

Virtual Christian Magazine

Hope And Encouragement For The Real World

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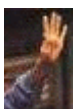


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Thoughts for Thanksgiving

By Joel Meeker

A Thanksgiving Day in Thailand opened my eyes to things I'd taken for granted



THE FIRST THANKSGIVING DAY I spent outside the United States was quite an experience. I had just turned 20, and was working as a teacher in a refugee camp in the golden triangle region of northern Thailand. We were doing our best to prepare Laotian refugees who had fled the communist regime in their country, for the move to the host countries who had agreed to take them in: Australia, Canada, France or the United States. We taught them English or French, and the rudiments of Western culture they would need to get along in their new homes.

Strangers in a Strange Land

It was a challenge. Though my students took their studies seriously and applied themselves, some of the concepts we needed to teach them were difficult to convey. How do you explain all the comforts and complexities of life in a Western metropolis (many of my students were to go to Los Angeles), things like supermarkets, shopping malls and superhighways, to people who have lived all their lives in remote and sometimes rather primitive villages? Many of my students came from families who practiced slash-and-burn farming. They lived in bamboo houses with dirt floors.

While I was doing my best to teach my students about the West, I was also learning from them, as well as from the whole experience of living without running water and electricity. It was my initiation to life in what we now optimistically call "developing" countries. As my students described their former lives to me, the gritty reality of how life is for the majority of the world's population struck home hard.

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I learned about the shorter life expectancy people have in such countries; 55 or 60 was very

old for them. I saw how much more frequently they were ill, often with diseases we no longer worry about in the West. I discovered how much more difficult it is to earn one's daily bread, and how long hours of back-breaking labor, day in and day out, may not guarantee subsistence to a family. And I saw the suffering of the refugee: family members separated and lost during their escape, or killed by pursuers. There is the loss and disorientation that comes from having to flee one's home and country with only such items as can be carried by hand. Some reported having been the victims of chemical weapon attacks.

A Thai Thanksgiving

It was in this context that in mid-November, my friend Dave and I, who were the only two English teachers at the Chiang Kham refugee camp, received an invitation for Thanksgiving dinner. An American lady working on a local mission had invited the various aid workers and missionaries in the area. We were a group of 10 all together, including an Italian doctor, a Swiss dentist and his wife, and an aid worker from somewhere down under. We were thrilled to receive the invitation because Dave and I thought we were going to have a bowl of rice with a bit of tough water buffalo meat in hot sauce for our Thanksgiving dinner, like we had at most other meals. But our hostess had somehow managed to find a plump turkey, not a common item in northern Thailand. She made stuffing and gravy. There were mashed potatoes. She prepared a sauce out of a local fruit which tasted very close to cranberry, and had even made pie out of a local squash that tasted just like pumpkin.

Our hostess asked a Mr. Calloway, a missionary who had lived in Asia for over 30 years, to ask the blessing before the meal. I whole-heartedly said "amen" to the thanks he offered for all the blessings received. During the meal the Americans present answered questions from the others about the history and meaning of the holiday. Listening to the others and giving some of the answers myself, started me reflecting on Thanksgiving Day, and how easy it is for the "thanks" part to fall out of the celebration of this American and Canadian holiday. I was more thankful for that meal in Chiang Kham than I ever had been during Thanksgiving as a child.

Not that I hadn't been thankful before. My parents had taken Thanksgiving Day pretty seriously as a day of giving thanks to the Creator for our blessings. It's just that I hadn't really realized how many blessings I had, until I could compare with people who'd never had most of them. It had never occurred to me that our regular Thanksgiving meal each year, would represent a "never in a lifetime" experience to a big part of the world's population. "Familiarity breeds contempt" goes the old saw. I suspect that is true of blessings. Those we've always had, be they some of the most precious, can easily be taken for granted. And they often are.

A Short List of Blessings

Since that Thanksgiving Day spent in the golden triangle, I've visited and sometimes worked in other "developing countries" in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. I'd like to share a short list of blessings I took for granted before those travels. Perhaps there are some here that you take for granted as well. These are written from an American point of view, but they are generally true for all the nations that make up what we call the "West."

I never miss a meal unless I choose to. Like many Americans, I worry more about eating too much than not eating enough. Most people in the world don't

eat their fill every day. According to the 1999 World Health Organization report (all of the statistics to follow come from that report), half the children growing up in Guatemala will have their growth stunted by malnutrition. This happens to over 60 percent of the children in Ethiopia. Granted, these countries are on the worst end of the spectrum, but there are many others in Africa, the Americas, Asia and even Europe where malnutrition stunts tens of percents of the children.



