

Virtual Christian Magazine

Hope And Encouragement
For The Real World

*"All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the LORD,
and all the families of the nations shall worship before You"—Psalm 22:27*

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Psalm 22—An Awe-Inspiring Prophecy!

By Bob Berendt

King David saw, a thousand years in advance, precise details of the greatest event in history—the death of a Man who would save billions of lives.



“They gape at Me with their mouths, like a raging and roaring lion”
(Psalm 22:13).

A BOUT 1,000 YEARS BEFORE the life and death of Jesus Christ, a remarkable psalm was written by King David. The writing of these verses was inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16). When this psalm was written, it contained details of the future sacrifice of the Redeemer of all mankind.

Even if David might not have fully understood what he had written, in Psalm 22 we find a cluster of the clearest and most detailed prophecies that have ever come to pass. Minute details are given about the death that Jesus was destined to endure for all humanity, including you and me. Only the power of God could inspire a prophecy and bring it to pass 1,000 years later.

Perfect fulfillment of prophecy

There were at least 28 prophecies fulfilled on this one day—the last day in the life of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Witnesses to the events that surrounded the death of Christ attest to the perfection of each detail of prophecy.

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all describe aspects of these events—events that are a mirror image of Psalm 22. There are at least 12 details recorded in this psalm that match the Gospel accounts, a few being Christ's pierced hands and feet (Psalm 22:16; John 20:25-28), the words spoken by those who killed Him (Psalm 22:7-8; Luke 23:35) and even Jesus' last words (Psalm 22:1; Mark 15:34).



The prophecies of Christ's scourging, the tearing of His flesh, mocking, prolonged agony and slow death are all clearly fulfilled. Jesus could not control the beating He received from the soldiers or their gambling for His garment (it was customary for soldiers at an execution to divide the clothes of the prisoners among themselves). God foresaw this custom centuries before Rome existed!

Who but God could bring these events to pass 1,000 years after He inspired them to be written? Other scriptures add prophetic details to Jesus' ordeal as well, but none that I have found are as profound as this psalm.

The truly amazing thought that arises from the study of these passages is that Jesus, as the *Logos* or Word who became flesh (John 1:14), was also the One who inspired these words to be written about His sacrifice and death. He was the "Rock" that followed Israel (1 Corinthians 10:4). He had inspired David to write about Himself.

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No wonder He prayed in agony the night before these events took place (Matthew 26:36-42)! Jesus knew exactly what was about to happen. He had known how He would die since the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8). He knew He had to fulfill the will of His Father.

Prophecy inspires personal transformation

Psalm 22 describes the destiny of Christ as the "Passover Lamb" whose sacrifice pays for the sins of all who repent. This is why He was sent to the earth. There is no recorded historical challenge to any of the prophecies of Psalm 22. The witnesses didn't express any disagreement. They understood—later—the very events they had witnessed.



After His resurrection, Jesus expounded the prophecies that had just been fulfilled in front of their eyes (Luke 24:27). Once they understood, the disciples were so strongly convinced that they changed from relatively weak and frightened men into powerful dynamos for God. The hope that was expressed through all that they had witnessed convinced them of the future complete fulfillment of God's wonderful promises.

Over a decade later, the apostle Paul heard these events from Jesus Himself, and Paul's records agree with those of the eyewitnesses (1 Corinthians 11:23). This cloud of witnesses is too great to ignore. There is no figure of ancient history whose death is more clearly recorded than Jesus Christ. Jesus died exactly as Psalm 22 stated He would. Prophecy was fulfilled down to the last detail.

Lessons for the future

Much of the Bible is prophecy. The religious system of Jesus' day did not understand these prophecies or they would not have killed the Messiah. When we comprehend the absolute control and power God displayed by fulfilling Psalm 22 and many other prophecies, then we must comprehend the fact that every prophecy that is still to come *will* come to pass exactly as God stated. This fact shows that only God is God. Isaiah 45:21 and 46:9-11 boldly proclaim that only God can make a prophecy come to pass. We ignore His word at our own peril.



Many people have the image of Jesus Christ and God the Father as gentle, always forgiving, ever patient and kind. We read the scriptures that tell of God's great sacrifice and love for mankind, and we do not easily think about the anger and wrath that God has exhibited against evil.

He has controlled and fought against evil since the rebellion of Lucifer and his followers. God is an unstoppable warrior as well as a loving Father. The book of Revelation contains strong statements about Christ coming with power and might (Revelation 19:11-21). He is King of Kings and "treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God" (verse 15). That statement ought to inspire us to pause and to consider. Since Psalm 22 is so explicit, could we mistakenly think that these future prophecies are any less explicit?

We can read in 1 Corinthians 13:8 that prophecies fail. They do not fail because God cannot fulfill them, but they fail because God and only God can change them. The book of Jonah is written to help us understand that truth.

