William Kiffen: A Life Anchored in Christ
The Seventeenth Century

I. The End is NIGH…?

It is a time of fear and crisis.[1] On every front there is an impending calamity:

Climate. The world's temperature regulation seems to be out of alignment and uncommonly bad weather has ruined growing seasons and reduced harvests for decades. Portions of the world experience extreme temperatures that haven't been seen for more than six hundred years.[2]

Politics. There is increased political polarization and militant rhetoric that threatens to tear apart the common bonds of unity that are shared between citizens of the same nation. Coups and violent political upheaval are threatened at nearly every turn.

War. In some places, politicians have persuaded their followers that war is the only legitimate solution to their predicament. As a result, tens and hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children are suffering at the hand of cruel persecutors. In some countries, more than a third of their total population is in danger of losing their lives.

Religion. There are rising fears of an islamic incursion—particularly into Europe—that will destabilize the Western world as we know it. Subversive inroads have already been made by jihadists into many countries that until recently would have been considered safe.

Immigration. Tens of thousands of nomadic people move across borders until they are ultimately caught and deported.

Deadly viruses. Recently, a series of deadly viruses have swept the world and taken with it a great number of lives.

Famine. The bad weather, political upheaval, war, and contagion have resulted in poor harvests which have destabilized the global food supply chain.

Infant mortality. Scores of children are dying each year in or just out of the womb.

A rise in atheism. There is a rise in atheism that seeks to dethrone established moral and ethical standards.

Frightening technological change. Last, in recent years there has been a shocking amount of technological discoveries that are both amazing and incredibly frightening. Many are wondering if the world will ever be the same again.

Eschatological speculation. Things are so bad that many assume that the end of all things is very, very close. Some are even working within politics and the government itself to bring about the end more quickly.

Sound familiar? What century do you think that this is a description of?
This is not a description of the present day, but of seventeenth century Europe.

Oftentimes it is lamented that we live in an incredibly evil age—I don't deny that. However, I think it is wrong to believe that our situation and especially our trials are unique.

Climate. Depending upon who you ask, we may or may not have a climate crisis on our hands in the 21st century. *In the seventeenth century, Europe experienced some of its coldest years and most disruptive weather patterns in well over 600 years.*

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[1]John D. Woodbridge and Frank A. James III, *Church History Volume Two: From Pre-Reformation to the Present Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2013), 285-86.

[2]Woodbridge and James, 286.

Politics. In our day, there is constant political turmoil domestically and internationally—and we are keyed into it at every turn. *In the seventeenth century, the Holy Roman Empire was seeking to reestablish its hold on the kingdoms of Europe. All the while, protestant rulers and other dissenters wrestled with all their might against the papacy and its agents.*
War. In recent years, we have seen wars break out in Ukraine, Iran, Sudan, and other places in the world. *In the seventeenth century, a number of protestant nobles came to Hradcany Castle in Prague to complain to the Roman Catholic council about their treatment. As tempers heightened, several men climbed the stairs to the third story of the castle and unceremoniously threw three of the papist councils out of the window. They fell 60 feet into a moat and all survived. This event, called the defenestration of Prague, was a precipitating event to the Thirty Years War. This caused the deaths of millions in Europe. In Germany, the population dropped from 21 million in 1618 to 13 million in 1648.*[3]

We could use up all our time together this morning comparing the similarities between our time and the 17th century. My purpose is for us to consider the fact that our trials are not really new. Our forebearers in the faith have walked through similar seasons of difficulty and we may learn from their example.

Today, we'll be asking the question: how do we live well in this fallen, sinful world?

To help answer our question, we'll consider the shining example of faithful Christianity in a man from the 17th century named William Kiffen (1616-1701). *But first we have to put Mr. Kiffen into his context.*

II. William Kiffen

Make Good Use of the Ordinary Means of Grace.

Tudor London. William Kiffen was born in 1616 in London, England. The city at that time was only a bit larger than Santa Rosa, with an estimated 220,000 residents by the time of the early 17th century.[4]

Elizabeth I. England had enjoyed a time of relative peace and prosperity under Queen Elizabeth I, whose reign spanned nearly 45 years from 1558 to 1603. Elizabeth had successfully navigated troubled political waters on the European continent by indefinitely deferring her marriage to either a Roman Catholic or Protestant suitor. "One modern historian describes the twenty-five-year-old Elizabeth as a woman who could 'speak French, Latin and Italian… [and] was also skilled at double talk'."[5]

She used her ability to be ambiguous to not declare whether she was with or against Rome until she could put her country in a favorable position. Ultimately, she sided with the Protestant cause and favored her own church: the Church of England.

