

# Christian Odyssey

VOL. I, NO. 9

Exploring Life and Faith

OCTOBER 2005

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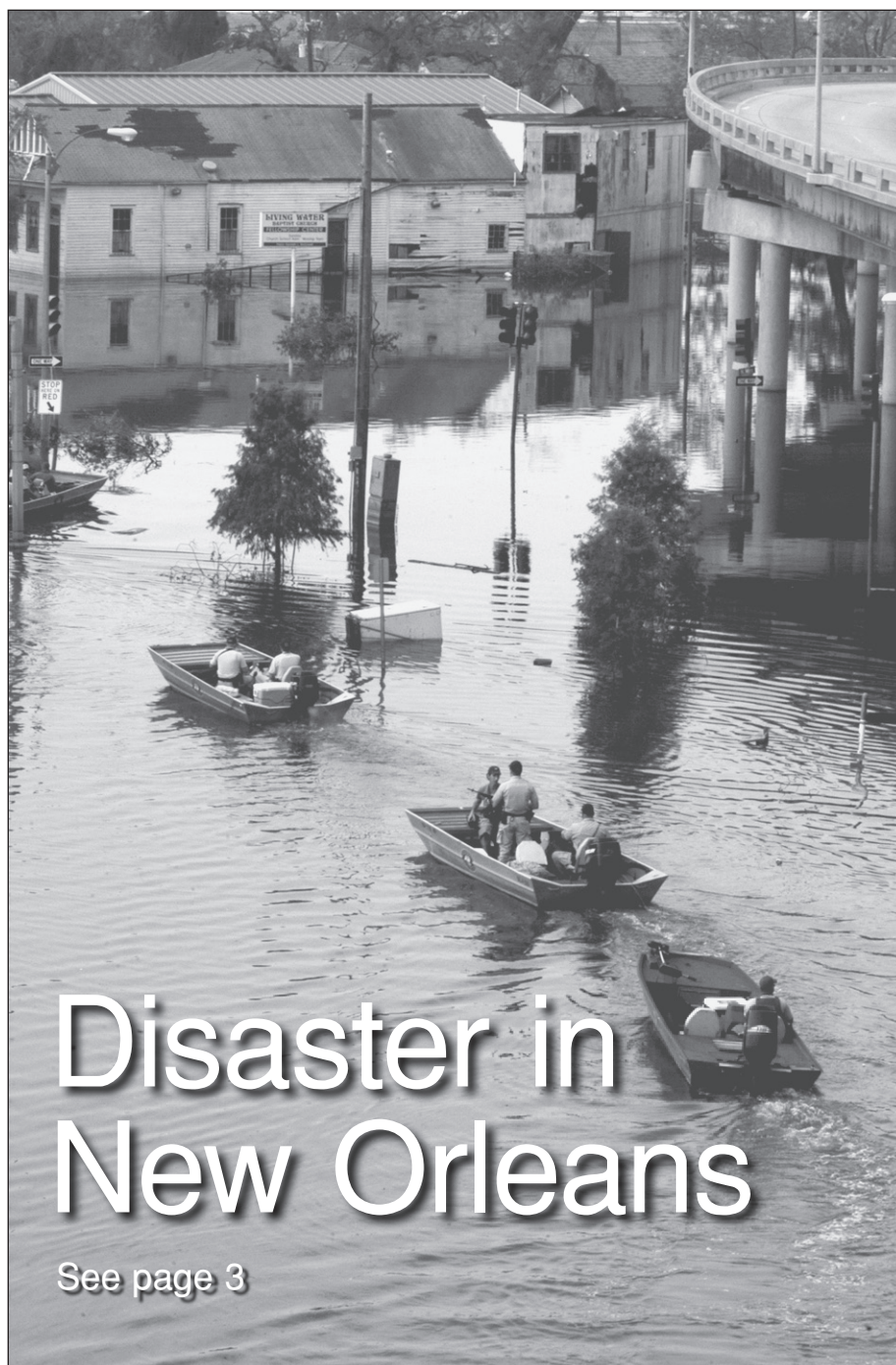
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WORLDWIDE  
CHURCH OF GOD

*Living and Sharing the Gospel*



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*Christian Odyssey* gratefully accepts contributions to help meet publication costs. If you would like to join our team of supporters, send your contribution to:

Christian Odyssey  
Box 111  
Pasadena, California, 91123

*Christian Odyssey*

Circulation 16,000

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**Postmaster:** Please send address changes and Form 3579 to *Christian Odyssey*, Box 111, Pasadena, California, 91123-0001.

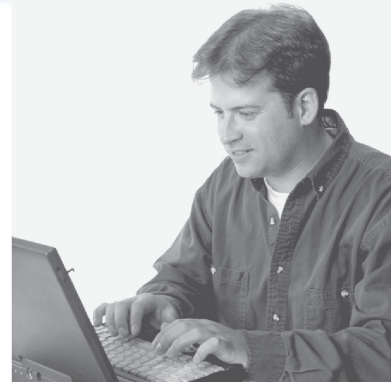
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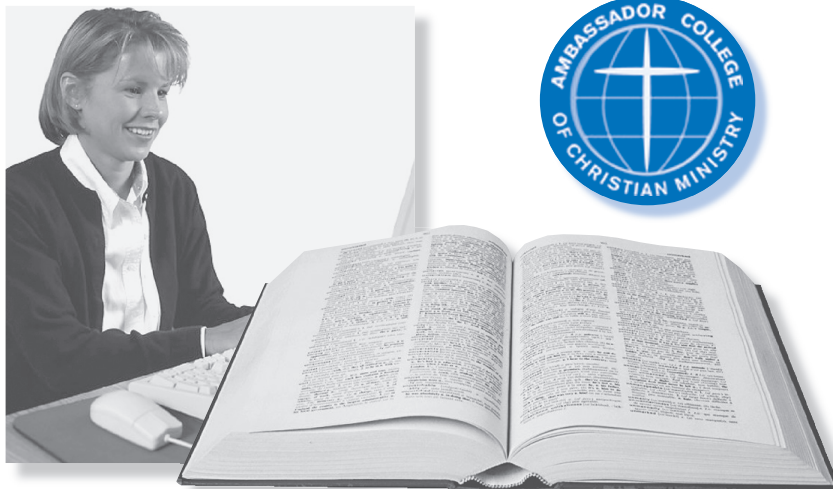
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# Disaster in New Orleans

By Joseph Tkach

In what may be America's worst natural disaster, nearly a million people have been displaced by Hurricane Katrina.