Prophecies are given with the hope that humans will stop and consider—and then repent. With repentance from mankind, many of these prophecies could be cancelled. God does not rejoice in the suffering, punishment and death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23). Still, the wicked will die (Romans 6:23) unless they repent and seek God. Let us not err by thinking that God is softheaded. That would be a fatal mistake. He will come. He will conquer. He will rule. He will overthrow all who oppose Him. Nothing can stop or deter Him.

We must comprehend the fact that every prophecy that is still to come will come to pass exactly as God stated.

A wise person will choose to stand with Christ and not against Him since He is the only hope for this deceived world (Revelation 12:9). Jesus said that if we knock, it will be opened, and if we seek, we will find (Matthew 7:7). The Scriptures hold the key—you have the choice. God wants you to consider the prophecies He has inspired and choose life.

Recommended reading

Jesus Christ's story is the most fascinating one in history! Much of it has been ignored or distorted through the centuries, but the Bible gives us the real story. You can find it outlined in a helpful resource called [Jesus Christ: The Real Story](#). You can download this resource or request a free copy be sent to you.

Don't Miss the Mark!

By John Fox

I was on duty when the call came in. The supertanker Exxon Valdez had run aground in Prince William Sound, Alaska, unleashing a huge oil spill! Why did it happen? And what lessons are there for us today?



SIXTEEN YEARS AGO I SAW FIRSTHAND how “missing the mark” causes great ruin. I worked for Upjohn Healthcare, and I was one of two national emergency responders, handling sensitive situations for the federal drug testing programs Upjohn administered.

In the early evening of March 24, 1989, I received a never-to-be-forgotten phone call. At 12:04 a.m., the fully-laden supertanker *Exxon Valdez* ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William

Sound, Alaska. I was being called to handle the post-accident drug testing of the two vessel traffic controllers working in the radar shack in Port Valdez. So I left Atlanta Saturday evening for Alaska.

By the time I arrived in Anchorage late Sunday morning, to make the six-hour scenic drive to Port Valdez, the oil slick was already reported to be the size of Delaware. How much oil was spilled?

“[At a minimum estimate] approximately 11 million gallons or 257,000 barrels or 38,800 metric tons . . . Picture the swimming pool at your school or in your community. The amount of spilled crude oil was roughly equivalent to 125 Olympic-sized swimming pools” (*Details About the Accident*, <http://www.evostc.state.ak.us/facts/details.html>).

By the time I arrived in Anchorage... the oil slick was already reported to be the size of Delaware.

As we descended into Anchorage, a *huge* black oil slick surrounded the shipwreck. Like other memories from that trip, I have never forgotten that sight. Billions of clean-up dollars were ultimately spent. Wildlife was decimated. Fishing and tourism suffered greatly. And lives were ruined.

Lesson learned

Out of many lessons, one is, *the disaster could have been avoided!* In a nutshell, *Exxon Valdez* requested permission to go outside the normal shipping lane due to icebergs. That was OK. However, the tanker went beyond that approval. No one corrected the error—not the vessel traffic controllers in Port Valdez and not the ship’s crew. The ship’s crew did not even call for help as they discovered they were in trouble.

I stayed with the Coast Guard commander in Port Valdez, and he told me the call that awoke him was around 12:30 a.m. He answered, “This better be good!” and the relief vessel traffic controller said, “It’s the big one!”



Other factors involved in the accident included crew fatigue, possible drunkenness, probable drug use ashore, shipboard laxness and carelessness in following company and maritime protocols, etc. Like *Titanic*, the *Valdez* nightmare was also a tragedy of preventable errors, as the official report read:

“Until the *Exxon Valdez* piled onto Bligh Reef, the system had worked perhaps too well... A general complacency had come to permeate the operation and oversight of the entire system. *That complacency and success were shattered...*” (emphasis added).

The report’s conclusion was that the shipwreck was more than the one error of a possibly drunken skipper. It was the result of “gradual degradation of oversight and safety practices that had been intended, 12 years before, to safeguard and backstop *the inevitable mistakes of human beings.*”

Of course! Any child's protractor shows us that being off course just 1 degree will, over time, create a *huge* divergence.

A personal reminder

In remembering my Alaska adventure, I was reminded that I, too, so easily miss the mark. We cannot be complacent in our Christian lives. If we are not on guard, vigilant and sober, as admonished in 1 Peter 5:8, we eventually "miss the mark." Missing the mark is one of the ways the Bible defines "sin."

Oh, this typically doesn't happen all at once, does it? James warns us we are tempted for a while before we actually give in to the temptation and sin (James 1:14-16). It takes time and lots of unrecognized mistakes to turn a 230,000-ton supertanker off course. *And it takes time to turn back.* Once disaster looms, whether a huge iceberg or a small hidden rock spur, a ship can't just turn on a dime. It is not possible to suddenly stop and turn back to avoid the terrible penalties of missing the mark. The same can be true for us.