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[3]Woodbridge and James, 304.
[4]https://www.britannica.com/place/London/Tudor-London
[5]Woodbridge and James, 237.

Through her shrewd political devisings Elizabeth separated herself from the authority of the Pope. In terms of how the church would function, sound, and look she struck a middle route between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism. The theology became one that was clearly rooted in the *solas* of the Reformation, but the service itself retained Roman Catholic elements: the vestments, the altar, elements of the liturgy, the burning of incense, and so on.[6] This was a good time to be a protestant in England.

James I. After Elizabeth died without an heir in 1603, her nephew, James I King of Scotland, assumed the throne of both England and Scotland. He maintained Elizabeth's religious policies, ensuring that a period of stability continued under his rule.

William Kiffen the Orphan. William Kiffen was born into this English world. It was one that was centered around king, country, and church. Reformation truths were allowed to be proclaimed in all their might and exposited upon in all their depth.

However, those hard years of bad weather and plague soon came to London and settled upon young William. When he was only nine years old both of his parents contracted plague and died. These were to be the first of many pangs that would piece William to the heart in his long life.

Divine Intervention. William survived the following years, and the next we know of him he became an apprentice to a glover at the age of 13.[7] A glover is simply someone who makes and sells gloves. However, after two years of being an apprentice to this glover—who was essentially his master—he grew melancholy and decided to run away.[8]

As he was fleeing, he passed by St. Antholin's church, where the Puritan Thomas Foxley was preaching on "the duty of servants to masters."[9] Seeing so many go into the building, Kiffen decided that he ought to go in as well. Of course, hearing the sermon Kiffen became extremely convicted by what he heard. He was even convinced "that Foxley's sermon was intentionally directed at him."[10] He returned home repentant and resolved within himself to hear more of this preaching—from those "whom they called Puritan ministers."[11]

Salvation. After regularly listening to several Puritan ministers it was the preaching of an Arminian, John Goodwin, which God "used to bring Kiffen to Christ."[12]

How gracious is the Lord God Almighty that he would look on an orphan, a run away, a depressed teenager and shine the light of Christ upon him. Such is he for each one of us. We are all unworthy of the affection of God and yet he gives himself—all of himself—to us freely at the cross. May we, like William, look to Christ in his life, death for our sin, and resurrection and put our whole hope in him that we may be forever wrapped in the triune embrace of God.

Growth. After his conversion, Kiffen began to meet with other zealous young men who encouraged one another in the Scripture, in prayer, and in repeating sermons that they had heard to one another. This they would do at five in the morning before they all attended a

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[6]Woodbridge and James, 243.

[7]Michael A.G. Haykin, *Kiffen, Knollys, and Keach: Rediscovering our English Baptist Heritage* (Peterborough, CA: H&E Publishing, 2019), 53.

[8]Haykin, 54.

[9]Haykin, 54.

[10]Haykin, 54.

[11]Haykin, 54. Cited from Ivimey, *Life of Mr. William Kiffen*, 2-3.

[12]Haykin, 54.

preaching service at six.[13] These young men voraciously consumed the Word of God and meditated upon it.

One biographer noted how this season in Kiffen's life prepared him for the ministry. Kiffen never received a formal theological education. Instead, he cut his teeth in this small group.[14] Just like how Jesus chose ordinary men to be his apostles, so he chose an ordinary teenager like William Kiffen to train for the ministry through these ordinary means: Bible study, prayer, and listening to the Word of God proclaimed.

Brothers and sisters, please do not think that God cannot qualify you to minister Christ to others through the same means. We are not qualified to proclaim Christ because we've been to seminary. We are qualified to proclaim Christ because we are in Christ, filled with the Spirit, and commissioned by him to make disciples of all the nations (Mt 28:19-20).

Follow Christ, No Matter What the Cost.

The Terror of William Laud. "During the 1630s Puritans within the Church of England, like Kiffen, came under extreme pressure to bring their thinking and behaviour in line with the views of William Laud, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633."[15] Laud was appointed Archbishop by the new King Charles I. Charles had an eye to conform the Church of England away from Reformed theology and towards an Arminian position. Laud was ruthless in his persecution and even torture of Puritans who held fast to the *solas* of the Reformation.

