

CWRmagazine

Spring 2016
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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

The Jesus Way



What Others Are Saying...



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

Incredible Issue!

The Winter 2015 issue of *CWRm* was incredible—Brad Jersak about God being more than a Christian, Greg Albrecht on how empathy is such a Jesus kind of attitude, Brian Zahnd about God’s love and Monte Wolverton explaining why he is still a Christian. *CWRm* is truly a great Christian magazine because it dares to forget all the religious acting and talks about life as most of us live and experience it. Thank you—keep it coming!

Oregon

He’s There For You and With You

I enjoyed the article, “He’s There For You and With You” by Greg Albrecht in the Winter 2015 *CWRm*. Pastor Greg gives a lot of encouraging material about Christ-centered empathy in this article. I needed to be reminded that “Jesus did not come merely to feel FOR us, he came to feel WITH us.” The yellow box on the last page of the article, titled “Empathy Is...” provides helpful food for thought.

Arizona

“Are You Saved?”

This message is in response to the article “Are You Saved?” by Brad Jersak in the Fall 2015 *CWRm*. The writer definitely hit on some key points and persuasions. Our Lord teaches us to see, perceive, comprehend and understand—just as he does.

Beyond that, it is the Word of God, the Truth, living in us who leads us to believe in him. The Truth, the Living Word of Abba is always causing us to be alive through Jesus Christ. It’s all about the **being** and not the **doing**.

Arkansas

Where Have You Been All My Life?

I don’t know how I first found you on the Internet a year ago, but I can tell you since then I have listened to every sermon you have given at *CWRa*, and I have read the electronic digital version of many of the articles you have printed. *Where have you been all my life?* I have never, ever read or heard a message so honest, so liberating and so real. This is so far from the sanctimonious silliness, irrelevant tripe and legalistic crap I see and hear all around me. You have invigorated my desire to know God.

New Jersey

Grateful and Inspired

Thank you for all the gifts that have come my way because of your ministry. Specifically the daily radio program, the videos, the sermons, the uplifting Partner letters, the print publications, the prayers you offer for everyone, the very personal help you give in times of need, the books, music and all the other helpful resources you make available to those who seek hope and refuge in our Creator.

I’m sure I speak for many in saying that I am truly grateful and inspired by these gifts.

Wisconsin

Feed More Hungry Souls

Just want to let you know how much your ministry has helped me through these many years. I have been blessed by your books, especially the two volumes of *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul* and *Rejecting Religion—Embracing Grace*. My eyesight is not very good but I hope to re-read some of your books. They have helped to set me free from legalistic

religion. I am now content wherever I am and I have peace in my heart. May God bless your ministry to help feed many more hungry souls.

Missouri

A More Christlike God

I just finished reading *A More Christlike God* by Brad Jersak. The whole way through I was holding back unfounded tears thinking, “God is so much better than I even imagined.”

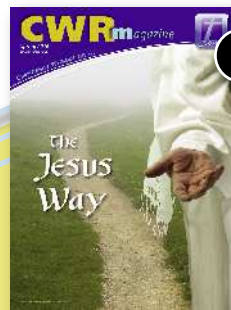
Then at the end, like an old Hebrew scholar recounting the history of Israel, you take me through how beautiful God is, then finish with the story of your addict friend...well I lost it. God’s grace and pursuit of us is amazing. This book put all the things I believe about God into words (and better). I cannot thank you enough for this work.

Email

I just finished Brad Jersak’s book *A More Christlike God*, and all I can say is THANK YOU! I have been on a three-year journey in the wilderness and I have read over 25 books in that time period. I felt it was essential for me to pursue God to see where it led, because I just had so many unanswered questions. Thank you for this book and the perspective it provides.

Ohio

• See page 6 of this issue for details about how to order *A More Christlike God*.