We cannot be complacent in our Christian lives. If we are not on guard, vigilant and sober, as admonished in 1 Peter 5:8, we eventually "miss the mark."

I'm not talking about the occasional sins, setbacks or weaknesses we all struggle with. I am talking about the *big one!* *It is possible for us to miss the mark.* It soberes me that we can spend our entire lives in the Church of God and still not get it or still not turn. Worse, we can spend our lives doing right and then turn away at the end, and all our previous good gushes out the gash in the shipwrecked hull of our life.

When we get off course, we are on the verge of total ruin, as Solomon described in Proverbs 5:14. But ruin is not God's will for you and me. God wants us to stay on course, to avoid the reefs that will surely rip us to shreds and cause our precious cargo of oil—God's Holy Spirit—to leak away!

To stay the course, we need to follow the rules—God's law. We need to be involved in His Church, and maybe ask for more input from the ministry, who are there as friends and mentors to help us guide our lives safely through the turbulent narrows full of icebergs and rock spurs. And most of all, we need to keep the true Pilot, Jesus Christ, at the helm of our ship of life.

In the same boat

I am grateful God allowed me to be present for the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill. Although I've known some turbulence since then, it changed my life. The Alaska trip gave me an inside perspective, with valuable life lessons learned. For me, missing the mark requires no effort: it is as easy as breathing the air Satan corrupts. I can get up off my knees and sin—and I desperately need God's forgiveness all over again. *You and I are in the same boat.*

But God is our true Captain, and He has given us a trustworthy Helmsman—Jesus Christ. He sees the icebergs ahead that could sink us, and He knows the narrows, for He has successfully navigated these waters. God promises to lead us out of the turbulent straits into peaceful waters. If we will just listen to our Captain and Helmsman, we will not run aground, we will stay full of oil, and we will make our port—the



Kingdom of God.

Recommended reading

Our destructive human nature, influenced by Satan, is on a collision course with God's beneficial way of life. How can we make the changes that will turn our lives around? [*Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*](#) explores the biblical answers. You can download this booklet or order a free copy to be mailed to you.

Living Between the Lines

By Sandy Letellier

Can you imagine the chaos of driving without lane markers, traffic signals or rules? More frightening, imagine trying to live life like that!



HAVE YOU EVER DRIVEN ON A FAMILIAR HIGHWAY that has just been resurfaced? Was it so freshly paved the highway workers had not painted lane markers? Well, recently I had such an occasion on Highway 190 in my small town of Covington.

Like many roadways in Louisiana, this one was in dire need of resurfacing. It was narrow, worn and filled with ruts and potholes. After quite some time, the planning commission decided to resurface and widen this section of the highway. They decided to add a center lane for turning to bring our road up to modern standards with a much longer and wider turning lane on the northbound side of the



highway.

One day I entered Highway 190, heading south to run a few errands. The widening and resurfacing had been completed, but the lines were not drawn. The drive across the lanes was smooth, almost like riding on air. It was fun at first, but quickly that feeling turned to fear. Within a moment I became disoriented by the massive black expanse that lay ahead. What was once routine had suddenly become strange. I was uncertain as to what to do. Traffic was coming toward me from the other direction, and suddenly I didn't know where the lanes began or ended. It was fast and furious and so confusing for everyone.

The southbound lane had become the center turning lane, and what used to be the right shoulder was widened and had become the southbound lane. I found myself in the middle of the road not knowing where I was supposed to go. It was just as bad on the way home in the northbound lane. Finally, they striped the road and painted the arrows indicating turning lanes. The road was safe to drive again.

Traffic was coming toward me from the other direction, and suddenly I didn't know where the lanes began or ended.

No stripes, no arrows: a Christian lesson

I couldn't help but see the parallel of this highway and our Christian lives today. So often we hear people in and out of the Church exclaiming, "No one is going to tell me what to do and how to live my life!" People often want independence and don't want to answer to anyone for anything. It seems that few people are willing to submit to authority anymore. That is sad. Without rules and guidelines and directions, we would all be on the highway of life, scrambling around, trying to figure out where to go, all the while dodging near catastrophes.

The lines and the arrows on roads tell us where we should be driving. There are laws that, when enforced, see to it that we obey these directions. The directions keep order and provide safety for all.

That is what God's law does for us as Christians. God's law teaches us where to drive, spiritually speaking. His laws are directions that, if followed, provide safety, comfort and peace for all. If we cross a line on a highway, it can be dangerous. Sometimes it can be fatal. If we cross the lines God has given us, it can be even more dangerous. Sometimes it can lead to a spiritual fatality.

God's law teaches us where to drive, spiritually speaking. His laws are directions that, if followed, provide safety, comfort and peace for all.

The Bible tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:33 that God is not the author of confusion. He is a God of order and peace. When we don't want to be told what to do, we are in essence rejecting what God has set in motion as a way for us to live.

