

*My soul, be on thy guard, ten thousand foes arise;  
 The hosts of sin are pressing hard to draw thee from the skies.  
 O watch, and fight, and pray, the battle ne'er give o'er;  
 Renew it boldly every day, and help divine implore.*

*George Heath*

# A People Set Out of Place

(THE WASHINGTON TIMES) — The traditional family lost ground in America during the 1990s, with census data showing increases in cohabiting couples, single-parent households and “non-family” groups. Married-couple households dropped from 55.1 percent of all households in 1990 to 51.7 percent in 2000, the Census Bureau said in a report issued on May 15. Households in which married couples lived with their own children also fell, from 25.6 percent of all households in 1990 to 23.5 percent in 2000.

CLAIMING THERE IS A DEITY SOWS SEEDS OF INTOLERANCE — A student told the school board, “To say that there is a deity is sowing seeds of intolerance and divisiveness throughout the senior class, especially for those who believe in multiple gods or no god at all. Step aside from your personal views and look at diversity.”

(AGAPEPRESS) — In a case pending in federal court in New York, a pastor is arguing for the right to display a billboard that carries a Bible verse. Pastor Kristopher Okwedy of Keyword Ministries paid for the billboard in Staten Island, New York. It carried a single verse: Leviticus 18:22 “*Thou shalt not lie with mankind as with womankind; it is abomination.*” Critics called it hate speech, arguing that New York City’s anti-bias policy prohibits any public expression of intolerance toward homosexuality.

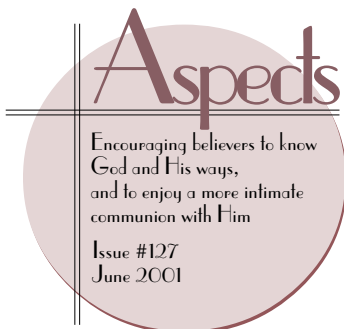
(THE WASHINGTON TIMES) — China is deploying nearly 100 of its newest short-range missiles, capable of carrying nuclear warheads, at a base about 275 miles from Taiwan.

Reading these reports that describe a world so different from the quiet, tranquil life I live, I wonder how God would have me respond. Should I be grateful that I haven’t any children being indoctrinated into lifestyles that are in opposition to my beliefs? Should I be thankful that I don’t live in Taiwan? How am I to respond to a world that so vehemently hates my Lord?

Jesus, better than anyone, knew what it was to be a stranger in a strange land. After the purity of heaven, this earth and its people could only have been, at best, a curious and awkward environment for the Son of God. Curious people doing curious things—their impact on Him relieved only by the advantage of their being His own creation.

But out of Jesus’ compassionate heart flowed the understanding that we, too, as His followers, would be subjected to that same homesickness for the halls of glory. As brothers and sisters, joint heirs, Jesus knew that we, like Him, would feel like people set out of time and out of place.

*“Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.*



*Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.”*  
Luke 6:22-23

My peace comes from the knowledge that all of this will pass away. My joy comes from knowing that my life, ultimately, is defined and controlled not by passing events and trials that

surround me here, but by an eternal Father in heaven.

I may rejoice in the opportunity to somehow affect troubling events for good while I am here; God may use me to further His Kingdom while the earth and its ways are still here. But my true happiness will be found in looking beyond these transient tribulations, toward the joy set before me in the place He has prepared.

## Ashes

Over several weeks of an earlier summer this writer spent more than a few afternoons working out behind the house, cutting down trees, trimming branches, and clearing several years' growth of weeds from around the pond. The work not only resulted in a tidier landscape, but a less-cluttered vista from the house to the pond, a fresh stack of wood for the winter—and a massive pile of scrub and branches to be gotten rid of.

