

Virtual Christian Magazine

Hope And Encouragement
For The Real World

"Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character'"—1 Corinthians 15:33, New International Version

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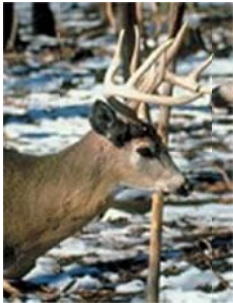


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Overscheduled Families

By Becky Sweat

Many parents worry their children will be left behind if they aren't signed up for lots of activities. But are the benefits of such a hurried lifestyle really worth the time stress?



AS RHONDA PARKER APPROACHED the playground, she was happy to see another woman with a child at the swing set. Her child seemed to be about the same age as Rhonda's daughter, Emily. Rhonda began pushing Emily on the swing and smiled at the other girl's mother. The other woman looked back at Emily appraisingly, and then asked, "How old is she?"

"She just turned 4," Rhonda replied.

"What preschool do you have her in?"

"She doesn't go to preschool," Rhonda answered hesitantly.

"Music lessons, then? Or dance?"

"Well, no." Rhonda was getting uncomfortable now.

"Lauren has preschool Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings," said the other mother. "That leaves Tuesday and Thursday mornings for her swim lessons. Then Monday afternoons she has ballet class, Wednesday afternoons she has piano lessons and on Thursday afternoons, she has reading club at the library. I can barely keep up with her schedule, but it's worth it." After a pause she added, "Aren't you worried that your daughter will get behind?"



“Get behind?” Rhonda repeated incredulously. Even though she’d only given Emily a few pushes on the swing, she had lost the urge to chat. Rhonda excused herself, then grabbed Emily’s hand and headed over to the slides, feeling somewhat annoyed at this mother’s competitive attitude and a little unsettled at the same time. Could she be allowing her daughter to fall behind by not involving her in all those outside activities?

Many parents today find themselves confronted with the same question. They worry that if they’re not hauling their children to an endless array of structured activities, the youngsters will miss out or be left behind. On the other hand, if they do decide to get on the activities fast track, mother and father may start to feel like chauffeurs rather than parents.

The pace of life

Of course, just a generation ago, these were hardly major issues for parents. When most of us who are now parents were growing up, we probably spent our afternoons and weekends riding bicycles around the neighborhood with our friends, playing games in vacant lots, climbing trees, jumping rope or playing hopscotch—just having our own informal fun.

Today, parents have their kids involved in any number of activities, from dance lessons, computer instruction, junior theater, nature camp and art classes, to soccer, tee ball, gymnastics and hockey. They start enrolling them when they’re preschoolers and keep them busy all the way through high school.

Could she be allowing her daughter to fall behind by not involving her in all those outside activities?

“The pace of life has picked up and it’s coming out of family time and time for kids to just hang out and be kids,” notes William J. Doherty, professor of family social science at the University of Minnesota and author of *Take Back Your Kids* (Sorin Books, 2000).

Weekends used to be a time for families to just kick back and relax together, he says. “Now parents are busy all weekend shuffling their kids to all the different sporting events they’re involved with. That’s in addition to running errands or catching up on housework that didn’t get done during the week since both parents are often working full-time jobs.”

According to a recent study conducted by the University of Minnesota, there has been a decline of 12 hours per week in an American child’s free time over the past 20 years. During the same 20-year period, conversations between family members in a household decreased by 50 percent, the study says.

Pressured parents

Most parents readily admit that constantly running from one event or activity to the next isn’t a lot of fun. So why would they opt for this type of lifestyle for themselves and their children? Alvin Rosenfeld, a medical doctor and author of *The Over-Scheduled Child: Avoiding the Hyper-Parenting Trap* (St. Martin’s Press, 2000), believes that most often it’s a matter of parents feeling societal and parental peer pressure to provide more opportunities for their children. “They see everyone else’s kids involved in a lot of different activities and that just seems to be the thing to do,” he says.

Nowadays, parents think that filling their children's discretionary time with "enriching" opportunities is essential to being a good parent, Doherty says. "We have higher expectations today of what our children should be experiencing, what they should be learning and what they should be doing." He adds, "Previous generations had much more of a sense that, other than the time spent in school and church, kids do best just playing together on their own. But now we tend to see children more as bundles of creative potential. And so parents enroll their children in all kinds of structured activities in order to maximize that potential."



It may start out with parents simply wanting to provide their children with a new experience, so they sign them up for a class of some kind. But soon, one or two classes turn into three or four. It's not long before parents become overwhelmed with all the places they have to take their kids on weeknights and weekends. Not only that, but they often find themselves in a competition with each other, competing to have the child who's the fastest athlete, the best artist, the earliest reader, the most talented musician, etc.

"We live in a very competitive society," Doherty remarks. "If we see somebody like a Mary Lou Retton compete in the Olympics for example, then everybody gets the idea that 'if I get my daughter into gymnastics at age six maybe she can be that good.' And so we push and push our kids to do more and more."