Everything is governed by a law of some sort. Throw a ball in the air, and it comes back down because it is governed by the law of gravity. Who put that law in motion? God did! God even allows human judges and officials to rule and govern over the land, hence the law of the land.

Stay between the spiritual lines

Be on guard. If we reject authority, we are putting ourselves on a very dangerous spiritual highway. We are opening ourselves up to our adversary, Satan the devil. Now I am not suggesting that we not question things from time to time. God wants to know that we know what we know. We are told to prove or test all things (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

However, it is one thing to prove the validity of something and another to reject and refuse simply because we do not want to be told what to do. How can God work with us if we are not willing to follow directions and bend to the laws that He has set in motion? God wants to see if we have a willing heart to submit to Him.



The officials who have been appointed to set the rules and regulations for highway safety base their decisions on what they know will protect travelers, if these laws are followed. There is no malice in their decision making. Likewise, there was no malice in the heart of our Father when He set forth His laws for us to follow. God's laws were given out of His love for us. In fact, when we follow God's laws, we also show love toward God and love toward all mankind.

It is so important to live by the laws that govern our streets and highways. If we follow directions and stay between the lines, the end result can be safety and longer days on this earth. If we adhere to God's laws and stay between the spiritual lines that He has drawn for us, the end result will be peace and eternal life.

Recommended reading

God tells us He created His laws for our good! Imagine how much better this world would be if everyone kept even just one of God's laws. What if no one ever stole or lied or cheated on his or her mate? [The Ten Commandments](#) looks at the subject of God's law in a fresh and interesting way. You can download this resource or request a free copy be sent to you.

God's Pruning Process

By Andy McClain

I agonized over pruning my trees because I thought it would harm them. Pruning, whether physical or spiritual, doesn't seem pleasant, but it really is necessary for health and growth.



OUR BACKYARD HAS TWO BOWL WILLOW TREES. In the past 10 years, they have grown to about 25 feet tall and nearly 25 feet in diameter. We love their shade and the privacy they provide during the summer. In the fall, however, we noticed they needed some care. The branches were getting thick and rubbing against each other and there were quite a few dead limbs.

Now I am not a tree expert, and at the time I knew virtually nothing about trimming trees. So I had an arborist come out to our home and inspect our trees. He told me that although our trees were basically healthy, they needed pruning.

Like the trees in my backyard, we sometimes need pruning in our spiritual life. Jesus Christ reminds us of this when He says, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:1-2). Pruning involves cutting off superfluous branches. This is done to make the tree bear better fruit, grow higher or to give the tree a more handsome appearance.

God's Word is the perfect tool for pruning us. God's Word is sharp so that it can remove the unwanted "branches" in our lives without harming us.

All trees need attention and care if they are to flourish and beautify our yards. Before we prune, we need to have a mental picture of what we desire our tree to look like. According to *The Better Homes & Gardens New Garden Book*, "Grown under optimum conditions... a tree has a good chance to become the beauty you hope it will be."

In similar fashion, God knows the beauty that He hopes we can become when He says, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). God envisions us becoming part of His family. When He prunes us, He has that vision in mind.

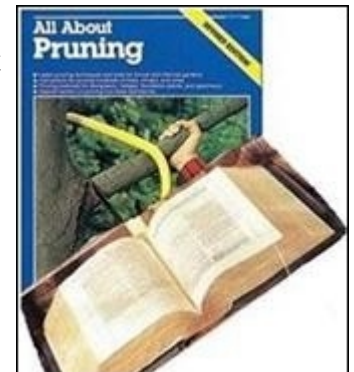
How to prune

Before I pruned our trees, I had to learn how to prune so I wouldn't injure the trees. We can be very thankful that God “pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:13-14).

A very encouraging scripture from one of the newer translations available today, called The Message, reads, “No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). Pruning is a process through which God mercifully helps us.

When pruning a tree, it is important to use the right tool. Although chain saws work well for large branches, they are not appropriate for smaller branches that require a gentler touch. Hand pruners and small pruning saws work better for this. Also, tools need to be sharp to reduce the possible harm to the tree.

God's Word is the perfect tool for pruning us. God's Word is sharp so that it can remove the unwanted “branches” in our lives without harming us. “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). God's Word helps us to discern our intentions and thoughts.



God directs our pruning through the Holy Spirit. God's Spirit guides us “into all truth,” helping us to study what we need (John 16:13). It also helps us to see what God is working out in our lives. The Holy Spirit encourages us and directs our minds.

Pruning must also be done at the proper time. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Forestry Service recommends pruning trees during the dormant season so that the wounds will close during the next growing season and minimize the transmission of disease. A tree pruned at the wrong time of year is more susceptible to a fatal disease.

