sly creature he is, didn't try to tempt Jesus during His fast. He waited until the forty-day period was over. Jesus could eat now. He had ended His fast. Satan wasted no time. He went straight to Jesus and told Him, "If you are the Son of God then it would be an easy thing for you to just turn these stones into bread. You've finished your fast; it's okay for you to eat. Who would know? Go ahead and feed yourself; you deserve it.

Jesus refused to use the power of God for such a trivial thing and even though the temptation to feed His hungry body had to be great He said, "*It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'*" (Verse 4). That is the first course of a balanced spiritual diet – The word of God.

We here in the United States don't really appreciate the Bible. God has allowed for us to have this wonderful instructional guide book to teach us how to get through life as a Christian. But all too often the Bible is allowed to collect dust and we tend to rely just on what we hear from the pulpit and on the radio and TV. While these things can be very informative and good and God has given them their place in our teaching process, nothing can serve as a substitute for reading the Bible under the influence of the Holy Spirit. It is food to our hungry spiritual souls. It is nourishment that builds strong bodied believers in every spiritual way.

We can't substitute. While I have poked fun at myself in my bad eating habits, I know that I may get away with my physical diet. But we cannot grow in Christ and expect to be strong believers in Him aside from this first course of the balanced diet for Believers.

November 3

“A Balanced Diet for Believers” Part Two – Tempting God By Jerry D. Ousley

I think I've related this incident before but to illustrate today's topic I'd like to share it with you again. I remember when I was just a teenage boy riding home with my parents one evening. I was sitting in the backseat and meditating on God. It hadn't been long since I had committed my life to the Lord and I was thinking about the passage of scripture where Jesus had told His disciples that if they commanded a mountain to be picked up and cast in the sea in the Name of Jesus that it would be done. I believed in God. I felt I was a strong Christian even for a teenage boy. So, I decided to put God to the test.

As we sped down the highway I looked over to my left and there was a rather large hill. So, I prayed under my breath, "God, I believe you. I believe your word. I'm asking that the hill be picked up and thrown into the sea, in the Name of Jesus." I sat there fully expecting to see that hill rise up in the air and go flying toward the ocean. But nothing happened. Again, in silent prayer I said, "God I fully believe in you; so why haven't you honored my request?" Feeling very disappointed in God I heard a still small voice coming from deep within me answer, "Son, you don't know who lives on that hill."

Somewhat surprised at the answer I had received, I then took a closer look and saw lights near the top of the hill. A family lived up there. Had God honored my request they would have probably been killed or at least lost everything they had all because of my stupid, selfish request. Why should I have to prove God anyway? Why couldn't I just take Him at His word and know that if someday I got into a situation that required a hill or a mountain to be moved that He would do it? It was tempting God. I learned a lesson that day about faith and praying in the Name of Jesus. I found out that it wasn't the words spoken or the demonstration of power but simply believing God for what He spoke and praying for things that Jesus would have prayed for – not some lavish display of power that wouldn't benefit anyone but me.

The second temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4 took place when the devil took Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem. Looking down from that very tall structure the devil told Jesus, "If you are the Son of God then just take a leap from here. Didn't God say that He

would protect you and send His angels to guard you in as much as He wouldn't even let you bruise your foot against a stone?" The devil saw that Jesus was going to use the word so now he was going to play the game and use the word too. He quoted a scripture from the Psalms that spoke of Divine protection of the coming Messiah.

Jesus responded with, "It is written, 'YOU SHALL NOT TEMPT THE LORD YOUR GOD.'" Jesus knew that this would only be a display of power. For certain it would have gotten His ministry off to a tremendous start. But Jesus knew that God would protect Him if the need arose. To purposefully place one's self in the path of harm to prove the power of God was just a plain old case of tempting God. It was completely unnecessary.

Yet today people try to tempt God. We do it in a variety of ways. Sometimes it is in large public displays that could only make the individual look honored and favored by God. Sometimes it is in the plain and simple. We need to learn that we can trust God without the miraculous in our lives. He is a God of miracles. I believe He works miracles for us everyday most of which go unrecognized. How often has He protected us and we didn't even know it?

The second part of a balanced spiritual diet is trusting God despite what comes our way without the expectation of special favor. We don't deserve anything at all from God. If we got what we deserved we'd all be dead right now. We don't minimize the miraculous but we do need to begin trusting God whether we see a mighty display of power or simply live life day to day in the less obvious of miracles. Trusting God and not requiring some powerful act to make us believe Him is a true trait of our strong Christian faith. It is the second requirement of a balanced diet for believers.

November 4

“A Balanced Diet for Believers” Part Three – Worship By Jerry D. Ousley

We've talked about worship recently. I don't want to repeat myself and bore you with those same details but let's just say that worshipping God is a very important part of our balanced spiritual diet.

In the Old Testament the Bible tells of some very strange situations regarding worship. First of all, in the book of Exodus, when Moses went up Mount Sinai in order to receive the Law from God, he was up there for forty days. While there receiving the tables of stone etched with the famous Ten Commandments, the people were left below. They had witnessed the miracles from God that had led them out of Egypt just months before this. They had been led through the wilderness by a cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night. God had taken care of them and there could be no doubt that it was His hand protecting and providing for them.

Yet, while Moses was on Sinai receiving the Law the people below had already given up. They asked Aaron to make a god that they could worship. He did and when Moses came down from Sinai with those precious tables in his hands, he found them already sinning against God and worshipping a false god. Who would have thunk it? It's beyond me.

We also read in the book of Judges how that after God had miraculously led the people into the Promised Land and had given them rest from their enemies, they turned away from God and began to worship false gods. They would sin against God and turn from Him, God would allow those in the land they had not yet conquered to oppress them, they would cry out to God and He would send a deliverer to free them from their oppression and in a few short years they would be right back in sin serving other gods. In Judges this happened over and over again. I can't imagine how they could do this but then when the dust is all cleared on the matter it came down to the fact that they really didn't want to serve God. They wanted to have all the blessings and privileges He provided but they also wanted to do as they pleased.

I suspect that in many cases this has not changed yet today. People want the blessings, the freedoms, and the good life God provides without doing what it takes to have a spiritually balanced diet. They don't want to read the word or they would. They don't want to take God for what He has said or they would. They don't want to worship God or they would.

In Matthew 4 we've been reading about the temptation of Jesus. In the final temptation we see the devil taking Jesus to a very high mountain. As they surveyed all the kingdoms of the world, the devil told Jesus that if He would just fall down and worship him that he would give control of all these kingdoms to Him. I suspect that the devil knew that Jesus' mission was going to ultimately provide the way for this to happen anyway. But if Jesus would worship the devil, then He could gain back the control of the world without having to go through all the pain and suffering that He did. It must have been a great temptation.

But Jesus ended the devil's temptations for the moment with these words: "*Away with you Satan! For it is written, 'You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve'*" (Verse 10). Jesus would not take the easy way out. It would not have accomplished His mission.

By the same token we must be willing to experience the spiritual in the right way. We were created to worship God. It is our duty. But aside from that if we have come to Jesus Christ in true repentance worshipping God should not be an act of duty but a pleasure to fall before the One making it possible for us to escape the death penalty of our sin. In whatever way we choose to worship God it should be done freely and willingly. Worship of God is the third course of a balanced spiritual diet for believers.

November 5

“A Tale of Two Churches”

Part 1

By Jerry D. Ousley

My wife told me one time about a dog her family had. It was a small black dog with a pedigree of “mutt” and was duly named “Blackie.” Well, according to her this dog had two natures. For instance, when company would come Blackie would wag his tail and act as friendly as any dog. But once they stepped foot outside their car he’d growl and bark and if he could get a hold on you, he’d bite.

She told of an incident where he once saw some people coming. They’d been there before so when they saw him in the yard, they opened the car door and hollered for him. He came running over, tail almost ready to wag clean off his body and hopped right up in the car with them. They petted him and he tried to lick their faces just like he was really glad to see them. But once the car stopped and they all got out he nearly had them for dinner. I don’t know if it’s possible for a dog to have a split personality like people or not but it certainly seemed like Blackie was two different dogs.

The Book of Revelation chapters 2-3 talks about seven specific congregations to which the Lord instructed John to write letters. From these letters we can glean information that is good teaching to our own congregations today as well as our individual Christian lives.

But these letters also serve another purpose in that they are representative of the seven different ages found in church history. This is not the place to go into detail about them but I want to specifically mention the last church, that of Laodicea. This was the last congregation he had written a letter to and it is very disturbing in that it relates one passage of scripture that we have often used in altar calls, as a witnessing verse and so on. It says, *“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.”* (Revelation 3:20). What’s so disturbing to me about this verse is that we must remember that John wrote this to a congregation of his day. It was written to Christians.

Now why would any Christian in his right mind put Christ out the door and allow Him to stand there knocking? But that's what Jesus told John to write.

I believe that the congregation of Laodicea was representative of the last age of church history, and folks we are living it right now. Today there are basically two churches in the world. They are ignorant of denominational boundaries and can exist simultaneously in the same congregation of people.

What separates the two are attitudes and heart matters not membership requirements. The two churches are the false, organized church of the world and the Body of Christ made up of those who have genuinely given their hearts totally to Jesus Christ. You see, going to church doesn't make anyone a Christian. Jesus did tell us not to forsake our gathering together (Hebrews 10:25) but we were never told whether there was a definition attached to that requiring once a month, once a week, or once a day. It is the coming together of believers for fellowship and worship. But what makes us a member of the one true Church is our salvation experience with Jesus Christ.

Which church do you belong to? Have you given yourself totally and honestly to Him? If you have then you belong to the true Church. If you haven't then I'm afraid you may be a part of the other church. But if so, you can make that right immediately. You can come to Jesus Christ, confess to Him that you have been a sinner, repent (or make a complete change) of sin, and then believe in your heart that He has done the work that He said He would do. If you'll do that you can assure yourself membership into the One, true Church – the one that belongs to Jesus Christ.

November 6

“A Tale of Two Churches” Part 2 By Jerry D. Ousley

In a lot of comedy movies, you'll see someone take a big drink of whatever it happens to be they are drinking just as someone else is telling them something that is shocking and instead of swallowing their drink it comes flying out of their mouths all over the place. That's spewing. I remember a time when I was a kid. It was during the Christmas/New Years holiday season. We had all kinds of things to snack on; nuts, candy, cake and fruit. I had eaten a little of all of them. Then I had a bowl of cereal with milk. Then I ate some more fruit – grapefruit to be specific. Somehow that mixture in my stomach didn't set so well. About a half hour after I had eaten, I had to make a run to the bathroom because I had some spewing to do myself.

We've been talking about the two churches that co-exist today. We have established that the congregation of Laodicea represents the church of today that is made up of the world system and organized religion. Specifically, this false church is made up of those who:

- (1) Are church attendees who have never made a commitment to Jesus Christ thinking that their good works are all that they need to be qualified for Heaven.
- (2) They have a form of Godliness but deny His power.
- (3) They are supporters of modern thinking and call those who depend on God “weak minded.”
- (4) They love their comfort and are lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God.
- (5) They love to weed out and run off true believers in Christ.
- (6) And finally, they reduce the worship of God to a mere social gospel.

Of this so-called church Jesus said that they were like lukewarm water and He would spew them out of His mouth. Even though these people making up the false church are actually against the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Bible indicates that our Lord has a great love for them. That's why He stands outside their door knocking to gain access. You see our Lord loves every soul – every man woman and child in this world whether they love Him or not. He doesn't want those in the world to be lost. He wants them to be saved.

We, as believers in Jesus Christ, need to come to this same realization. We should want to see them come into the real Church too. Do we? Are we constantly criticizing and condemning them? This isn't to say that we agree with what they are doing. It doesn't mean that we tell them that they can do whatever they want. It doesn't mean that we are to let them run roughshod over us. It does mean that despite what they do Jesus loves them and so should we.

We must find ways to help others move out of the church that is false and into the one that is true. In the tale of two churches only one can really go to Heaven. Our duty is to spread the word – the good news from God that Jesus has made a way to escape. He has taken the chains of bondage off of man that has been placed there by the false church and has given us opportunity to be free in the real Church. Come today. Come to Jesus and be a member of the real Church.

November 7

“It’s Finally Over!” By Jerry D. Ousley

Aren't you glad? I sure am. Ads all over the place - sometimes it's hard to see the yards for all those campaign signs. And evening TV is made completely un-enjoyable with the endless slurring that's going on. Why can't a candidate just speak his or her platform, and leave their opponent alone? After all, if we know what they stand for, and what they are going to try to accomplish, shouldn't that be enough for us to make our decision as to who we should vote for? You wind up voting for the one who seems to be the lesser evil of the two, and that might be decided by "eny, miny, moe! Oh well, here it goes!"

The fact of the matter is, there are some very good politicians out there who do stand for what is right. It's all those whom we aren't sure of that give the occupation a bad name. In our governmental system, elected officials are necessary or we would wind up in total chaos. Despite all the aggravation that's involved, we must pray that God will help us to make the right decision, then pray for those individuals that God will guide them during their term of office, rather than say "I knew I should have voted for the other guy."

Life is full of decisions; our choice for life's marriage partner, where we are going to live, where we are going to work, whether to buy this car or the other one. We all have to make those expensive difficult choices. But there's one choice you must think about that will affect you not only in this life, but in eternity. Will you serve God, or choose another path? Think about it. This is ultimately the most important decision you'll ever make . . .

November 8

“A Taste of Glory” By Jerry D. Ousley

Now-a-days my sense of smell isn't very good. But at one time I had a really good sense of smell especially when it came to food. Shortly after we were married, I was going to visit my parents one day. They live down a very long driveway just off the street. I had rounded the corner and was perhaps half a mile from their house when I caught a whiff of a very delightfully familiar scent. It was peanut butter fudge. As I drove down the road, I took a moment and just breathed deep being completely submerged in that wonderful odor. I knew that it had to all be in my mind but what was wrong with basking in that culinary glory? I was now completely ready for peanut butter fudge. I knew that there was no way I could smell that far away. My sense of smell was good at that time, but not that good.

As I arrived at their house, knocked on the door and then entered the living room suddenly that sweet delectable fragrance returned. I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw Mom just taking out a freshly made batch of peanut butter fudge! It goes without saying that I stayed long enough to get my fair share of that glorious candy. It was good.

Peter, James and John got a much better treat than that. In Mark 9:1-10 Jesus had been speaking to the people and told them that there were some in their midst who would not die until they had experienced with their own eyes the Kingdom of God along with its power. It is hard to imagine what everyone probably thought but I believe, had I been in that crowd, my mind would have thought about seeing Heaven. Six days later Jesus took Peter, James and John with Him up a mountain. When they arrived at the summit what they saw left them speechless. They witnessed the transformation of Jesus from a mere man to His true glorified self. Then two figures that appeared were identified in the scripture as Moses and Elijah. Unless Jesus called their names, I'm not sure how these disciples knew that they were Moses and Elijah but somehow, they did.

Always full of words but not quite knowing what to say, Peter opened his mouth and spoke, "Lord, let's put up three tents, one for You, one for Moses and one for Elijah." His intention from the reading indicates that it was for worship purposes. But it was not what the Lord wanted.

These disciples were experiencing something that no other man had ever had opportunity to experience. They were right then and there seeing the Kingdom of God in glory and power. They didn't know what else to do and so human nature kicked in and they immediately wanted to organize things.

That's just like us today. I want to talk to you for a moment about worship. We define worship as being a lot of different things. Many times, we refer to music when we talk about worship. But I want to tell you that worship has nothing to do with arrangements, music, artifacts or our physical position. Worship takes place when our hearts – the seat of our very existence – our souls – touch the heart of God. It can happen during a song that pulls us into that union with the Almighty, or it may take place as we listen to the word as spoken by a minister or other speaker but none of these things really define worship. It could happen in a group of people or when we are completely alone with God.

In John 4:23 Jesus told the woman at the well that the day was coming when those who worshipped God would do so in spirit and in truth. That is about the closest definition of worship I can imagine. When our spirits reach God in unconcealed truth then we are ready to worship our Creator. Once we have experienced this true worship, we will never be the same again. We will long for that brief contact with God. Our very souls will yearn to be in His presence. It is something that cannot be defined by any of our physical senses. It is a realization of our total inadequacy compared to God's complete power. We bow before Him because we know He is the all powerful. Then we bask in the warmth of His glory acknowledging our dependency on Him. That is worship and it is a taste of glory.

November 9

“The Meeting of the Law and Prophets”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Meetings are a necessary evil in life, at least to me. I realize that some meetings are important in the decision-making process but I have to tell you that I just don't like meetings. I've been in a lot of meetings that were a total waste of time and I've been in meetings that made me feel guilty for not wanting to go because in the long run they turned out to be very informative.

At a certain place I worked for a few years our plant manager had to participate in a daily telephonic meeting. It was a meeting of all the different plants with the main plant in Dayton Ohio. He would sometimes spend an hour to an hour and a half each day at those meetings. I worked in the office just outside of his. He would always shut the door but the walls were thin and although my intentions weren't to eavesdrop you could hear much of the conversation in the outer office. One particular meeting had gone on longer than normal. I continued doing my job with the muffled noise in the background when all of a sudden, I heard this loud crash. I jumped up to see if everything was alright and when I opened his door, I found the plant manager picking himself up from the floor saying, "Everything's okay," in answer to those on the other end of the phone asking, "What's going on?" He had leaned back in his chair and had fallen asleep. Apparently, he got a little too comfortable and he fell out of his chair. It's a good thing that it was a telephonic meeting!

In Mark 9:1-10 Peter, James and John were privileged to attend a meeting with Jesus. But this was not your ordinary every day meeting. Jesus was changed to His full glory right before their eyes and then two more Biblical VIPs showed up – Moses and Elijah. There is a host of spiritual giants from the past that could have also taken part in that meeting but their presence would not have been nearly as significant as these two gentlemen. The Bible talks several times about the law and the prophets. This meeting was literally with the Law and the Prophets.

God had given the law to Moses and Elijah very proficiently represented the prophets. It was significant because Jesus had come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. The Law, as given to Moses, represented God's instructions to man. The promise was that if the Law was kept totally without breaking then that individual would be considered as being in God's grace.

But as far as I know Jesus was the only one who fully kept the law without breaking a single commandment. The prophets foretold of the coming Messiah and so it was significant that they also be represented at this meeting. Jesus not only fulfilled the law and the prophets but He also went a step further by dying on the cross willingly for our sin and so He became the sacrifice to clear us from breaking the law. Again, this was a very significant meeting.

There is nowhere in the scripture that tells us that the law has been annulled. The things spoken by the prophets still hold true today. But because of what Jesus did for us we can have our own meeting with the Law and the Prophets. That meeting starts out like one of defeat. There we stand guilty as accused. The Law and the Prophets stand as our accusers because we have broken their word. That's how the meeting starts.