Ten of thousands were stranded in New Orleans without power, without food, without drinkable water, without sanitation, without medical services, without police. New Orleans grabbed the headlines because it involved the most people, but the destruction was severe in southern Mississippi and Alabama, too.

One tragedy piled on top of another to make them all worse. If only the city had been built in a better place. If only the people had built better levees. If only they had evacuated before the hurricane hit. If only the government had acted quicker to bring food and water, and to transport the refugees. If only...

## Where was God?

All sorts of human decisions contributed to the tragedy, but it was nevertheless a natural disaster—nature gone awry—an “act of God.” Where was God when the hurricane hit land? Where was he when the 140 mile per hour winds hit Mississippi? Where was he when the levee broke? Where was he when the people were trapped inside their attics when the water rose too high?

God was there, on the ground, in his people, suffering along with them. When one part of the body suffers, Paul said, every part suffers with it (1 Corinthians 12:26)—and that includes the head of the body, Jesus Christ. He suffers with us—he has proven his willingness to do



it before, and he does it time and time again. God loves his people—he loves even the people who do not believe in him—he loved them enough to send his Son to die for them. When we grieve, he grieves, too. When we suffer, he suffers, too.

God is big enough and powerful enough to do something about it. Sometimes he intervenes, and we hear stories of miraculous intervention—but often we do not. Maybe the hurricane could have hit harder and stronger than it did, but still, it killed several hundred people. God could have stopped it entirely, so that it didn't kill any people at all, didn't cause any property damage at all, and yet he did not.

Whether the disasters are small or large, why does God let them happen? Frankly, we do not know the complete answer. The Bible does tell us that when sin entered the world, God said that nature itself would work against the people. “Cursed is the ground because of you... It will produce thorns and thistles ... until you return to the ground” (Genesis 3:17-19).

When the first people sinned, nature itself went awry—and nature will win over every person, and every person will return to the dust from which they came (v. 19). Old age will strike—unless something else does first—and nature will have its say.

Paul says that creation itself “was subjected to frustration” (Romans 8:20), and it waits for the day when it “will be liberated from its bond-

age to decay and brought into the glorious freedom” (v. 21).

Frankly, we do not know how physics would function without “decay” of some sort, and we do not know how God will fix the problem. But we do know that there is something wrong with nature, caused by sin, and God has chosen to allow that—even with the difficulties it causes, even though those “difficulties” are sometimes huge disasters that kill thousands of innocent people. Sin often affects innocent people, and sin has somehow affected nature itself.

We may pray for the day when “the time comes for God to restore everything” (Acts 3:21), but we still have to live in the world gone awry.

## Looking to Jesus

Jesus saved his disciples from a natural disaster—the storm on the sea of Galilee. He saved Paul



Rescuing victim from Hurricane Katrina. [Photo by Jay C. Pugh, U.S. Navy]

and his companions on a storm-caused shipwreck near Malta. But nature still had its way, for they all eventually died. Many were killed by evil people, others by disease (another example of nature gone

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# Disaster

Continued from page 3

awry), some by old age. God allows nature to take its toll. Not forever, not permanently, but God still lets



Photo by Liz Roll, FEMA

it happen. Someday, I suppose, we will see how magnificent the plan is, but for now it seems quite messy.

Jesus talked about a natural disaster in one man's life. Who sinned, the disciples asked, this man, or his parents? Neither one, said Jesus (John 9:1-3). Not all problems can be pinpointed to a particular sin. It's just that nature doesn't always work the way it is supposed to, and for this particular man, the result was a disaster in his own life.

Jesus fixed that particular problem, but most of the time, he allows his people to suffer the consequences of a world messed up by sin, where even the forces of nature work against us.

Jesus talked about another disaster in Jerusalem: the tower of Siloam fell and killed 18 people. It was not a natural disaster, of

course, but a disaster nonetheless, a tragedy that killed innocent people.

Jesus did not spend time blaming the engineers or the builders. Instead, he turned to the audience and said, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:4-5). Take that disaster, and instead of blaming somebody, examine yourself. Get your priorities in order, and the chief priority is your relationship with God.

Bad things happen to good people as well as to the bad. The disaster that hit someone else could have just as easily hit us. God could allow it to hit us just as well as he could allow it to hit them—that's the lesson we need to consider from these tragedies. We need to turn to God, to trust him even when the "acts of God" strike close to home.

During his tremendous trial, Job said, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15). We need a similar kind of trust—knowing that the God who did not spare his own Son will never cut us off, though we walk into the valley of the shadow of death, though we enter death itself.

The God who spared not his own Son also rescued his Son after he went through that valley, and he promises to rescue us, too. He will give us life again, but to do it, we

live in a world that takes life away.

If Jesus were talking to the families of the 18 people killed by the tower collapse, he no doubt would have been as compassionate as he was with the man born blind.

When we are dealing with the victims of Hurricane Katrina or any other disaster, we need compassion, too—compassion that motivates us to help. Many of you have given generously, and no doubt will continue to help during the long recovery period. But we also need to examine ourselves. When tragedy strikes someone else, we do not need to ask where God is—we need to ask where we are, and whether we can do something about it. The only thing worse than nature gone awry is a heart gone cold.

Can we trust God even when nature strikes us dead? Yes, we should, for one way or another, nature will strike every one of us dead. We have nowhere else to turn, for God has the only solution to the problem. But we need to trust him.

When disaster strikes, God is there, suffering in his people, and working in his people. Therefore, when disaster strikes, God's people can be found standing with him, not casting blame, but helping out, making a positive difference, loving as Jesus loves. 🦋



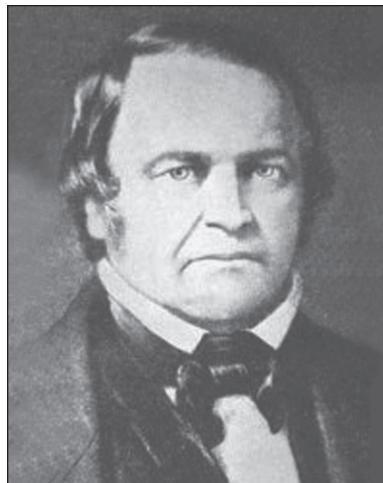
Photo by Liz Roll, FEMA

# The Great Disappointment

By Paul Kroll

It was Oct. 22, 1844. On this day, as many as 100,000 Christians gathered on hillsides, in meeting places and in meadows. They were breathlessly and joyously expecting the return of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The crowds had assembled because of the prophetic claim of an upstate New York farmer and Baptist layman named William Miller (1782-1849). He was certain from his studies of the Bible that Jesus Christ was going to return on that day.