As a result, many Puritans fled England and set out for the New World. Others who desired to stay, like Kiffen, were forced to join illegal congregations.[16] Joining an independent—and therefore illegal—congregation meant that he was opening himself up to constant risk for worshiping and following Christ in a way that the state did not endorse. Kiffen made this leap in 1638 after diligently searching the Scriptures that he "might be directed in a right way of worship."[17]

The congregation that he joined was suffering. Its pastor, Samuel Eaton, was in prison and would die there shortly thereafter. With this vacancy, the church asked Kiffen to step in. Having been prepared by his sharing with his friends, he stepped into the pulpit to preach Christ. So it happened that sometime—we're not exactly sure—over the next three to four years they called him to be their pastor.[18] So it was that Kiffen became a minister of the gospel in an illegal denomination.

Baptist. After several years of bi-vocational shepherding and studying of the Scripture, Kiffen and his congregation came to the conviction that believers' baptism was the correct mode of baptism. He believed that this was "the 'safest way' for him to follow in his Christian life was to step into the Footsteps of the Flock (namely) that order laid down by Christ and His Apostles, and Practised by the Primitive Christians in their times which I found to be that after Conversion

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[13]Haykin, 54.
[14]Haykin, 54-55.
[15]Haykin, 55.
[16]Haykin, 55.
[17]Haykin, 55. Cited from William Kiffen, "To the Christian Reader" in *A Sober Discourse of Right to Church-Communion* (London, 1681).
[18]Haykin, 55.

were Baptised, added to the Church, and Continued in the Apostles Doctrine, Fellowship, Breaking of Bread, and Prayer; according to which I thought myself bound to be Conformable."[19]

In short, Kiffen was willing to follow the Scriptures no matter what.[20] Even if this meant the ire of the government, time in prison, and being barred from institutions of higher learning. **He was willing to follow Christ no matter what.**

Confessional. In 1644, there were seven like-minded Calvinistic baptist churches in England—they were all located in London.[21] These congregations had received much criticism from those who supposed that they were anabaptists. Anabaptists at this time had an extremely bad reputation on the European continent for being rebels, notorious sinners, and heretical in their beliefs and teachings. In order to distance themselves from those allegations, the pastors of these seven churches assembled a confession of faith that accurately put forth their views.

They explained the charges levied against them in the preface:

> "lying under that calumny and black brand of Heretickes, and sowers of division." From the pulpits and in the writings of fellow Puritans, they had been accused of "holding Free-will, Falling away from grace, denying Originall sinne, disclaiming of Magistracy, denying to assist them either in persons or purse in any of their lawfull Commands, doing acts unseemly in the dispensing the Ordinance of Baptism, not to be named amongst Christians."[22]

This confessional document laid out the orthodoxy of the Calvinistic baptist churches and assuaged the concerns of many Puritans of the day. However, it did not stop the hatred of many and the Baptists continued to be persecuted with varying degrees of vehemence for the following decades.

William Kiffen was one of the fifteen pastors who boldly signed onto this confession and assisted in its composition.

Set Your Hope Fully on the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Joint-Venture. It was around the same time, in 1645, that Kiffen embarked upon an overseas joint-venture with one of the men from his church. They entered into the mercantile business by buying and selling cloth through the then flourishing markets of the Netherlands.

This entrepreneurial endeavor turned out to be extremely successful. Kiffen wrote, "It pleased God so to bless our endeavours, that, from scores of pounds, he brought it to many hundreds and thousands of pounds: giving me more of this world than ever I could have thought to have enjoyed."[23]

Religious Liberty. The late 1640s saw the bloody days of the English Civil War. Ultimately, King Charles I was accused of treason, deposed, and beheaded. The monarchy was officially abolished and Oliver Cromwell stood in as the Lord Protector. Cromwell desired to give the people far greater religious liberties than they had hitherto enjoyed. This meant that the

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[19]Haykin, 55.
[20]Haykin, 56.
[21]Haykin, 41.
[22]Haykin, 41.
[23]Anthony L. Chute, Nathan A. Finn, and Michael A.G. Haykin, *The Baptist Story: Second Edition* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2025), 85-86.

Baptists were finally able to operate without fear of being persecuted by the state. It was a time of great flourishing for the Baptists in England with many churches planted.

Liberty Lost. However, it wasn't long until Oliver Cromwell died and "no leader of like calibre emerged".[24] The nobles in the land decided that it would be best to restore the monarchy and invite Charles II, King Charles I's exiled son, to return to the isle to assume the throne. While Charles II made many promises concerning the maintenance of religious liberty in his land, it wasn't long until the persecution of the Baptists resumed.