Every oak tree felled produced a stack of logs for the fireplace and a couple of cart loads of brush to be hauled to the burn pile. Combined with several old railroad ties and the sections from the recently replaced garage door, as well as mounds of weeds from Linda's gardens, the latticed crush of branches crowned an impressive, intimidating mound to be burned. The accumulated heap was quite large, towering twice my height, and with an expansive diameter requiring me to mow a wider margin of safety around its circumference.

Then a Saturday dawned reasonably still, and with a touch of humidity in the air: perfect for disposing of the burn pile. I filled the tank on the water wagon, and stationed it nearby for safety. Setting the windward side of the pile alight, it immediately took off, becoming a raging, towering furnace in only seconds. I scabbled around, working the edges into the central inferno, but mostly I just let it burn. And except for the tar-soaked railroad ties, which burned for several hours, in thirty minutes it was pretty much over. And now that huge pile has been reduced to a thin layer of gray ash. Everything gone.

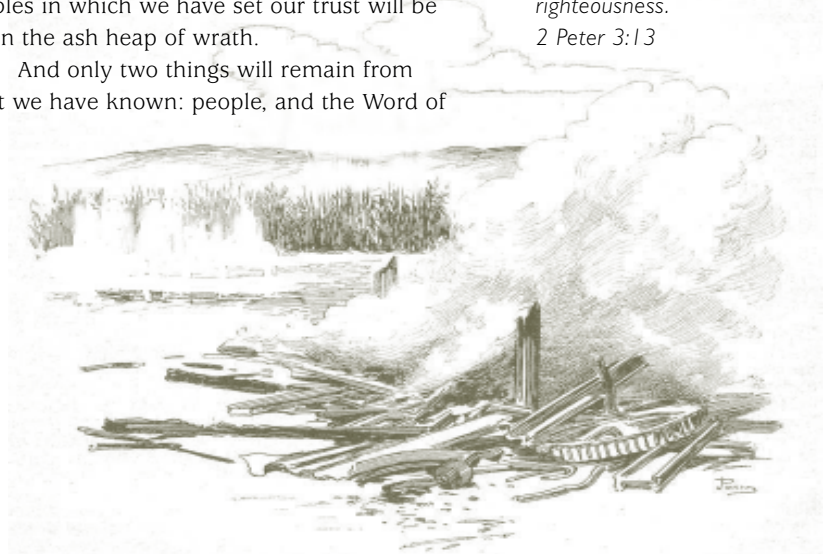
*“Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD’S wrath. In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will be consumed, for he will make a sudden end of all who live in the earth.” Zephaniah 1:18*

In that pile were many substantial. There were parts of trees that had been living for many years, railroad ties hewn by man and set in place beneath the rails decades ago, and a wooden garage door that had served this house for almost twenty-five years. In that pile were things ugly and beautiful, useful and worthless. But in moments they were all gone. Consumed by the flames and reduced to ash.

There will come a day—an awful, terrible, glorious day—when this earth will be utterly consumed and replaced with something better. All those trinkets with which we have surrounded ourselves—all those bright and shiny baubles in which we have set our trust will be left in the ash heap of wrath.

And only two things will remain from what we have known: people, and the Word of God.

*But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*  
2 Peter 3:13



# Static on the Line

*The LORD is near  
to all who call on  
him, to all who call  
on him in truth  
Psalm 145:18*

**I**t began the other night—an intermittent crackling on the telephone line. A rude interference and an undependable dial tone. Then the phone would ring, but when answered, there would be only crackling on the line. By this morning the line was dead, and an unsettling panic threatened to move in. How could I call out? No one would be able to reach me! Oh no!

While I await the arrival of the telephone repairman (for I've already determined the fault lies outside the walls of the house), I try to go on about my normal business. But always in the back of my mind is that uneasy sense of being off-balance. The phone lines aren't right, therefore *life* is not right.

As I wait for my phone-repair savior, I wonder whether my reaction would be the same if I discovered static on my line to God—my prayer line. What if that means of communication went bad, or were suddenly severed; would I feel the same sense of uneasiness—even panic? What if I suddenly had no access to God's word—His Scripture? Would I panic?