The prophesied return date had arrived. The waiting crowds peered expectantly upward as the hours slipped away from daylight to darkness. Oct. 22 was coming to an end. Anxiety grew as nightfall descended. Then the midnight hour tolled and still Christ had not returned. People became ever more restless. Through the wee hours of darkness the dejected and stunned crowds meeting at various places, mainly throughout the Northeast United States, began to disperse. When the daylight of Oct. 23 arrived, it was clear that Christ was not going to return as expected.



William Miller

## Failed prophecy and its aftermath

This dashed hope came to be known as “The Great Disappointment.” In his book *When Time Shall Be No More*, historian Paul Boyer offers an example of the deep despondency suffered by the Millerites. In the words of one tragically disappointed believer: “Our fondest hopes and expectations were blasted, and such a spirit of weeping came over us as I never experienced before... We wept, and wept, till the day dawned” (page 81).

When Jesus did not return as expected, many who had hopefully waited for the return of their Savior threw off their faith completely. Some refused to give up their hope and eventually replaced one delusion with another. They would claim that Christ must have come invisibly in 1844, moving into the Holy of Holies in heaven to begin his “investigative judgment” of Christian lives.

Many simply returned to the churches out of which they had come, no doubt confused, distraught and embarrassed to have accepted something that was revealed to have been an empty fantasy. Miller, having renounced his prophecy studies after the Great Disappointment, died

Dec. 20, 1849. Any remaining followers split up over differences of belief and doctrine. Ultimately, a variety of groups arose from the ashes of the Millerite camp, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists.

The October 1844 debacle was, in fact, the second great disappointment for followers of Miller’s chronology and prophecy blueprint. He had previously announced that the coming of Jesus Christ would occur in about the year 1843. The year came and went without Christ’s return. Miller’s prophetic claim had failed and disappointed many people.

Then, someone pointed out that he had neglected to take into account the transition from B.C. to A.D., so that his calculations were one year off. Miller then moved the expected return of Jesus forward by one year, this time specifically to Oct. 22, 1844. But the great disappointment happened once again to the thousands of followers who had given away their possessions and waited in expectant belief—for nothing.

William Miller, as all Christians do, yearned for the coming of God’s kingdom. However, this yearning was translated by him into a misguided belief that Christ’s return would occur in his time on a specific date. Miller thought he had discovered in the Bible certain prophecies, which if rationally studied, could provide him with a certain date for Jesus’ return. His study and calculations of various prophecies, such as the 70 weeks prophecy of Daniel 9 and the 2300 days of chapter 8, brought him, he believed, to Oct. 22 as the date for Christ’s return.

## American prophetic streak

It seems that prophetic belief, such as Miller’s, is strongly entrenched among some Christians and in American popular religion. The Millerite movement of the 1830s and 1840s was not an isolated event. As Miller and other leaders of his movement crisscrossed the northern states they found a ready audience of people who held to various prophetic ideas about how and when Jesus would return.

The Millerite phenomenon is not an isolated movement, but grew up in a Premillennialist culture popular with many Christians. Many tens of thousands of Christians living at the time—average people—were eager to follow Miller’s belief or some other prophetic scheme. As Boyer

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# Put on the Armor of God

*Christianity is a life and death struggle for eternal stakes. But we are promised victory.*

By Neil Earle

**R**ich, bustling, cosmopolitan Ephesus—a city of 225,000 people in the first century—was one of Satan’s strongholds in antiquity. Historians called it “the throne of idolatry.”

## ‘Beasts at Ephesus’

For generations the merchants of Ephesus had hawked their silver idols without hindrance. Until A.D. 52. In that year the apostle Paul, the first century’s greatest one-man threat to idolatry (Acts 17:16), walked into town (Acts 18:19).

A mighty work of evangelism blanketed the province of Asia (Acts 19:10). Paul spoke out, proclaiming the empty corruption of idol worship and calling the people to repentance (Ephesians 5:5).

Multitudes responded to the gospel. They dumped their astrological guides and esoteric charts associated with the goddess Diana—worth 50,000 pieces of silver (Acts 19:19).

But the silversmiths struck back (Acts 19:24-28). They used their influence to trigger a great religious hysteria against the work of Paul (Acts 19:34).

Paul wanted to face the mob he referred to as beasts, but his friends wisely persuaded him to retreat (1 Corinthians 15:32, Acts 19:31).

## Rallying the church

In A.D. 61, while under house arrest in Rome, Paul tried to steady the Ephesian church for the tough years ahead; a time when, as he had already warned, they would



have to carry on without him (Acts 20:17-28).

Materialism, commercialism, a cynical sensuality—these constantly threatened the faith of Paul’s converts at Ephesus. Religious deception was rife.

How could Paul rally the church to carry on their spiritual battle without him?

Near the end of his letter to the Ephesians, the Holy Spirit filled Paul with a stirring word picture drawn from Paul’s prison experience.

Rome’s relentless legions and the bravery, hardiness and discipline of the individual Roman soldier were legendary.

We can almost see the creative fires burning inside Paul as he neared the end of his letter. “Put on the full armor of God,” Paul concluded, “so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (Ephesians 6:10-11).

“The Roman soldier has his armor,” Paul was saying, “so does the true Christian.”

With the armor of God we can brace ourselves for the battles we will face in our Christian lives (1 Timothy 6:12). We, like the Ephesians, are up against Satan’s wiles. But we, like them, will win!

Second Corinthians 4:4 exposes Satan as the “god of this age.” It’s no stretch

to see what Paul means in Ephesians 6:12: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of

this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Soldiers who have been briefed by their commander-in-chief are on spiritual alert. They expect battle! That is why Paul counseled young Timothy: “Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Jesus Christ” (2 Timothy 2:3).

## God’s arsenal

“Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist” (Ephesians 6:14).

The Roman soldier’s two-edged sword hung from the protector belt around his waist. The belt protected his loins, but also put his sword within quick and easy reach. In Paul’s analogy the sword is the word of God, the sure promises and faithful instruction of the gospel recorded in the Bible.

God’s Word is the Christian soldier’s offensive weapon. It cuts through the negativism, accusation, doubt, hopelessness—those favorite “wiles of the devil.” While the belt of truth protects

our vitals, we also draw inspiration and hope from the living scriptures, “the sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17).

With the Bible as our sword, we switch from the defensive to the offensive (Hebrews 4:12). Bible study bathes our mind and spirit in hope and enthusiasm (Psalm 119:97).