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Cover Story

The Jesus Way is the focus and mission of CWR/PTM in 2016-2017. The Jesus Way will encourage us to keep our eyes on Jesus and our hearts open to him.

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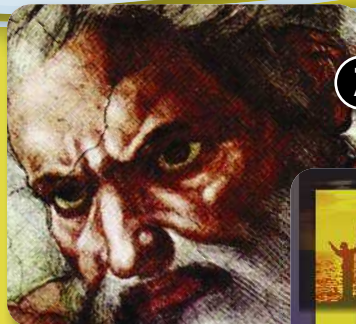
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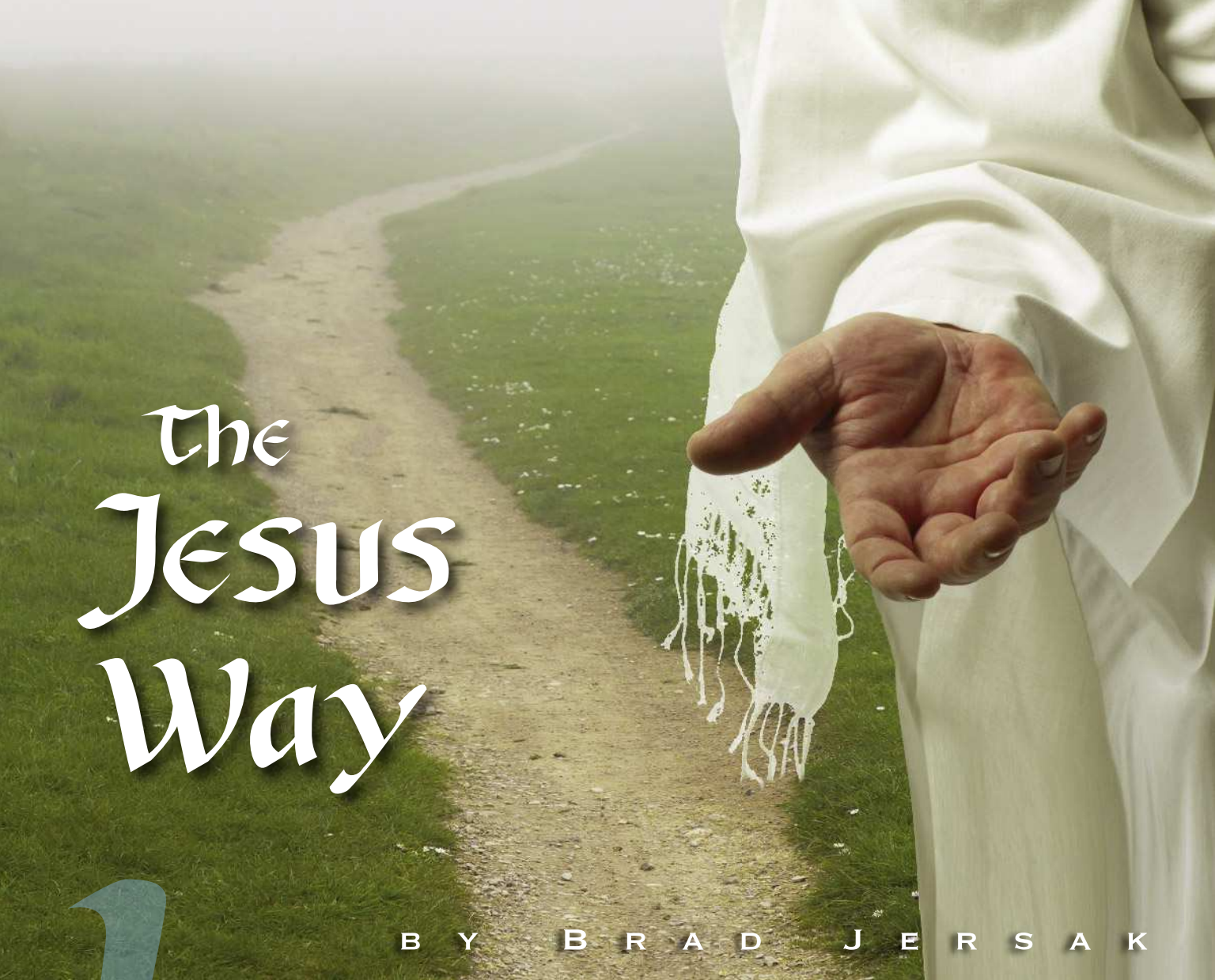
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The Jesus Way