Parents may either subconsciously or consciously try to create "trophy kids" as a way to show off to other parents, according to Rosenfeld. "It's keeping up with the Joneses, only with your children rather than with possessions," he says.

Even if parents are not particularly competitive themselves, Doherty adds, "they're still going to notice that all the other five-year-olds are already mastering soccer kicks and judo moves, and they can feel like they're letting their own child down by not exposing him or her to these things."

Life in the fast lane

Another part of the equation is that parents themselves are much busier today than parents of previous generations. In many households, both mother and father have full-time jobs, commute an hour or more each way to work and as a result may be away from home 10 hours a day.

"When both parents work outside the home, they need somewhere to send their kids during those after-school and vacation hours and that often means signing them up for organized after-school activities and summer day camps," notes Susan K. Mackey, a clinical psychologist with the Family Institute at Northwestern University.

But not only are both parents working, they're also devoting more time to earning a living. Mackey believes this is due to concerns people have that if they don't put in long

According to a recent study conducted by the University of Minnesota, there has been a decline of 12 hours per week in an American child's free time over the past 20 years.

hours, they may lose their job. “Nowadays there’s this pressure that if you don’t work 50 to 60 hours a week, you will get laid off if your company is downsized,” she remarks. She contrasts this to the 1950s, when people were pretty much guaranteed to keep their jobs if they were loyal employees and put in 40 hours a week. But that’s not the case anymore. Working overtime, weekends, and being on call 24 hours a day, is standard for employees at many companies.

As parents become busier, this spills over into their kids’ lives. So if a mother doesn’t get home from work each day until 6:30 p.m., her children are likely to find themselves in an after-school program. If both parents are working 40 or 50 hours a week, what might otherwise be downtime during the evenings and weekends is now taken up with housework, grocery shopping and other errands. On top of that, parents may have to make time for their children’s recitals, soccer matches, baseball games and other functions on weeknights or weekends.

The result is a rushed, hurried lifestyle for everyone in the family, but even in the more “traditional” family situations where one parent stays home, life remains more hectic nowadays than it was in the past. “It just seems to have gotten into our culture that we have to be busy, busy, busy all the time,” Mackey says. Many women who choose to stay home with their preschool-aged children are never home more than a couple of hours at a time during the day, because they’re always having to drop their children off or pick them up from one class or another.

Quality time?

Obviously, parents need to earn a living and that may mean working late on occasion or taking a night class now and then. And certainly some outside activities can be very valuable and rewarding for children. The problem is when people overbook their schedules to the point that they’re always rushing somewhere.

Too many outside activities can cut into family time, which for many families is already scarce. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports that since 1960, kids have, on average, 10 fewer hours of parental time per week—primarily because both parents work and are working longer hours. Even when parents and children are home together, parents often feel so tired and stressed that they don’t have any emotional or physical energy left for their children.

Once family members jump onto the fast track, life at home may never be the same. Everyone in the family, kids and parents alike, can get tired of constantly being on the run. Often the only interaction parents and kids have is in the car on the way to the next class or sporting event, and that usually goes along the line of “Did you remember your backpack?” “Oh, we’re going to be late!” “What time did you say I need to pick you up?” It’s hardly the kind of conversation that could be classified as quality time.

Nowadays, parents think that filling their children’s discretionary time with “enriching” opportunities is essential to being a good parent “I think everybody feels rushed today, which makes free time all the more precious,” Rosenfeld says. “It should make you think twice about how you use your off time. You could spend it hauling your child from one activity to the next, or you could have some one-on-one time with your child, even just doing everyday things at home like cooking dinner or playing a board game together.” He adds that while kids certainly appreciate having their parents sitting in the bleachers, attending your child’s sporting events can’t be counted as family time.

“It’s really parenting from the sidelines,” he says.

Not enough family time can mean that children are missing the stabilizing, character-shaping influence of their parents. “It can get to the point that parents seem to know little about their children’s lives, and the influence of peers and the media may be outweighing the influence of parents,” says Isabelle Fox, a family counselor and author of *Being There: The Benefits of a Stay-at-Home Parent* (Barron’s, 1996).

This is a real danger if parents are workaholics or too focused on competing via their kids’ pursuits. They can inadvertently send the wrong message to their children about what’s really important in life. “The message kids often get is that materialism is more important than true values,” says Frank Vitro, psychology professor at Texas Woman’s University. “Kids can get the idea that succeeding in your career is all that matters and that family relationships take a backseat.”

While all kids need family time, Doherty contends that it is most critical for children at elementary age and younger. “At this age especially, the focus should be on spending time with Mom and Dad rather than on outside activities,” he says. “If you don’t spend regular time with your children when they’re young, how are you going to influence them when they’re teenagers and you’re telling them not to smoke or do drugs? Why would they stop and listen to you if you haven’t built a strong connection with them when they were younger?”

Adds Doherty: “It’s important to remind yourself that your kids are never going to be young again. Once this time is gone, you can never regain it. We ought to enjoy them for the brief flicker of time we have with them.”