## Our ally

“Stand firm then ... with the breastplate of righteousness in place” (Ephesians 6:14). Satan’s treachery and cunning know no bounds.



In our battles to put down lust, anger, fear, pride and doubt we often set ourselves up for discouragement when we don't make the progress we would like (Philippians 3:12).

Even the veteran Paul faced this (Romans 7:19). But he excelled as a Christian soldier because he tapped into "the hope of righteousness by faith" (Galatians 5:5). God gives us righteousness through Jesus Christ living inside us by the power of the Holy Spirit (John 14:23).

This righteousness goes beyond mere human righteousness, will-power and self-instilled emotional highs. It engenders a relaxed, calm blessed assurance in God as our Redeemer and Ally.

The righteousness of God is ours by faith (Romans 3:22). The Roman soldier wore a tough leather breast-plate strengthened with metal strips. It was difficult to pierce. So with the Christian. The certain conviction that Jesus Christ's own righteousness is at work in us through the Holy Spirit wards off Satan's "fiery darts" (AV), the crafty whispers that tell us: "See, you've sinned again. You'll never make it. Why don't you give up?"

### 'Celeritas!'

The Roman soldier's leather sandals were essential in battle. Solid footing on difficult terrain often gives the winning edge in battle. Three times Paul encouraged Christian soldiers to stand, "your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace" (Ephesians 6:15).

Julius Caesar's watchword as a general was *celeritas!*—swiftness! The Roman sandals symbolize mobility, preparedness, speed. "A moving target is harder to hit," is still a good military maxim. So it is with Christian soldiers. Those actively living out the gospel of peace are hard for Satan to pin down!

### The indispensable factor

Incredible stories survive of the massed strength of the Roman shields. Take the "tortoise," for example. Squads of Roman legionnaires would align their shields



over their heads while the outer ranks held their shields in front of their bodies forming an impenetrable square called the tortoise. A crack unit could form a tortoise so securely that a horse and chariot could ride on top of it.

No wonder, then, with this in mind, Paul counseled us: "In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one" (Ephesians 6:16).

Christian soldiers are shielded by faith, the unshatterable conviction that our ultimate victory is assured (Romans 8:38-39).

Are there fiery darts in the Christian life? Yes, plenty.

Gossip, evil reports, sly innuendos, the bitter faith-destroying attacks on doctrine. There are unwanted health reports, quarrels with neighbors, unexpected personal clashes at work. Some of the cruelest and



most effective darts come from the people closest to us. But the shield of faith—knowing that God has already secured our ultimate victory—extinguishes Satan's darts every time (Romans 1:16).

### The helmet of salvation

Even today in potentially violent sports such as football, car racing and ice hockey, a helmet is mandatory. In 1 Thessalonians 5:8 Paul highlights "the hope of salvation" as vital Christian armor. Our warfare is so constant, so incessant, so fierce that we could easily collapse under the strain of battle fatigue.

This is why good morale is so important in the Christian fight.

A stirring battle order inciting to combat is usually the last stage in galvanizing soldiers for victory. From where do we get our battle orders?

From Jesus Christ, our Commander-in-Chief, who is the living Word of God: that "through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). This spiritual headgear protects the head, the brain, where the Christian soldier aims to "take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5).

What hope God gives us in his Word! For centuries Christians have gleaned inspiration from such stirring passages as Joshua 1, 1 Peter 1-3, Hebrews 11 and the books of Ruth, Esther and Psalms. And we need it. Sometimes the battle is intense indeed.

Paul knew that his Ephesian brothers and sisters—and we too—can stand through all the shocks and alarms of the Christian life. Jesus Christ, the Captain of our salvation (Hebrews 2:10, AV), has promised us the victory. 🦋

BRING the children: Principles for effective ministry to children

### Principle 4

# Nurture Children in the Way of Jesus

By Ted Johnston

In this series we're addressing five principles for effective ministry to children.

We've discussed blessing children with Jesus' love, relating to them at their level, and involving them in our lives. We now turn to the fourth principle: nurturing children in the way of Jesus through teaching.

Before we discuss the content of that teaching, let's be reminded of our motive: we teach to glorify God by loving children in his name. Motivated by God's redemptive love for children, we seek to help them become and then grow



as disciples of Jesus. We teach both through modeling and instruction. In this article we'll focus primarily on teaching children about Jesus' life and love.

I remember well attending Sunday school as a young child. I loved the stories from the Bible about David and Goliath, about Jesus walking on water, about Jonah and the whale.

But what I didn't learn clearly was the gospel of salvation by grace alone, received through faith in Christ alone. And thus my formative religious training was about biblical characters and events, but not about the joy of Jesus' life and love for me.

Because of this teaching deficit, I fell prey as an older teen to a false gospel—a gospel of behaviorism and legalism that was no gospel (good news) at all. But thank God he is faithful and relentless in pursuing us. He did not abandon me to deficient teaching, and by his grace I came to understand and embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And so I make an impassioned plea to Christian parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers, children's ministry workers and others who teach children: teach them the one, true authentic gospel. Teach them about Jesus and his redeeming life and love. Take them to the cross, the empty tomb, the resurrection, the ascension and promised return of Christ. Lead them through your teaching to their Savior, to his grace, and to a life in his service as stewards of that grace.

Sound too complicated for a child to understand? Not at all! The gospel is simple enough for a young child to understand. If we are clear and consistent in our teaching, the message of God's unconditional love always comes through.

The entire Bible, when understood in the light of the gospel, conveys the over-arching message of Christ and him crucified and raised for us.

When we teach about David and Goliath, we can use that story to direct children to love and depend upon their Savior, despite the Goliaths in their lives. When we teach about Jonah and the big fish, we



We teach to glorify God by loving children in his name. Motivated by God's redemptive love for children, we seek to help them become and then grow as disciples of Jesus.





As teachers and parents we have children for only a few precious hours each week. What will you teach them through those hours? My plea is that you teach them the gospel about Jesus.

can use that story to speak of following Jesus faithfully and about Jesus' death and resurrection to secure our salvation. In short, we teach the whole Word of God to reveal fully the living Word, who is Jesus.

One of my seminary professors is fond of evaluating his students' sermons with this penetrating, diagnostic question: Where is the cross? I recommend using the same question to evaluate teaching curricula and individual Sunday school lessons. Where in this teaching is the cross?

As teachers and even as parents we have children for only a few precious hours each week (and even each year). What will you teach them through those hours? My plea is that you teach them the gospel about Jesus.

And as you teach, remember not to "dumb down" the gospel for children. Certainly we want to communicate at their level of cognitive development—using words they understand and teaching techniques that capture their

imaginations (for more on this see the March *Odyssey* article "Building Believing Children"). But teach them the full gospel.