I have a generous life expectancy. As of 1998, a boy born in Haiti has a life expectancy of 51 years. A girl born in Bangladesh has a life expectancy of 58 years. A male Rwandan child will live, on average, to be only 39. This means I'll have 20 or 30 extra years to live compared to many of my counterparts in the world. Barring something very unusual, I'll get to watch my children grow all the way up, and have a good chance of meeting my grandchildren, and even of watching them grow up.

My family receives excellent medical care. This is not something to be taken for granted as the new millennium dawns. Though I may sometimes complain about the cost of medical coverage, and the difficulties of getting insurance, my family has access to some of the best medical care in the world. Much of the world has only the most rudimentary of care. Over 10 percent of the children born in Pakistan will die before age 5. The figure reaches a shattering 25 percent of the children born in Afghanistan.

My children receive free public education. While our public education system has its problems, even with its flaws we can be thankful for it. I have friends in Cameroon who can't afford to send all their children to school. At a cost of about \$50 per year, per student, they must choose which of their children they will send, when they can find the money to send any of them. Since most of the people in the country are unemployed, and there is no social security system, they have no guaranteed income. This makes going to school a precarious proposition for most children there. The average woman in Cameroon over 25 years of age has 1.7 years of schooling. The average man has 3 years.

I can count on the free and fair election of the nation's leaders. Most of the countries in the world claim to be democratic, but for many of them this is true in name only. I may not agree with our leaders on everything (I don't), and I may even worry about the fitness of some of them to govern (I do), but I don't have to seriously worry about them fixing elections, or staging a military coup d'etat and refusing to leave office. Many countries in Asia and South America, and almost all countries in Africa, live in perpetual fear of just such things. In some regions of the world, domination by the strongest and most ruthless is just standard operating procedure.

By hard work I can advance in the career of my choice. The United States has been called the "land of opportunity." I believe it. I've met many very intelligent, capable people in Europe, not to mention Asia and Africa, who have a good education--sometimes graduate degrees--job experience and the willingness to work hard, but who are unemployed or underemployed, or in dead-end jobs, because the economic situation in their country stifles advancement. You remember the old joke about the toy to help children learn about life: no matter how you put it together, it doesn't work. That joke is economic reality in much of the world. People with equivalent education levels and experience, may have one tenth or less of our purchasing power. If the average American so chooses, he can go back to school (while keeping his

current job) and change careers to one he thinks he'll enjoy more. We can advance as far as our ability and drive will take us. That's a luxury most people in the world don't have.

The Fruits of Unthankfulness

In the New Testament, when Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans, he gave a description of how the world came to be in such a discouraging state. Verses 21 and 22 of chapter one say of humanity in general "although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools." I find that passage striking. It says that not being thankful to God changes the way we think, and for the worse. It "darkens our hearts." It takes away from our happiness and our mental and emotional well-being.

Could some of our personal problems be caused by a lack of gratitude? Could that loss of mental balance be the reason for some of the worsening conditions in the world? We like to think we're becoming more "wise" as we approach the new millennium, but there are many situations out there in the world that look pretty "foolish"--problems large and small that don't get solved because of the way people are thinking about them.

What about problems in our individual lives? Could some of our personal problems be caused by a lack of gratitude? Maybe we should try something as simple as being more thankful. Paul apparently felt it would help us get our thinking straight.

The blessings I mentioned above are not things I've earned. I just happen to have been born in the United States. In my experience, we Americans are not smarter than other peoples, but in many, many ways we are more blessed. Yes, we work hard, but others in the world work as hard or harder with much less to show for it.

We are like children growing up in a wealthy family. Because we've always had certain blessings, we can easily take them for granted. We may even spend more time complaining about what we wish we had, than being thankful for what we already have. Someone once said: "He who is not grateful for the good things he has, would not be happy with what he wishes he had." Something to think about.

The national forefathers who started the tradition of declaring days of thanksgiving, from William Bradford in 1621, to George Washington in 1789, to Abraham Lincoln in 1863, did so because they sincerely believed the Power on high to be responsible for the emerging nation's blessings. But we've become a more "enlightened" country now--or have we? I wonder how thankful we will be not only on this Thanksgiving Day, but also through the rest of the year. After all, we never stop being blessed.

Home Is Where Our School Is

By Shari Fooshe

Being the teacher at home is not easy, but it has been rewarding!



AS I SIPPED my morning cup of coffee, I noticed the neighborhood children waiting at the bus stop. Several had been at my house yesterday playing, and I knew them well. My attention was diverted by the sound of footsteps pattering down the hall. Megan, my 6-year-old daughter, appeared, still in a pink nightgown and holding her favorite teddy bear. She smiled a sleepy grin. "Hi, Mommy! What are we going to do today?" she asked. Through the window we could see the bus pull up, and we watched the kids climbing the steps.