Making time for family

Chances are, you can relate to what’s been discussed in this article. Over-packed schedules are a part of our lives these days. It seems everyone, young and old, is rushed, under pressure and stressed out about everything that “needs” to be done and not having enough time to do it all. Which leads to the question: Is it even possible to slow down and simplify your family schedule these days?

“It certainly is!” Doherty is quick to reply. Start by recognizing how important it is to spend time with your children. Be willing to make it a top priority. If you have to, schedule time to be with your children, just as you would schedule a meeting to be with your most important client. Pencil a date on the calendar, if that will help you make the time to be with your kids. Plan for it to be a special time for your children, where you’re giving them your full attention, rather than just having them ride along with you when you’re out running errands.

Before you sign your children up for outside activities, ask yourself why you want to do it. “If you felt pangs when you heard another parent talking about what his kid is doing and so you’re enrolling your kid in the same activity to ‘keep up with the Joneses,’ that’s not a reason to get your child involved in an activity,” Rosenfeld says.

As a parent, you will need to decide what you value most and what’s most important in the long term for you and your children. Ask yourself: Will the activity add something positive to your child’s development or to your family life? How would the activity impact family time? If you and your

spouse already have an over packed work schedule yourselves, do you want to spend two nights a week driving your 7-year-old to soccer practice? Know whether you can truly handle adding more commitments to your schedule.

“If you say ‘yes’ to too many enrichment opportunities, the whole family will pay the price,” Rosenfeld warns. “Weigh the benefits of participation against the cost, time, energy, logistical effort, stress and expense—to you, your child, and the rest of the family.” Some families make firm rules (such as one sport per child per season), while others make decisions on a case-by-case basis.

Be sure to allow for some downtime every day. This might be time when you would go for a walk with your children in the park, read a book together, do some baking, throw a few basketballs into the hoop outside your garage, or just sit at the kitchen table together while drinking hot chocolate.

“The unstructured, unplanned time is normally the happiest—and possibly most important—time of all for both children and parents,” Fox says. “Doing these sorts of things spontaneously can allow families to relax and enjoy each other.” Not only that, she says unscheduled time allows children the opportunity to use their imagination and be creative, and teaches them to fill their own free time enjoyably.

Before you sign your children up for outside activities, ask yourself why you want to do it.

“Childhood needn’t be an endless treadmill of productivity and self-improvement,” Rosenfeld remarks. Kids need relaxed, carefree time with their parents—time when they aren’t involved in some kind of sport or structured activity where they are expected to perform.

“Allowing your kids to be ‘unproductive’ convinces them that you love them for who they are, that they don’t have to perform, and that they don’t have to get awards or be the lead in the school play to have your love,” he says.

If all the other parents you know have their kids booked in constant activities, don’t allow yourself to feel guilty because you’ve got your child in only one or even no activities. Be willing to go against the tide—even if everyone around you is on the nonstop activity treadmill. “Your children have their whole lives ahead of them to pursue outside interests and build careers,” notes Doherty. “But they’re only going to be young once.”

For more helpful information about how to have a happier family life, see our free booklet [Marriage and Family: The Missing Dimension](#).

Religious Nuts

By Robert Berendt

The terms may vary from place to place, but it seems every society and every generation has had some experience with those who are deviant thinkers.



WE LIVE IN AN INCREDIBLE SOCIETY and world. There are many and varied thought patterns around us, and we strive to categorize a “norm” from them with which to judge human behavior. We realize there are some at the far ends of the spectrum from this norm, but we are puzzled and amazed (sometimes beyond belief) at the really peculiar behavior and thought patterns of some. As many would say: they are “nuts” (nuts meaning crazy or fouled up in their thinking).

The nuttiest of all

When I try to develop a pattern for “nuts,” I find that there is no nut as nuts as a religious nut. Religion has done more to push the behavior of people over the edge of all that is considered allowable and acceptable than any other form of thinking. Leaders have even declared themselves to be “gods” here on Earth.

As late as 1945, many Japanese considered their emperor to be divine. The early pharaohs of Egypt and Caesars of Rome declared themselves divine. Myriads of kings and other leaders proclaimed themselves to be led and directed by a Supreme Being. In Europe, the royal crowns carried a symbol on the top of the crown that indicated that the king or queen was in their position by divine appointment. The crown of Hungary has a golden cross on top, and Britain has a great jewel as this symbol of divine blessing. The Pope in Rome is said to be appointed by divine guidance. The imams of Islam feel the same about their calling.

Religion has done more to push the behavior of people over the edge of all that is considered allowable and acceptable than any other form of thinking.

Almost all spiritual leaders claim divine guidance and appointment of some sort. Some have sacrificed a great deal to follow what they believed was their destiny and calling from a deity. Most are leaders who are balanced, but some are obvious extremists.

There are numerous stories of parents who have put their own children to death because they "heard a voice."