From time to time some wonder if a young child can understand enough to be a disciple of Jesus. (They usually frame the question as "Can a child be saved?" or "When is a child old enough to be baptized?") My answer is that Jesus invites children to him—why not be his tool to help them come, to help them meet Jesus, and to help them follow Jesus?

A young child can understand being sorry for harming others (repentance); the need for forgiveness that cannot be earned by trying to be good (grace); trusting God to rescue them rather than relying on themselves (faith); and living life in that trust through actions that express love for God and for people (Christian ethics).

These are key gospel concepts that form the key components of our teaching. All sorts of biblical stories make these points in powerful, memorable, child-friendly ways

that even quite young children can understand and embrace.

We are blessed in this day to have an array of teaching resources at our disposal. I suggest that you visit a good Bible bookstore and spend a few hours looking at some of the teaching curricula.

Many stores will let you take some resources home to preview them before deciding on a purchase. Many of the curriculum publishers provide free samples online that you can download to preview. As you evaluate these, remember the diagnostic question: where is the cross? Jesus does not have to be the primary character in each lesson, but he should be the primary goal. 🦋



Jesus invites children to him—why not be his tool to help them come, to help them meet Jesus, and to help them follow Jesus?

# 'God told me to...'

*When God spoke to people in the Bible, there was no question that it was a message from God. It usually was delivered in person by an angel, and it usually scared the chicken gravy out of the recipient of the message.*

*How can we know whether God is leading us toward a particular decision, or whether it is just something we want to do for our own reasons?*

By Mike Feazell

**G**od told me to move my family to Arabia."

Alex stared at his friend, wondering if he was just joking or had gone mad. Alex had known Tom for more than 10 years. He'd been best man at Tom's wedding, not to mention godfather to Tom's and Alicia's twin girls. And Alex knew that Tom and Alicia were as cut out for missionary life in Arabia as toads in an omelette.

"That's, well, a pretty big decision, Tom. How do you know it's really God's will for you?"

"Well, just a lot of things." Tom stared deep into his coffee cup. "Pastor Mel's sermon a few weeks ago really got me thinking." He glanced up at Alex. "We're pretty selfish enjoying the good life here in America while people all around the world need help. I gave it a lot of prayer, and God seemed to answer that we should go."

Alex nodded thoughtfully, weighing how to respond. "How did God give you that answer?"

"Well, for one thing, I was talking to the Hogarths, you know, the missionaries in Arabia. They said they could use some help."

"What kind of help?"

"Well, you know, I'm pretty good at carpentry, and they said that's just what they'd been praying for—somebody good at carpentry. It was like God was just saying to me, 'This is what I want you to do, Tom.'"

"What does Alicia think about it?"

"Oh, she's not as excited as I am, but I'm praying she'll come around."

"Not as excited?" Alex said.

"Well, actually she's dead set against it. She can get pretty hard-

ing themselves that God is telling them to marry a certain person, take a certain job, go to a certain college, or "get out there" and do something really big and meaningful for him.

But is he—really?

How can we know whether God is really leading us into some major life decision, or whether, just maybe, we are simply bored and frustrated with our current situation and looking for a change or a way out? A way out with God's name stamped on it?

Here are a few thoughts God told me to pass along about decision-making. Or maybe he didn't. In any case, here are my two cents worth. A biblically rooted two cents worth, of course. Make it two minas or two dinars or two mites worth if you'd rather.

1. When God spoke to people in the Bible, there was no question that it was a message from God. It usually was delivered in person by an angel, and it usually scared the chicken gravy out of the recipient of the message.

2. When God had to tell people what he wanted them to do, it was usually something they did not want to do.

3. Sometimes, our prayers for God's blessing are really our prayers to get our own way despite what God thinks. Take King Ahab, when he wanted to attack the King of Aram, who was snatching some of Ahab's favorite cities.

Ahab asked Micaiah the prophet if he'd be victorious. Micaiah told Ahab the truth, even though all the other "prophets" had said Ahab would surely win the battle.

Ahab wasn't looking for God's



Illustration by Ken Tunell

When God spoke to people in the Bible, there was no question that it was a message from God. It usually was delivered in person by an angel, and it usually scared the chicken gravy out of the recipient of the message.

headed sometimes. But I think the Lord will show her it's the right thing for us to do."

"Hmm, I see," Alex dumped a pack of powdered sweetener in his coffee. "What if he doesn't?"

"He will, Alex. I trust the Lord. And I have a really good feeling about this decision."

Tom is not unique. Every day, Christians somewhere are convinc-

will; he was looking for affirmation of his own will. He was doing a bullheaded thing, but he also wanted God's blessing to cover his backside.

Well, God is apparently not into covering the backsides of bullheads. Ahab attacked the king of Aram and got nailed with an armor-defying arrow. Apparently God doesn't stop us from making stupid decisions when we are hell-bent on making them.

4. God is pretty clear about what he "tells" us to do: "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" And for what it's worth, we don't have to go half way around the world to find our neighbors.

5. One of the reasons we crave to do something "great" for God is that we are unsure of how we stand with him, and we hope that if we do something "great," like move to a faraway corner of the earth and be a missionary, God will like us more and we can feel better about our relationship with him.

That's not gospel thinking—that's religious thinking. God loves us where we are, and there is a "great" Christian work in our being ourselves in Christ and showing his love to the people we run into every day.

6. Changing our location does not change us. We can't run away from our problems. If I'm a lazy curmudgeon in Peoria, I'll be a lazy curmudgeon in Bangladesh. If I'm a short-tempered mule with my first spouse, I'll likely be a short-tempered mule with my second, or third, too.

If we need to change, we just might need to change ourselves

first, not merely our circumstances. We might need to pray for a clean and godly heart of love, and then take that clean heart wherever life leads us, not where we think there might be more spiritual glory.

Spiritual glory is invisible, don't forget, and it's present in every act of kindness and self-sacrificial love. Geography or possessions have nothing to do with it. If I want to do "more" for God, I might do well to start by being a better husband and father, or wife and mother.

8. Some ordained people give poor advice. Don't think that when a pastor or missionary says, "Hey, I think God is calling you to such-and-such," they necessarily know what they are talking about. "In a multitude of counselors, there is safety," says the proverb. We shouldn't take one hyped-up person's opinion as though it were God's sacred word just because it's what we wanted to hear.

#### Concluding thoughts

"God told me to . . ." is often a euphemism for "I want to and have decided to . . ."