God knows the perfect time to prune us. Read again the story of Esther. God is very much a part of our lives despite how separated we sometimes might feel. Mordecai's response to Esther in Esther 4:12-14 after learning of Haman's evil plot to exterminate the Jews shows God's providence. God placed Esther in the exact position necessary to be used by God for intervention. It is sometimes difficult to realize that God's timing is perfect, but God knows what we can become when properly pruned.

Why prune?

Pruning improves tree health and strength. Pruning for health involves removing diseased or insect-infested wood. Typically it involves thinning the crown to increase airflow and reduce pest problems, and removing crossing or rubbing branches. Pruning encourages trees to develop a strong structure and reduces the likelihood of damage during severe weather. All of these actions encourage growth of the main trunk.

As we are pruned in our spiritual lives, we must “seek those things which are above” (Colossians 3:1). Paul instructs us, “Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Colossians 3:5). These attitudes and actions are things that “rub” against God’s ways, much like the branches in trees.

Our pruning must be extensive for us to grow in God’s character. Just a few verses down Paul says, “You yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him” (Colossians 3:8-10).

I agonized over pruning my trees because I thought it would harm them, but what I learned is that pruning actually improves health and strength.

God’s pruning process uses the circumstances in our lives to help us grow in His character and appearance. Even Jesus Christ was pruned. Hebrews 5:8 tells us, “He learned obedience by the things which He suffered.” *Vincent Word Studies* says that “Jesus did not have to learn to obey... but he required the special discipline of a severe human experience as a training for his office as a high priest who could be touched with the feeling of human infirmities... The fundamental idea in verse nine *perfected* is the bringing of a person or thing to the goal fixed by God.”

Don’t be discouraged

Sometimes pruning does involve trials. We must remember Hebrews 12:5-6, which says, “Do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens.”

Adam Clarke’s Commentary on the Bible says the following about these verses: “Here is the reason why we should neither neglect correction, nor faint under it: it is a proof of the fatherly love of God Almighty, and shows his most gracious designs towards us; from which we may be fully convinced that the affliction will prove the means of good to our souls, if we make a proper use of it.”

Barnes’ commentary on verse 10 follows with a similar thought: “This is the elevated object at which God aims by our trials. It is not that he delights to produce pain; not that he envies us and would rob us of our little comforts... it is, that he may make us more pure and holy, and thus promote our own best interest.” Remember, God is pruning us to become like Him.

Producing growth

Pruning is also done to improve appearance and produce growth. This involves enhancing the natural form and character of the tree by removing limbs that turn inward, cross or extend. It means removing anything that competes with the growth of the main trunk—water sprouts, root suckers and excess lateral branches. Thinning lateral shoots will let the remaining branches get better air circulation, water and sunlight.



Any Y-shape in the main trunk creates a weak zone with two competing branches. The lesson for us is to choose whom we will serve. As Christ says, “You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24). We must remember that we are the work of God’s hand and that we “are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Isaiah 64:8; Ephesians 2:19-22). As our inward man changes, our actions will also.

I agonized over pruning my trees because I thought it would harm them, but what I learned is that pruning actually improves health and strength. Our pruning may not be pleasant sometimes, but we can take comfort because God says, “Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Before the priests could enter into the temple, symbolically coming before God, they had to be cleansed. God had the Israelites create the bronze laver between the tabernacle of meeting and the altar for this purpose (Exodus 30:17-21). We too must be cleansed to serve as priests before God (Exodus 29:1-4; Leviticus 8:1-6; Ephesians 5:25-27).

The word *cleanse* (Strong’s number G2511, *katharizo*) that Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians 7:1, when he says, “Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God,” comes from the same root word that the word *prunes* (Strong’s number G2508, *kathairo*) in John 15:1-2 comes from. It means to purify.

Before we can serve God as kings and priests, we must be cleansed. It is through the pruning process that God develops His strength in us and molds us with His character and in His appearance so that we can serve Him for eternity.

Recommended reading

Do negative influences seem to grow out of control in your life? How can we make the changes that will turn our lives around? [*Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*](#) explores the biblical answers. You can download this booklet or order a free copy to be mailed to you.

Encouragement—A Powerful Parenting Tool

By Britton M. Taylor

Encouragement is a foundational parenting principle—and a priceless gift we can give our children that pays great dividends.



IT IS SAID THAT OUR CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES shape us into the adults we become.

As adults, we can look back on many factors and events that have had tremendous influences on us. In this article, I will focus on one item that has had a positive impact on my personality and approach to life. As a parent of three myself, I hope this article will prove helpful for other parents who have the incredible challenge of rearing one of God's most precious and wonderful gifts—our children.

It is wonderful yet sobering to bring a child into the world. For parents to give life to a human being that is born in their own image is an amazing blessing. The new mom and dad want only the best for their child. What can we do to help ensure that our children develop into the positive, productive adults that we hope they will become?

Encouragement is one of the greatest things we can give to our children.