I have seen individuals who do not seem to be seeking personal glory but who wander about proclaiming that they have a message from God. Some are dressed in rags; some wear robes that make them stand out in a crowd. A man in Vienna, Austria, was well known on the main shopping district since he dressed in a white sheet, carried a shepherd's rod, wore green leaves on his head, and loudly proclaimed doom and gloom for the city and nation. I have no doubt that men like these are reasonably sane and take as their role models the stories of people like Jonah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and others who actually did serve God.

The danger of extremes

But some religious nuts that proclaim divine guidance have sent countless people to their early deaths in the name of their belief. The Kamikaze of Japan died for their divine emperor. The Incas of old were among the many pagan religions that designated the most handsome, beautiful, flawless, and young among them to become the sacrifice to the gods. It is usually the youngest and best that die at the whim and order of a religious person who has designed a reason for their sacrifice and proclaimed that reason to be given directly by divine inspiration.



Photo by
Cable Cast (San Diego County Sheriff's Dept.)

Many Christian leaders of old proclaimed, "letters coming down from heaven" to be the mainstay of their beliefs and statements when they wanted to exert control over people. I do not mean to poke fun at sincere people who believe that what they are doing is pleasing to God; however, when actions defy all logic and when others are hurt by the deeds or words of one who proclaims himself to be guided by God, then I feel they need to be categorized as dangerous—dangerous to themselves and dangerous to others. There are numerous stories of parents who have put their own children to death because they "heard a voice."

I have met a number of people whose personal life is a mess but who fully believe God has reached out to them with some divine message, which nobody except themselves can understand or know. They feel they have a mission to minister to and correct others. It is interesting to note how many of these types often seek ministers to impress and correct with their divine message.

Hallmarks of Christian fanatics

Religious nuts have ideas that are preposterous and meaningless to all but them. They carry a Bible (or other supposed authority) in their hands to proclaim their authenticity and are an embarrassment to the very words of that holy book.

Paul had much to say about some he met who were far from Christ. In Titus 1:15-16, he wrote, "To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted

A person who is truly confident will have no concern that someone is questioning him, and even if someone wonders if he has "lost it."

and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted. They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good” (New International Version throughout). In Colossians 2:18, Paul states, “Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions.”

What God desires instead

Paul exhorts us in Colossians 3:12: “Therefore, as God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” Humility of the greatest degree is what we need before God. The Bible informs us that we have nothing to offer and our very best is as filthy rags before Him (Isaiah 64:6). With that in mind, a person ought to fear to step forward and serve God without being invited. That invitation should be stronger than just a dream in the night.

The book of Luke records the advice on humility given to one who was invited to a wedding (Luke 14:8-11). Verse 11 states that he who exalts himself will be humbled. Men like Gideon wanted God to show them that He really meant what He said. Many of the men God chose as prophets and messengers resisted that call and even went the other way. Humility will cause a converted person to be very slow to think that God would choose him.

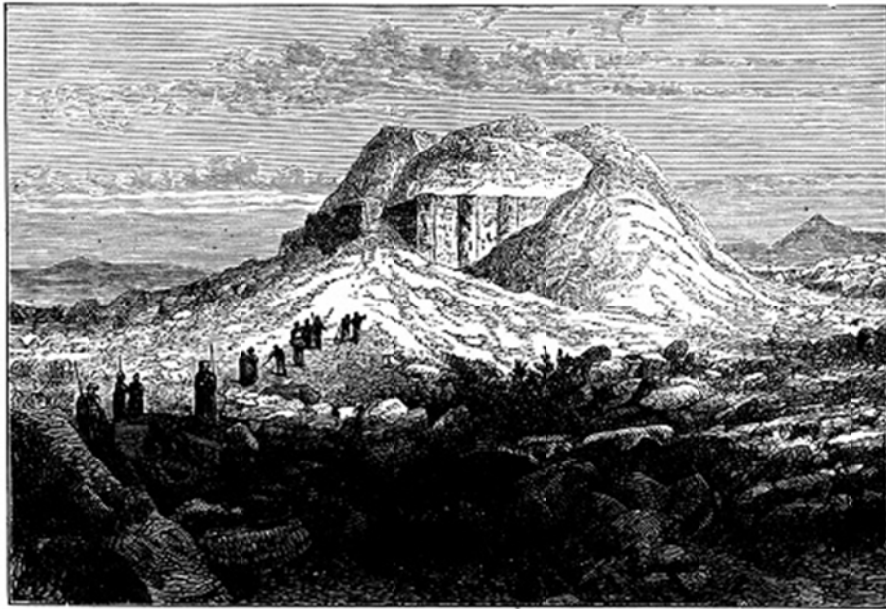
False prophets will always surround us—so says Peter (2 Peter 2:1-3). He wrote that these people will exploit you with stories they have made up. In verse 10, Peter claims that they are bold and arrogant, which becomes obvious the moment you question their credentials. A person who is truly confident will have no concern that someone is questioning him, and even if someone wonders if he has “lost it.” A person who has a false confidence built on his own stories will always react strongly and defensively. The bottom line is that God has given us a book, the Bible, for a guide to show us who speaks the truth and who is just another nut.