But the ending is one of complete victory. We stand guilty there is no doubt. Then in steps Jesus. He paid for our sin. He took the blame for our inability to keep the law and the word of the prophets. He takes His place in the meeting on our side, in our defense and tells the law and the prophets, "This person is guilty it is true. But I have paid their debt. Their sin has been attributed to my account and I have forgiven them. They are no longer guilty." Now that's the kind of meetings I like!

November 10

“Hearing from God” By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*here's a story that goes something like this. A certain man by the name of Norman, who was also a bit lazy, was struggling with the existence of God. Not only was he a bit lazy but he was also a bit greedy. So, Norman decided to put God to the test. He prayed, "God, if you are real then I'm asking you to prove yourself to me. I'm asking you to let me win the lottery. If you are as powerful as people say you are then this will be a simple thing for you to do." Norman ended his selfish prayer and went on about his business all the while thinking how rich he was going to be if God was real.

Several days past and nothing happened. Then two months passed and still nothing happened. Norman decided to go to a church and let the minister there know that he had found out that God wasn't real after all. But when he got there even though the doors were open it seemed no one was around. Norman decided to just tell his thoughts to God even though he had come to believe that He wasn't real. He said, "See, I knew you weren't real. I asked you one simple little thing and nothing happened." Just then Norman heard a booming voice that seemed to come right out of the sky saying, "Give me a break, will you? Give me something to work with here. Will you at least buy a lottery ticket?"

In Mark 9:1-10 Peter, James and John also heard the voice of God. They had just witnessed the very powerful transformation of Jesus showing His amazing glory and had seen Moses and Elijah with their very own eyes. Not knowing what else to do Peter blurted out, "Lord we should put up three tents; one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." The inference was to give them a place of honor and also to worship them. Of course, they should have realized that they were bordering on sin right then and there because only God was to be worshipped.

That's when they heard the booming voice of God from Heaven that brought their attention back to what was important. God told them, "This is my much-loved Son. Listen to Him." Plainly and simply God got them back on track and in a way they wouldn't soon forget.

We talk a lot today about hearing from God. While I would never limit God by saying that He doesn't speak audibly from Heaven any more, I don't know many people who have

heard the audible voice of God. I'm not saying that there aren't any around today; just that I don't know them. I have never heard the actual voice of God. I'd say most of you haven't either.

But that doesn't mean that we can't hear from Him. More often than not God speaks to our hearts – the seat of our souls. It can come as simply as a suggestion in our minds, or a reminder in our conscience that something is right or wrong. Sometimes it seems like it's hard to know if it is really Him or not but there are ways to know. For instance, He will not speak anything to us that goes against the Bible. He won't tell us to do something that is wrong or that will hurt someone else. God's actual voice can be very powerful. Just read in Exodus how the people reacted when God spoke to them, or remember Job when God spoke to him from the whirlwind.

God may never speak to you or me audibly, at least not on this planet while we are alive. But I'm sure that He is speaking to us. He's giving us the direction we need. Sometimes we've just got to be still for awhile and listen to Him.

November 11

“A Wineskin in Smoke” By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*he other day I was cleaning in the garage and found an old soda bottle. This was not a plastic bottle or even a disposable glass bottle but one of the old sixteen-ounce returnable bottles (for those of you who care to remember). To be specific it was an old Big Red bottle. This was no ordinary old returnable bottle mind you but a very special one. It was burnt black around the neck and edges because when our children were small, we used this bottle every year to shoot bottle rockets on the Fourth of July. As I held that old pop bottle a lot of memories filled my head.

The bottle wasn't much to look at. As I said the neck and top of the bottle were covered with black carbon as a result of all those bottle rockets being fired from it. The smoke had stained the bottle and quite honestly most people would probably have thrown it away but not me. It was a very sentimental item and I carefully put it away. Who knows, we may need that when our grandchildren get old enough to enjoy bottle rockets!

Psalm 119:83 tells us, *“For I have become like a wineskin in smoke, yet I do not forget Your statutes.”* The wineskin was the bottle of ancient days. They would take a new wineskin and fill it with new wine. As it fermented it would make the skin stretch. As they hung in the kitchens of their day, they would become dingy, dirty and dried out from exposure to the smoke from the open oven/fireplace. I can almost imagine the Psalmist looking for a way to express how he felt when he looked over and saw the wineskin hanging there. The outer surface was covered with cracks from exposure and looked old and worn out. Its days were numbered and he would have to replace it soon. Looking at that dirty, dingy, smoke-covered wineskin, he too felt like his days were numbered. He must have felt useless and worn out from all the mileage placed on his body over the years.

David knew what this was like. He was a godly man and had loved God since his early childhood. He had spent many days watching the sheep, writing psalms and praying to God. Out there all alone he had become very close to God. Close enough that when the day came for him to face the giant, Goliath, he had no fear because he knew that God was with him. After that he married Saul's daughter, Micah, and because of the jealousy of his favor with the people by his father-in-law, Saul, he spent several years running for his life. Finally, after

Saul's death he was made king of all Israel and led them into one victory after another until all their enemies had been conquered. During his latter days and the days of his son Solomon, Israel experienced power and peace like never before in history.

But in the later part of David's life, he sinned against God. He committed adultery and had Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, murdered on the battle field in attempt to cover up his sin. He also went directly against God's word in numbering the people. He was severely punished for these crimes and paid many years in the rebellion of his own son, Absalom.

David knew what a wineskin in smoke must have felt like. You can read the words of pain and loneliness he wrote in the Book of Psalms. Yet despite his failure he never let go of God. He stood faithful and true. When people came against him, even his own flesh and blood, he never stopped depending on God.

We fail sometimes. If we fall hard enough, we will certainly pay. Sometimes the penalty of sin is carried within the sin itself. It causes hardship and pain. But despite those things we can still hold on to God. We may feel like an old wineskin that's hung under the smoke for years. We may be brittle, cracked, smudged and dirty. But we can know that we have held on to God. He won't let us down. He knows how to use old smoke-covered wineskins.

November 12

“Job Felt Like a Wineskin in Smoke”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Have you ever had a boil? I have. They hurt. I can't really tell you what they hurt like because they hurt like a boil and unless you've had a boil you don't know how they feel. Trust me; they hurt. It was in Bible College. At one time I probably had up to five boils in my private parts. I don't know what caused them but I can tell you that they were not any fun. Not only did they hurt but they itched. But when you scratched, they hurt worse. I've had a boil or two since then but four or five at a time is torture.

Because of my own minor experience, I've always felt a little kinship with Job. Talk about suffering loss! He invented the definition. Think about it for a moment; in a single day he received news that all his herds (which was a great part of his wealth) was lost. His great wealth was decreased to nothing not in a week or a month but in a single day. Back in the days of the depression we're told that people committed suicide because of the loss of their wealth. It isn't recorded anywhere that Job thought about suicide from the reading of the word. In fact, he took the news pretty good considering everything.

Now imagine that pain of loss magnified when on the very same day he received word that his children had been celebrating together and a great wind had taken down the house killing them all. Not only his wealth but the sons and daughters that he loved and the promise of descendants (which was very important in those days) – was all gone in a single day! That was tragic loss. It had to be a very horrific experience.

But it gets worse. A short time later God gave the devil permission to torture Job with pain (as if he hadn't already). He woke up one morning covered - not with four or five boils but from head to foot with boils. Ouch! I really don't know how he took it. The Bible paints a picture of him sitting in an ash pile scratching those painful, itching sores with a piece of broken pottery. He had lost everything he had. He had lost all his children in a single day. Now in another single day he lost his health and wished for death (notice again that he didn't think about suicide but it didn't mean that he didn't recognize that he'd be better off dead).

But that still wasn't the end of it. Not only did he suffer all these losses but his best, most trusted friends showed up to comfort him, only instead of giving comfort all they could

seem to do was accuse him of some great sin. Job knew he hadn't committed the sins they accused him of. But he couldn't for the life of him seem to understand why God would put him in the place he had found himself. If anyone felt like a dried out, dingy and dirty wineskin hanging in smoke it was Job.

Let me share some words that Job spoke. Oh, he did his share of complaining and questioning of God. He couldn't understand what he had done to deserve such punishment. But despite his human feelings, despite the justification brought on by all his suffering he said, *"Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."* (Job 13:15). Think about that for a moment. There was no doubt that God had allowed all these calamities to come upon Job. His accusers knew it and Job knew it too. Job could have reacted in anger at God; he could have lain in his ash pile and cried, "Why me Lord?" But despite all his pain both inside and out, he declared that if God allowed his life to end and put even more on him, still he would trust in God.

There are many today who are reading this that can justifiably ask God, "Why?" You don't understand why you need to go through pain. It is beyond you even though you have spent hours, days or weeks thinking about it. You may have said, "God what have I done to deserve this?" Perhaps it is pain caused by rebelling children and you find yourself asking God, "Where did I go wrong in raising my children?" The fact of the matter is you may have done nothing wrong. For reasons beyond us God knows that the thing you are even now experiencing will ultimately make you stronger. You feel dried out, cracked, dirty and dingy just like that wineskin hanging in smoke. But hang on. Don't give up. Say like Job, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him!" Make that statement your theme song if you have to. I know the Master who has the power to restore that dried up wineskin. He can and will make things right. Just hang on a little longer; you'll see.

November 13

“Do You Feel Like a Wineskin in Smoke?”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Back when I was a junior in high school, I had a knot rise up on the left side of my neck. I didn't think much of it for a while but it continued to grow. My parents took me to see a doctor and it was diagnosed as a cyst. We were told that it would be a simple operation to remove and that the scar would be minimal and would eventually shrink to the point that no one would ever be able to tell it was there.

I won't go into all the details because it would just take too long. However, if you see me today, I still carry a very large and noticeable scar where the cyst was removed. I've learned to live with it and to be honest there's a decent testimony that comes from that scar. It has served on many occasions to be a door opener to witness for the Lord.

Being a small kid in school and getting picked on a lot I used to make good use of that scar by telling people I had gotten into a knife fight and that they should see the other guy. Of course, that wasn't true and I would always make sure that those I told knew that I was kidding (well, nearly always). Still, it made some wonder, and I think it made me appear to be tougher than I really was. Sometimes those scars in life can be useful.

For the past few days, we've been talking about a wineskin in smoke. Psalm 119:83 tells us about this situation. Their wineskins (or bottles) would be left hanging in their makeshift kitchens that utilized an open fire pit on which they cooked. This would cause the room to be very smoky and over time that wineskin would begin showing the results of the exposure to the smoke. It would begin to dry and crack and be covered with a sooty substance. The Psalmist compared trials, tests, sickness and the wear and tear of life to this smoke-exposed wineskin.

Have you ever felt like a leather bottle hanging in the smoke? I'd say most of us have at one time or another. What does that feel like? Your personal situation leaves you feeling dried out. You may feel dark and dingy, maybe even dirty because of your exposure. You may feel like you are done for and that there is no hope. The bad news is that most of us feel like that at one time or another. We can get over some things but there are others that we may never get over.

Still there is good news: If we are guilty of sin like in David's case, God will forgive us if we will repent. I've often said that the day we first repent of our sin is only the beginning. Over the years we'll find ourselves repenting more and more as we fail God or as He shows us something else in our lives that needs changing. Repentance is a regular practice for believers in Jesus Christ. God will forgive us and yes, this is a guarantee. However, we've got to go a step further and accept God's forgiveness and be willing to forgive ourselves. God always forgives. But sometimes we aren't willing to forgive ourselves and if we don't accept God's forgiveness then it nullifies our hope. What we are guilty of may require us to ask forgiveness of others, but then that's the restoration process.

If it is emotional, a result of loss in our lives, or sickness striking our bodies we have hope of healing. Whether we receive healing or not, the deeper healing comes in that we can be changed in our attitudes. It requires us to realize like Job that even if God allows death to come to us, we will trust Him. Trusting Him means that we realize that God knows what He is doing, that His love will never leave us, and whatever we go through He goes through it with us. Maybe our scars will never be removed just like the one I carry on my neck. But inside that dingy, smoke smelly, dried-up bottle is brand new life – young life in an old bottle!

November 14

“Serving Two Masters”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I know you’ve heard the worn-out expression, “Trying to burn the candle at both ends.” If you’re like me there have been times that we’ve had to put that old saying to the test. Let me tell you from personal experience that when we do this there’s only one place to hold on to that candle and that’s in the middle. As the candle burns shorter and shorter on each end, one of two things is going to eventually happen; either we hold on too long and we get burned or it gets too hot and we drop it. It is not something we can do forever.

It’s the same in life; when we try to do too much it’s just like burning a candle at both ends and eventually, we’re going to run into a problem that we can’t handle requiring us to make a choice, or we just get burned out and drop the whole thing. Back in the days when we were pastors, we often found ourselves burning the candle at both ends. In fact, there were times when we had it burning at both ends and several places through the middle! I was working a full-time job and trying to fulfill the role as senior pastor while my wife was putting in twelve-to-fourteen-hour days cleaning coordinating and taking care of a Youth Center for the congregation. It came to the point that we were only home together one evening per week and honestly there was so much that had to be done that we felt guilty about having that one evening each week to ourselves. Now isn’t that ridiculous? We were way too busy and still there was always something else to do. I’m glad those days are over!

In Matthew 6:24 and again in Luke 16:13 Jesus talked about this very thing. He called it “Trying to serve two masters” or two bosses. Those who have tried to dedicate themselves to two full-time jobs know well what Jesus was referring to. There will come a time when the jobs conflict with each other and then you have to make a choice as to which one you’re going to be loyal to. Somebody’s not going to understand and the result could be the loss of one of those jobs. Jesus finished his comparison by saying that we could not serve God and Mammon.

The word “mammon” in the truest definition is wealth personified; in other words, wealth with a personality. The only way wealth can have a personality is when it takes on the personality of its owner. Serving the Lord and serving wealth is impossible. I’m not saying that it is wrong to be rich. There’s no sin in money. How can a piece of paper defined as a certificate of deposit – a dollar bill - be evil? It isn’t. But the greed that compels people to lie,

cheat, steal, murder, rob, lust, hate and envy is very evil. That's what usually comes into the heart of those who are serving mammon.

Mammon causes the heart of the individual to be turned away from serving God and concentrating only on how to get more. 1 Timothy 6:10 tells us that the love of money is the root of all evil. Think about it; this verse is saying that all the evil that takes place in the world stems from the desire for wealth. The desire for wealth stems from trying to escape the curse of work that was put on mankind when Adam and Eve sinned in Eden. If you have enough wealth you don't have to work because you can have anything you want. The problem with that is this: even if one gets enough wealth to last them the rest of their lives they still aren't satisfied. There are more billionaires in the world today that at any other time in history. How in the world could a person not live on a billion dollars, or a measly million dollars? Still the race is on to have more and more and more.

But Jesus said that we can't be loyal to both. We will despise or hate one or the other. We can't serve two masters. Jesus didn't say that the rich couldn't go to heaven. But the rich really face a trial of which most of us cannot relate. I hear someone saying, "I'd sure like to give it a try." Well, me too but so far God hasn't allowed it, and, well, He's my Master so if I ever get rich it will only be through and by Him. So, I guess the only thing left to do is to choose. Which master are we going to serve? Will we serve God (who in reality makes a billionaire look like a pauper) or mammon? Hmmm? Which is it going to be?

November 15

“Friends with Mammon” By Jerry D. Ousley

A*ll* of us who work outside the home report to an individual who tells us what to do and gives us direction in our jobs. That person may or may not be a believer in Jesus Christ. However, it is highly advisable that we do what that person tells us to do as long as it isn't illegal, immoral or against our Christian principles. The reason for this is that if we don't, we may not have a job tomorrow. We are subject to that person and that employer and depend on them for our daily income.

Wouldn't it be nice to not have to depend on someone else for our income? But we all do. Regardless what country we might live in or what our job is, even if we are the proprietors of our own business, we depend on others to make our living. If we are self-employed, we depend on getting business from other people whether they are believers or not. If we turn down jobs because someone isn't a Christian, we probably won't be in business very long.

The Apostle Paul depended on others to make his living. He refused to take offerings from the congregations he visited, at least for himself, and the Bible tells us that he made his living as a tent maker. Now the Bible doesn't say this but if I were a betting man my money would be on the fact that Paul didn't refuse to make a tent for a non-believer.

We have established that the word “Mammon” means “wealth personified.” It is, in other words, the driving force of money – the greed and desire to have more and more as well as the power that goes along with it. There's nothing wrong with money and thank God for that or we'd have a much rougher way to go in this world. We all need to make a living. Each country and society may have slightly different ideas of this concept but it is a fact in life.

In Luke 16:9 Jesus told us to make friends with mammon. It does sound a bit strange to think about being friends with something that is so dangerous and detrimental to us and it sounds a bit like a contradiction with Matthew 6:24 (which is repeated in Luke 16:11). In these verses Jesus told us that we can't serve two masters and brought the illustration down to serving God and/or mammon. We can't serve two masters. It would seem on the surface then that the best thing to do would be to flee mammon in order to resist temptation.

But Jesus also knew that we had to make a living. So, what is He saying here? He's telling us that even though we must serve God it is smart to make friends with mammon being very careful not to become a slave to it. We have to pay for things. I couldn't type this up, post it on the internet or tell you about it without mammon. I have to buy the computer, pay for internet access, pay for the website hosting, not to mention, the electric bill, or this lesson wouldn't even be possible.

It takes a wise individual to know how to make a living but also know how to stop short of serving mammon. The key is always putting our true Master first. As Christians we need to seek the Lord in our financial decisions. We must avoid impulse buying in order to keep ourselves as free from debt as we possibly can. Debt leads to a great temptation to serve mammon. I'm not saying that debt is serving mammon but it most certainly can be because if we are too deep in debt then we put great pressure on ourselves to make more and more money.

Being friends with mammon is beneficial because if we fail, we can lean on our financial sources. That's what Jesus was saying. If we have been faithful to pay our financial obligations and we have been good stewards with what God has entrusted to us then when things get tough, we've got something we can depend on. Is this saying that God won't take care of us? Absolutely not! But since Jesus told us this, doesn't it stand to reason that making friends with mammon is one of those God-given resources? So, let me ask you, are you serving mammon or are you just friends?

November 16

“What’s the Straight About Mammon?” By Jerry D. Ousley

I had an uncle who I feel had the wrong idea about mammon. I don’t want to speak evil of the departed and I did have a love for my uncle but he was wrong in the way he handled money.