B Y B R A D J E R S A K

Last year, 2015, was CWR/PTM's "Year of the Bible." We featured articles and interviews about what the Bible is and how to interpret it through a grace-based, Christ-centered lens. While our editors and columnists contributed to the conversation, we were also treated to new perspectives on biblical inspiration, authority and interpretation from a variety of guest authors from whom we hope to hear more in coming years.

Now, the CWR editorial team has put thought and prayer into a fresh guiding theme

through the next two years. It's my privilege to introduce the *Jesus Way* as our focus for 2016-17.

I sense the *Jesus Way* becoming a healthy catchphrase among those who know that *living faith in the living Christ*—versus religious identification—will shine a guiding light on the path ahead.

Of course, anyone can use a catchphrase, gut it of significance, and mount it on a religious trophy wall. Indeed, spiritual taxidermy has often been the prevailing sin and mortal wound of Christendom.

Nevertheless, we hope that by continually refocusing on the person, the message and the life of Christ, we will become more alert and aware of new life in Christ as He lives it within us.

THE *JESUS WAY*—WHAT JESUS TAUGHT

The *Jesus Way* theme begins as we fix our attention on the captivating content of Jesus' teachings—what he taught and what he thought "following him" would look like in practice. The *Jesus Way* shows up in his "gospel of the kingdom," in the parables he composed and in his

great oratories from the “Sermon on the Mount” to the “Olivet Discourse.”

Biblicists (who ascribe all-sufficiency to the Bible) are frequently insistent on “the plain reading of the text.” Yet it’s fascinating how quickly a bullish biblicism dissolves when Jesus says, “Love your enemies” or “Do not judge.” Suddenly we pretend it’s very hard to know what his words mean. Some hide behind the difficulty of the original languages or supposed illusiveness of the historical context. Proof-texts of caveats and exceptions are drummed up. This resistance is an obvious defense mechanism of the flesh against the hard (but clear) teachings of Christ when confronted with his lordship.

The truth is that Christ’s words can be a tough pill to swallow—many who heard him trudged away sad or stomped away mad, knowing that he spoke words of life, but only in the wake of the death of self. Who could bear that? So we *undergo the Gospels—medicine for the heart, poison for the ego*—praying for empowering grace to take up our own cross and follow Jesus.

THE *JESUS WAY*—HOW JESUS MINISTERED

The *Jesus Way* also includes *how* Christ taught, *how* he ministered and *how* he treated others. *How* did Jesus minister to the vulnerable, the sinner, the sick and the poor? *How* did Jesus treat minorities, women and children? *How* did he heal the broken in body and soul; *how* did he set prisoners free from religious and demonic chains? And also—lest we sidestep the issue—*how* did Jesus address the religious establishment and temple authorities?

We can ask the Gospels, “When is it appropriate to show kindness and compassion?” Answer: *always*. But also, “When is it right to confront and rebuke?” On multiple occasions, Jesus’ words and tone have an edge. He could be terse with religious insiders.

But beware! We’re not Jesus. Our pious outbursts typically sound less like him and more like those trotting on religious

THE TRUTH IS THAT CHRIST’S WORDS CAN BE A TOUGH PILL TO SWALLOW—MANY WHO HEARD HIM TRUDGED AWAY SAD OR STOMPED AWAY MAD, KNOWING THAT HE SPOKE WORDS OF LIFE, BUT ONLY IN THE WAKE OF THE DEATH OF SELF.

high horses. When we think judging others is being “prophetic,” we’re just as likely becoming Pharisees.