It isn't wrong to want to do something and decide to do it. But why not be honest? Why not say: "I have decided to go to Africa and work in a health clinic. Please pray for

me." That would be honest. But 99 times out of a hundred (in my opinion, of course) when someone says, "God told me to go to Africa


and work in a health clinic," they are playing fast and loose with honesty.

God can and does bless us in our decisions without making them for us. God gives us the ability to weigh the factors in our lives, get advice, do some research, study the issues involved and make informed, well-considered decisions. And we should ask him to lead us.

But why not let God lead us? That is, why not let God lead us instead of first deciding what we want to do (for our personal reasons whether we admit it or not), and asking for his stamp of approval (remember King Ahab) and then announcing that "God told me to."

That pretty much amounts to a shell game of avoiding personal responsibility for our decisions.

Wouldn't it be nice to enjoy the godly freedom to say: "Lord, I've got several paths before me, and based on all the facts as I understand them, here's what I think I should probably do. Please have mercy on me as I enter into this, because as you well know, I am often a moron. I know that in my need, you have always been there, and I know you'll see me through this, too. Just don't let the bumps be too hard this time.

"If there's something I'm missing here, would you show me before it's too late? And if I miss the cue, then I say it again, please have mercy on me, a sinner and a frequent dumbbell. And one more thing, if this is a trap door instead of an open door, would you mind not letting go of my hand until I get back to where I ought to be? Thanks. Amen." 

**It isn't wrong to want to do something and decide to do it. But why not be honest? Why not say: 'I have decided to go to Africa and work in a health clinic. Please pray for me.'**

**God loves us where we are, and there is a 'great' Christian work in our being ourselves in Christ and showing his love to the people we run into every day.**

Lesson 28

# A Lesson About Faith

## Mark 6:1-6

*Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.*

*“Where did this man get these things?” they asked. “What’s this wisdom that has been given him, that he even does miracles! Isn’t this the carpenter? Isn’t this Mary’s son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren’t his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.*

*Jesus said to them, “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor.” He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their lack of faith.*

By Mike Feazell

When the prophet Samuel was looking for the right man to anoint king over Israel, God sent him to the house of Jesse. Jesse’s grandmother was the Moabitess, Ruth, and his great-grandma was the infamous woman of Jericho, Rahab. An unlikely family in which to find the most famous king of Israel. But if that were not enough, when Jesse brought out his eldest and most accomplished son to meet Samuel, God said, “No, Sam, that’s not him.”



Samuel went through seven of Jesse’s boys, and God turned thumbs down on every one. Perplexed, Samuel asked Jesse, “Are you sure that’s all your kids?”

“Yeah,” Jesse said. “That’s it. Well, except for David, of course, but there’s no way he’s the one you’re looking for. He’s nothing but a sheep kid. He’s out there with the sheep now—definitely not king material.”

All Jesse’s boys nodded and a couple snickered. “Definitely not king material.”

“Listen, Samuel,” Jesse said. “These are all fine boys here. Why don’t you ask the Lord again, because you can bet your sandals that if one of my boys is going to be king, it’ll be one of these. David’s nothing special, and frankly, things are better around here when he’s off with the sheep.”

Samuel shook his head, eyeing the imposing lineup

of Jesse’s boys. Tall, good looking, and probably good warriors, he figured. Why does the Lord always have to pick the low enders? He smiled. He himself was a bit of an unlikely choice too, come to think of it. If it hadn’t been for his mom’s crazy vow, he might have been a normal kid instead of growing up in the tabernacle cleaning linen and hauling water for old Eli.

“No, the Lord says it’s none of this bunch. You’d better go fetch this David out of the pasture.” He shrugged. “With the Lord, you never know. I had to pull Saul out from behind a pile of grain sacks, you know. The kid was shaking like an olive leaf.”

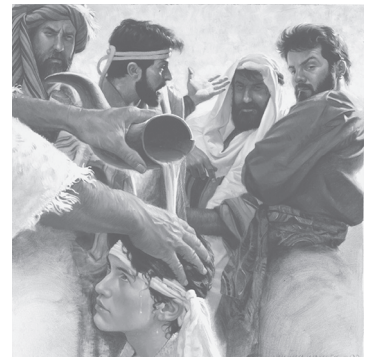
With a laugh, the prophet added: “The Lord doesn’t see people the way we do. He’s not into looks and all that folderol.”

You know what happened. David’s brothers must have been a little miffed that little brother David was anointed king instead of one of them. Maybe they felt a little like the sons of Jacob, who resented the way their dad made over spoiled little Joseph as if the older kids were little more than glorified ranch hands.

It was no different with Jesus. How can somebody you grew up with, somebody you might have watched grow up, somebody whose habits and idiosyncrasies often got on your nerves, suddenly start acting as though he thought he was somebody? Just who in Galilee does this guy think he is?

Woody Allen once said, “I wouldn’t want to belong to any club that would have me as a member.” Or maybe it was Mark Twain. Or Groucho Marx. Or all of them. Anyway, the people of Nazareth must have had a similar policy: “Anybody from around here has got to be a loser; just look at us. No, we don’t care if he can do miracles, this guy has got to be a fraud.”

See Lesson About Faith, page 16



David’s brothers must have been a little miffed that little brother David was anointed king instead of one of them.

# Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms

Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling

By Terry Akers

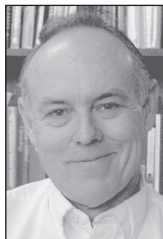
Recognizing the need for a clear and concise theological reference for lay people, theologians Stanley Grenz of Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, along with David Guretzki and Cherith Fee Nordling have co-authored an excellent little book that satisfies this need in the contemporary evangelical church.

*Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*, published by InterVarsity Press, can help anyone seeking a better understanding of the theological terminology and history of the Christian church.

As stated on the back cover, "Beginning the study of theology is like stepping into a conversation that has been going on for two thousand years; but how do you make sense of this conversation—and take part in it—if you don't understand the vocabulary and know what the various participants stand for?"

The entries provide succinct definitions of terms, trace theological movements and traditions and give a brief sketch of the major theologians in church history. It is endorsed by leading evangelical seminaries.

The book has a simple format—the terms, phrases and names are arranged in alphabetical order. Its descriptions are summary overviews, not exhaustive treatments. The writers who collaborated on the *Pocket Dictionary* are broadly evangelical in perspective, but their definitions are generally ac-



cepted from the various Christian traditions.

It is not intended to be read from cover to cover, but serves as a reference book to be consulted as needed.