"Well, today we are going to do some subtraction, study about the Statue of Liberty and learn to make cursive Bs," I said. "Then we will go to the pioneer village and look at that water wheel you were interested in, for starters."

"Yeah!" Megan squealed. She loves to see how things work and draw pictures of her interests.

"Also you have Scouts this afternoon, so we need to make sure all your papers are filled out for your new badge."

"Alicia and I both get our badges today," she said. The bus pulled away with a dull roar as 3-year-old Mariah entered, blonde hair tousled from sleep. "Good morning, Mariah!" said Megan, bending to kiss her sister's cheek. They always hug each other tightly in the morning.

"Good morning, Megan!" she replied sleepily, as they both climbed up to the dining room table for eggs, toast and juice.

I sat down, looking at my two little girls, so cheerful, talking

excitedly about the day's events. A sense of deep fulfillment settled over me as I sipped my coffee. My eyes looked to the refrigerator where two pictures hung with homemade magnets. One was by Mariah, a picture of colorful circles in rainbow colors. She had done it yesterday during art time. The other was a picture of a smiling lady. Below it read, "To the best teacher in the hole world--my Mommy." Spelling error aside, it melted my heart.



A Difficult Decision

Yes, I am the teacher in our home. The decision didn't come easily. I first began looking into home education when I noticed Megan seemed to excel in reading. At 3, she was sounding out letters and reading small words. Her attention span was incredibly long, and she enjoyed listening to adult conversations. I would take her to the YMCA and put her in the age appropriate nursery when I would exercise, only to find her with the 6- and 7-year-old children, building complex Lego sculptures and conversing on their level. I noticed she was bored with children her own age. Although she would play with them, it was only for short periods of time before she would do something on her own. This remained a constant in her life.

Visiting Schools

The summer before she was scheduled to start school, I visited 11 schools. We walked around and observed the classrooms. It was soon apparent that she would be bored in her age-appropriate classes. She was interested in third-grade reading, although in a few areas, including math, she was about average. I feared her exceptional talents would be suppressed in a normal classroom, while she would never get the extra attention she needed in mathematics. In an average classroom of 30, a teacher has to divide her time to all fairly. I knew Megan's strengths and weaknesses better than anyone, and I thought I could focus on them better without holding her back in language arts and spatial abilities.

Are you thinking of home education? An ever-increasing number of families are choosing to home school their children each year. What are the benefits? Are there pitfalls? Faced with these same questions last year, I began to search for the answers.

Finding Facts

First, the facts I uncovered were overwhelmingly positive. I had always thought that home education was something new, developed in these modern days out of fear and peer pressure concerns on the part of parents. However, I found that home education has been going on a long time, and in fact, has provided society with famous names such as Thomas Edison, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Benjamin Franklin, Winston Churchill, Alexander Graham Bell, Daniel Webster and Albert Einstein, just to name a few.

History shows that home schooling, when done correctly, has tremendous advantages. The Middle Tennessee Home Education Association (MTHEA) revealed that home-educated children perform at a 75 to 95 percent average on nationally recognized achievement tests. They attribute this to the one-on-one attention the child receives. The child can learn at his or

her own pace until a subject is mastered, rather than working at the rate of the slowest or most proficient child in a classroom. Just as I envisioned, strengths and weaknesses can be assessed and addressed at a personal level. The association further reinforced my decision by pointing out that the teaching parent can control distractions in the environment and create an efficient learning forum.

I considered that because parental values and ideas are the primary daily influence, these would become the standard of excellence Megan would strive for, rather than the group values of her peers. A secure and stable home allows for a stability and maturity to develop in her that could become lost in a large group setting. I thought that when expectations are based on a group, rather than an individual, something could easily be overlooked. According to the MTHEA, the result will typically produce self-confident young people with strong family ties. In addition, due to exceptionally high SAT scores of recent years, prestigious universities and colleges are beginning to recognize home schoolers as desirable candidates. With all these statistics in mind, there were still many questions to ask myself before I began.

Tough Questions

Do I have the patience to teach my child at home? Most states have mandates on the time required to teach at home. I had to be willing to sit down and take time with my child. I reminded myself that this is her education. I had to take it seriously, to work with her, not just try to get it over and get on with the day. I had to consider it my job to teach her. Experts will tell you that home schooling should never be thought of as the easy way out.

In fact, one should strongly assess one's reasons for wanting to home school. It should never be done out of fear or anger at a system, but rather because you want the best education for your child and feel you can provide it.

If you feel you lack the ability, patience, discipline and character to teach your own children, don't home school. I've seen many parents make the mistake of expecting too much or too little from their children. Those who expect too much can set up their children for failure by criticism, setting the tone for years of frustration and anger in the child. Those who expect too little make excuses for less than the best effort from the child, teaching them to be lazy and sloppy. A balance is difficult to strike and takes careful, loving patience and deep thought. Pray about it, and ask God to recognize your strengths and limitations. Each person must honestly assess whether he or she is up for the job.