Encouragement is one of the greatest things we can give to our children. This is second only to our leading them in the sacred truth of God and demonstrating our sincere love for them. I believe that giving them proper encouragement greatly influences their approach to life and their interaction with others. Encouragement, or lack thereof, impacts their feelings of self-worth more than any other single factor in their lives.

Positive parents

As I reflect upon my relationship with my father, I vividly remember how he always smiled at me the first time I saw him each day. As the day progressed, and depending on what I was doing, his

smile sometimes left and was replaced by a look of indifference or maybe even a frown. As a new day began, however, he always gave me a warm smile that made me feel appreciated.

One summer I remember him introducing me to his coworkers at a company picnic by saying, “I want you to meet my son.” Just the way he said it felt so good. In looking back, perhaps without knowing it, my dad gave me the encouragement I needed. Though he is no longer with us, I have nothing but positive feelings about my dad.



My mother always told my two sisters and me that we could accomplish anything that we set our minds to accomplish; that we were just as smart and capable as any of our friends at school, in the neighborhood or at church. All we had to do was apply ourselves and we would succeed. To my parents' credit, I never felt beaten down or discouraged. I always felt that they loved and appreciated me and that they wanted me to be happy and to succeed in life.

The professionals say

Professionals in the field of parenting have long understood the need for parents to encourage their child. Notice what they say:

- Christina Raley, editor of Momtomom.com, a positive parenting Web site, says, “Perhaps nothing is more critical to your child’s development than developing his or her self-esteem. This is a product of ‘unconditional love’ and it is accomplished through encouragement, affirmation and appreciation of the unique qualities of your child.”
- In his book, *Children: The Challenge*, Rudolf Dreikurs reminds us that “children need encouragement like a plant needs water.”
- The poem “Children Learn What They Live” contains these gems: “If a child lives with encouragement, he learns confidence” and “If a child lives with praise, he learns to appreciate.”
-
- Douglas Cowan, Ph.D., in his article “Classic Parenting: Encouragement, Praise, Acceptance, and Responsibility,” wrote, “Encouragement comes when you focus on your child’s assets and strengths in order to build his/her self-confidence. It comes from seeing the positive.”

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As we can see, the professionals emphasize the importance of giving encouragement to our children. Encouragement is a pure form of positive feedback. It is encouraging for children to hear from the individuals they love most, their parents, that they are loved and appreciated. It is encouraging to hear their mom or dad say they are proud of their efforts.

A pastor's experience

Unfortunately, many adults did not receive this type of encouragement from their parents when they were children. As a church pastor, I cannot remember how many times I have counseled individuals over the past 32 years who have told me how difficult their childhood was. Their parents never encouraged them; in fact, it seemed their mother or father only talked down to them and said negative or critical things. It seemed they could never please their parents. So many could not remember ever hearing a positive or encouraging word from their parents.

I have counseled so many adults who have told me how their mom or dad had verbally beaten them down. Their parents made them feel worthless and that they could not accomplish anything. They only had their faults pointed out to them. They were never encouraged. Even though many years had passed since their formative childhood, you could still see the hurt and downtrodden look in their eyes.



Parents should not treat their children this way. Take the time to praise them when they do right. Most of us have probably worked for bosses whose only personal communication with us was when we messed up. We only heard the negative. We were never told we were doing a good job.

Individuals who only criticize will typically defend this approach by saying, “Well, if I don’t say anything, then that means you are doing OK.” This approach really won’t cut it, especially when we are rearing children—our most prized possession.

A sad story

Several years ago I spoke with a man in his 70s. Through tears he told me he loved his wife and children, but he could never tell them. I had known his family for many years and personally knew that he had not encouraged his children. It “just wasn’t in him” to be able to express love or encouragement.

Some of you reading this article may have a similar background where giving encouragement is not in your nature. You never received it from your parents and you can’t seem to give it to your children either.

I have counseled so many adults who have told me how their mom or dad had verbally beaten them down.

Thankfully we have the Holy Spirit within us that can lead us to change. At our baptism our “old man” was crucified with Christ. We became a new creation. Most of us have made dramatic changes in our lives. We can change in this area too, if we ask God for His help and if we try.

A good friend of mine in the ministry, fellow pastor Vic Kubik, once told me, “When encouragement is given, it should be encouraging to the individual who is receiving the encouragement.” Encouragement is for the other person’s good.

For some helpful tips on how to give encouragement to your child and some specific positive statements you can use, see the sidebars below.

Scriptures

We know that our Heavenly Father loves us and encourages us. Notice these four scriptures and see how God expresses His love to us through ongoing encouragement:

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- Isaiah 41:10: “I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand.”
- Psalm 55:22: “Cast your burden on the LORD, and He shall sustain you.”
- Joshua 1:9: “Do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”
- Hebrews 13:5: “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”



Remember

“Children need encouragement like a plant needs water.”