When the Jews had been taken into Babylonian captivity, they found themselves suddenly without the temple, without worship, and without God's word. When some of them finally returned to Jerusalem, after Nehemiah

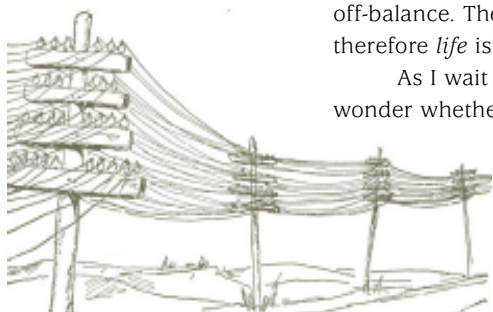
rebuilt the walls of the city, they clamored to hear God's voice through His written word.

*And all the people gathered themselves together as one man into the street that was before the water gate; and they spake unto Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel. Nehemiah 8:1 kjv*

The returning remnant was hungry to once again hear the voice of God after being so long away. And when the book was opened and read, they showed respect for that from which they had been so long deprived. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law...

*Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. Nehemiah 8:3b,5-6 niv*

And I wonder what my response would be if I were suddenly deprived of God's voice. By His grace, I'll never be without His written word. But I can know with certainty that I'll never call out to Him, and hear only static on the line.



## Leaving it With Him

**O**n November 3, 1999, a Monday, my computer died—and I'm grateful. To be precise, on Monday the Windows Registry exploded, leaving bloody shrapnel all over my system drive. Then the system stopped recognizing my CD-ROM, leaving me helpless to repair the damage. I spent two days trying to work things out, until, finally, the solutions were implemented—and I stand before you today victorious.

*...for your Father  
knows what you  
need before you  
ask him.  
Matthew 6:8*

In the midst of my travail, my weaker side (the dominant side) fretted and fussed, whimpering with frustration, all the while muttering oaths against Bill Gates and his faithful minions of Redmond. How dare his brilliant invention disrupt my day, and bring all my work to its knees! (fist shaking wildly toward the Northwest)

On the way to the hospital (in this case, the PC guru at Linda's office), my higher side decided to practice what it occasionally

preaches. Driving into Des Moines, I prayed: “Father, thank You for this trial. Thank You for the lessons I will learn through it—and after. Thank You for getting me through it, so that You alone will get the glory.”

Yesterday afternoon, at last, the hardware was repaired, so I could begin restoring the software. And before the dust had settled, I realized that I had come out of the trial ahead of the game. Without spending any money, without any trips to the local electronics store for the latest upgrade—without doing anything illegal or unethical—I ended up with better hardware and better software than had been in my system before.

All last evening, while reinstalling programs, I felt the face of God looking down, smiling at me with a satisfying grin, saying,

“See? Just let me stay in charge, and I’ll take care of you.”

*Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

*Hebrews 4:16*

I really didn’t ask to profit from the experience. To break even would have sufficed. But God, in His typical liberality, chose to leave me in better condition than before. He sent me through the trial to reinforce my dependency on Him—and to remind me that His solutions are always better than any I might devise.

## The Sounds of War

*Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. Isaiah 40:17 niv*

Standing on the west porch the other night, watching the rolling balls of lightning flash and churn across the north horizon, it seemed that this is how it must be for a witness to the rages of war. Distant rumblings, constant and threatening, interspersed with close crashes that lift one’s heart into the throat—these are the sounds of anger from those in possession of the implements of war.