Setting the Schedule

Opinions will vary on this, but I personally chose strict schedules for my daughter's schooling. We begin promptly at 8 a.m. and go until she is finished for the day. Of course, like any school, we break for physical education and lunch. The reason I chose strict scheduling rather than open hours was I thought she needed to learn now that schedules are part of living. Going to work, getting to activities, meeting deadlines, all require life schedules.

This doesn't work for everyone. Some choose two hours in the morning, a field trip midday, two more hours of class. This may work better for families with small children who take naps, leaving the optimum school sessions for those times. Another benefit of a flexible schedule is allowing both parents to get involved. Still, as your children become older, I recommend

getting them into consistent scheduling. It will make transition into college and the workplace much smoother.

Socialization Concerns

One of the chief concerns typically is socialization. This worried me originally, but I found it needn't be a problem. There are many opportunities for social interaction, and more are becoming available all the time. With home education on the rise, you can probably find out about home school activities in your area through your umbrella school, which is the school you register under, or home school support network. Some areas even offer co-ops with other home school parents. Sports leagues, camps, field trips, proms, graduation ceremonies, teen banquets and retreats are becoming available. The only difference is you, the parent, know with whom your kids are socializing.

Check into clubs and civic organizations. Don't forget your church, library, community theater, Scouts and 4-H programs. We were involved this year in all the above, as well as weekly nursing home visits. This diversity teaches children to appreciate all ages and facets of life.

The time I have teaching my children has been a rare and precious gift.

If you have tried to locate these possibilities with no success, then it is up to you to initiate it. Don't be afraid to lead a Scout troop, organize your own field trips, start a church play group or visit other home schoolers. Once a week, we take a field trip. Get a phone book and start making calls from A to Z. Does your area have an advertising agency, fire department, post office, deli? Call them, and explain you have a home schooled child who would like to learn all about their job. I found that 100 percent of businesses we asked were willing to show us around their workplace.

Remember that balance is the key. Know your kids' playmates and make sure their values are similar to yours. But do not put them in a plastic bubble. Your children will need to learn to deal with many kinds of people as they take their place in society.

Where to Begin

OK, now you know some pitfalls and positives. If you still want to proceed, where do you begin? Look up the Home School Legal Defense Association at www.hslda.org. This group provides home schooling requirements for different states. I am reciting the requirements for the state of Tennessee below, but your state may be different.

Next, request an information packet of your state's rules from the state education department. This should include names of schools that you can register with that will then be legally responsible for keeping your child's transcripts and attendance records. I chose a private, church-related school. If you choose that option, be sure the religious school's beliefs won't interfere with your own.

The private school route allows me to tailor my child's curriculum, rather than forcing me to go along with the public school that requires education in homosexual lifestyles and evolution. I also wanted Bible to be an important part of the curriculum. And my daughter is just 6, but reads on a fourth-grade level. The private church umbrella school allows me to choose her needs at her level.

Once you register under your choice of school, you will be told what records, attendance reports and standardized testing are required. Be sure to submit your curriculum.

Worried about leaving something out? So was I. Gather a list of resources and study them. I recommend Robin Scarlata's book "What Your Child Needs to Know When." You can find this at www.familychristianacademy.com. Also, listed below are several home school curriculum suppliers. You can order a pre-designed curriculum from them, or tailor your own program from several. Experience is the great teacher, and you probably will find yourself overbuying teaching materials the first year. As time goes on, you will learn what works for you. I can recommend only what I have used and has worked well for me. Those include: Horizons Math from [Alpha Omega](#); language arts and the Geography Songs from [Sing, Spell, Read and Write](#); and art selections, history and health from [A Beka](#).

That is it. Take a deep breath, prepare your weekly schedule and begin. It has been worth it for me. The time I have teaching my children has been a rare and precious gift. As I watch their minds open to new skills, understanding and knowledge, the rewards come back to me through the love and excitement in their eyes.

Home-schooling Resources

There are a lot of valuable resources on the Internet. Put your search engine on home school and see what you find. Here are a few I have used:

- Sing, Spell, Read and Write: (800) 321-8322 or www.singspell.com
- Youth Educational Adventures: (888) BIBLE-44 or www.cemnetwork.com
- Sonlight Curriculum: (303) 730-6292 or www.sonlight-curriculum.com
- Alpha Omega Publications: (800) 622-3070 or www.home-schooling.com
- A Beka Book: (877) 223-5226 or www.abeka.com
- Home School Legal Defense Association: www.hslda.org

Making the Most of Public Schools

By Becky Bennett

Although public education has a bad reputation, there are still reasons to feel good about choosing public schools.