We were at my parent’s house one day talking about inheritance. My uncle and his wife were visiting and he happened to be listening in on the conversation that was going on. My view and stand was (and still is) that if it came down to arguing, fighting and fussing over what my parents would leave behind when they were gone, that I’d just walk away from it. I mean that; I’d rather not inherit a thing as to fight and fuss with my siblings about those things Mom and Dad may leave behind. To me, that’s a gross lack of respect and doesn’t reflect our love very well. I’d rather not have anything as to disrespect them.

Anyway, my uncle heard me saying these words. After a moment he walked into the room and said, “Well I’ll tell you one thing; if I’ve got a dime coming to me, I want it!”

My uncle professed to be a Christian. He went to church regularly. But on more than one occasion he had gotten what he wanted sometimes by shady practices. He had a familiarly unique way of separating church and state; he simply thought of finances as business that had nothing to do with serving God.

While I don’t stand in judgment of my uncle (he had to answer to God for himself), I do want to go on record as saying that we can’t leave God out of our finances. I don’t believe all the things being said today by so-called prosperity teachers, but I know that God should be an integral part and a regular partner in our finances.

We need to put together what Jesus was talking about in Matthew 6:24 and Luke 16:9-11. On one hand Jesus told us that we can’t serve two masters, referring to God and mammon. We can’t. We will wind up being faithful to one and forsaking the other. That’s dangerous because the greater temptation is to forsake God and be faithful to mammon. Riches can indeed be a cruel master. While money is necessary in our lives the old saying

that “money isn’t everything,” is very true. We have to have it but we don’t have to serve it. As a matter of fact, I’d rather be the poorest of poor rather than to serve mammon instead of God.

Even though Jesus warned us about serving mammon He also told us to make friends with mammon so that when we fail, we can still have a place to live (everlasting habitations). In a nut shell Jesus was telling us very simply to know how to handle money and put God first.

In another instance the disciples of Jesus had asked Him if a rich man could make it to Heaven. Jesus answered by saying something like this: “It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into Heaven.” For many years I thought He was referring to a needle you sew with. It is impossible to fit a camel through that little hole. In fact, I can barely get a thread to go through it after a half hour of trying! So, I always thought that Jesus was saying that a rich man couldn’t get into Heaven and so reasoned that it was a sin to be rich. But what Jesus was referring to was the low hanging arches over the streets of those ancient cities. A camel passing through town would have to sometimes get down on its knees in order to fit under those arches. They were called needles. So, in essence Jesus wasn’t saying that a rich man couldn’t get into Heaven but that it required him to take extra measures to do so. He would have to spend some time on his knees in order to put God first and not yield to the temptation of serving mammon. We’ve got to have money but we don’t have to serve it. Make your master Jesus Christ and listen to Him when it comes to being friends with mammon.

November 17

“In The Valley” By Jerry D. Ousley

In the early 1990's I received a devastating blow. I'm sure that there are several of you who can completely identify with this problem. My job of five years was coming to an end. We had been given notice that the printing plant was going to be shut down. It was something no one could have predicted and hard to imagine how it felt unless you have experienced it.

I was in a better position than most because I was given the choice of relocating either to Dayton, Ohio or Johnston City, Tennessee. It was exciting to think about moving to another state and a part of me really wanted to do that. However, we were pastors of the church in Crothersville, Indiana. A person has a sense of a higher call. We had preached that God would take care of His people if they would only trust in Him and so now, we had to literally put those words to the test as an example to our congregation. So, we made the decision that we were going to throw ourselves on the mercy of God and refuse the relocation proposals.

It wasn't easy going to work knowing that each day brought me closer to the end. I couldn't just go find another job right away because in order to collect the offered severance pay, we had to work up until the official closing date. It seemed like we were stuck between heaven and Earth. We were preparing to enter the valley.

In Joshua 7 and 8 we read the account of the Battle of Ai. The history of this battle, in a nutshell, was that God had just led the people of Israel in a great victory over Jericho. The witness to the people of that victory left them feeling invincible. They were now facing another battle with Ai. It was a smaller city and so without consulting God the elders of Israel proposed to only send around 3000 men. They felt that it would be an easy victory. But it wasn't. Israel was sorely defeated and lost thirty-six men in the battle. Now the people wondered what was going on.

To make a long story short it turned out that a man named Achan had not followed God's instructions at Jericho. They were not to take anything at all as spoils of the battle, but were to destroy everything. However, Achan saw a change of clothing that really took his eye, so along with a bar of silver he returned after the battle to his tent where he buried these items.

I guess he thought that later on, after some time had passed, he could wear his new outfit and begin to spend his silver and no one would know what he had done. But God knew.

Because of Achan's sin God had allowed Ai to miserably defeat Israel. That sin was found out and Achan paid for it with his life. But the damage had been done. Joshua and the people had to humble themselves before God. The Lord gave Joshua a plan to recover but it first required him to enter a valley.

In our Christian experience we have ups and downs. Our ups are usually referred to as "mountain-tops" while our downs are called "valleys." We all have them. There are times when it seems everything is just going like clockwork, we're hitting on all cylinders and life is humming along. During those times we may feel like we've got it together with God and nothing can rob us of it. But in order to continue arriving at "Mountain-Top" experiences we are required to enter the valleys in-between. The situation I described above about losing my job was one of those valleys. I know you have experienced your own valleys and you may be in one right now.

God's plan, more often than not, will include valleys. It's because He knows we can't learn on the top of mountains. The view may be great. Being on top of life always feels better. But if we really want to learn about God, grow in our experience with Him, and become strong Christians we've got to go through valleys. We learn in the valleys. Sometimes we learn not to do things that we have done in the past. Sometimes we learn how to deal with pain, grief, suffering and hardship in the valley. How can we ever tell someone else how to get victory in their lives unless we know firsthand? There are lessons that no classroom can ever teach. These lessons only come through valley-experiences. We're going to see how Joshua was able to turn his valley into a victory. We don't want to stay in valleys but while we're there let's learn what God wants us to know.

November 18

“The Attack of the Enemy” By Jerry D. Ousley

Last time we began telling you the story of how we lost a job due to a plant closure. We took what we thought to be the noble route of staying with our congregation instead of relocating to another part of the country in order to keep the job. Surely God would bless us because we chose to remain with the congregation the Lord had placed us over.

The funny thing is that just after we made the decision to stay it began to rain. It rained all day on Friday and all of Friday night. I got up before anyone else in our house on Saturday morning and looked out the window. Water stood over the streets, over the yards and to be frank it looked like our house was an island out in the middle of a very large lake. To say the least I got a little concerned and thought to myself, “I’m going to have to wake everyone up so they can get ready because I think we’re going to have to evacuate.”

But the rain began to subside. The sump pump in the basement was working overtime but thankfully we were going to be okay. A couple of hours later one of our elders knocked at the door with bad news. The church building hadn’t escaped as easily in those nine inches of rain. In fact, water had filled the basement (where two full oil tanks had overturned pouring out all their contents) and had risen to around six inches inside the building. We would have to replace the furnace, all the electricity, all the floors in the building as well as the walls. The structure was not only ruined by flood water but also by nearly five hundred gallons of fuel oil that had permeated everything.

We did not have flood insurance, the building was unusable, I didn’t have a job but the Lord had told us to stay. How could the Lord do this to us? We now had no job and seemingly no church!

The point of this story is that when you get in the valley the enemy is certain to attack. Joshua spent that night in the valley with a few thousand men. Of course, God had given them a plan to ambush the city but he and his men would take the brunt of the enemy’s attack until the time was right.

Often, we descend from the mountain top of victory into the valley. It may be a sickness we don't understand; it could be a financial crisis that we don't feel we deserve. Perhaps our character is being unduly questioned; or it could be a host of other things that drives us into the valley. While we are there we will be attacked. Sometimes that attack is severe. It is meant by the enemy to defeat us and maybe even force us to turn our back on our Lord and Savior. He whispers things that aren't true, like, "See, Jesus has forsaken you," or "You never had the goods anyway. Just give up and forget it!" His goal is to use the valley against us.

The enemy poured out like a flood from Ai to come against Joshua and his men. Even though God had given them a plan, until it had been executed it had to seem like he was forsaken until the right time came.

Our enemy has one goal when it comes to you and I; he wants us stopped. He wants us destroyed. He wants to completely annihilate us. He wants to do this because we pose a great threat to his plan. We stand for the Lord God Almighty. Our witness destroys his kingdom and he wants us out of the way.

When we find ourselves in the valley remember that God has a plan. He won't leave us alone forever. If we will stand firm and hold to our guns, rescue is on the way. We will make it and when we climb up out of this valley the mountain-view will be even more spectacular than we could ever imagine. Resist the devil like the Bible says in James 4:7 and guess what ... he will flee from YOU.

November 19

“The Rescue of the Lord” By Jerry D. Ousley

T**O** finish the story we began, I had lost my job, our church building had been destroyed and our small congregation found itself worshipping in the recreation center of another church in town (and thank God for them). The denomination we were a part of had managed to scrape together a sum of around \$18,000.00 to help us. We were thankful because we knew if we made it stretch and did most of the work ourselves, we could get the job done.

I had to take a second shift production job in order to keep our bills paid and put food on the table for a few months. There’s nothing wrong with working second shift but have you ever tried to pastor a church and work second shift? It isn’t easy at all, let me tell you.

We had services for a whole year in that recreation center while the men of our church spent every spare minute they could replacing floors, putting up drywall, installing a new furnace, painting and more. By the time we were finally able to return to our building our congregation had dwindled down to between fifteen and twenty people.

But we were home. God really did have a plan because we not only wound up with a better building but He began blessing our faithfulness while we were in the valley and we soon began to grow. Some people who had left returned and we actually gained families after that. It had been a trial but God was in it all the way.

In Joshua 8 after spending all night in the valley Joshua waited for the certain attack of the army of Ai. It came the next morning and it wore hard upon them. But God had given them a plan. As the men poured out of Ai those of Israel who had been in hiding came out, took the city and set it on fire. When the smoke began to ascend the army of Ai knew something was up. The men who had destroyed the city began to attack Ai from the rear and the five thousand men Joshua had hidden on the sidelines appeared. They lit in to the army of Ai and quickly defeated their enemy. God gave them a great victory that day.

So, it is with us. As we have said there are periods in our lives when we must descend into the valley. Those times aren't fun to say the least. They are trying, testing and hard times. During those times our enemy, the devil, will certainly come on the scene and magnify things so as to completely destroy us. But we've got to do like Joshua and hold our position firm.

God has a plan. He loves His children more than we could ever know. He will not leave us alone in the valley. In the very popular twenty-third Psalm David said this: "*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me*" (verse 4). Even though it may feel like we are in that dark valley all by ourselves we are not. God is ever present and He is right there with us.

Sometimes in order to teach us He will allow us to feel sad, down, gloomy and desperate. But He really is right there. He really does have a plan of action. He is certainly going to get us through that terrible plight if we will only hang with Him. He will come to our rescue.

The next time you find yourself in the valley remember how wonderful you felt when you came through the last one. Remember how much you learned during your last trial. Know that God will not let us down but He will go with us through each and every valley we have to cross in life. And when we come to that final valley – the one called "the Shadow of Death," we will know that He is surely with us. He will get us through it too. When we emerge from that final valley, we will find ourselves in a land that is only one great big mountain top. It's the land of God. He has a plan. He will gain the victory. He will rescue us. All we need to do is spend the night in the valley.

November 20

“Here They Comes Again ...” By Jerry D. Ousley

What are you talking about? Already? We haven't finished paying for last year yet. Are you sure we've seen eleven months since last year? The answer to all these questions is of course, "Yes." We're talking about that wonderful time of the year when we celebrate, get time off from work, eat until we think we're the turkey (literally), and spend, spend, spend on an endless list of gifts for Uncle Henry, Aunt Susie, and Cousin Jim, twice removed.

The fact of the matter is, we have made this wonderful, joyous, fun-filled time of year to become a dread and drudgery because of the commercialism that's now involved. Have you noticed in the department stores, Halloween costumes and Christmas trees sit almost next to each other? Thanksgiving seems left out entirely except for in the food stores.

If we took a poll, I'd almost be willing to wager that ninety-seven percent of us have said at one time or another "What I'd give for just an old-fashioned Christmas Holiday." What we are really longing for is a time we remember as children when the Holidays were fun, pure, simple, and relaxing.

They may never be the same to us again. Unfortunately, no one has successfully invented a time machine yet, so we probably will never be able to go back to "The Good Ole' Days." However, we can begin now by looking at the upcoming Holidays for what they really mean. I'm talking about being thankful, not just on Thanksgiving Day, but each and every day. And what would happen in our lives if we took the spirit of giving just as God gave to us and begin giving now, not just gifts of things but gifts of ourselves to others? What changes might occur in us if we could have different attitudes, take the dread of being busy out of the Holidays and replace it with what these special days started out to be? Let's work on this, shall we? Who knows what might happen in our lives ...

.....

November 21

“Thanksgiving” By Debbie Ousley

A *little* girl who was a part of the Youth Center we had at one time shared this thought about Thanksgiving with us. Thank you, Patience.

“Thanksgiving is a time of the year when we all give thanks to the ones we love. But it all is not just saying “thanks.” It is showing it. Most of the time families fix a big dinner. In my family the turkey is a big part of the dinner. Thanksgiving is a big part in the year. It is when you take the time to remember all the good things the people have done for you and go back and thank them, even if you already have. And that is my point of view about Thanksgiving.” – Patience

The way we treat those in our lives, whether family or strangers is a reflection of how we treat God. *“If you have fed, clothed, visited or welcomed the least of these, you have done it unto Me” (Matthew 25:34-46).*

The way we see and appreciate what others do for us is a small witness to how we acknowledge and appreciate what God does for us. And as we also come with a thankful heart we also come with a heart of giving. So, I guess, “enough said.” THANKS-GIVING.

November 22

“With Thanksgiving” By Jerry D. Ousley

The holidays are fun, aren't they? Well, aren't they? Tomorrow we will be feasting on Thanksgiving Dinner, watching football and then on to Christmas shopping. I'll never understand why the ladies want to get up before dawn the day after Thanksgiving, hit the road to their favorite mall and turn from ladies to raging maniacs. I'd much rather spend the day watching action movies or something.

The holidays are times when a lot of us put on a few extra pounds due to multiple dinners on Thanksgiving and Christmas. We all know what it's like to want to please all those extended families. I've known of some who have eaten as many as three full dinners on Thanksgiving Day. How can you not put on some extra tonnage? I'd like to think that my current weight situation is due to the many holiday dinners I've had over the years, but that's probably just a good excuse on my part.

The holidays can also cause us to be anxious. Don't you just love the way TV commercials advertise the latest and best in toys, video games and clothing styles this time of year? I guess who can blame them. After all they're just trying to make a living too. But then we've got to get to the mall the morning after Thanksgiving, stand in line for possibly hours waiting for the store to open, then rush like we're racing for a million bucks to get one of those items that every kid wants for Christmas – but there's only a limited supply. Man, I think I'd rather face line blockers; at least they only want control of the ball and don't want to step on your face to beat you in line – all to spend your hard-earned money for a gift that little Johnny will play with for two weeks and then put on the shelf as another Christmas memento.

As Thanksgiving begins, let's first of all remember what the original holiday was all about. It was to give thanks to God for a good harvest and for having enough food to get through the hard winter. I'd say that we've come a long way since those first days, wouldn't you?

Giving thanks to God is something that should be a daily routine for us. Giving thanks with an attitude of real gratitude can work wonders in our lives. It causes us to slow down and think about all those simple, daily things we so easily take for granted. It also helps to ease

those anxious emotions that have been proven to aggravate and actually cause sickness and disease. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6: "*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God ...*" Try it this season. It will make all the difference in your world.

November 23

“Thanksgiving” By Debbie Ousley

Thanksgiving - Giving Thanks

Is there a new thought I can give to you about Thanksgiving? Maybe just a “Now” thought, one that we know, or have known, but need reminded of. The true meaning of these special holidays, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, etc. have suffered because of the same reason our family unity and Church unity have begun to suffer - Lack of commitment.

Commitment and enthusiasm are two elements we need to make anything special. It's contagious (enthusiasm). I'm not saying to make it bigger and better (remember, we're talking about the true meaning of this holiday) - “GIVING THANKS.” I'm talking about the enthusiasm to gather our loved ones together (even if you haven't seen your brother for a year). “Don't make plans; we are going to be together Thanksgiving Day.” Commitment - “I'll BE THERE!” “I won't let work, friends, or high water keep me away!”

Thanksgiving is not necessarily a Christian holiday, but freedom for it was one reason for the big move. These holidays are not nearly as old as the “Gospel Story,” but like it, time has not smothered out, lack of commitment not stopped it, nor did lack of enthusiasm silence it, because, contrary to opinion, most American people know where their strengths and blessings come from and we are THANKFUL.

The “biggy” that robs us of being thankful is always wanting more. This drive has become a monster eating up any sense of accomplishment and thankfulness before we can enjoy it. Being thankful is an attitude that should be present in our lives all the year, not just on Thanksgiving Day.

But it's nice we have a day off work to celebrate it. That's one thing we can be thankful for, Amen?

November 24

“A Time of Thanksgiving” By Jerry D. Ousley

This is the day of feasting! My mouth can't wait for a generous “chunk” of that succulent turkey, delicious ham, mashed potatoes and a sundry of wonderfully prepared vegetables. And then, just when you think you can't eat another bite, your eyes fall on the table covered with deserts that make your mouth juices begin to flow. It's fun.

But the celebration sometimes misses the mark. We feast in celebration of the time when the Pilgrims gathered with the Native Americans, who were largely responsible for teaching them how to raise their crops in the New World, and feasted. It was a time of giving thanks to God for blessing, life, and friendship, all of which are very worthy of thanksgiving.

I'm happy for time off from work to honor this precious holiday. But I can't help but think, “Shouldn't we be just as thankful each and every day?” Each morning, we get up from bed, and have the health to get ready for work; each time we fill ourselves with nourishment; each time we lay down safely for a good night's rest, shouldn't we be thankful?

If we take the time to look around us at all the misfortune in this world, we should be inspired to give God thanks. It is only by His grace that we are not that child from Sudan, with stomach swollen from starvation. It is only by God's Divine grace that we have what we have. We enjoy prosperity, with plenty to eat, a different outfit of clothing to wear each day, freedom to move about as we please, experiencing all the modern conveniences and comforts of life, and all the while complaining about the minor things that might inconvenience us.

How often have you heard someone respond to a brisk “good morning” by saying “what's so good about it?” In our small but pleasant Community, we are wonderfully blessed. If we just think about it, the annoyances that most of us grieve over are very minute compared to the plagues of the world today. When I catch myself complaining about a minor ache or pain, then think of those who are suffering from terrible, incurable diseases in this world, I am ashamed. When I catch myself complaining about a dish that's not salty enough, or is a little over cooked, then think of those in this world who are thankful for a piece of molded bread, I am ashamed.