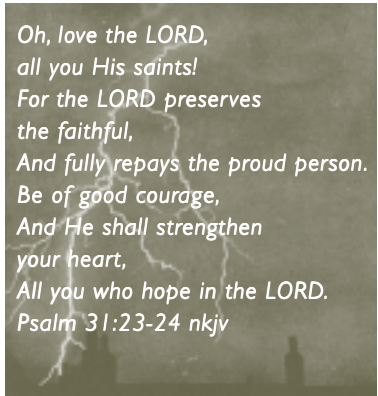
Beirut, Kosovo, East Timor, Somalia, Kuwait and Iraq, Kashmir, Rwanda, Afghanistan, Chechnya. Nations and individuals rise against each other when they conclude that they have less than they deserve. Ancient grudges combine with modern weapons to create misery, famine, unspeakable horrors, and an earth blackened by arrogance and greed.

*He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth, and its people are like grasshoppers. He stretches out the heavens like a canopy, and spreads them out like a tent to live in. Isaiah 40:22 niv*

How can one possibly remain sane without viewing it all through the eyes of a sovereign God—to whom all of this senseless violence is little more than the warfare of microscopic bugs? Man’s arrogance withers in the presence of an omnipotent sovereign. When the human mind at last comprehends that there is Someone who answers to no one, when pride is bowed down before the throne of One so righteous and holy, when human greed is broken before the bar of perfect justice—only then will there be “peace on earth.”

Those of us living on this side of the Rapture will never see such a day. Man will remain arrogant and proud; he will always keep his ability to slaughter innocents in the name of power and greed; nations and tribes will continue to make war against each other. It is who we are.

How, then, shall we live? Shall the pestilence of human war reduce our hope to rubble? Shall the arrogant stupidity of leaders leave us in abject sorrow and depression?



*Oh, love the LORD,  
all you His saints!  
For the LORD preserves  
the faithful,  
And fully repays the proud person.  
Be of good courage,  
And He shall strengthen  
your heart,  
All you who hope in the LORD.  
Psalm 31:23-24 nkjv*

# Settling

...a wild donkey  
accustomed to the  
desert, sniffing the  
wind in her  
craving—in her  
heat who can  
restrain her?  
Jeremiah 2:24a

Okay, I admit it. Don't tell anyone, but sometimes while I'm throwing on clothes after my morning shower, I'll turn on the TV and flip through a few channels. And sometimes (Just once in a while, that's all. Really.) I'll happen upon the channel showing *The Jerry Springer Show*, and linger for a few minutes (Just a few. Really. Trust me.) to see what sort of human oddities they're parading about on that day.

For those of you in other countries, or who have been living in a cave for the last ten years, the Jerry Springer Show is the modern version of *Truth or Consequences* married to *That's Incredible!* The producers go trolling for the lowest life forms they can find, dress them in the sleaziest attire they can obtain from the local Goodwill store, then pit them against each other in mock battles—usually incited by one or more of the guests revealing a heretofore hidden, aberrant lifestyle that is met with the displeasure of the other guest(s). It's all rollicking good fun for those with the morals of germs.

Well, the other day, perusing the channels after my morning ablutions, I discovered that old Jer had on two women who both lived with—yet who each claimed sole ownership of the affections from—their live-in boyfriend. They were pretty strange all by themselves, exchanging revelations and looks of stunned disbelief, as they each claimed that this Adonis loved only them. But the place really broke loose

when this adored and adoring Greek god came out on stage.

The world has never seen a more miserable-looking slug than the lowlife that crept out in his baggy clothes, scruffy goatee, and multitude of earrings and other bodily piercings. And he had the personality and IQ to match his loathsome appearance. (Honest, I only watched for a few minutes.) Even the callused Jerry Springer couldn't hold back his incredulity. Laughing, he said to the two women: "You're fighting over this? *This?*"

All right, enough of Jerry Springer and his cretaceous minions. As stunningly bizarre as that scene was, it illustrated perfectly the paradox of the Christian settling for—even pursuing—the counterfeit pleasures of this age, when the true and eternal delights of heaven are at his or her disposal. "You're settling for *that*—when you could have *this?*"

We carry around within us the buds of riches, the true essence of quality and wealth, the knowledge of eternity, and the capacity for holiness. Why, then, do we waste our time with such trivial, base distractions intended for those of meaner birth?