Notice that when Jesus censures his opponents, his reproofs are tear-filled. He loves them. He wept over Jerusalem when prophesying her demise. He pled earnestly that she would repent before giving her over to the consequences of her actions. The self-destruction he foresees does not lead to gloating, but to grieving.

And note too that Jesus recognized when it was time to be silent. Like a sheep led to slaughter—Jesus didn’t demand the last word, unless perhaps it was “Father, forgive them.” I doubt that he gets embroiled in our silly Facebook culture-war dramas. I can’t imagine he was so free with reactive rants typical of our culture today.

At the end of the day, what does the *Jesus Way* show us? It shows us that that God is love. **If we know anything at all about Jesus, it is that he loved every single person**

who ever met him—and that included his “haters.”

THE *JESUS WAY*—JESUS’ FINAL PATH

Then, of course, after Christ performed his last healing and preached his final sermon, the *Jesus Way* culminates in the *Via Delarosa* (way of suffering)—Jesus’ final path or way or journey. We see him *go up* to Jerusalem, *go up* to Gethsemane,

go up to his trial and then, *go up* to the Cross—and beyond.

“Beyond,” for us, includes his descent into and conquest over hades (the grave). “Beyond” includes his triumphant (and actual) resurrection from the jaws of death. And “beyond” includes Christ’s ascension and enthronement as Lord of the cosmos!

The *Jesus Way* reveals to us the mystery and meaning of the Cross: that the righteousness or divine justice (same word in the NT) of God is fulfilled on the Cross through Christ’s self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love.

The *Jesus Way* spells the death of death because, as St. Chrysostom once said:

“He that was taken by death has annihilated it!

He descended into Hades and took Hades captive!

He embittered it when it tasted His flesh! ...

It was embittered, for it was abolished!

It was embittered, for it was mocked!

It was embittered, for it was purged!



THE *JESUS WAY* IS MORE THAN A SET OF THEOLOGICAL BELIEFS WE TRY TO EMBRACE. IT IS, AFTER ALL, A WAY. BEFORE THE FIRST DISCIPLES WERE CALLED "CHRISTIANS," THEY WERE CALLED THE WAY—THOSE WHO TRAVELLED IN THE TRACKS OF THEIR DIVINE-HUMAN TRAILBLAZER.

It was embittered,

for it was despoiled!

It was embittered, for it was bound in chains!"

How do we know this? Because Jesus rose from the dead...for real! The disciples were not convinced by an empty tomb or inspired by a lasting legacy.

They were captivated by a risen Man! Nor does the resurrection start and end with an event in history; it means Christ was and is alive. Now. Today.

And so the *Jesus Way* not only proclaims the death and resurrection of Jesus back then; it announces, anticipates and experiences the presence of the living One today.

Wherever two or three of us gather, Christ is *still* in our midst. Living as if that's true (because it is true) is crucial to the *Jesus Way* and distinguishes it from all dead forms of religion.

THE *JESUS WAY*—THE REVELATION OF GOD

The wonder of the *Jesus Way* is that the entirety of Jesus' teaching corpus, his ministry portfolio and his saving work is far more the lifework of history's greatest guru, healer and savior. The *Jesus Way* is the definitive revelation of God himself.

When we say "Jesus is the living word of God," what do we mean? We mean that **Jesus is what God has to say about himself, in person no less!** As I've shown in *A More Christlike God*, Jesus alone shows us exactly what God is like. To see Jesus is to see the face of the eternal, invisible, almighty God! Or to say it in reverse, how does God reveal himself in time? He does it the *Jesus Way!* And such a surprising way for the divine to manifest—in the weakness of human flesh! Edward Shiloto once wrote:

*"The other gods were strong;
but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst*

stumble to a throne;

But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,

And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone."