This Thanksgiving, let's really begin to give thanks. Let's realize that God has chosen to bless us with plenty, not to selfishly lavish ourselves, but to be able to help those who are poverty stricken, dying in starvation and disease. Then, let's begin to have "thanksgiving" each and every day.

Have a good Thanksgiving feast. But don't forget to give thanks . . .

November 25

“Which Turkey Is Which?”

By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*hanksgiving Day – It has always been one of my very favorite holidays. It is, of course, the day we are supposed to give an extra special thanks to God for the many blessings He has given us. I realize that during this particular year, many have lost their jobs, perhaps their home and some of you may have been forced to go into bankruptcy. It isn't pleasant and I know that it's hard but even so, here in this country most of us still have a lot to be thankful for.

On a lighter note, our Thanksgiving Day celebration usually begins by watching part of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade on TV. I usually try to catch a glimpse of it while my wife is working hard in the kitchen, manufacturing all kinds of wonderful and delectable odors that tempt my nose and make my stomach growl.

Every other year our son and his wife come in. They take year about during the holidays. Later on, our daughter and her husband will come over, along with two of my wife's sisters and their families. It is usually a great time of sharing a wonderful meal together, laughing, talking, solving the world's problems and topping the day off with a great movie. We thoroughly enjoy it.

One of my brother-in-laws and I have nick-named each other “Turkey.” I guess that's come from all the years of practical jokes, pokes and other pranks, many of which I'd rather not discuss. Calling each other “Turkey” on Thanksgiving Day always makes me hungry because I dearly love a big slice of white meat from that delectable bird. But with talk about the turkey for dinner and calling each other “Turkey” sometimes it gets confusing as to just which turkey is being talked about.

He and I used to “play argue” a lot. Most folks got the idea that we didn't like each other very well. But the fact of the matter is that it was the farthest thing from the truth. Even though we poked fun at each other and called one another all kinds of funny sounding names, we really do like each other a lot. I'd do about anything for him and he's the same way. We just like the verbal jousting match that usually takes place when we're together. I'm thankful for his friendship.

We have a lot to be thankful for. God has given us life one more year; we have a roof over our heads and automobiles to get around in. From the looks of me, we've managed to have more than enough to eat, and I'm not wearing the latest styles (I couldn't even tell you what they are) but I've got good, clean clothes to wear. Those are the basics and if we have those then we've got something to be thankful for.

In 1 Timothy 6:8 Paul wrote, "*And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.*" That's not a lot but it is admirable. Learning to be satisfied with what we have is a coveted trait. We Americans have a lot of wants and desires for things. Many of us have great possessions. The question comes to mind, "do we really need all this stuff?" What could we live without? Now don't get me wrong; I like my stuff. I really don't want to get rid of it. But lately the question has come to my mind almost daily, "Lord, can I live without all these things?" I believe that if we are blessed with our daily needs of food and clothing (and I'm going to add shelter and companionship to the list even though the Bible doesn't), then our daily needs have been met. If we can really become satisfied with our daily needs then those extra things that God allows to come our way become special blessings. That's a lot to be thankful for and it certainly makes for a blessed life and "turkey" talks around the table.

November 26

“Thanksgiving Aftermath” By Jerry D. Ousley

The day after Thanksgiving – most of us here in the United States of America know that we pay for the feast in which we have indulged. In fact, many of us ate two meals and some maybe even three. We can't leave anyone out and we certainly don't want to hurt their feelings. Now don't get me wrong, I enjoy eating. The two meals I indulged in were both wonderful. I thoroughly enjoyed all the delicious food and the delectable deserts afterwards. But I know that I'm going to pay. If I am lucky, I can keep up my meager exercise program and hint of a diet and just maybe I can keep from adding more mass to my already overweight body.

My but we are blessed in this country. There are so many places in this world that would feel that they had experienced a part of Heaven to just have one of our meals each week. This article isn't meant to lay a guilt trip on anyone, but we really need to think about these things and be extremely thankful to God for what He has allowed us to be born into. I think of that sometimes. Maybe my home isn't picture perfect. I know that by many standards in our country I am a poor man. But I am blessed. There were probably enough scraps from the tables of our Thanksgiving Dinners in our country to feed several countries for a day. What would my life be like if God had chosen to let me be born in Ethiopia, or Sudan, or India? Things would be much different. I can't even imagine.

But God privileged me to be born here. He granted me grace in marrying my wife and we were awarded the special favor of raising our two children. God is good. Money isn't always plentiful but especially with our relationship with God, we are rich. No, I couldn't write you a check for \$1,000.00 and I don't have an estate which my children will fight over when I'm gone, but God has allowed us to pass on an inheritance that is priceless by allowing us to raise our kids in a Christian home.

No, my home is not perfect. My wife and I disagree sometimes, but we love each other despite our differences. We have been granted the special relationship of being married for thirty-two years now. That is special. That is a blessing.

I know many of you can boast of more years, more blessings and much to be thankful for. Yes, Thanksgiving has come and gone, but we need to learn to be thankful 24/7, not just for one day each year.

Psalm 100:4 says, *“Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise: be thankful to him, and bless his name.”* As we waddle away from the Thanksgiving table (I speak for myself, of course) let’s never forget to be thankful. Let us do as this passage says and come before God Almighty with the giving of thanks – being thankful to Him and blessing His Name.

November 27

“To Ponder” By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*hanksgiving is over and Christmas is just around the corner. This really is a great time of the year if we put aside all the expense. It's fun to see all the colored lights and festively decorated homes.

We've a lot to learn about the true meaning of Christmas which most of us know is about the birth of Christ. I was reading the Christmas story found in Luke 2 the other day and, though I've read it many times before, this particular verse just jumped out at me: *“But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.”* (Luke 2:19).

When Mary began to “ponder” here are some of the things she had to “ponder” about:

- (1) The angel coming to her and telling her that, as a virgin, she was going to have a child that would indeed be the long-awaited Messiah (Savior).
- (2) Joseph had been given a dream of an angel coming to him and telling him that it was okay to go ahead and take Mary as his wife, even though she was several months pregnant.
- (3) The taxing and census of the Roman Government on all of their empire and possessions which caused them to have to be in Bethlehem when she gave birth.
- (4) The shepherds coming in to worship her child, saying that angels had visited them and told them about her son's birth.

That's a lot to “ponder” about! It'd sure make my “ponderer” sore! When I took the time to see just what the word ponder meant in the original Greek, I found out that it means *“to bring together in one's mind.”* So what Mary was doing was thinking about all these miracles that had happened and was trying to put them all together to see how they fit.

However, she wasn't doing it in her mind but in her heart. The Greek word used here for heart means *“the center of all physical and spiritual life.”* So, Mary was trying to piece this thing together, but not just in her head but at the very core of her being - in her soul.

When I realized this, I thought, “Wow! That’s the key to understanding the whole “Bible!” It can’t be done necessarily with the head (it just gives me a headache!). We look at spiritual things in the natural and they just don’t make sense. That’s because the natural man (or the carnal nature) just can’t comprehend it. We must think of things in relationship to “beginnings and ends” and when we talk about “forever” it just doesn’t add up. It’s like trying to make a one-gallon jug hold two gallons of milk. It doesn’t work.

But when we get our head out of the way and bring it together in the core of our life – our heart, our soul, then things begin to connect. We can see the big picture and we can somewhat understand the spiritual side.

This Christmas, let’s “ponder” things in our “hearts” instead of our “heads” and it just might come together. Let Christ lead us by way of the Holy Spirit and Christmas this year just might take the “Grinch” out of us. Whad’ya think?

November 28

“Family – You’ve Gotta Love ‘Em” By Debbie Ousley

“Leftovers”

*Thanksgiving has been over for at least a week or two,
But we’re still eating turkey,
Turkey salad, turkey stew,
Turkey puffs, turkey pudding, turkey patties, turkey pies,
Turkey bisque and turkey burgers,
Turkey fritters, turkey fries!
For lunch our mother made us turkey slices on a stick,
There’ll be turkey tarts for supper,
All this turkey makes me sick,
For tomorrow she’s preparing turkey dumplings stuffed with peas,
Oh, I never thought I’d say this –
“Mother! No more turkey . . . please!”*

Megan recited this poem when she was in the fifth grade and I still laugh every time I read it. I don’t know about you but the best part of the turkey is testing it when carving and a big turkey sandwich with Miracle Whip later that night. Got milk?

Please, don’t get me wrong, I enjoy the big family dinners and it’s nice when you receive compliments like “This is the juiciest turkey I have ever eaten,” but really, even “family” would be reluctant to say, “This bird is as dry as sawdust!” And you can get a little suspicious when two or three volunteers to bake the turkey next year.

Ahhh ... family ... they can be your biggest blessing or a person’s biggest pain all in the same day. Who am I kidding? All in the same hour! We are required to love them and most of the time we do, but understanding them and living with them without a little strife, that would be something new!

You have families that are very close (wishing sometimes you didn’t know everything that’s going on in their marriage), then, there are families when asked if they have any siblings,

would need a moment to think about it before they answered (former president Carter would be in that group).

You have some people that would like to trade in their family for a more ideal one ... I wonder what that would be. More like them, I reckon! Duh ... Let's admit it though, "Blood is thicker than water," and the most of us would give up a kidney for a family member. And even though we might not agree with everything our family members do (contrary to them being proud of all our actions) it would not be advisable to let us hear anyone bad-mouthing them. That's a "right" reserved just for us 'cause we know in our hearts we do love them.

It's not our intentions to "wound" and even our disapproval is seasoned with love; 'cause when it comes right down to it, we do want the very best for them in life, not leftovers!

November 29

“The Gift”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I like gifts. Most people do. Receiving means that someone was thinking enough of you to spend their time and money to pick out something they believe you would like to have. A gift says, “I care about you and want to do something special for you.”

My wife has always been good at getting gifts for others. To be honest she is one of the most thoughtful people I know. She’s always picking up something for a person at work whom she thinks needs a lift in life. Without doubt she is a giving person.

She gave me a gift once (well she’s given me many gifts over the years, of course). But this gift was one that changed my life. It was back in the early 80’s and the birthday gift she gave me was an old TI99/4A personal computer. Back in those days they weren’t very powerful and this one was typical. But it was the first computer I ever owned. Up until that time I had no idea that I was so interested in them. This one caused the bug to bite me and it bite hard. It didn’t take long for me to realize the potential of what could be done with that machine and I’ve been awestruck by them ever since. Little did she realize the aggravation it would cause her over the years or perhaps she would have gotten me a different gift for my birthday.

I’ve literally spent thousands of dollars on computers since that day. But it has proven to become my source of income. My job today is an IT specialist (that means Information Technologist). I work on computers not only where I work but also on the side. I’ve mastered several software packages, done a bit of programming, and built computers from scratch. I learned how to build websites and actually have several paying customers. It was a gift that has given much over the years and continues to give.

Each and every one of us has the opportunity to receive a spiritual gift like this, only what it gives is much more valuable. It is the free gift of Jesus Christ. In Romans 5 the free gift is mentioned in verse 15, 16 and 18. The free gift comes by His grace. He freely gave His life as a sacrifice for sin so that we all might be saved.

It often comes in a plain wrapper, not with bows and tags and brightly colored paper. It may not look like much on the surface. But once opened it continues to give throughout our lives.

It is marked just to us. No one can open it except the one named on the package. It is just for us and no one else. Each one is designed specifically for that individual.

We'll never find this gift unless we are looking for it. It is carefully placed because its intent is that we know what we are doing. God wants us to come to Him but we must want to come to Him. He will never force anyone to make that choice. If we don't look for it, we'll never find our gift.

The size of the package doesn't matter. Some may receive a large box while others a small box. But the contents are just exactly what each individual needs. We can't benefit from someone else's package regardless how large or small it is. It must be the one with our name on it. Our gift continues to give throughout our lives. We will never exhaust it. It comes with twenty-four-hour, seven day per week service and that service is only a prayer away. It comes with a manual that covers anything that we may ever come across regarding our gift. It tells us specifically what we need to do in every situation.

It is also a gift that requires us to keep giving it away. As we do, it becomes the gift that others need and no matter how much of it we give away we never run out. That's the gift of eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. So, when are you going to open your gift?

November 30

“Time Just Wouldn’t Permit It”

By Debbie Ousley

If you talk with people for very long there’s one observation that will always come up and that is how fast time passes. It’s almost scary the way the days run into weeks and weeks into months. It’s risky trying to relate an event and how long ago it happened. You might think it was a couple of weeks ago when in reality it was a month ago (and that’s not that long).

The saying, “It seems just like yesterday” is being quoted more and more. Now that Thanksgiving has passed (in a blur) we’ll turn around a few times and it will be Christmas. We have no time to get anxious about the buying and preparing for it because, friends, it’s here! “Stop the world and let me off! Well, I don’t want off but could’ja slow it down?” “Time stands still for no man,” but does it have to speed up for goodness’ sake?”

I remember the good ole’ days with the porch swing and catching fire flies (how long ago was that?). I don’t remember being bored. I remember the “time” to enjoy, and the “time” to ponder about the unknown aspects of my life, and I liked it. That’s one important part of our “kids” lives’ that’s missing. They’re always being on the move that can’t be good for them. But if they are a part of this fast-paced life they too are forced to ride this crazy ride.

I’m sorry for that. I really am! We don’t even know who or what to blame. We find ourselves having to choose between doing one task and feeling guilty because we’ve had to forfeit another one that’s just as important. What’s the answer? I wish I knew. The only advice I can offer is that we be sure to put the most important “thing” first. CHRIST – our personal relationship with Him (not just church “stuff”). Our family, husband and kids – Their well-being (not all their “stuff”) - Ourselves (we’re not much use to others if we’re a mess), and then miscellaneous.

By then we’ll not just be out of time, we’ll be out of energy and everyone will just have to understand when you say, “time just wouldn’t permit it.”

December 1

“The Lull Between” By Jerry D. Ousley

We are officially in that lull time between Thanksgiving and Christmas. You know, the time we endure our jobs for another four weeks before we get another long weekend; the time most of us make our mad dashes to the department stores and malls to find that special gift for those on our list; the time we party and indulge ourselves talking about how we shouldn't do it, but we do anyway; the time that we frantically try to get the church Christmas play together hoping for a success; the time we really should be thanking God for all that He has blessed us with this past year and be looking toward the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ.

This is a time for reflection. As I look back over the year, I see a lot of things I did that were wrong, but there were some right things too. We made some life changing decisions and some little decisions that don't matter much to anyone. But one thing's for sure, those decisions will affect our future.

Mostly, people are getting ready for Christmas. The stores are stocked and ready for a record-breaking year (or at least they hope). Many will go overboard in spending, as they do every year. We have in past years. I don't wish bad luck on any of the stores who are looking to make or break their year this season and I don't want to see people hurt themselves financially buying all those things that they can't really afford. But I do want to say that it's past time we refocus our attention on just what the holidays are really all about.

I was talking to a man the other day as part of my job and we were discussing how we were going to get some parts in that my company needed for production. I made the statement that since they wouldn't ship until the Wednesday before Thanksgiving that we wouldn't receive them until the following Monday. He responded with, "What's that got to do with anything?" As if he expected me to force special shipping so that we would receive them during the holiday. He also expected us to work through the holiday and have them ready for him on Monday. Our nation is quickly losing its holiday spirit I'm afraid. Work already has no regard for Sunday like it used to and now our industries are trying to swallow our holidays as well. I fear that our prosperity and drive for wealth has taken over our need for "R & R," and our focus on God.

The fact of the matter is, God, from the very beginning and from all of His Divine wisdom, knew that people need to take time to rest, enjoy themselves and their families, take a day off at least once a week and take time to celebrate those things that are really important and really matter in life. There was a time that we understood this. It seems that time is becoming lost among all those other demands of today. It's scary, at least to me.

The good news is, we can make a stand for what is right. We can draw a line in the sand and make decisions that will affect our lives in a positive way. Those aren't easy decisions because it means not "being with the program." But I beg your pardon, the original program, God's program, was the right one to begin with.

I hope you and your family have a good holiday season. I pray that you will make time for God in your holiday plans and that you will realize what is really important in life. The world isn't going to end if a few automobiles don't make it to market, or if you don't make the profit you had planned on this year. But decisions made that put God and family second in order to assure that those material things get delivered or we top our gross income from last year will affect you and your family. Think about it ...

December 2

“Pairlee Colwell” By Jerry D. Ousley

Many of the articles from Spirit Bread have come from experiences from my childhood with this woman I called “Grandma.” She and my “Grandpa,” Willie Colwell, have been great sources of inspiration to me as well as others in my life. We all need those people who have expressed genuine love and concern for us over the years. We all need people to influence us who have a deep-rooted faith in God.

This article bears the name of my “Grandma.” Her birthday was Sunday, December 2nd. She went to be with her Lord a few years ago. The world has suffered a great loss, but she is now where she had longed to be for so many years. She reached her goal in life, “to be with Jesus.”

I remember a story she told me once that illustrated her trust in God. It happened back in the 40’s when things were really tight. They lived in Kentucky then. If I remember correctly, a gorilla had escaped from a circus that had passed through the area. They dismissed school, sent all the young children and women home, telling them to stay inside, and took the older boys along with the men of the community to search for the dangerous animal.

My “Grandpa” was working up in Indiana at the time and so he was away from home most weeks. That night, my “Grandma,” home with the children, heard a noise out on the front porch. They had a three-foot brick wall around the property and she didn’t think much about the noise. The neighbors were always dropping by so she instinctively opened the door to see who was out there. She heard a quick “thump” on the porch and the next thing she heard was something running through the corn field just on the other side of the brick wall. It was too quick to be just any animal or a man. She always felt that it was the escaped gorilla and that God had once again protected her. She wasn’t afraid and just went back inside with the kids. She knew that God was with them.

I also remember her patience that had become an acquired trait, I suppose from all the tribulation she had experienced over the years (remember that the Bible tells us that tribulation brings patience). Later in life when I was a teenager and young adult, I lived with her for a while. At times I would take her to the store or to church. While waiting for traffic to clear so I

could pull out on the road sometimes I would get impatient. You know how it can be. But she would always respond with “Just wait. There will always be a time.” And she was right. It’s like that in life too. If we patiently wait there will always be a time.

May we all find a deep relationship with God like this wonderful “saint.” When we can rest in Jesus Christ, knowing that He is our protection, we can then have peace in this life. It only comes through knowing Jesus Christ. “Thanks, Grandma!”