Historically, in the great universities of Europe and America, theology was known as "the queen of the sciences." Karl Barth called it "the joyful science." Christians in fact "do" theology (from the Greek *theos*, "God" and *logos*, "speech") whenever they speak of God or things relating to God.

This makes all believers theologians whether they

pages and covers the 300 or so theological terms that one is most likely to encounter in books and articles and is comprehensive for its size. A complete reading would leave one with a broad grasp of the world of theology. Most definitions simply describe the given term for what it is without interpretation.

Grenz, Guretzki and Nordling succeed in fulfilling their stated purpose for this book—to "provide you with a foundational, working knowledge of the concepts."

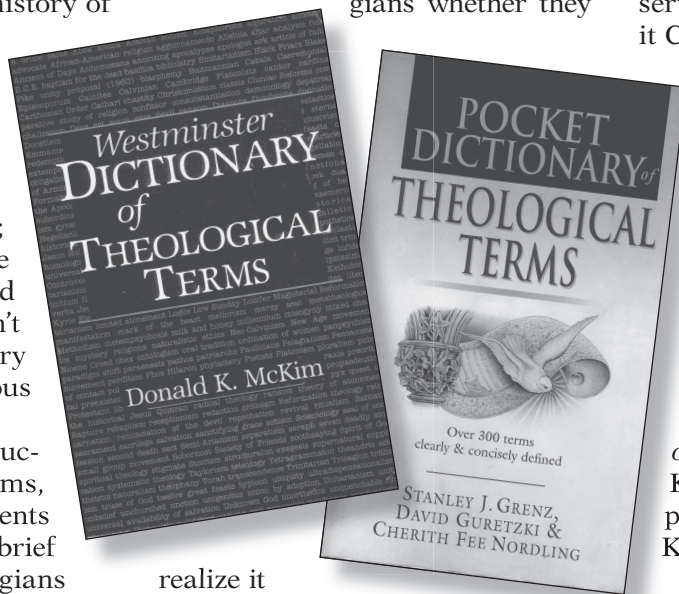
Theology has been classically described as "faith seeking understanding." It provides a valuable service to the church by keeping it Christ-centered and safely within the middle swath of orthodoxy. It appeals to Holy Scripture, protecting the church from heretical ideas that press in against it.

All members of the Body of Christ need to articulate what they believe in a way that is faithful to God's Word. This little book is a good starting point to do this.

*The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* by Donald K. McKim is a similar work published by Westminster John Knox Press.

It also offers brief definitions of more than 5,500 terms drawing from 21 theological disciplines. The terms listed alphabetically are defined in one to three sentences.

These two books compliment each other, as one often provides an extra dimension to the other that makes the meaning clearer. These two volumes serve the layperson well for their general theological needs. 🦋



realize it or not. But theology can be done well or poorly—that's why a grasp of the terminology is essential to the quality of our "God talk."

Scripture directs the church to be ready to give an answer for its faith and to faithfully proclaim the gospel, and an effective vocabulary is a vital key to success in both areas.

*The Pocket Dictionary* is 122

# Abraham's example of faith

## A study of Hebrews 11:8-19

By Michael Morrison

Hebrews 11 is a description of faith in action—how God's people have always lived by faith. In this chapter, several verses are devoted to the example of Abraham, whom Genesis says specifically believed God (Gen. 15:6). He is rightly called "the father of the faithful."

**"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going"** (Heb. 11:8, based on Gen. 12:1, TNIV throughout).

The author's purpose here is not to prove that Abraham had faith (the readers already knew that), but to give examples that 1) illustrate a life of faith and 2) encourage the readers to have similar faith when they are pressured to abandon Christianity. So the author selects situations from the life of Abraham that are similar to situations the readers are in. Just as Abraham had been called out of Mesopotamia, they had been called out of Judaism toward a promise they could not see, and they obeyed and went.

**"By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise"** (Heb. 11:9).

It is possible that the readers had physically left their homeland and moved to a new city, but the author is probably suggesting that the readers felt like strangers religiously. They probably met in a house church instead of a synagogue; they did not have a feeling that they had a permanent place. Welcome to the club, the author says. Abraham felt like that, too, even when he was in the Promised Land.

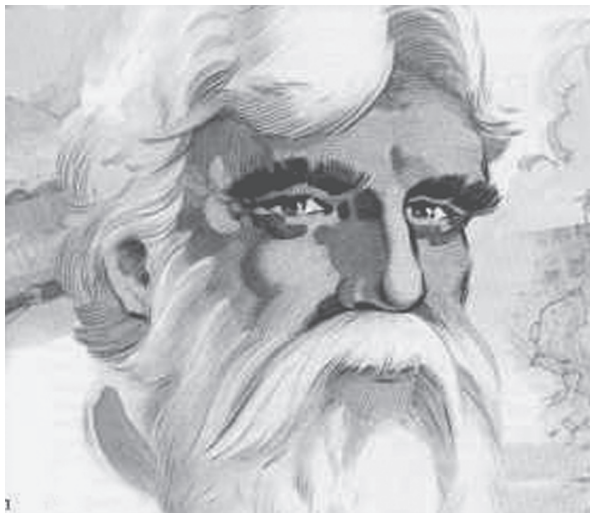


Illustration by Ken Tunell

"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going" (Heb. 11:8).

God does not want us to view this world as a permanent home, because he has something better for us. We are encouraged to see the future with Abraham: **"For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God"** (v. 10). Canaan had many cities with foundations, but they were all destined to crumble, because they were built on physical foundations, and the cities were filled with violence and idolatry.

Abraham was looking forward to something far more permanent than stone. Genesis says nothing about this, but our author believes that Abraham had religious motives that were similar to his own. We should look to the future reward, not to the circumstances we are in right now.

Verse 11 has a translation problem because the sentence seems to have Sarah as the subject, but the Greek verb refers to the father's role in reproduction. Some translations choose to put Sarah as a parenthetical thought (Even though Sarah was old, Abraham was made able to father children...). Others, such as the TNIV, make the verb appropriate to a mother's role: **"And by faith even Sarah, who was past age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise."**

Sarah laughed; so did Abraham (Gen. 17:17; 18:12). They both thought they were too old to have children, but God blessed them with a child anyway. Abraham even had children after Sarah died (Gen. 25:1-2). The author's point is that God did what he had promised, and we should also consider God faithful, and trust him to keep the promises of salvation he has made to us.

**"And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the**

seashore” (Heb. 11:11, referring to Gen. 22:17). Just as God made the universe from something that could not be seen, he made the Israelites from something humanly impossible.