SUMMER IS ALMOST OVER as I write, and this one has been an interesting one. Having moved to a new part of the country, our family has been learning about the native birds and studying their songs from tape. We've gone on nature walks to pick leaves from trees and then learned more about them from our tree book. My daughters Heather and Erica have written several short (and some very long) stories and read many books. Heather, my 9-year-old, found a tape and book for learning Italian and has been trying out new phrases on the rest of us.

As you may see, learning isn't pushed aside during our summers, so I was surprised when my daughters said they could hardly wait for school to start! But you know, I had to agree with them. I too am looking forward to our new school.

Like other schools our children have attended, this new school seems to have teachers and administrators who care, and who support values of cooperation, kindness and respect towards others. Overall, we've enjoyed teachers who are well-educated and have the skills, creativity and desire to teach. Remember your devotion to your first teacher? My daughters have come home from school full of "My teacher says...." Their teachers' most simple advice, such as how much glue to use (a dot's a lot), how to cut things out and leave just one piece of paper to throw away, how to take care of crayons, etc., is repeated in awed tones because they are from a fresh, novel source.

At the higher grades especially, public schools offer the expertise and resources for specialized courses, such as chemistry, calculus and computer science. Even at the lower grades, though, I've appreciated the educational resources our schools have offered. The school libraries have been stocked with a wide variety of books. The computers have had some excellent software packages. Our last art teacher really knew her stuff! Assets such as these have provided a rich, multi-textured way of learning that I would have a hard time duplicating.

Positive Peer Pressure

Another positive thing I'm looking forward to is peer pressure. Surprised? While usually noted for its negative influence, I've found there can also be positive pressure to learn. When I ask my children to do review work during the summer, they sometimes act like I'm singling them out for punishment. But during the school year there's no whine--everyone's learning their multiplication facts! My daughters have found classmates who are as good as they are, or better, at math and it's spurred them to work even harder!

Being in a new neighborhood, I'm anticipating getting to know others through school. Sending our children to public school has been an opportunity for our family to be "a light" showing God's way of life in school, a small microcosm of the world. True, this has had its challenges. We've had to deal with a system that is not geared to our beliefs.

For instance, our family does not participate in Halloween festivities. The customs and their sources have always seemed unbecoming for a Christian and we ask that our children not be required to make witches, haunted houses and the like. My daughter's first grade teacher accepted our request without comment, but months later, she asked about our religion and wanted to learn more. It is always my prayer that God will give us the right words in "bucking the system" and help us to represent His way well so that as the apostle Peter said, "That whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation" (1 Peter 2:12).

I still have my concerns about what my children are exposed to in public schools. It's a battle that takes place on many fronts.

Even young children can be the "salt of the earth"--a positive example to others around them. I've noticed that family rules and standards can be attractive to other children if they are accompanied by a visibly warm, loving family. And children can surprise us by their acts of compassion and kindness to others. I remember Ricky, a young boy in Heather's second grade class. Ricky was an extremely troubled child who had been abandoned by his drug addict mother while she was visiting her latest ex-husband. Ricky's problems affected his school life, too. He had trouble learning, refusing to even try. Most kids made fun of Ricky, but I was proud when Heather's teacher told me how Heather had helped Ricky with a report and actually persuaded him to contribute.

I've felt like we're helping other people's children simply by opting for public school. One reason that public education as a whole has been reluctant to go with the "school voucher" system that many have advocated is that it could pull out the best and brightest, leaving problem schools even more problematic. Abandoning the public school system might be fine for my children; but if this attitude is multiplied many times over, where would it leave the children who have no choice but public schools?

A Battle on Many Fronts

I still have my concerns about what my children are exposed to in public schools. It's a battle that takes place on many fronts. And yet I think staging the battle at this age has advantages. I am able to give them exposure to the world while still providing the protective environment of our family. I'm not going to be able to protect them from wrong influences forever. There is an advantage to being able to expose them to the wrong things of this world while we as

parents are still there to give guidance, insight and God's direction. But I readily acknowledge that there is risk involved here. It is our responsibility as parents to continually make sure the dangers are not too great. These dangers vary from school to school, from child to child and even from age to age.

While I've chosen to send my daughters to public school, I haven't relinquished my ultimate responsibility in their education. Cheri Fuller in her book "Helping Your Child Succeed in Public School," compares a parent's role in education to that of a general contractor who subcontracts various jobs in building a house. Parents are "in it long term, from kindergarten through college. The child may have many teachers along the way, but his parents are his primary instructors and guides. Parents 'sub-out' parts of the educating task, but they must oversee, provide support and resources, take the initiative to keep in touch, and hold school personnel accountable for their part of the project."