As parents, let’s be sure to take advantage of this powerful parenting tool. Together, we should set our hearts on a course of encouraging our most prized possession—our little ones given to us by our Father in heaven.

Ways We Can Give Encouragement to Our Children

- Look for opportunities, large and small, to tell your child through word and action that you are proud of him or her. We must correct when needed, but strive to eliminate unnecessary negative comments.
- Smile often at your child! This simple effort sends the message to your child that he or she makes you happy and is appreciated and loved.
- Catch your child being good. Don’t just take the position that he or she is supposed to be good. Let your child know that you noticed him or her being good. This is not only an excellent way to encourage appropriate behavior, but it also boosts a child’s self-esteem to know that he or she is doing something right and you appreciate it.
- Don’t overlook the opportunities to give a pat on the back, a quick squeeze or an arm around their shoulder. These are sure ways to demonstrate your approval and encouragement.

Recommended reading

Parenting can be the most rewarding job, but it can also be one of the most challenging. The United Church of God has compiled some of the most helpful biblical advice on marriage, family, friendship and career into a booklet called [Making Life Work](#). You can download this resource or request a free copy be sent to you.

Specific Positive Statements

Here are specific positive statements that you can incorporate in dealing with your children. Realize though that children can see through insincerity. They don't like hypocrisy. They want a "straight shooter."

Your encouragement must be sincere. If it is not, it will "ring hollow" over time. You must be sincere or these comments will not reap the rich reward they can produce. Never use these messages sarcastically or you will damage their effectiveness and your child won't trust you when you mean them. Use them often, whenever they are appropriate.

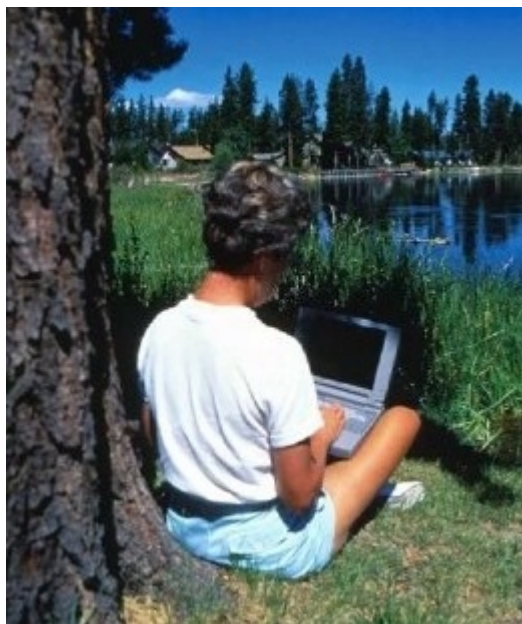
- I knew you could do it!
- You're doing a great job!
- I'm proud of the way you are sticking to this!
- I know this is hard; you're really working at it!
- You've made a lot of progress!
- Thanks for picking up those books. You are such a big helper! I really appreciate it!
- It was very nice of you to help the younger boy today; I'm really proud of you!

While it's easier to provide negative feedback than positive feedback, children need to feel loved and appreciated. Children thrive on positive attention.

Good Bible Study Resources Available Online

By Henrik V. Blunck and Mike Bennett

Dozens of tools to help you understand more about God's Word, the Holy Bible, are readily available through the Internet. They are invaluable, but they are free!



ALMOST EVERY BIBLE STUDENT wishes he or she had more Bible versions, concordances, lexicons, dictionaries, commentaries and other Bible helps. These can give background information and added insights into the meaning of both familiar and hard-to-understand scriptures. But buying all these books can be expensive, and they can take up a lot of space.

Now, however, tons of such resources can be found on the Internet! We can be even more effective servants of our Almighty God if we also make use of the technology at our disposal.

Online Bibles and helps

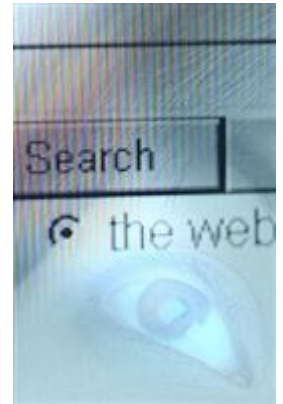
You might want to check a scripture in various translations. You will be happy to hear that a number of Bible versions are available online through your Internet browser.

In English there is the Blue Letter Bible Web site (www.blueletterbible.org), and Bible.com offers an online service that also serves non-English-speaking people at www.bible.com/bible_read.html. Another site with various Bible translations, Bibles in other languages and Bible helps is www.biblegateway.com.

Free downloadable Bible software

You also might benefit from visiting the e-Sword home page found at www.e-sword.net to find free Bible study software. The e-Sword project follows in the tradition of Johannes Gutenberg, who originally made the Scriptures widely available through the printing press. E-Sword offers you numerous dictionaries, commentaries and so on that you can download and access on your computer.