December 3

“The Big Snow” By Jerry D. Ousley

“And the national weather service is predicting somewhere between nine to fifteen inches of snow ...” That was not good for Southern Indiana. We very seldom got a snow like that! Nine inches of snow would be very difficult to get around in. I was at work when these predictions came and the snow began falling. But the way it was falling worried me even more because it seemed we already had six inches of snow and it was only morning. It was supposed to snow all day and all that night.

I was going to be off until Tuesday after that day, so all I had to worry about was getting home that night. But my wife had to work the next day. She came up with a plan to get a motel room and spend the night. That way she would only have about three miles to drive. It made sense. So, after she got off work, she went to the motel room and I made my way home.

It was obvious that we were in for more than the original prediction so I tuned in to the weather. We had already received our fifteen inches and now they were predicting up to fifteen more that night. Surely not! But they were right. When I got up the next morning somewhere close to thirty inches of snow was on the ground – Unheard of in Southern Indiana!

I shoveled off the porch and sidewalk leading to the driveway and hoped that I could break the snow with the van. I couldn't. Then we got a call from my wife. She was still stranded at the motel. She had worked shoveling snow with a dustpan since 4:00 AM and still wasn't out! My brother-in-law was trying to get out himself to pick up his wife and they were going to give my wife a ride home – But he was stuck too! Now what?

I started digging – It was the only thing I could do! That's when my neighbor spotted me and walked over to talk with me. “I can cut you a path with my snow blower if you'd like.” - I'd like! And so, he did. In about twenty minutes what would have taken me the rest of the day was done. I finished digging out the van and my daughter and I took a test run.

I had planned on warming up a bit (the temperatures were in the teens) then calling my wife and make sure my brother-in-law had not shown up. If not, I was going to make the run to pick her up. But as I came into the house the phone was already ringing. It was her and she informed us that she had finally dug out with the help of some of the other stranded motorists at the motel, and was picking up my sister-in-law to take her home. It took them another 3-1/2 hours, but they made it!

What impressed me most was the sudden urge to help others. I don't know what I would have done if it hadn't been for my neighbor and my wife might never have dug out if it hadn't been for some of those people at the motel. We do need each other!

I believe that most people are basically good inside. That was reflected in a fifteen-mile traffic backup on the Interstate for 7 hours. The news was full of people helping each other.

That's an example of what God did for us. Mankind found himself in a hopeless situation and God became a man in Jesus Christ, and came to us to help us out of trouble. We would never have the hope of salvation without Him. He made the way for us to get out of the "big snow" of life!

December 4

“The Sled Ride” By Jerry D. Ousley

I'll never forget a certain day when my brothers and I decided to go sledding. It was a cold day in January. We had gotten several inches of snow a few days before. We found a good hill, and began to pack down our sled path. The snow had crusted on top and crunched hard. But, with some persistence we managed to open up a pretty good path. The hardened snow made it very slick and promised some good speeds down the hill.

It was great! We had a lot of fun as we took turns making the descent. My youngest brother, Terry, was only a few years old at the time and so he took turns going down the hill with my middle brother, Ken, and myself.

We spent a couple of hours like this just having a ball. But it was getting cold and we were a little hungry if I remember correctly. So, we planned one great finale of a ride down the hill. I prostrated myself stomach down on the sled and my youngest brother climbed on my back. Then I bent my legs at the knees to allow room for Ken to sit in the rear. I would guide the sled as we raced down the hill. It promised to be a fast and exciting ride.

When we all got situated, we pushed off and away we went. It was just as it promised to be. We continued to pick up momentum and I could see the bottom of the hill coming up fast.

Suddenly, I lost control of the steering and the sled began to veer off the path. We now found ourselves off the comforts of our packed down track and in the crusty, deep snow. Then it happened. The sled just dropped into the snow and stopped. Ken fell off the back with little mishap, but I was now the sled and continued down the hill with my face buried in the crusty snow. Terry, still atop my back, was holding on for dear life. We continued to slide this way for several more feet before we finally came to an abrupt halt.

Ken was sitting half way up the hill, laughing as hard as he could. Terry, not knowing what had happened began to cry. I lifted my face from the crusty snow, and felt the sting of cold in new cuts. My glasses were okay but were hanging half on and half off and my face was comically packed in snow.

I picked myself up and assessed the situation. I did have a couple of cuts on my face but I seemed to be okay. I adjusted my snow packed glasses so I could see again, and then comforted Terry (well, as much as an older brother who was still trying to get his bearings could do) and he finally quit crying. But it was another snow before we tried that again.

As I thought about this story, it seemed to me that a lot of us find ourselves in this very situation in life. We race from job to job, commitment to commitment, and obligation to obligation. Everything seems to be balanced and going well, until we get veered from the path. It happens. Then it seems tragedy has struck. It could be our health, our finances, or even our spiritual condition.

Many people turn to other things to soften the blow of the “crusty snow in their face” like alcohol, drugs, or something else. Others see the unbalance and tragedy as the end and sadly take their own lives.

What I’d like to say is that these things happen. We may never be able to explain the “why” but we’ve got to look to God for the answers and the comfort to pick us up and get us back on track instead of these other “non-answer” pacifiers. He will give us those answers. He made us this promise: *“I’ll never leave you nor forsake you ...”* (Hebrews 13:5). It may seem at times that He has, but He hasn’t. Usually, it is us who does the “leaving and forsaking.”

This Christmas, remember the “sled ride of life” can get us off track. Many experience tragedy during the holidays and instead of being festive times they become painful times. Don’t let the “sled ride of life” beat you. Turn to Christ instead. He will get you through and He will be right there with you, even when you get stuck in the “crusty snow.”

December 5

A Dedicated Sacrifice” By Jerry D. Ousley

In the classic movie, “Brave Heart,” Mel Gibson portrays a Scotsman who has rallied an army to stand against the king of England and his evil oppression. He tells his men that some of them will die on that day and they did. But he spoke to them of freedom and bravery that caused each of those men to take their place and hold their ranks even though the end might be eminent for them. They fought many vicious and bloody battles and won most of them before Brave Heart was captured and his life tortured from him in effort to get him to recant his rebellion against the king of England. This man gave his life for his cause of freedom.

It also reminds me of Stephen. In the book of Acts we read his story. He had been captured by those wishing to put a stop to the Christian message being taught. When given a chance to speak he took advantage of that time and related to them the message of Christ and how their sin merited salvation by His shed blood. When he accused them of taking an innocent life (referring to Jesus) they became so angry that they gnashed their teeth at him and began to encircle him so as to stone him to death. This they did, but in the process, Stephen saw Jesus Christ standing beside the throne of God – standing not sitting – as if outraged by this tragic action.

As they stoned Stephen a young man by the name of Saul was standing among them. He didn't throw any stones that day but he did hold the robes of those who took part in the stoning. As a devout Pharisee we see this young man later leading a group to take Christian prisoners. During that trip he saw his own vision of Christ that resulted in his conversion. He became a Christian and was as devoted to his new faith as he was to his old. He became the Apostle Paul and wrote a good portion of the New Testament. In Romans 12:1-2 Paul writes, *“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”*

In the first part of that passage Paul is actually calling us along side of him. He stands like a brave heart calling us to spiritual battle. The original language suggests that he is calling

us to stand by his side, urging us to be a living sacrifice to God. Of course, we know that Jesus Christ became our sacrifice for sin. Paul is not suggesting that we be sacrificed for sin but that we become a living sacrifice, standing strong, straight and tall in this spiritual war we are waging against the powers of darkness.

We may hear the call and wish to join the ranks but knowing what our past lives have been like we slink back thinking ourselves to be unworthy, maybe even cowards because of our past failure. But there is never a time like now to take our place in the ranks that have formed to withstand the power of the enemy.

Because of Christ within us we are holy and acceptable. God will not reject our living sacrifice. If we have come to Him in repentance and have genuinely given ourselves to Him then it becomes our reasonable sacrifice – our sworn duty – what is expected of us. The only difference is that even were we to be slain physically in this war we can never be slain spiritually. Because of Jesus and His own sacrifice for our sin our souls will never die. This human, frail body will one day pass on but our soul has been given eternal life with Jesus Christ our Lord. Do you hear the call? Does your heart leap with excitement as you hear the rally cry of God's bugle? Accept your reasonable service to Jesus and become a dedicated, living sacrifice for Christ.

December 6

“Conforming and Transforming” By Jerry D. Ousley

High school is probably one of the most traumatic and life changing periods in a person’s time here on earth. I say that because that’s the time we are the most influenced by those around us. I remember trying to fit in. During my childhood my family moved a lot so I was the “new Kid” eight different times from kindergarten to my senior year. Being the “new kid” is not a pleasant experience. In order to fit in you’ve got to learn to be like the other guys if you’re a guy, and girls if you’re a girl. If you don’t then you remain an outcast the whole time you’re there. I’d find myself trying to comb my hair like the other guys (which was really hard for a guy with curly hair), trying my best to dress like they dressed, act like they acted, say what they said and so on and so forth.

It always meant giving up some of who you were and taking on an entirely new character. This change in our physical lives is not always a good one. That’s why we see gangs in our cities, violence in our streets and feelings of terror many times from our senior citizens towards the younger generation. When a person gets involved with the wrong crowd and tries to fit in, even though they may determine that they will not change, if they want to fit then change is a prerequisite. Of course, if it is a good crowd then that change may make us a better person but not always.

When we get married there are changes that have to be made; adjustments to endorse and personal habits broken. Men and women are so different that when the two marry and begin living together the adjustment can become a source of conflict. Each one doesn’t really understand the practices and habits and getting used to each other can be a challenge. That’s why the first two or three years of marriage are the toughest.

In life sometimes conforming and transforming is good and sometimes it is bad. But in our walk with God, it is always imperative. In Romans 12:1-2 we see that Paul called us to his side, to stand with him becoming a living sacrifice to God. Then he said in verse 2, “*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*” We are not to conform to this world. In other words, don’t do what the world does and don’t get used to living here. I don’t have time to get into all the “dos” and “don’ts.” As a matter of fact, each group has their own

set of “dos” and “don’ts.” Basically, if the Bible doesn’t directly address a matter, then that is left up to God’s dealing with the individual. If the Bible specifically tells us not to do it then we shouldn’t do it. That’s pretty simple. So, conforming to the world is defined first by the word of God then by God’s individual dealing with our hearts. But be careful not to become judgmental of others if God deals with you to stop doing something or give up something. He may not have dealt with the other person about the same thing.

If we maintain a daily prayer and devotional life including God’s word then that should get you through the “dos” and “don’ts.” We now have to be transformed. Once again that daily prayer and devotional life – not just something that gets you by but a deep and sincere seeking of God and His will, transforms you. It begins in the mind. God begins to change our thinking. As our thinking changes so does our actions. What we do is a result of what transpires first in our minds. That’s why Paul said to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. If you really want to change your life to reflect Jesus Christ then you must be transformed in your mind. Spending time with God in prayer and His word whether in a group or all by yourself, is the only way to do that. Let His word take root in your heart. Let Him invade your life. When you do, conforming to the world will hardly be a concern because your mind has been changed – transformed. You are a new creation in Jesus Christ and all things have passed away and been made new inside of you. You are conforming to God, not the world because you have been transformed.

December 7

“The Good, Acceptable and Perfect Will of God” **By Jerry D. Ousley**

When our daughter was in her “Terrible Two’s” stage of life she lived up to her reputation. She was simply stubborn. This little girl was sweet as a chocolate covered ice cream cone but when it came to making her do something against her will, well that little two-year-old girl became a little monster. She could hold her own and she wasn’t afraid to do it.

There were times when she would do something wrong that warranted punishment. We could spank her and she would cry but she would sometimes come back with something like, “That didn’t hurt!” I told you she had a very strong will. I thought, “Well maybe we could make her stand in the corner.” So, I did. But I want to tell you, that task proved to be harder than it sounded. In fact, to keep her in the corner required me to stand in the corner with her. I began to wonder just who was getting punished here! We later found out that the only effective way to punish her was to take things away that she liked. That was the ticket. It’s funny how each child is different. I know each of our children had to be punished in different ways for it to make a difference.

We all have our own wills. When we want to do something, we find a way to do it. Military leaders have found that to control individuals you must break down their wills. There is no doubt that the human will is a very strong force.

God also has a will. His will is what He wants us to do. However, He doesn’t force Himself upon us. We may be affected by the consequences of not following Him, but He won’t force us to obey Him. In fact, God gave us our wills and even though He wants us to conform to His, He will not violate ours in order to bring us under subjection. If we are okay with the consequences then we can do our “own thing.”

In Romans 12:2 Paul wrote, *“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”* Paul said that if we want to prove (or show the truth – testing) the will of God then we are to be transformed by renewing our minds. Our transformation is proof of God’s will. It’s a good transformation. It brings goodness and wholeness into our lives. When

we choose to renew our minds and be transformed then we are bringing proof of God's good, acceptable and perfect will.

Some have taken it to mean that God has three wills. This teaching says that there is a good will of God that He accepts. There is the acceptable will of God – His allowing some things even though He might not completely approve, and there is the perfect will of God. However, He doesn't have three degrees of His will but only one will that is threefold: good, acceptable and perfect. When we have transformed our minds to what He wants for our lives then we prove that good, acceptable and perfect will of God.

Being transformed into God's will isn't always the easy way. In fact, it could be the hardest thing you've ever done. It may require great sacrifice on our part. But I want to tell you that if we will conform and be transformed to God's will everything that comes in our lives whether good or bad, will ultimately build us up because God is good, acceptable and perfect. In the long run we'll be better off. Again, it won't be easy. Sometimes it may seem like our world is falling apart. But hold on to God and keep on being transformed by Him, and you will find that as the years go by, as time passes, we will grow stronger and stronger and never regret being in God's will.

December 8

“A Rock-Solid Church”

By Jerry D. Ousley

When Jeremy and Megan were children, I used to kid them at Christmastime telling them that Santa Claus was going to bring them a box of rocks. Jeremy being the oldest, of course was first. It wasn't a threat of punishment mind you; I was just kidding with him. I'd ask him what he wanted for Christmas and he would start listing the things he wanted. At the end of his list, I'd say something like, "and I bet you also want a box of rocks!" And he would reply with a laugh, "No!" Of course, we didn't get him a box of rocks and he knew that we were just joking.

But when it came Megan's turn to go through the same scenario I was totally surprised when she responded with a big "YES!" What was that? She actually wanted a box of rocks. I kidded her about it two or three more times that year and she always responded with "Yes!" I was flabbergasted. Why in the world would a child want a box of rocks for Christmas? Overcome with curiosity as to why any child would want a box of rocks as a Christmas gift, I finally broke down and asked her and she said, "Because of the dogs."

Now this girl was thinking. What had happened was that back in the summer Jeremy would take her for a ride on his bicycle down the road and a couple of dogs would always chase them back. It scared her. In her little mind she reasoned that if she had a box of rocks, she could throw them at those dogs and make them stop chasing them. Well, I thought that was a pretty good reason for wanting a box of rocks for Christmas. So, I dutifully went out to our graveled driveway and filled up a small box with the best and biggest rocks I could find, wrapped them up and watched her face glow that Christmas when she opened a box of rocks (of course she had other presents too). She couldn't wait to ride with Jeremy again and she did just what she said she was going to do – she threw those rocks at those dogs. I can't recall if they stopped chasing them or not but it made her feel better and I think she actually enjoyed throwing those rocks at the dogs.

The rocks gave her a sense of security. She wasn't scared to ride with Jeremy because she now had a weapon; and she used it! In Matthew 16:17-19 we read the account of Jesus talking with Peter. Jesus had been asking the disciples what people were saying about Him. Some responded that they had heard that Jesus was a teacher, or a prophet and some had

even referred to Him as The Prophet, or the Messiah. Jesus then turned to Peter and asked him, “Who do you think that I am?” Peter responded with confidence, “You are the Christ – the Son of God!” That was exactly who Jesus was. Jesus told Peter that his revelation was directly from God.

Then Jesus told Peter something else. He said, “You are Peter,” (which means a rock). He continued, “And on this rock I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not be able to stand against it.” What a revelation! Some have wrongly interpreted this as a referral to Peter being the first leader of the Church. He was a great leader of the Church. But a deeper look into the original language says: “You are Peter (a rock) and on this THE ROCK I shall be home building on me the out-called . . .” Jesus wasn’t necessarily saying that the Church would be built on Peter but on THE ROCK – the revelation of who Christ was.

For the next few articles, we’re going to be talking about a Rock-Solid Church. We need rock-solid congregations today. But the only way we can be rock-solid and have that protective assurance that our daughter Megan had with that box of rocks is to know who Jesus Christ is. He’s more than a good teacher; more than a prophet of God. He is God in the flesh. He is the Lamb of God taking away the sin of the world. It is a powerful Church and those of us who have been called of God to salvation are a part of it. Isn’t that exciting? Isn’t it wonderful to know that we are out-called from this world system to stand on THE ROCK? The Rock-Solid Church isn’t made with brick and mortar or built by the hands of men. It is built solely on that truth of revelation given to Peter and to each of us who knows Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior – He is the Christ – The Son of the Living God!

December 9

“Growing” By Jerry D. Ousley

During high school there was this fellow who amazingly was smaller than I was. We appropriately called him “Pee-Wee.” Everyone picked on Pee-Wee. Of course, being one of the smaller kids in school I didn’t have a lot of friends so even though I kidded with Pee-Wee I made sure that he knew I was just kidding because he was also my friend.

The one thing that amazed me about Pee-Wee was that no matter how much the other boys picked on him he always had a grin on his face. He was a good-natured guy and I often wondered how he could be so happy when he was the smallest boy in our grade.

Years later I was flirting with the idea of joining the US Army and the recruiting sergeant made mention that he needed to stop in on Pee-Wee (of course he called him by his properly given name). He had joined the army months before and was finished with his basic training and in on leave before moving on. I thought to myself, “It will sure be good to see Pee-Wee again,” and then I wondered how such a small guy could make it in the United States Army.

We arrived where Pee-Wee lived and I got out of the car with the recruiting sergeant as we approached this big burly guy. I thought, “He must have been talking about someone else with that name,” because this certainly wasn’t Pee-Wee. But when the man turned around there was that big grin that had been so familiar to me in high school. Pee-Wee had become a giant. His muscles bulged large and tight in the tee-shirt he was wearing and I thought to myself, “I’m sure glad I was on his good side in high school.” Somehow after school Pee-Wee had taken a growth spurt and now was twice the size of most of the guys who had taunted and teased him so much.

In Matthew 16:17-19 we read Jesus’ words to Peter about the Church. He had said that on this rock (the truth of who Jesus really was) the Church would be built. As we have already established it wasn’t a structure of brick and mortar but made up of something much stronger - the saved souls of people around the world. He told Peter that He would be giving to him the keys of the Kingdom. It would be so impenetrable that the gates of hell (literally interpreted as the un-perceived) would not be able to overtake it. He also said that whatever he (Peter) bound or loosed on earth (the ground) would be loosed in the heavens. This simply means

that those following God would have authority over the spiritual evil currently controlling the earth and God would honor their word against that evil kingdom.