THE *JESUS WAY*—FOLLOWERS ON THE *JESUS WAY*

While the *Jesus Way* is founded on the words and works and way of the Master himself, another component suggests itself. Out of that glorious life, we see how early Christians responded in faith and love to Jesus. The New Testament is the apostolic church's initial interpretation of what the *Jesus Way* looks like in the aftermath of the life of Christ. The fledgling Way was messy and at times bloody, for they were breaking new ground, but what remarkable lives these martyr-witnesses led!

The *Jesus Way* is more than a set of theological beliefs we try to embrace. It is, after all, a Way. Before the first disciples were called "Christians," they were called *the Way*—those who travelled in the tracks of their divine-human Trailblazer. A Christ-centered, grace-filled life demands far more than reciting a prayer, signing a doctrinal statement and taking a ritual bath. It means surrendering to the grace and care of the Waymaker as he directs our paths. It's our hope that through the coming years, the *Jesus Way* theme will encourage that surrender in all of us. □

GOLD MEDAL WINNER!

A More Christlike God, written by Editor-in-Chief Brad Jersak. Winner of the Enduring Light Christian Thought Gold Medal in the 2016 Illumination Book Awards. This groundbreaking book from CWRpress takes readers beyond the ugly parodies of Christianity into the beautiful gospel of a more Christlike God. **To order go to: www.ptm.org/christlike**



Welcome to CWRm

Beginning with this issue we welcome two new columnists: Cindy Brandt with her column, "Outside In" (page 28) and Zack Hunt with his column, "Costly Grace" (page 19). Find out more about Cindy and Zack in the "Newsmakers of 2015" report on page 27.

Out for Blood?

Rethinking Hebrews 9:22

Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

by Brad Jersak

News flash! In spite of Christianity's serious public image problems (in case you hadn't noticed), there are also increasing signs that the gospel—the Beautiful News of God's grace through Christ—is being rediscovered. Whether in books, blogs or social media, I'm seeing evidence that God is being remembered as the Father of Love, the God enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth. The symbol of the "old rugged cross" is once again coming to represent God's essential nature: namely, his self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love. And that's good news for everyone! On the cross, in the face of human cruelty and bloodlust, God-in-Christ revealed his bottom line character: a mercy that endures *forever*—the loving-kindness that is *everlasting*. We discover that "the blood of Jesus"—i.e. a metonym for God's self-offering, sacrificial love—can wash *anything*.

Anything. Anyone.

Still, there will be holdouts who believe real justice requires retribution, vengeance and satisfaction of wrath.

Happily, I can say many are starting to get over it. Hang in there! The shelf-life of the vengeful punisher is coming due and should pass away in not too many generations.