*The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man does not live on bread alone.'" Luke 4:3-4*



The other evening, Gilley discovered a small mouse in the living room. Now, as a mouser, Gilley is an excellent pointer, but a poor excuse for a carnivore; she's good at making the discovery, but lousy at making the kill. So the little varmint was in no immediate danger.

We have such occasions down to a regular drill: Linda finds her leather gloves; I keep an eye on the critter and move whatever furniture is in the way of capture; Mom sits clenched in

her chair, praying that the ferocious beast won't skitter up her legs; and the girls sit in peaceful repose, watching us humans do their work for them.

It took only about ten minutes for us to get the frightened little mouse cornered under the desk by the front door. Trapped in the enclosed area, Linda quickly had him captured between her hands. She carried him outside, to a point well away from the house, near the bushes alongside the drive. There she only loosened her

## Letting Us Struggle

grip, and slightly separated her fingers, giving the little critter the chance to believe he had orchestrated his own escape—which he did, at last scurrying to safety in the bushes.

*"I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified." John 17:13-19*

Father God can do anything He likes. He could have let mankind remain perfect in the Garden of Eden, but, instead, He let Eve and

Adam give in to temptation. He could have, with the greatest of ease, simply bestowed perfect holiness upon everyone on earth, but, instead, He accomplished it one person at a time, through that person's belief in His sacrificed Son.

And God could have lifted out every believer, letting them come along with Jesus when He returned to the safety and peace of heaven, thereby saving them all from the temptations and trials of living on earth. But, instead, God left them behind, to live and hurt and struggle through life.

Oh, the believer is still cradled in the palm of His hands. Father God is still supreme: He possesses the power to squash us like bugs, and He possesses the mercy to free us from every imaginable trial. But, instead of doing either, He simply cradles us, remaining near, while He lets us mature, and grow more dependent on Him, as we pass through the struggles of normal living.

## Through the Prism of Grace

Lying atop the sheets, sweating. Rising to work in the heavy stillness in which breath cannot be found. All around, the trees are green, the foliage lush, but it all presses down, heavy, the weight of the thick summer.

Months have passed since the first fresh buds of spring heralded new growth after the winter hush. After the dry brittle cold of the white season, even the damp heat that crept unevenly close was a welcome visitor. But the visitor stayed—stayed past the point of being a polite guest. It abused our generous nature, settled in and made itself at home.

Now the fragrant greens no longer herald fresh growth, but, old and tired, have joined to feed and be fed with the hovering dampness that pervades the land, the house—and the clammy sheets upon which one seeks relief.

Then a new day breaks wide with a cool breeze from out of the North. Suddenly the surrounding greens are once again friends. No longer in conspiracy with the cloying damp, they are now kissed with the fresh clean air that heralds the approach of autumn. Trees gone

long without rain, drop their leaves to litter the crackling grass with the dry musk of new mulch.

There are those who see life through the heavy mask of unrelieved sin—oppressive, mind-clouding, unrelenting muck that heaves the soul back down into the damp earth from which it was born. Philosophy does not conquer their frowning outlook; even their joy is muted by the emptiness of their heart. Discouraged, pessimistic, their days are a clouded blur, the distant horizon shrouded by the heat-shimmering mirage of depressed resignation.

There are others, however, who see life through the colorful prism of unfettered grace—the fresh breeze that blows cool and dry, carrying within it wisps of fragrant hope. Their feet tread lightly, springing easily upon the soil that holds no claim upon them. Their outlook is clean and open, their joy deep and real. Each new day bears new hope, new opportunity. Their horizon is sparkling as crystalline glass, near, and as certain as yesterday. They see each today through the hope and promise of tomorrow.