It was a terrific force that caused the Church to grow with leaps and bounds. Growth is important. People stop growing physically after a while (unless you count outward growth that sometimes comes after upward growth – if you know what I mean). But the Church should never stop growing. It should be increasing daily (and the true Church is). The word of God, when it is presented in the way He intended it, will go out under the power and influence of the Holy Spirit, and will do its job. Men will be either made angry enough to persecute believers or they will be attracted to it like a giant magnet and will join her ranks.

We need to continue growing in Christ as well. After all, we are the individual members and components making up the Church. Our growth will never stop unless we stop looking to grow. I have found that we will always be in God's school until we get to Heaven. Everyday presents a new opportunity and a new experience, either positive or negative, that will cause us to grow in Christ. Just like Pee-Wee we will grow. Although we may feel insignificant and useless, if we will continue in Jesus, we will one day be a spiritual dynamo for the Kingdom of Heaven. So, let me ask you, are you still growing?

December 10

“The Victorious Church” By Jerry D. Ousley

A few years back and at a particular place I was working something had happened that made my boss very suspicious and untrusting of me. I couldn't figure it out. I knew I had done nothing wrong but for some reason he began blaming me for nearly everything that went wrong. I was doing the purchasing for the company and a time came when the production manager and the boss decided that they were going to run ahead on parts so they could take the machine down for repairs. It was a great idea except for one thing; they hadn't told me of their plans and so I hadn't ordered extra material to accomplish what they had planned to do. When the parts ran out suddenly it was my fault. Somehow the boss figured I should be able to read their minds.

In another instance we were moving a part from one foundry to another. Consequently, we were going to save all kinds of money on the cost of this part. Our customer knew of the move and began demanding to know when they were going to begin saving money on the part as well. He came to me wanting to know when we could switch over. The problem was that the new foundry wasn't ready to run the part yet and I still had several orders outstanding with the old foundry. He told me that the customer was expecting to begin paying the new price in a couple of weeks and that I had cost him thousands of dollars. To make a long story short the new foundry wasn't ready to run the parts for another four to five weeks and we needed every single part on order from the old foundry. We wound up losing nothing.

I had taken just about all I could take and was nearly ready to just quit when it dawned on me that as long as I showed up for work whether he was mad at me or not, he had to pay me and so even though I was in hot water I still won! It was a matter of having victory in the face of defeat!

That's the way it is with God's one and true Church. We've been talking about the passage of scripture as found in Matthew 16:17-19 where Peter had confessed Christ to be the Son of God! Jesus had told him that no man had revealed this to him but that it was a revelation from God. Jesus also told Peter that the gates of hell would not overcome him and that he would have the authority – the keys – to bind and loose on earth and God would honor it. This wasn't a blank checkbook but authority based on doing what Jesus wanted Peter to

do. It's the same with us. We too have been given these keys but we are only to use them at the direction of our Master, Jesus Christ and for the things we know He would use them for.

Even though we have this authority today in our own modern world it seems sometimes that the enemy is going to run us over despite the promise that the gates of hell would not prevail against us. It seems that we are in constant defeat and that we are fighting a losing battle. It could be with our health, our finances, our children, our husband or wife or a host of other things. It seems defeat is eminent.

But stop and think about it for a moment. Every day we get up from bed it means that our enemy has not killed us yet. It means that we are still living in victory. And when one day we wake up in Heaven, then we still stand in victory. You see as a believer in Jesus Christ the only way we can ever be defeated is in our own minds. We may be sick; we may be stricken down by our enemies; we may have all kinds of problems going on in our lives. But if we realize that no matter what comes to us, because of Jesus Christ within us we always have the victory. God's Church is a victorious Church. It cannot lose because the war has already been won in Jesus and His sacrifice on Calvary. Come be a part of the victorious Church of Jesus Christ!

December 11

“Anointed”

By Jerry D. Ousley

We hear the word “anointed” a lot in Christian circles. It is associated with a separation or setting apart by God. While I certainly believe that individuals have been called or set apart by God for specific responsibilities, in a sense we have all been anointed by Him.

In Biblical times this anointing was symbolized by pouring oil over the head of the individual who was being set apart. Today some groups still use oil in anointing services but very seldom do you see them having a full container of oil poured all over them from the top of the head down. That would be an experience, wouldn't it?

Some years ago, I got “anointed.” I was working at a small sawmill. One day the owner decided that his log loader needed to be worked on. One guy was supposed to loosen the hydraulic line enough to hold the forks of the loader in the right position. This required one man on the outside and one man standing under the forks and in between where they were mounted. I was the guy on the inside. I don't know whether the other guy loosened the line too much or exactly what happened but what I do know is that those forks began a slow descent pinning me between the fork mount and the forks. That wasn't so bad but what came next was an experience. Suddenly the line came loose and hydraulic oil came spilling out all over me. Because I was wedged in between the fork mount and the forks I couldn't move so there was no escape from the flow of oozing oil. I had to just stand there and let it cover me. It took days for me to get all the oil out of my hair and my clothes. That was one anointing experience I could have done without. One thing was for sure; I was certainly a “slick” guy that day!

In 1 Samuel 10:1-8 we read of how Saul was first anointed by Samuel. This was a private anointing and not the official one we spoke about before. Saul and a servant had been looking for some donkeys that came up missing from his father's household. The journey led them to Samuel the prophet (called the Seer in those days). They thought that perhaps his God-given ability would allow him to tell them where the donkeys were. Samuel knew (by God's revelation) that they were coming and had prepared a great feast. Imagine their surprise when they found Samuel and he invited them as guests of honor at the feast? Anyway, before Saul left, Samuel called him aside, poured a flask of oil over his head and told

him that God had chosen him to be the first King over Israel. Saul probably thought the prophet Samuel had gone off the deep end.

But Samuel gave Saul in great detail what was going to happen to him on his way back home. We're going to spend a few days talking about those events and how they relate to us who are believers in Jesus Christ.

The first thing that happened was that he would meet two men by Rachel's tomb who would tell him that the donkeys had been found and his father was no longer as much concerned about the donkeys but whether Saul was going to make it home or not. That let Saul know that he could stop looking for the donkeys and go on back home. What he had been looking for was now found.

That's significant to us because we all have been looking for something. If you know Jesus Christ as your Savior then you know what you have been looking for. You have found it. The void in your life that nothing could seem to fill is now fulfilled in Jesus. We are all looking for something. Most often we have no idea what that thing is. We just know that whatever we do, and wherever we go nothing seems to satisfy a longing deep within us. That longing is for the void, left by sin to be filled up and restored back to God. Millions of people all over the world have no idea what they are looking for. But once they find Jesus Christ as Savior suddenly that void no longer feels empty. It has been filled with Jesus Christ.

That's the first step in our personal anointing; to find what has been lost. It is being restored to where we belong – A child of the Almighty God!

December 12

“God’s Provision” By Jerry D. Ousley

We’ve been talking about the time when Saul was privately anointed as the first king over Israel by Samuel the prophet as found in 1 Samuel 10:1-8. He was set apart by God signified by pouring oil over his head. Afterwards he was given specific instructions by Samuel including details that would happen to him on his way back home.

The second event that would take place was that he was going to meet three men on their way to the town of Bethel. The name “Bethel” means “house of God.” Samuel specifically told Saul that these men would have three goats, three loaves or cakes of bread and a flask of wine. I believe these things were significant because they represent the provision of God. The goats gave both milk and meat which is exactly what God’s word provides for us spiritually. The bread represented our daily provision of food given to us by God. The flask of wine was somewhat of a luxury and tells us that God will allow a few creature comforts on our journey through life as a reward for following Him.

I’ve experienced God’s provision. I can’t tell any miraculous stories like some others can. I guess I’m just ordinary. But I do know first-hand that God does in fact give us our daily bread. Even though there have been times in our life when money was so low that we weren’t sure how we were going buy groceries, the Lord always provided. If you could see me, you’d know for certain that I’ve never lacked when it comes to the food department.

God will give us what we need on a daily basis. That doesn’t mean that there’s anything wrong in preparing for the future if we are able, but we’ve always got to recognize that what we need today is what is really important. If we have food for today then we are truly blessed. We have plans for tomorrow and again there’s nothing wrong with that unless we totally waste today for future plans. Today is all we have for sure and if we have provision for today then what else do we really need?

Many in this world do not have provision for today. It’s our duty to share if we can. That’s what was significant about these three men in the life of Saul. Samuel told Saul that these men would offer him two of their three loaves. He was told to take it. We need to be willing to accept God’s provision in the way He supplies it.

There are a couple of points to make from this part of the story. First of all, we need to know that no matter how poor and destitute we may be God is going to provide, especially for those who come to Him. I will plainly say that I don't believe in the so-called prosperity movement of today. Those who preach this message will tell us that there is a formula to follow that God is obliged to honor, and that if we do these steps, we will not only be blessed of God but will find fortune. More often than not people pour a lot of good-will offerings into these ministries and get nothing in return. We don't serve God for what we can get out of it but we serve Him because we have seen our failure and His provision and love to us who are most unlovable.

However, I do firmly believe that when we come to God in sincerity and truth that He will bless us as a byproduct of our faith in Him. He will meet our daily need. He may allow some to be rich by worldly standards and He may only give us what we absolutely have to have to get by. The key is not what we can get but to be thankful for whatever He blesses us with – We who deserve death. I've noticed something. Even though the prosperous nations of the earth are not in God's will at this time, it seems significant that the nations having the most are those that have historically been led by people who devoutly believed in God. By and large other nations of the Earth that have been ruled by pagan worship are poor and lacking. That's because serving God will result in blessing. We don't serve Him for the blessing because if we do, we will find ourselves only using God for what we can get out of the relationship. But if we serve Him in truth, in love, and because we see the great things He has done for us, you can rest assured that He will give daily provision. And that is also part of God's anointing.

December 13

“In the Face of Your Enemies” By Jerry D. Ousley

O*ther* than a trip to Canada I've never had the privilege of traveling outside of the United States. Though I speak to people often from other countries and have communicated by email with people around the world I've never been there. Both our son and daughter were able to visit France when they were in High School as a part of their French classes and I'm glad for that. But so far God has not allowed us to leave. But who knows what the future holds?

I had an uncle who was also a minister. Some years ago, he had the opportunity to travel into Mexico with another group of ministers. They were going down to hold revival services. However, they were told that, at that time the country of Mexico was very reluctant to let ministers in simply for the purpose of preaching. They were counseled that when asked what their occupation was to tell them that they did something else. For instance, if they worked in construction, they were told to tell the border officials that they were a construction worker and not mention that they were ministers. That wasn't a lie and it worked for all of those who had other occupations. However, my uncle didn't work outside of the home and his church. He battled with it because he was going to have to tell a lie, or at least do some truth stretching, in order to get into Mexico.

When it came his turn with the Mexican officials, he decided that he was going to tell the truth and leave it in God's hands. When asked what his occupation was, he told them, "I'm a minister." There were no objections or further conversation. They simply stamped his papers "approved" and went on to the next person. After crossing the border my uncle looked at his papers and saw that the official had misheard him and approved his papers for entrance naming his occupation as a minstrel. God had caused this official to hear my uncle incorrectly.

I've read instances when the Iron Curtain was standing strong, how God allowed individuals to pass across the borders with car loads of Bibles in plain sight. The Bible was strictly forbidden but God hid the Bibles from their eyes.

God will bless us in the face of our enemies. Saul was told by Samuel (in 1 Samuel 10:1-8) that the next experience he would encounter would happen on the Hill of God. It is

believed that this place was called the “Hill of God” because there was a school of the prophets there. However, it was also occupied by the Philistines – the devout enemies of Israel. The armies from this nation plagued Israel for most of their history.

Samuel told Saul that when he arrived at the “Hill of God” that he would meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place (the place of worship) carrying musical instruments and told him that these men would be prophesying. He was further told that when he met them that the Spirit of the Lord would come upon him and he would prophesy too.

I believe this is significant. You see we all have enemies. To some of us our enemies may consist of other people who don't like us or don't like what we believe. They may be camped right where we worship. It's something to me how that other than mentioning that the garrison of Philistines was there nothing more was said about them. Saul was told that he would prophesy there after the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. And he did. He was able to worship in the face of his enemies. It wasn't a smear or blatant display of defiance but simply done in spite of them. It didn't matter that their enemies were there. They were anointed, worshipped and obeyed God anyway.

We can be obedient to God in the face of our enemies. It isn't that we are trying to defy them. Our enemies may be in the form of other people or in disease and sickness. It doesn't matter. The fact is that if we follow God, we will be able to worship not in defiance but in spite of. It doesn't matter that they are there. We can worship and serve God anyway.

Regardless what you are going through right now, what your experience is, or who or what your enemy is, just remember that God will allow us to worship and serve Him in the face of our enemies. He has anointed us to do so.

December 14

“Turned Into Another Man” By Jerry D. Ousley

I know a man who became someone else. At one time in his life, he had a very bad drinking problem and I think he not only drank but took drugs too. While any form of drunkenness is wrong in light of the Bible, there are some people who get drunk and are almost fun to be around. They get happy when they get drunk. But then there are a lot of people who get mean when they get drunk. This was the kind of drunk this man was. The first thing he wanted to do when he lost control was to fight.

One night he called me. It was a Friday night and he was drunk. He had stopped by our house earlier that evening and had made some insinuating remarks. I suppose he was trying to pick a fight then, but I'm kind of a mild-mannered guy and I don't take hints very well. It was about an hour or so after that when he called me. He plainly told me that he didn't like me and wanted to fight me. He wanted me to meet him somewhere so we could settle this with our fists. Other than the fact that I didn't approve of what he was doing I had no problem with this man. If he didn't like me, I couldn't help it. I told him that I had no desire to fight with him and that I wouldn't be there. I wasn't afraid and I don't think I was acting like a coward; I just didn't want to fight with this man (I didn't want to fight with any man).

Over the years there were several other incidents with this fellow but I never allowed myself to lose my temper with him. Years later he became a Christian. We became good friends and remain good friends to this day. He was turned into another man. He quit drinking and using drugs and turned his life over to Jesus Christ.

We've been talking about the unofficial anointing of Saul as the first king of Israel as found in 1 Samuel 10:1-8. Samuel had told Saul about several events that would take place on his journey home. First, he would meet two men who would tell him that the donkeys he was looking for had been found. Next, he would meet three men who would give him two loaves of bread. Finally, he would come to the "Hill of God" where he would meet up with a group of prophets and that he himself would prophesy. Samuel told him that after this he would be turned into another man. He would no longer be the same person he had been.

That may have been a bit distressing to Saul. I get the impression when I read the account of his early life that he was satisfied with who he was. He liked being the son of a farmer. He liked his life and the direction he was going. But then he met Samuel who told him that God was going to change him into a different person. His life would be altered and he would become the king of Israel and be responsible for all those people. I don't think that Saul was thrilled with this plan. Nevertheless, he accepted the will of God and during his early reign as king God gave him several victories and made him a great man in Israel.

God wants to change us too. It's part of His anointing. We may be satisfied, at least on the surface, with who we are. We may not want to change. But change is vital to each of us especially when it comes to serving God. Saul's change came when the Spirit of the Lord came upon him. It is the same with us. God wants to anoint each of us with His Spirit.

If we don't know Jesus Christ as our personal Savior then God wants you to experience His Spirit. If you will accept the free gift of grace given by Jesus Christ – The gift of eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven – He will make you a new person. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17 that if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature or a new creation. All things have been remade and made new. In other words, we become another man (or woman).

If you are already a believer in Jesus Christ then you know what I'm talking about. However, it isn't an experience that happens one day and then we just go on with our lives. Daily we are yet becoming that new creation. Our anointing experience is a daily experience. Saul probably didn't feel much different after it was all over and he arrived home. But it was the beginning. All things were even then being made new. Walk with Jesus daily. You'll find that each day becomes a new day with new experiences as you become another man.

December 15

“Do, Offer and Wait”

By Jerry D. Ousley

Doing isn't hard. After we get used to it offering and giving isn't hard either. But waiting can be a tough one. I need a lot of work when it comes to waiting. If we're getting ready to go somewhere and we have to leave at a certain time I'll always get ready too early and then I pace the floor waiting to go. If the wait involves someone meeting us at our house, then I walk from one window to another looking to see if they are coming or not.

I have learned to keep my mouth shut while I'm waiting. I used to be bad to complain. I'd get impatient and make life miserable for those who may be unfortunate enough to be waiting with me. I don't do that as much anymore. I guess I could look on the bright side though and at least realize that when I'm pacing the floor while I wait, I'm getting some exercise!

In talking about the incident where Saul was unofficially anointed by Samuel as the first king of Israel (1 Samuel 10:1-8) in Samuel's final instructions to Saul, he told him three things. First of all, he told Saul to do as the occasion demanded and told him that God was with him. Second, he said that he was to go to Gilgal where Samuel would meet him and offer sacrifices. Finally, Samuel told Saul that he would have to wait for seven days until he met him there. To me that was the tough part.

God tells each of us these same three things as we go through our journey of the soul. We are to do as the occasion demands and God will be with us. In other words, we must be willing, after God has made us a new person, to be obedient to God. That is a good practice after we have come to Jesus Christ in salvation. We read the Bible and do what the Holy Spirit tells us to do. What we read we apply to our lives. We live as we are instructed in the scripture. That's not usually the hard part. Once we have been changed and realize how awesome it is what Christ has done for us, we are eager to do the will of God.

Next, we are to offer sacrifices. That is representative of worship. This again becomes a natural response when we realize the great sacrifice Jesus made in dying in our place, for our sin. We are grateful. We are humbled. We are awestruck. To fall down and worship Him

is not really much of a sacrifice when we look at it like that. To offer sacrifices of praise becomes not only an easy thing to do but we soon become eager to do it.

The hard part is the final of the three; to wait. Waiting means that we have to learn patience. Is God being mean to us in making us wait? Not at all. In fact, we not only learn much when we wait, but we also come to know peace in waiting. We are used to a fast-paced stressful world. In waiting we are required to rest and be still. We spend time seemingly doing nothing but in reality, when we learn to wait, we learn to occupy ourselves with God.

We'd rather be loud in our worship. It is more fun to sing and dance. There's nothing wrong with that. But waiting quietly is also worship. When we are still and focused on God that is when He speaks to our hearts most often. We have prepared ourselves to listen to God.