For more information on distinguishing God’s true church amidst a world full of religious falsehood and fanaticism, please request our free booklet [*The Church Jesus Built*](#).

Blessings of Abraham (Part 1 of 4)

By William Miller

Abraham came from “Rrr” of the Chaldees—this is how my grandson likes to say it, but there is much more to learn about Abraham than from where he came.



UR WAS ABRAM'S NATIVE CITY in the country of Babylon, far southern Babylon, near where the two rivers become one before they enter the sea. Abram was told to go to Canaan. When Abram left Ur he went north, following the rivers toward their source. Haran, the city where his dad first set up a permanent campsite, was almost at the top of the Fertile Crescent. “Of the Chaldees” may have been a scribal gloss, according to *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, to better show readers of God's Word exactly from where Abram came. The first readers/hearers of God's Word did not know about Babylon in its glory days but rather after it had become Chaldean—as it is today.

In Acts 7:2, Stephen, as recorded by Luke, explains clearly that the Eternal spoke to Abram in Mesopotamia before he left for Canaan. The details of that meeting are not recorded, but the details of the message given him are: “Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you” (Acts 7:3). This command meant Abram would be asked to leave the country he knew well. It also meant that he would eventually leave his extended family. And down the road it would mean much more.

Archaeology tells or shows us that Ur was a great and prosperous city. I believe that Terah, Abram's father, may have been successful as well. But perhaps his business took a turn for the worse. Perhaps he was heading for “greener pastures.” When Terah leaves Ur, his son Abram is about seventy years old. Even if, as some speculate, life expectancies were significantly different back then, Abram was no kid. Abram, Abram's nephew, Lot, and their two wives accompanied Terah. Why? We know why Abram left, but why did Terah or Lot

The command to leave the country he knew so well meant he would leave his extended family. Down the road it would mean much more.

really leave? We may have to wait to find out all those details.

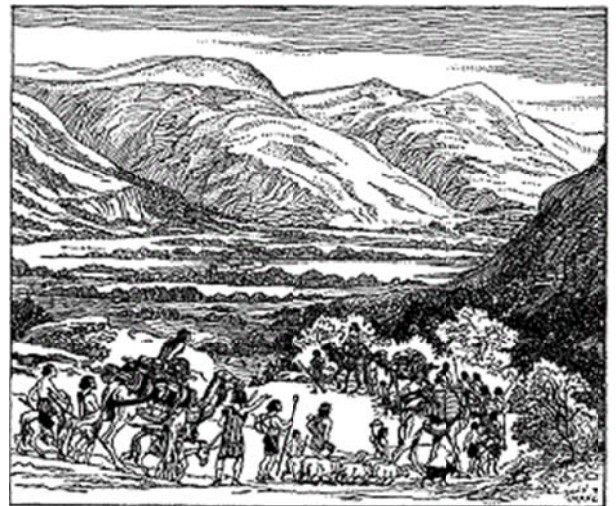
Continuing my thought that Terah had some sort of business, he moves north to Haran and finds enough success there to settle down. But Abram has been given a further goal—Canaan—and that semi-final objective never really leaves his mind. Leaving Ur to go to Haran with his father actually makes it easier for Abram to leave Haran later. Did God control Terah's life so that Abram could more easily accept his destiny? Probably. You must begin a journey before you can continue it.

Another possible explanation is that when Abram was first called he didn't yet have the faith to say no or goodbye to a strong-willed father. Abram did not immediately fully obey God's command to, "Get out of your country and *from your relatives...*" (emphasis added). Genesis 11:31 does not say that Abram took Terah with him. It says, "Terah took his son Abram..."—it seems that Terah was still in charge. So it seems that Abram may have had an overly subservient attitude toward his father and got sidetracked for a few years from going all the way to the destination that God had commanded.

In Genesis 12:1, it says, "The LORD had said to Abram..." This may mean even though Terah may have been the initiator of the move out of Ur, Abram willingly went because of his earlier communication with the Eternal. In Genesis 11:31, it appears Terah had planned to go all the way to Canaan. But death (God?) stopped him.

The Eternal's directive

We must ponder the explicit directive from the Eternal to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Canaan was known by Abram, at least as much as we know that a name on a map represents a country that exists, but when the Eternal states He will show Abram a country, make him "a great nation," bless him, and make his name great it means much more. When the Eternal had told Abram to leave his family and his father's house, He meant it. What have we had to leave on our personal journeys?



Moving from Genesis 12 to Hebrews 11, we learn that Abram may not have known much about Canaan (Hebrews 11:8), but it didn't matter because he was already on a journey beyond the physical. Hebrews 11:10 indicates Abram would never be totally satisfied with the physical, although physical rewards were part of the Eternal's promises to him (and to us as well).

How can death be encouraging? We are heirs of salvation.