This software is highly useful for personal Bible studies. Scripture searches are performed much faster using a computer.



Bible Reading Program

Another great online Bible resource is the *Good News Bible Reading Program* (www.ucg.org/brp). You can join the program now in progress with daily readings and commentary in the Writings section of the Old Testament, currently in the book of Job. Or use the archives as a commentary for any of the Old Testament books already covered in the last three years.

Bible Study Course

The United Church of God also offers a 12-lesson *Bible Study Course* (www.ucg.org/bsc), which can also be requested in printed form free by snail mail. Some of the subjects covered include:

- Why Did God Create Mankind?
- Why Does God Allow Suffering?
- Is There Hope for Human Survival?
- What Is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God?
- The Transforming Power of God's Holy Spirit
- The Annual Festivals of God

Ambassador Bible Center classes

Ambassador Bible Center is an intensive seven-month program covering the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. Now many of the classes can be heard through your computer! At www.ucg.org/abc/classes you can find the following classes:

- Daniel and Revelation
- General Epistles
- The Pentateuch
- Harmony of the Gospels
- Early Church History and more

Subject searching and personal answers

You may also find it useful to search the ucg.org Web site by subject to access its wealth of other biblical articles, booklets, sermons and other resources (www.ucg.org/search). For example, this time of year many search for subjects like “crucifixion,” “resurrection” and “Passover.”

If you don't find the answers you are looking for with a search, you are always welcome to submit a question by e-mail at info@ucg.org. The United Church of God personal correspondence team can help you find answers to your Bible and Christian living questions in our literature and with personal answers by e-mail. These dedicated ministers answer questions like:

- Why did Jesus keep a Passover the night before He died and institute new symbols? How often should we follow His example?
- How can you get three days and three nights from Good Friday to Easter Sunday sunrise?
- What does God want me to do?
- Why did Jesus Christ and the apostles keep the Jewish Sabbath, and where does the Bible command us to switch to Sunday?
- How can I overcome lust?
- How can I raise children who will want to be Christian?

We wish you a good study experience!

Henrik V. Blunck is from Denmark and Mike Bennett is from the United States.



Letters to the Editor

Christ's Passion Toward You and Me!

I appreciate all the articles in this issue of the VCM except for the first, “Christ's Passion...” Although there is a lot of truth in the article, there are a few points that I feel discourage the spirit of the article.

First, to put the picture from the Mel Gibson's movie up as if to use it as a mental image of Christ, I feel, is inappropriate. One main reason I would not see the movie is that I did not want the facial image of a worldly actor to be in my mind when I think about Christ. In a year or two this same actor may play a fornicator, murderer or who knows what in another movie. Why dirty the thought of Jesus Christ that way?

The other point that ruins the article is implying we “win” people over to God's way with kindness. Our kindness exudes from our conversion and seeking to be like Christ. When we see someone who needs help, we help because it comes naturally or the Holy Spirit prompts us. But God must “call” and “open” the minds of the people He wants as first fruits. Even God doesn't “win” people over—He allows the freedom of choice. Once these people “answer the phone” as Mr. Petty put it,

and they take the call, then they will come into the flock. If people come in just because we're nice and kind people (which we should be), instead of a sincere desire to seek God and answer His call, we would have to question the depth of their conversion. How deep would their roots be if they were based on a "Band-Aid" of kindness. I am *absolutely not* arguing the point that we should pattern our lives after the love of Christ—I totally agree. But we are not to do it to "win" people over—that's the way of the religions of the world—and it can sometimes be a superficial thing. All I am saying is that the point of God doing the calling was skipped over.

— M. Jones

Thank you for writing. I have to agree with your argument on the image used. We normally never use images of Christ in VCM, but this was used because of the mention of the movie, not as a portrayal of Christ. I can understand your feelings on this issue and we in no way intended to say this was Jesus, but your reaction clearly reinforces my feelings on the issue, this being that we should not use any images of Jesus in future issues.

As for your second argument with the article, I just want to say that the author was in no way saying we lead people to God's Church by how kind we may be. Someone must, of course, be called by God. The point is that our kindness and the overall way we treat people can either help them along or push them away. We are tools that God may use in His calling of others, and this is the point that was being made here. We are to let our lights shine so that the whole world may see.

"I still learn something wonderful"

Thank you for the magazines available online. Although I have been reading Bible prophecy now for several years, I still learn something wonderful when I read your literature, which by the way, I share with friends and coworkers. Again, thank you and know that God opens many doors to those that preach the Good News.

Only available online

Hello! Is *Virtual Christian Magazine* only available online or do you also have it in print form? While I have access to it online, my 81-year-old mother (baptized member since 1969) would love to subscribe to receive a hard copy of it. Thank you!

— JoAnna Buckwalter

Unfortunately VCM is only available online. But feel free to print articles and share them with others who do not have Internet access.

Some feedback messages are edited for space and/or clarity