We also learn something about the timing of God. In our instant-everything world waiting is a lost art. Anticipation actually makes whatever we are waiting for more valuable to us. It is so with our relationship with God too. He isn't slow or anything like that; God can do it now. But more often He makes us wait because that is part of our growing process. Waiting means that we are in anticipation of what God is going to bring. We need to do. We need to offer. But for most of us what we need to do most is wait, and waiting is the hardest part for a lot of people who are anointed of God.

December 16

“Caleb and Joshua” By Jerry D. Ousley

Here they came. A large group of people were watching as a small party of twelve men approached from the distance. They were the twelve original spies, one from each tribe of the currently nomadic nation of Israel. They had been slaves in the land of Egypt, and God, using the man Moses, had miraculously led them out of slavery to a land long promised to these descendants of Abraham. They had crossed the wilderness, received the Law of God by the hand of Moses and were now standing on the brink of the long-awaited promise. Their parents and grand-parents had told them stories of how they had come to be slaves for the Egyptians and how that God had promised that one day He would bring them out of their bondage and take them to a land rich in resources to live peaceful, healthy and prosperous lives. It all had seemed like a fairy tale as they had grown into men and women. Could it ever come to pass? But now here they stood on the edge of that land watching the men they had sent to spy it out return to tell them all about it. They had to be excited and overflowing with anticipation.

The men arrived in camp bearing giant clusters of grapes and other fruit they had discovered in the land. The people listened with great interest and happiness as the men told of all they saw and experienced there. It was without doubt a land they described as flowing with milk and honey. It was indeed a land rich in resources, flowing with water; a place where their cattle and sheep would have abundant pasture. All they had dreamed about could be found there.

Then they stuck the pin in their proverbial balloons. They began to describe the people. There were giants in that land. The place was crawling with hostile and pagan people. They didn't worship the God of Israel and sacrificed their children to false gods. They had huge walled cities and large armies. The men spoke with fear as they spoke to the people, "We felt like grasshoppers in their eyes and so we were. We can't defeat them. We'll all be destroyed. We've been deceived by this man Moses and we'll all be better off if we just give up this dream of a promised land, pack up our stuff and go back to being slaves in Egypt."

The people grew angry at God and angry at Moses for leading them here. Because of the report of these spies their dream had collapsed and disappointment discouraged them until they just gave up.

But two of the spies had a different word for them. Joshua and Caleb stood up and told the people, "They're wrong. We have the promise of God on our side and we can take them! Don't give up. Leap up in your hearts and have faith in God and we can possess this land He has promised to us!" But their words fell on empty ears.

Because of their doubt and discouragement God told Moses that these people would have to wander in the wilderness for forty years until all of that generation had died out and then He would take their children, as adults, into this land of promise. The only exception He would make was that He would allow Joshua and Caleb to live to enter the Promised Land.

Joshua later went on to succeed Moses as leader of the people and he led them into the land of promise. Caleb had stood strong for that entire forty-year period and God also allowed him to enter the Promised Land.

Today we have another promise. It is the hope of Heaven. Maybe you've just come to Christ or perhaps you've been a Christian for so long it's hard to remember when you weren't a believer. But just the same the devil would like to discourage you. He brings on all kinds of hardships including sickness, disease, financial difficulty and lost relationships with people. His attacks are designed for one thing – to make you discouraged and keep you from the promise of God. Remember Caleb and Joshua. Don't let him talk you into going back to your own Egypt. The promise is true and will come to pass. It's no fairy tale. The next time you feel discouraged remember Caleb and Joshua.

December 17

“Eighty-Five Years Young”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I *work* a job just like most of you do. But I have to confess that my job is mostly working with my mind and not my body. I should exercise but frankly I don't. For these reasons when I find myself in a situation that requires physical work, I'm embarrassed to say it makes me sore. I wrote another article about fixing some drain pipes. I worked for three hours on that job. Afterwards it hurt when I stood up to walk. That's shameful I know but it doesn't make it any the less true.

That's why the story of Caleb simply amazes me. In Joshua 14:6-14, we're told about the request of Caleb regarding his inheritance. Remember that he was one of the two men allowed to enter the Promised Land from the original generation of those coming out of Egypt. He said in this incident that he was forty years old when he went with the other spies. After the years of wandering and the years of war to claim the land he stood before Joshua, now eighty-five years old. I'm not so sure that I'll even be able to stand when I'm eighty-five! You'd think after all these years of faithfulness to God that he would ask for what he deserved: A piece of flat ground that wouldn't require much work; one that had already been conquered where he could spend the rest of his life in peaceful retirement.

Not Caleb. Instead, he asked for a mountain. It was a mountain that hadn't been conquered yet and would require him to continue fighting. He would not only have to fight to climb that mountain but after he got there, he'd have to fight those still living there to claim it as his. He told Joshua, "I'm eighty-five years old but I still have the same strength I had when I was forty. My wits haven't been exhausted and my mind is clear. I can fight just as good now as I could then!" To say the least I greatly admire this man. Age hadn't taken a toll on him. His faith in God had not dwindled and he still had enough spark in him that he was willing to spend his twilight years doing battle with the enemy. He was eighty-five years young!

While I'm not in as good of physical shape now as Caleb was at eighty-five, I want to have the same attitude about my spiritual life. I want to stay sharp doing battle with the enemy. I want to do my part to win this war with the devil.

What about you? I'll bet that you don't want to give up either. You may be a young person physically or you may now be in your twilight years. But regardless your physical condition, whether you're able to get up and go to work every day or whether you're confined to a bed or wheelchair, I'll bet that you are just as ready to do spiritual battle with the enemy.

Our claim is for a mountain just like Caleb's. Our struggle for Heaven is just like climbing a mountain and conquering its inhabitants. Are you ready for the spiritual battle? It won't be easy. It'll be a daily struggle to win the war. But I believe we can do it. We can, with the help of our Father in Heaven say along with Caleb, "It may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall be able to drive them out as the Lord said." Can you say along with Caleb, "I'm eighty-five years young?"

December 18

“What Made Caleb so Young at Eighty-Five” By Jerry D. Ousley

*F*or the last couple of articles, we’ve been talking about Caleb and how that at eighty-five he felt as strong and young as he did at forty. He had asked Joshua to give him a mountain that still had to be conquered as his inheritance in the Promised Land. You can find this story in Joshua 14:6-14. I continue to be amazed at his request. It is so typical of our own spiritual life and daily battle to obtain our prize at the finish line – Namely making Heaven our eternal home.

I stood up to a bully once. I was fifteen years old and skinny as a rail fence. This fellow, who was on the basketball team, had been pestering me. He stood about a foot and a half taller than me and was strong enough to pick me up and break me in two. I had taken all I could take and stood up to him. He told me to meet him at a certain place after school to settle the matter. Now I know that this looked like a slaughter. There was no way in the world that I could take this guy. But I had had it. I went to the place we had agreed on, a little shaky in the knees by now I might add (fear has a way of creeping into the picture when you have some time to think about the situation). I fully expected to get pounded. Was I ever happy when the other guy didn’t show up! Of course, at fifteen I had to make my brags, but inside I was more relieved than a man just untangled from a barbed wire fence!

Caleb wasn’t afraid to stand up to his bullies. He took his stand, made his claim and conquered his mountain even though he was eighty-five years old. As I thought about his story I wondered, “What made Caleb so young at eighty-five?” I believe it was several things.

First of all, I believe that it was his positive attitude. He could have conformed and been like the other ten spies when they had scouted out the Promised Land. But he chose to be different. He chose to be positive. “We can take the land,” he said. Even when he knew that they would face all those people he knew that this group of ex-slaves could win.

He knew this because he also knew that they had God on their side. No matter what was coming God had promised that He would deliver the inhabitants of the land into their hands if they would only keep His commandments and move on His word.

Then he also kept himself in shape for what he knew was coming. I believe Caleb had spotted that mountain way back when he was forty years old spying out the land. He knew what he wanted and he made preparation to be ready when the time came.

We too need to have these qualities in our own spiritual battle. Our goal may not be to take a literal mountain but we still have mountains in our lives – things that seem insurmountable. We need to keep a positive attitude even when things aren't going so well. Just because Caleb was allowed to go into the Promised Land, he still had to stay with the group wandering around in the wilderness for forty years. Things hadn't always been good for him but he stayed in shape for what God had promised.

We've got to have a non-doubting vision of God. Can we trust Him? Will He stay true to His word? You can bet your bottom dollar that He will, if we'll just do our part – Keep believing His word.

When we know what we want then we've got to make preparation for it. If we want to be a lawyer in life we've got to train and know what we're talking about. We've got to make preparation. We can do it – but only through Jesus Christ! So how young are you?

December 19

“What I Want for Christmas” By Jerry D. Ousley

As the most celebrated and also the most expensive of all the holidays approaches, the commonly asked question seems to be, “What do you want for Christmas?” Living in a land where most of us have an over-abundance, there really isn’t much that we need. Oh, there are some in this country that do have a great need, like the homeless in the cities. I know that some of them may deserve what they’ve received in life but many of them haven’t. Will we turn our backs on them or do our part to take care of them? There are some who have lost their jobs and this Christmas will be a struggle to pay the bills and keep food on the table. Others may have had a bit of bad luck with their health and are living on disability that also tends to disable Christmas.

While we don’t want to forget these folks, a great number of people in our country are just like me - Other than a new shirt or two, we really don’t need anything. It would be nice to get some great dining gift certificates – As always, my absolute favorite pastime is indulging in culinary excellence. But I don’t need it. The vehicle I drive could use some work and a face-lift, and elegance in transportation would be nice, but I don’t really need that either.

I suppose I could ask for what every beauty pageant contestant seems to ask for – That would be “world peace.” World peace would be nice, but when we know what the Bible says about that subject then we know that it will never come until Christ reigns on this Earth. We can’t control that event, only be ready for it so there’s not much use in asking for that.

Cold cash is always a good choice. It might not seem very personal but then, when you have the choice of spending it on what you’d like it can be a nice gift. But as long as the money is there to pay the bills, buy groceries and have a few extras now and then, cash isn’t really necessary either.

I guess I’m getting hard to buy for. As a kid (who am I kidding, even as a young man) I could think of a thousand things I’d like to have. But as life progresses it just doesn’t seem that those things matter as much as they did before. Trinkets and “pretties” really seem useless. I’m kind of at a stage in life when having less seems better (I know, I’m getting weird – what can I say?).

What do I want for Christmas? At the risk of sounding unbelievable, this is really what I want: A little snow on Christmas Day; the joy of seeing others tearing into their presents; maybe a simple gift or two to open for myself; a good family dinner with those that I love, and a good movie to watch that afternoon. Really!

Now this isn't meant in any way to make others feel guilty; if you know exactly what you want and what would make you happy this Christmas, I hope you get it. I mean that.

I guess there is one more thing I'd like. I'd wish that all who celebrate this Christmas could come to know the inspiration of the holiday as their own personal Savior. Yes, it is really about the birth of Jesus Christ. I know that there are those who are desperately trying to take Christ out of the Christmas holiday (I never did like the term Xmas) but let's face it, without the hope of what Christ came to offer, the holiday is given wholly to feasting, selfishness, and a chance to beef up the profits before the end of the year. That isn't really much to celebrate, is it? But the coming of One who gave the best gift of all – Freedom from sin and the hope of eternal life – Now that's something to celebrate!

December 20

“Jingle Jangle” By Jerry D. Ousley

“Jingle-jangle” - Just one of the many sounds of Christmas. There are many things that can make this sound: The ringing of the bells by Salvation Army volunteers as you go into the supermarket, the plunk of coins going into a donation can for some worthy charity, the bells on a sleigh as you take that fifteen-dollar tour around the square, and my nerves in the crowded mall trying to get that last minute gift.

We associate many things with sounds and Christmas is no exception. What about tearing paper on Christmas morning? I really enjoyed tearing into those presents when I was a kid, but I believe it is more fun as an adult, watching kids rip and tear those beautiful wrappings and turn them into a messy pile in the middle of the floor.

Carolers are another sound that, unfortunately, you don't hear as much as you used to. It may sound silly to go out into the cold and fill your lungs with icy air until you hear all those voices singing the joys of Christmas together. It makes you jump up from your seat in your warm living room and dash to the door, run out on the porch without thinking about the cold air to listen to that angelic choir.

Then there's the sound of the family crowded around the kitchen table. Laughter at uncle Joe's stories about Christmas's past; the ladies all making over cousin Sue's new baby; the rattle of plates and forks, ice sloshing in cups of tea and soda – all are sounds that not only make your mouth water but instill memories that will stay with you forever.

There are many sounds that bring wonderful memories to us. But some have bad memories of Christmas's past as well. Many have lost loved ones at this time of year and the sounds of the season invoke thoughts of those bad memories.

Regardless of your Christmas memories, there is one sound that should bring hope and instill a good memory for all of us and that is the sound of the Gospel. There would be no Christmas to celebrate had it not been for the truth of the Gospel and what this baby in a manger brought to the season. How could we help but celebrate the birth of One Who came to give us eternal life? When we understand just what this baby in a stable came to do then we

stand in awe and reverence, happiness and wonder in the shadow of the true Master of the Universe.

This Christmas as you enjoy all the sounds and “jingle-jangle” of the Season don’t forget the sound that brings the most joy, peace and happiness – The sound of the gospel. It rings louder than any sound on earth, yet it is surprisingly silent. You have to listen for it because at first it is but a whisper. But when that whisper catches our ear and we begin to concentrate on it, then it grows louder and louder until it is a deafening sound that pierces right through our soul and grabs us for the kingdom of God. That’s a good thing, by the way. Listen closely for all the sounds of Christmas this year but whatever you do, don’t miss the sound of the gospel found in the season.

December 21

“Gifts, Gifts, Gifts” By Jerry D. Ousley

By tradition Christmas has become a time for giving gifts. There’s nothing wrong with giving gifts just as long as we don’t go overboard, plunging ourselves yet deeper in debt and getting through the holiday relieved that it is over. Christmas should be a time of joy, when we get pleasure from what we have picked out for those special individuals on our gift list. But all too often we wind up buying things for individuals we really don’t want to buy for. I suppose we all do that to a degree. It’s called “saving face.” I know what that’s all about.

I remember a particular Christmas when I was a kid. Our parents had given us enough money to buy a gift for each other (I have two brothers, and one sister). It was “strongly suggested” to me that I purchase a gift for my sister (she was one of those during my childhood I really didn’t want to buy a gift for) and the “strongly suggested” gift was an Etch-A-Sketch (remember those?). I was offended. After all, this was my dream gift. I knew that if I only had an Etch-A-Sketch I was destined to become a great artist. This was to be the gift that would make me the coveted child in the household. I knew that it would forever decide my fate in life. And they had the audacity to “strongly suggest” that I buy one for my (ugh) sister. Did they think that I was an untalented freak and that the gift of all gifts was to go to her instead?

I looked around the toy department of the store always coming back down the aisle that held the coveted Etch-A-Sketch. I did some figuring and with money I had managed to save and what our parents had given us if I didn’t spend too much on my (ugh) sister I could walk out of there with my beloved Etch-A-Sketch. But those “strongly suggested” words made me to know that I would be in a whole heap of trouble if I followed my plan instead of theirs. I grabbed up the Etch-A-Sketch. Even in its bubble wrapped package I could feel the power of creation emanating from it. I felt that I was being cheated out of my life long career and that I was handing it over to my (ugh) sister. Alas, such was my lot in life!

Christmas morning finally arrived and I eyed the package that had been wrapped from me to my sister. Even though a few weeks had passed I couldn’t get over the feeling of being cheated. My heart was heavy as she tore into the gift and smiled with glee thanking me for her (my) Etch-A-Sketch. Then I was handed a box. “Hmmm this box has a very familiar feel to it,” I thought. It was approximately the same size and weight as the one I had given to my sister.

I looked at the label and discovered that it was from her. Could it be? Yes, it was! It had been “strongly suggested” to her as well and so she had bought me an Etch-A-Sketch. I smiled with a pretended happiness for my gift. But in reality, I was wondering if I could hide behind it because the embarrassment from my previous feelings had shrunk me to about two inches tall and I just wanted to disappear for a while.

Now I never became a great artist and, although my sister and I played with our Etch-A-Sketches for several years after that, it didn’t transform me filling me with talent. I’m really lucky to draw a straight line. But the life lesson I learned that Christmas left a memorable impact.

As I remember this episode from childhood, I realize that as we give at Christmastime we should never give begrudgingly. It will bite us in the butt. God will allow us to feel two inches tall and they don’t make Etch-A-Sketches any more (as far as I know) to hide behind. There are those who need our help particularly at Christmas. Of course, we can’t give to them all. But we can give. However, heed my warning – Don’t give because of those “strong suggestions” wishing that you had went a little cheaper so you could have kept some for yourself. You can’t really “save face.” We might be good at hiding it from others but what takes place inside, well, it’s not a pretty sight. It is better to not give at all than to give with that kind of attitude.

It makes me to wonder, what would have happened if Christ had given begrudgingly? He gave the greatest gift any human being on Planet Earth could have hoped to receive – the gift of eternal life in Him. What if He had decided to go “chincy” on His gift? I really don’t want to think about that question very long.

December 22

“The Box” By Debbie Ousley

*P*icture it! The little tot tears into his or her present and, after finally reaching the prize that seemed to them was wrapped in three layers of paper and held together with super tape, they start to crawl in the BOX! They climb on top of the BOX. The BOX becomes a car or a train; it becomes to them anything their imagination will allow it to be. Meanwhile, that fifty dollar - I MUST HAVE toy - lays ignored until they get over the BOX thing. Here we are, sitting with our mouths dropped open, wondering why we hadn't gone down to the local supermarket and picked up a whole set of BOXES for nothing.

As I thought about this scene, I began to wonder if maybe this is not what has happened to us. Why is it that we have such a hard time with “balance” in our lives? We, as Americans, seem to swing from one high point to another. Have we gotten so carried away with the idea of the Christmas season (the box) that we have forgotten the Gift (Jesus)? I know what you're thinking, “This has been done to death!”

Myself, I really enjoy Christmas, the lights and giving spirit; it is a great time of the year. Families are getting together, and churches are making fruit baskets and Christmas caroling, and working on the Christmas play that's held together with pins and prayer, all these things bless me! But all these acts of kindness and good will have to be because of the Gift (Jesus). They are the by-products of His birth. It has to be more than just a “sweet story.”

His birth brought a truth to us that tells us that He wants us to be in that same spirit of love toward our fellow man all year long. You see, the Gift (Jesus) is a gift that just keeps giving and giving; it's not like the decorations that are stored away after the New Year, and then dragged back out after Thanksgiving to be displayed as a sign that says “It's that time of year AGAIN! And, by the way, they are in a BOX along with most of the gifts we unwrap on Christmas morning, not to mention the BOX those after-Christmas bills puts us in with our pay checks.