Helping at School

Helping out at school has helped me stay aware of my daughters' school life. When Heather entered third grade last year, her teacher really intimidated her. She brought home reports of harsh rebukes of her classmates and strict rules that made her nervous and worried. Due to circumstances, I wasn't able to help in the classroom until more than a month after school started. I was relieved when I spent my first morning in class and found that Heather's teacher, while insisting on high standards, was patient, creative and encouraging. I relaxed, knowing it wouldn't be long until Heather would get used to her style and have fun learning.



Besides being able to witness the class life first-hand, I've found other advantages to being a school volunteer. I can have a parent-teacher conference every time I help, keeping track of how Heather and Erica are doing on a frequent basis. Because of my involvement at school, our family's requests are honored and respected as often as possible. I can meet and get to know the other children in the class. I can encourage friendships (or discourage them) based on first-hand knowledge.

I've also gotten to know other parents who volunteer. They're not all stay-at-home moms. Maggie used to help out every couple weeks for the 20 minutes she had before her work shift started. Henry worked full-time from the home, but adjusted his schedule so he could help in his son's class three hours a week. Naomi worked the night-shift as a nurse, but still spent four hours a week training kids for a cross-country program. Even a small amount of time helped these parents develop a team approach with the teacher and the school.

Our Home Is the "Home Room"

Though we've committed some of our children's education to others, it's helped me to remember that we really do home school. Our home is the real "home room," and my husband and I are the main teachers. We have a responsibility to review the work of the other teachers and supplement it where needed. We've encouraged our daughters to tell us about what they're learning and experiencing at school. The conversations have been interesting and educational and many times have provided us a jump-off point to give God's perspective on a topic.

There's one other thing that my husband and I do, which I think has been the major source of our positive public school experiences. We pray about it. We pray about the selection of a teacher, that there might be a good match of teaching style to our children's learning styles. We pray for our children's safety and protection--physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. We pray for them to have good friends who will be a positive influence. And we pray that God will give us wisdom and guidance to teach our children (really His children) and "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).

Useful Resources

- "Helping Your Child Succeed in Public School" by Cheri Fuller, published by Focus on the Family. The 1993 edition is out of print, but a new edition should be available this year.
- Family Education Network: <http://familyeducation.com/topic/index>
- National Parent Information Network: <http://npin.org>
- U.S. Department of Education: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/parents>
- Parents Toolbox for Solving Education Problems: <http://www.fastlane.net/homepages/eca/parentstoolbox.html>
- National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education: <http://www.ncpie.org/start.html>
- National PTA: <http://www.pta.org/programs/edulibr.htm#home>
- National Education Association: <http://www.nea.org/parents/>
- A good source for finding other related Web sites: <http://www.go.com/WebDir/Education>

Waiting for the 'End of the World'?

By John Ross Schroeder

As we approach the threshold of a new millennium, how does the Bible advise those who count on the "end of the world" around New Year's Day, 2000?



ARMAGEDDON AND APOCALYPSE are in the air. The coming turn of a century and a new millennium is greatly intensifying a nervous eschatological impulse. Some even expect the "end of the world" and Jesus Christ's return precisely on January 1, 2000.

Several strange events have surfaced. For instance, one small group has moved to the Mount of Olives just outside Jerusalem to help usher in the second coming. In a separate incident the Israeli government had to intervene and cancel a simulated "Christian" enactment of the events of Armageddon--a so-called preview of the coming catastrophe. Also, Christian groups have been funding a group called the Movement for the Establishment of the Temple. (Today, the temple area is occupied by one of the holiest spots in the Muslim world, the Dome of the Rock.) Not long ago hundreds of members of a doomsday group disappeared into the remote mountains of Colombia in South America.

Millennial madness seems to be in vogue as 1999 draws to a close.

There have always been some Christians who believed so intensely that they knew exactly when Christ must come back to earth that they tried to make it happen. How absurd this must seem to God. Christ is our Lord and Master--not the other way around (John 13:13).

Nonetheless, He did tell us to watch world events (Luke 21:36). We are to carefully assess the trends and conditions that would precede His second coming, but in a balanced and rational way--never attempting to set a date.

No Man Knows the Exact Time

When it does occur, the return of Jesus Christ is destined to be a hugely important benchmark event in world history. It will take its place alongside the Creation, Noah's Flood and Christ's first coming. The time factor is so crucial that God the Father has reserved the decision to Himself. At the time of His humanity even Christ did not know when it would be (Matthew 24:36).

But the disciples continued their persistent questioning after His resurrection to eternal life. They still wanted to know when. Christ gave them virtually the same answer that He had previously: "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority" (Acts 1:7).

Historically this reply has been very hard for us to accept. Somehow we want to circumvent Jesus' own words and figure out some way to know exactly when.