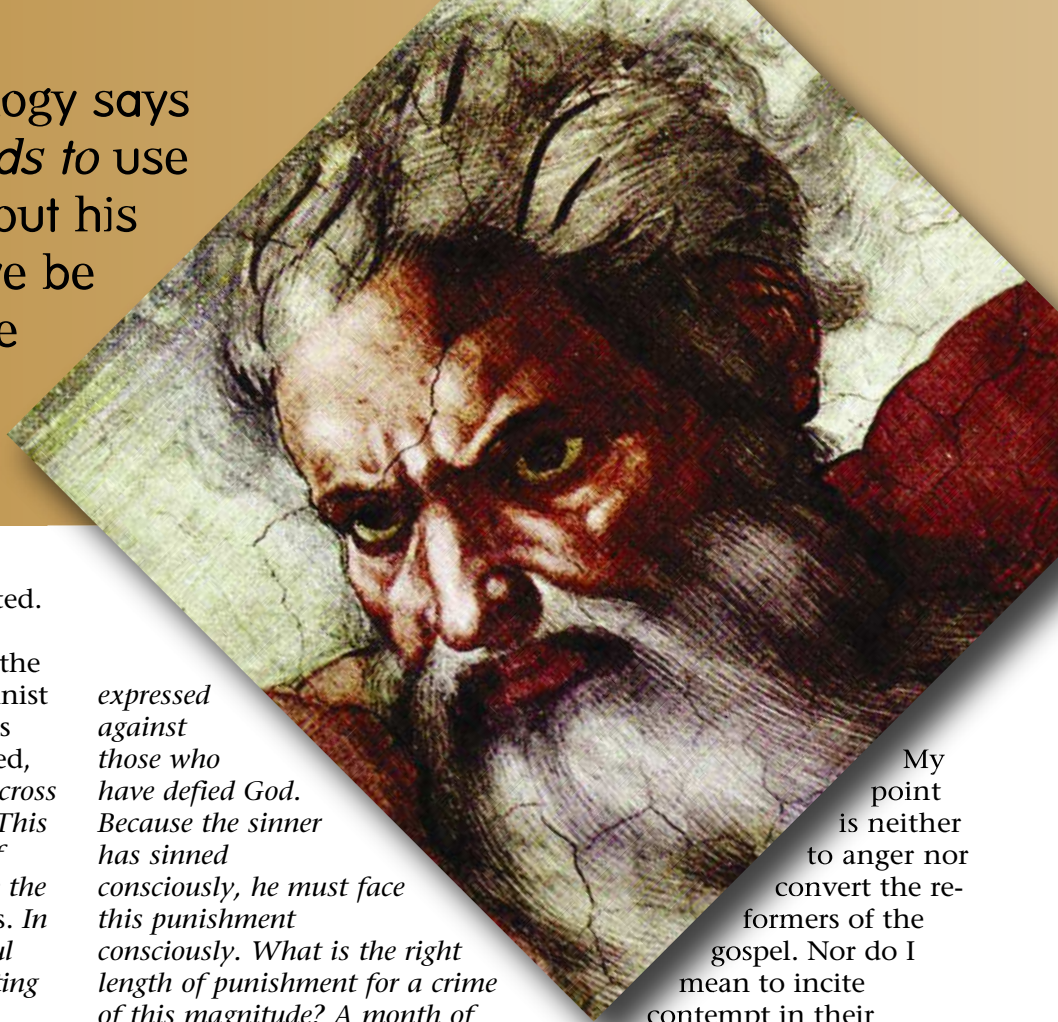
Admittedly, that stubborn old system of judgment and condemnation is

reluctant to let go. It has a rich backstory in Christian theologies of retribution that led to violent practices, including the torture and martyrdom of dissenters. But if our theology says God *needs to use torture to bring about his will, why should we be surprised when we become like the One we worship?* Just a week or two ago, I heard a radio preacher again making it very clear that if Easter means *anything*, it "begins with Christ dying to satisfy the wrath of God."

When I critique the "gospel" of an angry God who can only be assuaged through a violent sacrifice, I am often criticized for fabricating a caricature or straw man. I'm told no one really believes that or preaches it seriously. If only it were true. Sad to say, the caricature defense is an unsubstantiated cliché exposed easily enough by the trick question, "Then how does atonement *work?*"

I know for a fact that "appeasement theology" persists and permeates much of Evangelical theology—broadly, popularly. I know this because I find the supposed straw man in my undergrad and MA theology course files. I find the analogy of a volcano-god appeased by virgin sacrifices beside the word "propitiation" in my MDiv lecture notes and textbooks. I find pagan forms of appeasement in the margins and footnotes of my own duct-taped Ryrie Study Bible, my own master's thesis and my own sermon

If our theology says
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manuscripts... things I personally, faithfully parroted.