### Summary

The author is not done with his examples yet, and is not even done with Abraham, but he interrupts his list of faith-accomplishments to summarize some lessons from the story for the benefit of his readers. **“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own”** (Heb. 11:12-13).

The point: We do not receive all the promises of God in this life. Although we are given eternal life, we still die. But the gift is real, and the promise will be kept. We have to trust God on it. (We certainly can’t bring it about on our own power!) We look to God, not this world, for meaning and purpose in life. Our current life is just a temporary training time. We do not “belong” here; our permanent home and allegiance is the kingdom of God, and that is where our hopes should be.

**“If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them”** (vv. 15-16).

No one really thought that Abraham ever wanted to go back to Mesopotamia, but he could have if he wanted to. He could have turned his back on God’s promises, but he did not. In contrast, the readers of Hebrews were tempted to go back to where they had come from—back into Judaism. Don’t do it, the author seems to say. There is a better country waiting for you through Christ. Heaven is calling, and God will be pleased if you are faithful, and he is planning on your presence in his kingdom.

### Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

The roll call resumes in verse 17, with Abraham’s most severe trial: **“By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to**

**him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned’ ”** (vv. 17-18, referring to Gen. 21:12 and 22:1-18).

Abraham could not see how God would keep his promise, but in faith he did what God told him to do. He did not know how God would do it, but he guessed at one possibility: **“Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead”** (Heb. 11:19). Abraham himself had once been “as good as dead” (v. 11); the same God who gave him life could also give Isaac life.

When Abraham took Isaac up the mountain, he told his servants that “we” will return (Gen. 22:5); he did not expect Isaac to stay dead.

As the story turns out, however, God provided a substitute sacrifice (just as he later provided his own Son as a substitute for us), and Hebrews concludes: **“and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.”** In Abraham’s mind, Isaac was as good as dead, but he was rescued from it.

The author has given many details about Abraham; now he picks up the pace with a rapid-fire summary of three descendants: **“By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from**

**Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones”** (Heb. 11:20-22, referring to Gen. 27:27-40; 48:10-20; 50:25).

Isaac and Jacob believed in the promise of God, and passed it on to their children. Jacob, blind and on his deathbed, blessed Ephraim and Manasseh—acting on faith, not sight. Joseph also acted on the promise that God gave Abraham. Although Joseph was prince of Egypt, he knew that his descendants would later move to Canaan, and so he directed that his bones should also be moved. 🦋

**We do not receive all the promises of God in this life. Although we are given eternal life, we still die. But the gift is real, and the promise will be kept. We have to trust God on it.**

### Questions for discussion

- When God called me, did I understand where I was going? (v. 8)
- How “at home” do I feel in this world? (v. 9)
- Am I prepared to die before receiving the promises? (v. 12)
- Have I ever wanted to go back to where I came from? (v. 15)
- When faced with death, do I think of God’s promises? (vv. 21-22)

# Great Disappointment

Continued from page 5

observes, quoting from David Rowe, a commentator on the Millerite experience: “Millerites are not fascinating because they were so different from everyone else but because they were so like their neighbors” (When Time Shall Be No More, page 82).

The excitement in speculative prophecy that characterized the Millerites has continued through the 19th and 20th century, and into our time, especially under a different mode of interpretive prophecy identified as Dispensationalism. This was the brain child of John Nelson Darby (1800-1882).

Though most prophecy buffs of a Dispensationalist persuasion have avoided setting exact dates for Jesus’ return, they nonetheless continue to use Bible prophecy as a blueprint for their views of the end time. Usually, they maintain that his coming is imminent—in our generation. They claim the next dispensation of God’s dealing with humanity will begin with the rapture—when the Christian saints are supposedly

taken to heaven while the rest of humanity is left behind.

## ‘Imminent return’ the watch phrase

To Dispensationalists the signs of the times are always with us. While date-setting a la Miller is avoided, Christians are told that they must be ready because the rapture could occur at any moment. The time of the end is always right now, even though we may not know the precise date. Many fundamentalists, evangelicals—and other Christians—still believe that biblical prophecy is meant to be interpreted in such an

apocalyptic and speculative way. If rightly interpreted, they believe, biblical prophecy can tell us what will happen in the near future—in our lifetime.

But as with William Miller’s failed calculations, all this speculation about the end of the age is pure fantasy, the invention of admittedly brilliant, but confused minds. Christians would do well to remember the Great Disappointment of Oct. 22, 1844. Miller’s prophecy construct seemed to have been a logical and biblically based creation, but proved to be nothing more than a mirage of the human mind. 🦋

# Lesson About Faith

Continued from page 12

So Jesus said his famous line: “Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house is a prophet without honor” (Mark 6:4, NIV). You might not remember it quite like that, but don’t forget the King James Version is nearly twice as old as the United States; a little modern English is good for the

soul. Jesus said it in Aramaic, anyway, and none of us would make that out, even if we’ve studied it, because understanding someone’s pronunciation from 2,000 years ago is different from reading it today.

But we digress. The lesson we’re drawing out of this passage is that we’re a whole lot more enamored with impressive strangers than we are with the people we already know all too well. That helps account for sexual affairs, you know. It’s all in the mystery. If you really knew the goofball you were shacking up with for the night the way his or her relatives and friends do, you’d stay a million miles away. But alas, we have more respect for people we don’t even know than for those we do.

It was in Nazareth, where Jesus grew up, that he could heal only a few people. Why? Because they didn’t believe he could possibly be a healer. They could not accept one of their own as being somehow greater than they were, even if it meant foregoing the healing he could have brought them. Faith and humility don’t travel without each other. Trusting Jesus means seeing yourself in need of him. Knowing your need for him generates trust in him. He’s in town, your town, right now. Trust him with your burdens. Let him give you rest. It’s you he’s come to see. 🦋

## Lectionary Readings for October 2005

<p>Oct. 2 Exodus 20:1-20 Psalm 80:7-15 Isaiah 5:1-7 Matthew 21:33-46 Philippians 3:4-14</p>	<p>Psalm 96 Isaiah 45:1-7 Matthew 22:15-22</p>
<p>Oct. 9 Exodus 32:1-14 Psalm 23 Isaiah 25:1-9 Matthew 22:1-14 Philippians 4:1-9</p>	<p>Oct. 23 Leviticus 19:1-18 Deuteronomy 34:1-12 Psalm 1 Matthew 22:34-46 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8</p>
<p>Oct. 16 Exodus 33:12-23</p>	<p>Oct. 30 Joshua 3:7-17 Psalm 43 Micah 3:5-12 Matthew 23:1-12 1 Thessalonians 2:9-13</p>