Over the last nearly 2,000 years a few have wound up with egg on their faces. From time to time the overly zealous have set dates only to see all of them come and go without the appearance of Jesus Christ. One would have thought that we would have learned the lesson by now.

Many, however, seem to be prone to this weakness. Even the early apostles weren't immune, thinking that Christ would return in their lifetimes. But later in life they came to a more realistic view (see 2 Peter 3; 2 Timothy 4).

To better understand God's thinking, let's take a brief scriptural look at Christ's first and second advents from the overall biblical perspective.

Carefully Planned Far in Advance

The first coming of Jesus Christ was a carefully planned occurrence. It did not happen by accident, or just at any time in history. "But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Galatians 4:4).

Other translations render this expression variously as "the appointed time," "the right time" or something similar. God plans what He does in advance. The right time is that particular period most suitable to His plan and purpose.

Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8; John 1:29), but the actual event didn't occur for several thousand years. Almost 2,000 years have now passed since His death and resurrection. But, as Hebrews 9:28 reminds us, "Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation."

Scripturally both comings are connected and intertwined (Isaiah 61:1-2), yet there is a considerable time lapse between these two separate events. Both are enormously important steps in God's plan for humanity.

Consider the words of the apostle Paul to the church at Ephesus: "In Christ our release is secured and our sins forgiven through the shedding of His blood . . . He [the Father], has made known to us His secret purpose, in accordance with the plan which He determined beforehand in Christ, to be put into effect when the time was ripe, namely that the universe, everything in heaven and earth might be brought into a unity with Christ" (Ephesians 1:7-10, Revised English Bible).

Paul here speaks of a time that certainly includes the second coming of Christ, yet extends beyond that crucial event. He is apparently primarily referring to the time of the new heavens

and new earth described in Revelation 21 and 22, written several decades later by the apostle John.

A Divine Timetable

We can be absolutely sure that no major event in prophecy will ever occur without precise planning. In looking back, crucial occurrences will have happened "when the time was ripe" (Ephesians 1:10)--and not before!

We are to carefully assess the conditions that would precede Jesus' second coming in a balanced and rational way

The Bible makes this crucial point very clear. "For this was the plan of the One [the Father] who shapes the whole course of events to His appointed ends" (verse 11, Translator's New Testament).

God the Father will send Jesus Christ back to this earth at precisely the right time. Unlike us, He is able to see the whole picture--everything that is happening in the world at any given time. He alone has perfect knowledge of the past and the future. We can only perceive a part of the overall scenario. "We know in part and we prophesy in part," wrote the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 13:9).

Yet Christ told us to pray "Your kingdom come," plainly telling us that He wants us to eagerly and enthusiastically seek the time of His direct, decisive intervention in human affairs. In the meantime we are to diligently watch world news and trends while taking care to see that our spiritual life is in order as well (Luke 21:29-36).

Sober Words of Warning

We should carefully heed Jesus Christ's own words of warning in the Olivet prophecy, given shortly before His death: "Then if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect... Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it" (Matthew 24:23-24, 26).

If people would only understand and heed the very words of Jesus Himself, they wouldn't be setting up residence on the Mount of Olives or trying to act out the events of Armageddon in advance. Truly the second coming is a global event (verse 30). God's angels will gather His elect everywhere on earth, wherever they happen to be (verse 31).

Jesus Christ expects His followers to carry out His work of preaching the gospel of the kingdom (Matthew 24:14) and sharing His truth with the world (Matthew 28:18-20). We are to wait patiently for His return (Luke 21:19), knowing that "he who endures to the end shall be saved" (Matthew 24:13).

*Virtual Christian Magazine Editorial***The Pursuit of Nothing**

By Mike Bennett

ADVERTISERS ARE AMAZING. They are always coming up with some new thing to get our attention. Like the signs in New Zealand that I learned about in "Utne Reader" magazine. These billboards enigmatically featured "Nothing(tm)."

Now, I'm fairly jaded, but that aroused my curiosity. What is it? An exotic fragrance? A hint of a cool, cutting-edge technology on the horizon? The thing to get for someone who has everything? Actually, it turns out that Nothing(tm) was nothing. Literally. It was just a test to see how gullible we "consumers" are.

Not that a lot of people were sucked in by this, but to me it's a symbol of a materialistic society always seeking more, but always unsatisfied. Too often what we are sold on turns out to be Nothing(tm).

Only 45 Shopping Days...

As the Christmas shopping season hits us full bore, advertisers like to take their best shot at kids. Toys R Us has it down to a science. Yesterday they informed us of their new arrival.