To put an even finer point on this issue, Hebrews 11:9 further insinuates Abram might have become a more settled landowner but didn't because of his overriding hope that eventually a particular building/city with foundations (Ephesians 2:19 and 20) would be built. Abram, the one who journeyed with a purpose, always and continually intended to be ready for that building/city to appear, even though he was approximately 2000 years in advance of its major construction (1 Corinthians 3:16 and 17 and 1 Corinthians 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 11:1). I wouldn't call

him the architect, but he may have been the surveyor (in type) of that city. And with a bit more speculation, fueled by Hebrews 11:10, I think he knew that the city/building would be worth the wait!

Living by faith, not by sight

Hebrews 11:13 is therefore very encouraging! “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. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth” (New International Version).

How can death be encouraging? In this way, we who are also heirs of salvation (Heb. 1:14) can expect no more and no less than the heroes of faith expected, foresaw, or received. None of them or us has received the reward yet. But we who are still alive must continue faithfully to our end.

What more will God ask of us?

What more did he ask of Abram? Much more, and there is much more of this story to be told.

Look for more in the next issue of *Virtual Christian Magazine*.

Look Beyond the Surface

By Lynne Broschak

Sometimes what we see on the outside is meaningless. It just doesn't tell the whole story.



MY MOTHER ONCE TOLD ME, “Believe nothing of what you hear and half of what you see.” She didn’t mean this literally, but was warning me to be careful of gossip and judging what I see. Sometimes things are not as they appear to be. It’s easy to misinterpret what we see without knowing all the facts.

For instance, what if I were to invite you to come to work with me today? We’d park in the lot behind the building where I work and walk around to the front door. As we walk along the side street—oops! Be careful; don’t trip over that man sleeping on the sidewalk. He must be a lazy bum!

Oh, look at that woman. She’s here every day, squatting against the building, drinking coffee, smoking, and bothering everyone walking by asking for change. Why doesn’t she do something useful?

See that man over there, pushing the cart? He has all his possessions in the cart. He’s walking kind of funny, staggering a little, I’d say. He must be drunk again!

Don’t judge a book

These people could very well be my clients. These are the people I work with everyday—people with mental health issues, various addictions, homelessness, or any combination thereof.

In Psalm 7:8 it says, “The LORD shall judge the people: judge me, O LORD, according to my righteousness, and according to mine integrity that is in me” (KJV throughout).

It is easy to look at someone and figure you know all about them. It’s easy to judge someone whose lifestyle is different from ours and sees the world differently—but we need to look beyond that.



Homelessness has happened to people who seemed to have everything in life. Circumstances beyond one’s control can cause one’s situation to change drastically; no one is immune to happenstance. Each morning I pray for wisdom to know how to work with my clients, the right words to use to show kindness, respect, and patience, and for the wisdom to help them. I pray for the same kind of love and compassion that God has shown to me.

I work with our city’s very vulnerable citizens. These are people who live with mental illness, have addictions, or even deal with both. These people cannot advocate for themselves, as they don’t have the confidence or the ability to articulate their needs. People who have an acquired brain injury, for example, have a terrible time remembering things like where their money went, where they are going, when they should be there, or where they left their cell phone.

There are people who have had such horrendous lives and have made some bad choices. But, if we were to walk in their shoes, under the same circumstances we may have made the same decisions. And we might be where they are now. We don’t always know what has transpired in a person’s life for them to be in this position.

Homelessness

According to the Government of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (<http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/homelessness/>), there are many causes of homelessness, including insufficient affordable housing, low income, mental health and/or substance abuse issues, family conflict, violence, job loss, breakdown, and inadequate discharge planning (ex-offenders, mentally ill persons, and persons leaving the care of the child welfare system).

It’s easy to misinterpret what we see without knowing all the facts.

An estimated 150,000 to 300,000 people are homeless in Canada, living in shelters and on the streets. On any given night, 40,000 people stay in homeless shelters. Single men are the largest segment of homeless people in most Canadian cities, but homelessness is rising among both single women and lone-parent families headed by women.

Most of the street people I see are more to be pitied than scorned. I know there are a few who have chosen to live on the street: some because they don’t want the responsibilities of life, some because they really don’t know any other way of living. For them it’s an attitude of “better the devil you know than the devil you don’t know.” But when it’s freezing cold outside, I can’t believe anyone wants to be on the street.

Pretend to be homeless for a minute:

- You have no place to go.
- You have no place to sleep.
- You have very few possessions which you keep with you at all times because you're afraid someone might steal them.
- You have no ID—how can you prove who you are?
- You're dirty and you smell.
- Where do you go to the bathroom?
- You're afraid—especially if you are a woman—nighttime is very scary. You don't know whom to trust and you don't know what's around the next corner. You keep moving and moving.
- You're hungry.
- You're tired because you're afraid to sleep at night.
- Your feet hurt because you've been walking all day or all night trying to stay warm and safe.

It isn't a very pleasant scenario, is it?

There's also another group of the homeless you may not have considered. Did you know there are a number of homeless working people? These people have low-paying jobs and can't find accommodations they can afford. If they can afford them, they are often uninhabitable.