Wealth for the Glory of God. By the mercy of God, Kiffen was uncorrupted by his wealth. Instead, he leveraged it for the good of the church and the glory of God. This became especially helpful during the reign of Charles II. "On several occasions, Kiffen used his position and wealth to intervene on behalf of fellow Dissenters. In 1664, he was able to rescue twelve General Baptists from Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire, who had been sentenced to death under an Elizabethan law for participating in an illegal conventicle."[25]

Relationship with the Crown. Kiffen's position as a wealthy man curried his favor with the King. In fact, he had a direct relationship with him and on several occasions interceded for imprisoned saints directly to King Charles II. ***Loan story.***

Heartbreak. Throughout this period Kiffen was also beset with many heartbreaks. In 1669, his eldest son died at the age of twenty; a second son was likely poisoned in Venice and died; his daughter, Priscilla, died in 1679; and his wife of 44 years, Hanna, died in 1682.[26]

He wrote concerning the death of his wife:

> It pleased the Lord to take to himself, my dear and faithful wife, with whom I had lived nearly forty-four years; whose tenderness to me, and faithfulness to God, were such as cannot, by me, be expressed, as she constantly sympathized with me in all my afflictions. I can truly say, I never heard her utter the least discontent under all the various providences that attended either me or her; she eyed the hand of God in all our sorrows, so as constantly to encourage me in the ways of God: her death was the greatest sorrow to me that ever I met with in the world.[27]

On top of all this, two of his grandsons were caught up in a conspiracy-turned rebellion in 1685 that sought to remove James II, Charles II's Roman Catholic brother and heir, from the throne.[28] When the rebellion failed, Kiffen's grandsons were rounded up and sentenced to death for their involvement. Although Kiffen tried with all his might to have them acquitted, they were nonetheless executed. This was "no small affliction" to Kiffen and grieved him deeply.[29]

Worse still, Kiffen's second wife, Sarah, was found to have stolen from her husband, made false accusations about him, and refused to appear before the church to be reconciled.[30] The final pang was the death of his son, Harry, in 1698.

Haykin writes:

> Without a doubt, these events must have caused Kiffen deep anguish; but he did not waver in his commitment to the One whom he had served for most of his life. As he had

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[24]Haykin, 59.
[25]Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 86.
[26]Haykin, 65.
[27]Haykin, 65.
[28]Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 87.
[29]Chute, Finn, and Haykin, 87.
[30]Haykin, 65-66.

> written in 1693 at the conclusion of his memoirs: “The world is full of confusions: the last times are upon us: the signs of the times are very visible: iniquity abounds, and the love of many in religion waxes cold. God is, by his providence, shaking the earth under our feet; there is no sure foundation of rest and peace, but only in Jesus Christ.”

Kiffen had experienced the highest of highs and lowest of lows in his life. What kept him anchored through it all was his faithful Savior Jesus Christ. So it is with us. *Let’s take a few minutes to consider what God would have us set our minds upon from 1 Peter 1.*

III. Application

To return to our opening question—how do we live well in this fallen, sinful world? Here, we have Kiffen’s answer. To live well, Kiffen’s life gives us these three principles:

1. Make Good Use of the Ordinary Means of Grace.
2. Follow Christ, No Matter What the Cost.
3. Set Your Hope Fully on the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our days are passing like a shadow. Like a breath they are here and then gone. Kings come and go, political movements rise and fall, plagues surge and then recede, wars begin and stop, the weather is here one day and gone the next. We are blessed with friends, family, and children but even their lives are only a vapor. Nothing in our world is ultimately permanent, all is in flux. But the Lord our God reigns forever. He commands us not to put our hope in the world or anything in it. Rather, he tells us to put our hope in the grace that will be revealed to us at the coming of our Lord Jesus.

No matter what the century, no matter what the difficulty, no matter how much it hurts our God tells us to hope in him because he is good. He is the one who will wipe away every tear from our eyes, who will right every wrong, who will make everything evil come untrue. Let us put our hope in him who has had mercy on us and will lavish his grace on us forevermore.

Consider the 1689 London Baptist Confession. Additionally, I would encourage you to consider checking out the Second London Baptist Confession. This document was produced when religious liberty was more-or-less restored in the late 1680s under the reign of William of Orange. Like the first confession, Kiffen was intimately involved in the drafting and dissemination of this document which is still widely in use today.