*I remember my affliction and my wandering,  
the bitterness and the gall.  
I well remember them,  
and my soul is downcast within me.  
Yet this I call to mind  
and therefore I have hope:  
Because of the LORD'S great  
love we are not consumed,  
for his compassions never fail.  
They are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
Lamentations 3:19-23*

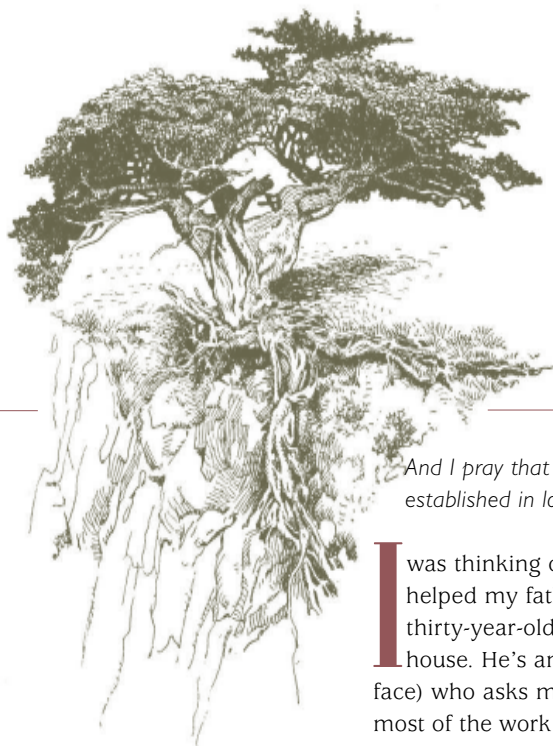
*I'm pressing on the upward way,  
New heights I'm gaining every day;  
Still praying as I'm onward bound,  
"Lord, plant my feet on higher ground."*

*My heart has no desire to stay  
Where doubts arise and fears dismay;  
Though some may dwell where these abound,  
My prayer, my aim, is higher ground.*

*I want to live above the world,  
Though Satan's darts at me are hurled;  
For faith has caught the joyful sound,  
The song of saints on higher ground.*

*I want to scale the utmost height,  
And catch a gleam of glory bright;  
But still I'll pray till heaven I've found,  
"Lord, lead me on to higher ground."*

*Lord, lift me up and let me stand,  
By faith, on heaven's tableland,  
A higher plane than I have found;  
Lord, plant my feet on higher ground.  
Johnson Oatman, Jr.*



## Rooted and Grounded

*And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love...*

I was thinking of the earth the other day, as I helped my father-in-law tear out a row of thirty-year-old bushes from the front of his house. He's an odd fellow (as I told him to his face) who asks me to come help, but then does most of the work himself before I arrive. Of the four old bushes, only one remained in the ground by the time I showed up (at the stroke of on-time; don't think for a moment that I was late).

The last bush was the most difficult to remove, of course. Its root system clung tenaciously to the patch of ground that had been its home for the last three decades. We dug and hacked and had impure thoughts about the old bush until, at last, it gave way under our relentless onslaught and came free—at the end, bearing an appearance not unlike a petrified octopus that had had all of its arms snapped off.

*I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power...*

If I were to be set alone in the middle of a huge stage, a solitary spotlight trained on my naked vulnerability—and, if I were to be interrogated in that moment, ordered to distill down to one, or just a few salient points the be-all and end-all of my faith, the strongest desire of my heart—

I would answer that I wanted to truly apprehend the love of Christ, and then to write that powerful truth into my own life. I would explain that I wanted to know God, truly know Him, in a way considered by many to be unattainable to mere men. And I would declare that I wanted to be so firmly and tenaciously rooted into God that His thoughts and my thoughts flowed unimpeded, unslowed between us.

I would tell my inquisitor that nothing is more important to me than for my life to be so firmly attached to God's, that no power ever devised could pull me away from His presence.

*And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Ephesians 3:16-19*

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