Hidden homeless

And then there are the hidden homeless. These are the people couch surfing, which means they stay at a friend or family member's home for a day or two and then move on to another place. Others are living in their vehicles, such as the woman we found, who is living in her van with her one-year old baby. She had been living with a friend who had given notice to the landlord to move but neglected to tell her. At the end of the month, the friend left while the woman was at work. When she got home, the apartment was empty and the landlord told her to leave because the apartment had been rented to someone else. As a result, she began living in her van. No one knew the dire straits she was in—not people at work or the daycare. Because she was working full time, she could not look for another place to live. She was not eating well or sleeping properly as she had to keep starting the van to keep warm. We found out about her and had her housed within a day. We also gave her some start-up money to buy food and essential items.



Back to the beginning

Remember the man we saw sleeping on the sidewalk this morning? It turns out that he had lost his job and his family when he was in an accident. The injuries were bad enough that he could no longer do his job. It hit him so hard that he hasn't been able to regain enough confidence to move forward. One day, however, he will.

Recall the woman asking for change who I mentioned? She had been abused so badly that her mind is protecting her from much of that pain by closing off part of her memory. She goes to agencies that provide her with lunch or supper but I don't know where she sleeps.

Remember the man walking funny, who was pushing the cart? He pushes the cart to help him keep his balance so he won't fall. His legs and hips have been damaged so often that he walks with a very unusual gait and is often thought to be drunk, when he isn't.

*Let's look beyond
the surface and
show compassion
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While we realize that some people take advantage of these kinds of situations by playing the role of a homeless or disadvantaged person, overall we must not judge those in need by putting them into a preformed box. God says, "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matthew 7:1).

Think upon the words of God in I Samuel 2:7-8, "The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: He bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and He hath set the world upon them."

Let's look beyond the surface and show compassion and mercy to those whose lives are different from ours. Let us thank God for what we have and pray for those who have so little.

Giving, Receiving and Gratitude

By John Elliott

Sometimes we are surprised by what influences us in our lives and what can really put us in awe.



KNEELING BEFORE THE TOILET in the motel's bathroom I prayed, "Father, please help me get a deer today." The early morning sun illuminated the snowcapped mountains' panorama above Squaw Valley in 1967 with an excitement that compelled me to run towards their base. Carrying my brother's new 30-30 lever action rifle, the climb up into the steep and wooded wilderness of unknown sights and sounds was exhilarating.

Having nearly died three years earlier from a ruptured spleen, each new day was an appreciated gift from God that I thanked Him for with regularity. The difficulty in working my way up the steep

terrain was continually rewarded with ever-expanding views, first of the valley below and eventually including other mountain ranges that stretched to the horizon. A last glance into Squaw Valley showed a curiously miniature complex of tiny buildings with moving vehicles that were oddly silent from up so high.

Nearing the summit, I came across a huge thicket of Manzanita brush that blocked my way forward. Close by, the crown of a downward curving section of granite rock that eventually steepened into a cliff. Its curved top offered an unobstructed way around the dense vegetation. The granite face had been overexposed to the elements, and under my boots' its surface began peeling away until I was suddenly sliding down an ever-increasing grade towards the face of the cliff. Unable to gain traction from the disintegrating rock layer, I cried, "Father, please help me!"



Diminishing seconds were all that separated me from rapidly approaching disaster as I released the rifle in a facedown, spread eagle position, utilizing every surface of my body to arrest the slide until finally stopping. Watching the dislodged rocks continue their downhill journey was something to really appreciate and give thanks for and I did. Then, carefully and cautiously, utilizing surface cracks and the more solid sections of granite, I was able to move across the crumbling face and work downwards to retrieve the carbine from a small ledge. The rifle's fresh "patina" would always be a reminder of that event.

The granite face had been overexposed to the elements, and under my boots' its surface began peeling away until I was suddenly sliding down an ever-increasing grade towards the face of the cliff.

Later, the deepening woods swallowed this 15-year old, so anxious to get his first deer. The only sounds were an occasional squawk of a Steller's Jay, the hollow drumming of a woodpecker in a distant tree, and the ever-whispering Ponderosa pines swaying slowly overhead. Checking the crisp official California deer tag whose sole purpose was to be tied to an antler, I again asked God for help in getting a deer, while applying all the hunting principles, my father had taught me. Moving through the wilderness alone with a rifle never felt so exhilarating. But my cautious steps and endless scanning revealed only empty meadows, bare boulders, dense brush, and no deer.

Soon, another patch of Manzanita blocked the path; brush so tough and springy that if one threw himself into it, it would throw him right back out. However, there was a low-growing section ahead that could be walked across. With boots stepping into the brush, the unexpected happened in a way never imagined. Suddenly, from the low brush just ahead, a young antlered buck jumped up. With my heart pounding, clicking noises coming from my throat, and my body shaking in excitement, I trained the rifle on him. Everything had happened so fast that my mind raced to assess the situation. The distance to the deer was not 500 yards, nor even 50 yards. Rather, he stood just five-yards away. "Thank you, thank you, thank you...Father" was all I could say!