America, we are blessed! But only because of the GIFT that came with almost no glitter, whistles, or ribbon. His wrapping was swaddling clothes, and His box was a cow's trough, but, man! What a GIFT!

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December 23

“Christmas Weekend”

By Jerry D. Ousley

I love it when Christmas falls on a Friday or a Monday. It means extra days off from work without having to spend precious vacation days. Our son and his wife are home for the holidays and it seems different but special having guests in the house. We've basically got it made. Oh, we don't have an abundance of money in the bank and we don't have the largest house in the town we live in. We don't have brand new fancy automobiles that tell us where to turn while others in the vehicle watch a DVD, but we do have plenty of good food to eat and time to laugh and enjoy each other's company. I feel blessed more than ever before.

It makes me to wonder how it must feel to live anywhere else in the world. I am concerned about our country like a lot of Americans are these days. But even with our problems and pettiness we are still the most blessed nation on the face of this globe. Most of us don't know what it must be like to live on pennies a day or to rummage through the garbage of the rich to find food. We have no idea what it is really like to be hungry or cold for an extended period of time.

There are those in the world who do. This Christmas weekend my heart goes out to them. My prayers are with them – not just in word. We are so concerned about being politically correct these days. Many are careful not to say “Merry Christmas” but “Happy Holidays” when what the world really needs to hear and know about is the reason we wish others a “Merry Christmas.” It is all because of Christ. In the midst of the “jingle jangle” He is the one who makes the entire season merry.

I hope that all who read this have the best Christmas they have ever know. But while we enjoy the gifts, the feasts and the good times let's not forget Jesus. Let's remember that the greatest gift of love we could ever give is to give Him away to others. Let's remember those who cover this earth who have need for physical wholeness but most desperately spiritual wholeness. Let's pray for them, love them, provide for them and become our “brother's keeper.” Not because we have to, but because the love of Christ within us impresses us to. Have a merry Christmas!

December 24

“Good ‘Ole St. Nick ...” By Jerry D. Ousley

*T*here’s been a lot of talk, confusion, and opinion over the past few years about, yes “Santa Claus;” good ‘Ole St. Nick. So, what about him? Should the Church discourage Santa Claus or what?

According to tradition, many years ago an elderly gentleman by the name of Nicholas wanted to help needy families by secretly giving food, shoes and toys for their children. He would get out his sleigh and go around leaving these gifts at their door then move on to the next house. Sometime later the Catholic Church made him a saint, hence the name “St. Nick.” This is the story in a nutshell and there are many variations of it, but basically that’s it.

Somehow, it was decided (probably by a group of ancient politicians) that St. Nick’s tradition be kept at Christmastime. Over the years the tradition of buying gifts at Christmas gradually began to overshadow the holiday’s true meaning.

Now, to make matters more complicated, there are those who say that Christ wasn’t really born in December. Some believe it was really in the spring and others believe it was more like September. So, they accuse the entire Christmas Holiday as being a farce and claim that it should not be encouraged by the Church.

The good thing about Christ is that He usually made things simple instead of complicated. We take that simplicity and turn it into a confusing and demanding mess. This is my opinion for what it’s worth: “Baloney!” Why do we have to take something good and wholesome and make such a big deal over it? Religiosity usually has a way of doing that. I say if we’re going to give gifts why not do it when we celebrate the One Who gave the greatest gift of eternal life to believers? And as far as whether December 25th is really Christ’s Birthday or not, well what does it really matter? At least we are taking a day and presenting it as an opportunity for the world to think about a Savior.

I say let’s look past the hype, the fighting and bickering, and struggle for gifts and look to the real spirit of the Holiday. Have fun, enjoy it, eat a lot, and remember Christ. Have a merry Christmas!

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December 25

“The Story of Christmas”

By Jerry D. Ousley

As she thought about the events of the past several months it seemed a dream and, in a way, a blur. It had almost cost her marriage to the man she loved so dearly. She recalled that day when the angel had appeared to her, speaking words that were beyond human imagination. For starters, not even a prophet, let alone an angel had been seen or heard of in recorded history for at least four hundred years.

This Heavenly being had told her that she had been graced to give birth to the Promised One. This had been the secret hope of every girl in her country. As a young teen she had dreamed what it would be like to be the mother of this great Expected One. It would be a life of luxury being the mother of a king. And the angel was telling her that she was the chosen girl.

But it had not been the life of luxury dreamed about. On the contrary, it had been a time of frowns and being shunned because she was expecting a child and had not been with her husband to be. He had almost broken off their engagement for this very reason, but then changed his mind because of a dream from God. They were married and he had faithfully stood by her side as she was treated like a prostitute.

Then, in the final days of her pregnancy, had come the new ruling from the Roman officials that her husband must travel to the city of his birth for registration that would bring a new tax upon them from the emperor. It had not been an easy trip and quite honestly, may have helped to bring her labor on after they had finally found a place to stay.

The little town was overflowing with people by the time they had arrived and not an inn in town had a room available. It seemed they were going to have to sleep in the streets and already feeling pain she knew this would not provide a very modest place to bring this “Promised King” into the world. Finally, however, one of the inn-keepers had offered to let them stay in his stable.

The little cave behind the inn was humbling but quite comfortable. There she gave birth to her firstborn son. She and her husband had just gotten through the trial and had the newborn wrapped up and settled in when a group of shepherds had shown up telling a story of angels appearing in the sky and announcing the birth of this child. It may not have seemed like a good place for a king to be born but they certainly got royal treatment from this group of men who smelled heavily of sheep.

It had been an exciting but tiring day and night. But she thought deeply about these things and knew that even though they were poor their lives were now rich and blessed because of this wonderful male child lying in the manger before them. Though he lay in a feeding trough for the cattle and donkeys surely one day he would feed multitudes.

Yes, it had been more than interesting because everything the angel had said had come true so far. Surely the rest would happen and when it did all nations of the Earth would be blessed in Him. (Luke 1 – 2)

December 26

“Agony” By Jerry D. Ousley

I've always considered myself to have had pretty much of a “cast iron stomach.” All my life I've been able to eat just about anything I wanted (and it shows). However, age has a way of catching up to you. How many times have you heard that one?

A few years ago, my brother and I decided to take our sons to see a Pacers game in Indianapolis. We had a great time and enjoyed the bonding with our teenage sons. After the game was over and we were driving home, we decided to stop and get a bite to eat. One of my all-time favorites has always been “White Castle.” There's just something about those wonderful little burgers.

We stopped and went in to order. I noticed that my brother's son ordered ten of those delicious little burgers. Then when my son and I got to the window to order, he ordered ten also. I got to thinking that I had always been able to out-eat anybody I was with and I wasn't going to be out-done by these two youngsters (hey, you got a better price by buying ten anyway). I thought, “If they can do it so can I.” My brother wasn't so brave (or maybe “stupid” is the correct word).

We made our purchase and decided to eat in the car on the way home to save time. And so, I began to chow down on my “White Castles.” After six, I began to feel a bit full, but I was determined to keep up with these two growing boys. I ate them all. What a man!

But, as with everything, there is always a price to pay. One of my uncles always said, “Education is always expensive no matter how you get it.” I should have remembered that. I got into bed and fell off to sleep almost immediately. But then, sometime in the night I awoke with my stomach tied in knots. How can I put this politely? God gave us two openings to release built up gas in our bodies. At this moment both were working overtime.

I think “White Castle” has another advertising feature that they have never explored. Eating enough of their wonderful little burgers will also give you exercise (move over Jared). I know because all night long I was running from the bedroom to the bathroom.

I prayed, "God, if you'll just let me live through the night, I promise I'll never eat ten 'White Castles' in one sitting again." What a gracious God we have, for He did let me live through the night. I have honored that promise to God (of course there's a lot of incentive there) because I never have tried to eat ten of those burgers since. And as long as I retain the brain cells with the memory of that night, I won't.

We all over-do-it at times, don't we? We push ourselves until we get overly fatigued or even sick. When we do that, God has put a wonderful system in our bodies that makes us stop and get relief from our problems whether we want to or not.

Why does God let us do that? He knows that sometimes the best knowledge that we can obtain is through experience. Bad experiences should teach us the simple lesson of "don't do that again." Why is it, though, that some people seem to never learn? They just keep going back to the same old thing that never worked before. People sin, get into trouble, beg God to bail them out, He does, and then in a short while they go right back to the same thing that got them into trouble in the first place. I can't say that I completely understand (but I am reminded by "White Castle").

People are like that. But God is an infinitely merciful God. He wants us to come to Him once and for all. When you are in agony, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally, remember that God is your answer. He will bring you relief, whether through a good doctor, a good friend, or through His word, to advise you. He's always there. He never leaves. Only we do. Remember that the next time you're in agony. By the way, I still like my "White Castles," but I know to stop at six.

December 27

“Knowing How to Fall” By Debbie Ousley

Recently, during my son’s visit over the Christmas holiday, he made a misstep and fell down the stairs. It was a short fall, only about two steps, but when he hit the floor, he just kind of rolled up in a ball. There was nothing broken and no injuries except for his pride when Megan laughed as she asked him “Are you okay?” You know how brothers and sisters are?

Once, at the Youth Center, one of the boys fell out of the back door and when he did, he just slid down each step and bowed when he reached the bottom.

At work I caught the toe of my shoe on a box and fell to my knees not even dropping a lot of material I was preparing to inspect. Truth? My old prayer bones were a little sore but no long-lasting results.

Knowing how to fall is a very important part of falling. It seems if we relax and don’t stiffen up our injuries are not as severe. I don’t know of anyone who enjoys falling unless they really are not falling – parachutists, bungee jumpers, or high divers. But we all fall sometimes in our lives. Knowing how to fall can save our lives, our minds, our reputations, and of course, “our face.” Being stiff and anxious is what seems to cause the most trouble. Trying to catch ourselves causes broken arms, and wrists. It’s not the fall that kills us; it’s the landing, right?

Falling is sometimes a way of saying, “We’ve failed.” We all have been taught that failing is BAD!

In the 1968 Olympic Games the last Marathon runner came into the stadium. No one was there to cheer him on because the race had been won hours earlier. As the runner made a turn, he lost his balance and fell down, unable to get up. One of the cleaning men ran down to the edge of the track and started clapping and shouting words of encouragement. The runner slowly struggled to his knees then drew himself up to hobble across the finish line. He fell, but he didn’t fail.

Acts 14:20 says, "He got up and went back." (NIV). Paul must have felt pretty bad after being stoned for preaching the Good News to those who wanted him dead. He fell but he rose up and kept going on.

So, I guess the most important thing to remember about falling is knowing there's a possibility that we will, and to rise up from that fall with the least injuries to our pride.

December 28

“Animal Tricks” By Jerry D. Ousley

People have trained animals to do all sorts of tricks. You can see them perform on TV on programs that range from variety shows to Animal Planet. We see dogs who bark in such a way that they actually sound like they are saying words. Parrots are taught to mock the human language and with enough work it sounds like they are carrying on an entire conversation. We’ve seen circus animals from parading elephants, boxing kangaroos, dancing bears, and people taming lions and tigers. It seems that there is nothing, with enough patience added, that man cannot teach animals to do.

God had some special animals as well. The very first was a dove that returned to the ark with the olive branch in its beak. What about Balaam’s donkey? It talked. Before we jump back in disbelief and claim that this author is off his rocker don’t forget about those talking parrots mentioned above. If man can do it, why do we think that God can’t? There was the whale or special fish that God prepared for Jonah. It swallowed him in one giant gulp and there he remained for three days. He wasn’t digested and I suppose that, along with his constant complaining he gave the fish a case of upset stomach and after Jonah repented God had the whale or fish vomit him out on dry land. That was a pretty good trick if you ask me. Let’s not forget about the raven the brought food to Elijah while he hid out by the brook during the famine until it dried up. Let’s see a man teach a raven to do that!

Throughout the Bible we can find incidents where God used animals to get man’s attention. He sent swarms of flies, commanded frogs to come out of the river and be, well, just about everywhere, and sent the locusts, all to get Pharaoh’s attention when He wanted him to release the descendants of Israel out of slavery from Egypt. Jesus used the example of the common sparrow to show how not even one in this abundant species of bird fell to the ground without it catching God’s attention.

It’s kind of amazing to me how that God can so easily train the animals to do things and man mocks Him by doing the same thing yet we read about one of God’s animal tricks in the Bible and with a “hummmph” say something like, “That’s impossible!” But if we can do it just think of how much easier God can do it.

The big difference is that man does it for entertainment or to make money while God does it simply to get our attention. We can be pretty hardheaded sometimes and God has to go to the extreme to get through to us. But He will do what it takes until we have proven that we won't listen even if a donkey says, "Good morning."

How much easier would it be for us to just believe what God wrote to us through the hands of the prophets and apostles? I know it'd be a lot easier for us. It isn't a hard thing for God to make an animal do something to make us take a second look. But He shouldn't have to do that. We need to get over the pride of what we think is knowledge and use some common sense to just believe God. If we don't, we'd better be watching the animals. It's hard to say what God will have them saying or doing next.

December 29

“Hi Ho, Hi, Ho, It’s Back to Work We Go” By Jerry D. Ousley

Some of us have enjoyed a long vacation break during this holiday season. Many of us thought ahead enough to save some vacation days so as to have some well-deserved time off. I’ve got to say that I have thoroughly enjoyed it.

I hope none of you have experienced tragedy or hardship during this season. However, I know that many do. If you have, I am deeply sorry and hope God will comfort your hearts.

But now that the holidays are over, it’s time to go **BACK TO WORK!** Yes, we’ve enjoyed our time and we’ve made our resolves, but now it’s back to the “ol’ grinding stone we go.”

A new year is dawning upon us and with that comes a whole new set of problems and blessings. God has a direction for us to go. As we return to work or school, whichever your case may be, let’s make one resolve to be true for all of us; that resolve is to “do whatever we find to do, just like we’re doing it for God” (Colossians 3:23), because really, we are.

If we can regard our daily duties as the work of God, then it will make the toil a little less painful and the duties a little less of drudgery. One might ask, “How can standing in front of a machine for eight hours a day be a work for God?” Well, if we do it with joy, and with our minds upon Christ, just our glowing presence will encourage others and make them wonder. That wondering could lead to a witness for Christ at lunchtime, and, who knows, but the salvation of a soul and a new birth into the Kingdom of God. Isn’t that exciting?

Take this New Year and use it for God. I promise you that it will enrich your life, it will make your soul prosperous, and we can do our part for the Kingdom!

Have a great year!

December 30

“New Year’s Resolutions” By Jerry D. Ousley

*P*erhaps you’ve been good at keeping these things, but it has never been one of my strong points. You begin with sincerity and really want to make improvements in your life. It’s hard to develop new habits, isn’t it? It takes discipline and I have to say that I admire someone who has the will power to get the job done and see it all the way through. It isn’t easy. My big resolution is to get more exercise and I usually start out keeping a tight schedule. But as days progress my schedule gets looser and looser until alas; I’ve broken my resolution. Last year I almost made it three days.

There is one resolution I’d like to discuss briefly, however, and it is the one that involves improving our spiritual lives. We determine that we are going to start attending church, or give up this or that to make us closer to God. Others may say that they are going to start treating people better, and the list goes on.

Improving our attitude or moral stance is, of course, a good thing. We all need to treat others better, or consider someone above ourselves. That is Scripture. But we will never succeed in getting closer to God just by doing these things.

You see, the morals we display or the way we treat others isn’t how we get closer to God but the results of getting closer to God. The way we get close to Him is by spending more time with Him. Most of us do that with our spouse before we get married. We go out to eat together, and sit and talk with each other. That’s how we find out more about the person we love and get close to the one we want as our mate.

The world would try to tell us that we need to see if we are compatible first suggesting that we move in with that person as sort of a trial run. But to really get to know the one we are going to spend the rest of our lives with we’ve got to spend time talking and communicating - Just moving in together borderlines “playing house.” The physical side of love comes later after marriage. Really, why commit physically if we aren’t willing to commit to the whole shebang?

It's the same with getting close to God. We can go to church, we can treat others with great respect and consideration, and we can be full of morals and honest as the day is long, but we can't substitute these things as ways of getting to know God. They don't take the place of what's really going on in our hearts. They only make for a good surface appearance.

Many marriages that end in divorce come as a shock to people because the marriage seemed to be full of good works and the two may have been very moral individuals. However, something failed in their communication and they just weren't friends any more. They had grown incompatible. What a tragedy.

Again, this is just like our relationship with God. Without time in prayer and reading His word how can we ever get to know Him? Our interests will eventually turn to other things and away from Him. Before we know it, we are committing spiritual adultery. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 tells us to "pray without ceasing" and John 5:39 says to search the Scriptures.

We can find that closer relationship with God this New Year, but it will take some work on our part. It will take dedication to Him and a commitment to Christ. If you've never given your life to Him, do it today. Simply ask Him, believe Him, and then spend time with Him. If you seek, you will find (Matthew 7:7). Now that's one New Year's resolution worth keeping.

December 31

“Here We Go Again” By Debbie Ousley

A *new* year, a time of new beginnings; a time to reflect on the old, vows made, maybe vows to not do certain things that we may have done in years past or vows to do new things in this year to come.

Mankind marks his existence by days, months, years, and by events from birth to death. We refer to it as a journey, a ride, a trip, or whatever, and as our Society makes such a big deal about the New Year, God blinks and it has passed. His timetable, if He even has one, is not so important, because He knows from beginning to end. James 4:14 tells us that life is like a vapor or a puff of smoke that’s visible for a little while and then disappears.

I ask the question as David did in Psalm 8:4 to the God who made all things great and small, “What am I that you are even mindful of me and that you care for me?”

More and more I know this as a certainty for my life (no matter how long it is in years) my peace, joy, and worth comes more from how much I love Him than how much He loves me. There are no words to describe God’s love for us. We can’t start to understand His kind of love. It’s out of this world!

So, if we don’t have words that can compare to, how can we really grasp hold of it? But we do understand our own definition of love so our love for Him, as we know it, determines how much we trust Him, how loyal we are to what He teaches us, how bold we’ll be to defend those truths, and how big a fool we’ll make of ourselves to obey them. Will my love for Him cause me to lose all if need be?

The missionaries who were killed in Yemen loved Him. The young lady from Columbine School who proclaimed, “Yes, I am a Christian,” loved Him. Their dying devotion came from the love they had for Him and as much as they could grasp of the concept concerning His love for them.

This is one woman’s opinion and I know everyone’s got one! But when we begin to really love Christ and His character, then we can start to realize the depth of His love for us.

For more information contact ...

Jerry D. Ousley

Spirit Bread

<http://www.spiritbread.com>

jousley@spiritbread.com