"My Twinn has a wonderful announcement. Our new My Twinn Babies have arrived. Just like our famous My Twinn Dolls, each of the babies is truly unique. And we're sure you'll agree, they're the world's most lovable baby dolls." It's hard to argue as my girls pored over the catalog, though the \$69.95 price tag made another argument.

Heather, my 9-year-old, is actually pretty astute to marketing ploys. In fact she has aspirations of being an advertiser herself, an honest one of course. She analyzes what the ads are trying to make her feel and do. This doesn't totally remove their enticing power, but seeing the inner workings does make her more of an informed consumer.

Thoughts About Materialism

Joel Meeker's article in this issue of VCM, "[Thoughts About Thanksgiving](#)," showed me another side to the subject of materialism. As Joel pointed out, "He who is not grateful for the good things he has, would not be happy with what he wishes he had."

Mega-wealthy King Solomon compared his frenzied search for more with trying to grasp the wind (Ecclesiastes 2:11). The apostle Paul gave this perspective on material things: "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out" (1 Timothy 6:7).

This led me to an interesting thought. What is the difference between "nothing" and "something"? The nothings in our lives dissipate, tarnish, fade and disappear. The somethings that are really something last. They are the relationships, the qualities of character, the spiritual dimensions that can continue beyond the grave. Gaining more physical toys doesn't give meaning to our lives, but, according to Paul, "godliness with

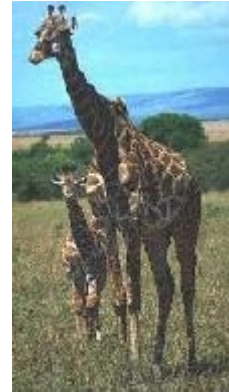
contentment is great gain" (1 Timothy 6:6).

Heather, who is alert to materialistic marketing messages, also pointed out a positive message she read at school. She wrote this little article to describe something that really means something.

The Giraffe Project by Heather Bennett

I was looking through my social studies book when I found out this surprising information: "Giraffes can live all over the world." But the author was not talking about an animal. A giraffe is what she calls people who stick their necks out to help others.

Maybe you know a giraffe. Maybe you are one. But are you an ostrich? An ostrich is someone who sticks his head in the ground waiting for problems to pass. No doubt an ostrich can also live all over the world. But by showing a good example, maybe we can all stick our necks out and make the world a better place.



Something to Get Excited About

Heather found that lesson something to get excited about, something to get involved in. When we get involved in helping others, expressing outgoing concern and active love, that's something to feel good about. Serving others through God's love is a more excellent way (1 Corinthians 12:31, 13:2). Without it, we are Nothing(tm).

Letters to the Editor

Wanted: Morality



One wonders if we have the language that we need for morality any longer. One remembers that "hate" once was legal motivation for a crime. Today we have removed hate as a motivation for a crime and produced and instead call them "hate crimes." How can you demonstrate motivation for a hate crime in court?

The stoic and pragmatic approach of distancing one's self to observe all matters that require judgment is no longer in effect.

Politicians do not accept bribes but they accept influence. The sparring with truth by wordsmithing. When an issue is presented in court one now "strategizes" and inserts the correct language to obtain goals. Should we wonder why morality is endangered?

-- Bob

Appreciate VCM



I really appreciate *Virtual Christian Magazine* as I live in a remote area. I am also married to a man of another religious belief and our 3 children are being raised that way. I would like to see more articles that offer help and encouragement for those of us in marriages with unbelievers, especially as it seems it is getting very close to the end of this age.

Thanks again for the great work you are doing in God's name.

-- SR



Thank you for your very valuable and well-written articles which I have read on your WEB site. I believe this is a very good new and interesting service for the scattered brethren.

-- Elva Sedliacik



I get your magazine, and just looked up this site, as I am just learning how to use the Internet. There are no United Church Of God people here, so I go the Seventh Day Adventist church to

worship now. I wish I lived near one of your churches, but now I have your web site, I can read all the latest.

Keep well, and may God bless you in all your programs.

-- Monica, Australia



I have just completed reading most of the *VCM* issues and I want to compliment all of you for writing some very inspiring articles. I found my first copy of *The Plain Truth* in a local convenience store back in 1982!

I have been receiving literature from UCG after learning of their existence by a few searches on the Internet. I was very happy to see that the fantastic message of God's plan was still being preached.

I have heard your message for over a decade. I've never been baptized. The one thing I am convinced of is that the total message you preach, the message I've heard all these years, the good news of God's amazing purpose for all people.

This message is so entirely perfect that it just has to be true. I would be hard-pressed to believe that life's answers could be any different. I know that this evil world's time is short, and a better world is hopefully just around the corner.

My longing is to somehow be a part of that better world-one that benefits from Christ's righteous rule. I always dive into any correspondence that I get from UCG booklets, updates, the Good News, etc. I encourage you to keep up the good work!

-- David