Our Focus

As humans, we often focus on the exciting things we get to have and do in our lives. We each tally our lot and compare it with that which others appear to have. Many times, we seemingly come up short.

From childhood, we discounted what we were given while comparing it to what someone else had. Our parents didn't do enough for us, didn't spend enough time with us and didn't give us enough stuff. There wasn't enough excitement, a good enough room, nice enough clothes, the best education or enough money to live a good life. Youth, focused on its self, can never get enough and so derides those who it feels are responsible. Too often, that mindset continues on into adulthood with harbored resentments about what one did not receive. God warns us about having a "get/take" mentality. Solomon wrote,

The leech has two daughters— Give and Give! There are three things that are never satisfied, Four never say, "Enough!": The grave, The barren womb, The earth that is not satisfied with water—And the fire never says, "Enough!" The eye that mocks his father, And scorns obedience to his mother, The ravens of the valley will pick it out, And the young eagles will eat it (Proverbs 30:15-17).

Remember how excited you were to have new school supplies at the beginning of the year? Remember how your new clothes were just a bit stiff the first time you put them on? Or, how that new pair of sneakers made you feel like you could run a hundred-miles-an-hour? Remember when you finally got an outfit that was just for Church? Or, when Mom made you that dish that nobody has been able to copy since? Remember your favorite teachers in school, your favorite class and the sport you did well at? Remember that summer at Camp where your skills blossomed among new friends? Those fond memories weren't actually about you. They were the sums of sacrifices being made FOR you.

We don't remember our diaper days, our teething fits, or the tens of thousands of hours and dollars spent in feeding, training, teaching, housing, clothing, transporting, protecting, babysitting, helping, consoling, and encouraging that was done by parents, teachers and church members who sacrificed in order to embellish our lives. Instead, we choose to critique our past by comparing its events with others we wish we had had. In a selfish state of mind, one easily ignores sacrifices made by family, spouse, employer, friends, the Church and even God. If not realized and repented of, one's pursuit of self-fulfillment is repulsive to those around him and results in isolation.

Youth, focused on its self, can never get enough and so derides those who it feels are responsible.

There is one alone, without companion: He has neither son nor brother. Yet, there is no end to all his labors, Nor is his eye satisfied with riches. But he never asks, "For whom do I toil and deprive myself of good?" This also is vanity and a grave misfortune (Ecclesiastes 4:8).

There are so many aspects of your life right now to be thankful for that you could spend the rest of your life showing gratitude for them. Every grain of sand is a miracle, every drop of water, every ray of sunshine, every living cell, the entirety of the universe and our ability to perceive it. Yet, do you pause to appreciate all you have been given or selfishly focus on what you don't yet have? God the Father and His Son have devoted their current existence to giving you everything They possibly can, including Their likeness, Spirit, and Son's life. What do They ask in return?

Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before His presence with singing. Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people

and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, And into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name (Psalm 100:2-4).

We call ourselves Christians and go through the motions of obedience. But when focused on self, we are in a state of always wanting more while grumbling about what we don't have. That mindset gives God more grief than He sometimes wants to bear.

Bring no more futile sacrifices; Incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies— I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; They are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow (Isaiah 1:13-17).

Close Encounters

Deep in the woods, two "young bucks" were locked in stares just five yards apart. There was irony in what was transpiring there that day. Both stood transfixed at the sight of the other's unique species. The deer was so young that his slender horns raised above a small frame that still revealed some of the red hair he worn as a fawn. The teenage boy was so green at hunting that he didn't recognize that the animal was legally immature. The buck, whose species is renowned for sensing danger, had apparently slept to within 5 strides of being stepped on.



We both found ourselves curiously assessing our situation and each other. After the initial shock, the rifle lowered and we just stood observing each other for a considerable period of time. His innocent curiosity was engaging. The design and structure of his limbs, marbled torso, colorful hide and "mule" tail were inspiring. His large, alert ears, twitching nostrils and "buck eyes" were captivating.

Finally, wearied from standing still for so long, I considered the options available. Scaring him off would have let me watch him run away, which could have been kind of fun. Instead, I chose to turn and let the deer watch me walk away. Why make him fear me should we meet again when we were both a little older? I thanked God for the wonderful experience and still relish that close encounter with my "first" buck.

How much more potentially wonderful are close encounters we can have with humans?

How much more potentially wonderful are close encounters we can have with humans? The gifts of life and family interaction given by parents who have devoted a big part of their lives to us are wondrous. The gift of love and the excitement of romance with a person of a different gender can be

mesmerizing. The infinite variations within God's creation are awe-inspiring. The calling to become a firstfruit in the Family of God is a supreme blessing (Rev 20:6).

What were those things we were complaining about which we haven't received?

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things (Mat 6:31-32).

Whoever changes their mindset to giving and serving like the God Family does, will receive great blessings, now and forever.

But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you (Mathew 6:33).

Through the years, there have been other deer, elk and a moose in our freezer. But the one I've been most thankful for was the one I walked away from.

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