For example, should we dismiss as a mere caricature the opinion of the famous Calvinist theologian, R.C. Sproul? This past year, he clearly explained,

Christ did His work on the cross to placate the wrath of God. This idea of placating the wrath of God has done little to placate the wrath of modern theologians. In fact, they become very wrathful about the whole idea of placating God's wrath. They think it is beneath the dignity of God to have to be placated, that we should have to do something to soothe Him or appease Him. We need to be very careful in how we understand the wrath of God, but let me remind you that the concept of placating the wrath of God has to do here not with a peripheral, tangential point of theology, but with the essence of salvation.¹

Or as blogger Tim Challies put it so clearly:

Sin demands justice, justice demands punishment, and punishment is made visible in wrath. A holy God is a just God, a God who judges right from wrong. When he judges something to be wrong he must punish it and the punishment is expressed in wrath.

God's wrath is a holy wrath that is expressed against sin, which is to say, against sinners. That white-hot hatred of sin will be

expressed against those who have defied God. Because the sinner has sinned consciously, he must face this punishment consciously. What is the right length of punishment for a crime of this magnitude? A month of facing God's wrath? A year?

My point is neither to anger nor convert the reformers of the gospel. Nor do I mean to incite contempt in their detractors. I only included

... Was there anything...that required a sacrifice or payment in order to placate...God to forgive sin? No. God is not enslaved by some higher goddess who can prevent him from freely forgiving...

Twenty years? Because of the eternal distance between God and the human sinner, he has committed an infinite, eternal offense and must face this punishment eternally. For God to come up with a sentence less than eternal would be to say that he is less than eternal. The eternity of the punishment is simply a realistic assessment of the never-ending vastness of the difference between us and God.

Thus the just sentence for sinning against this holy, holy, holy God, is to be judged guilty and to eternally, consciously face the wrath of God against sin.²

these citations in order to say, first, the claim that appeasement theology is a caricature is simply untrue.

And second, I reproduced these examples to remind myself that this is precisely what I once learned, believed and taught. Many of my friends and colleagues never went there. But I did.

But my confession includes more than echoing aberrations of cold, cruel theo-logic. Remember, we can also cite many "biblical" objections to a non-retributive Gospel. Herein, I want to attend to just one of

Christian theologies of retribution led to violent practices, including the torture and martyrdom of dissenters... I heard a radio preacher again making it clear that if Easter means *anything*, it begins with Christ dying to satisfy the wrath of God."



them—one of my old ace-in-the-hole, deal-killer proof-texts. Ready?

Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22).

That should end the discussion. The prosecution rests, your Honor.

Well it shouldn't. But it did—for me. See, God *can't* just forgive freely—that wouldn't be "just." *Sin must be paid for*. How? Only by the shedding of blood. Because why? Because a blood sacrifice is what God requires, what God needs, what God wants ... and by blood, we mean death. Death of the sinner, or alternatively, a ram, lamb, bull—or a Son. And so we taught, "Sin cannot simply be forgiven. It must be *punished*—by blood, by death—and only through the full payment of that penalty is God justified in forgiving sin."

We taught that. Yes. We did. It's right there in Hebrews 9.

Sorry.

I'm sorry I taught that.

I'm sorry I taught that the Bible teaches that. I'm sorry I didn't acknowledge the context—or even the whole verse. But you know, who wants to mess with an airtight system?

But now the gospel—the beautiful message, the

cruciform God—demands that we step back and see

the bigger picture, the agenda of Hebrews. This won't begin to be exhaustive, but I hope at least to point to a couple trailheads for further study.

1. The LAW requires...

The verse in question (9:22) actually says, "In fact, **the law requires** that nearly everything be cleansed by blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

So first, the shedding of blood is what **the law** requires. And just what is the book of Hebrews about? What are these chapters about?

Isn't the author's argument that our new covenant in Christ is superior to the old covenant of Moses—the *Law*—in every way?

The Law may *demand* one set of things (e.g. death and condemnation—2 Corinthians 3), but Christ (grace and truth! John 1:17) *delivers* something wholly other.

2. The inauguration of two covenants

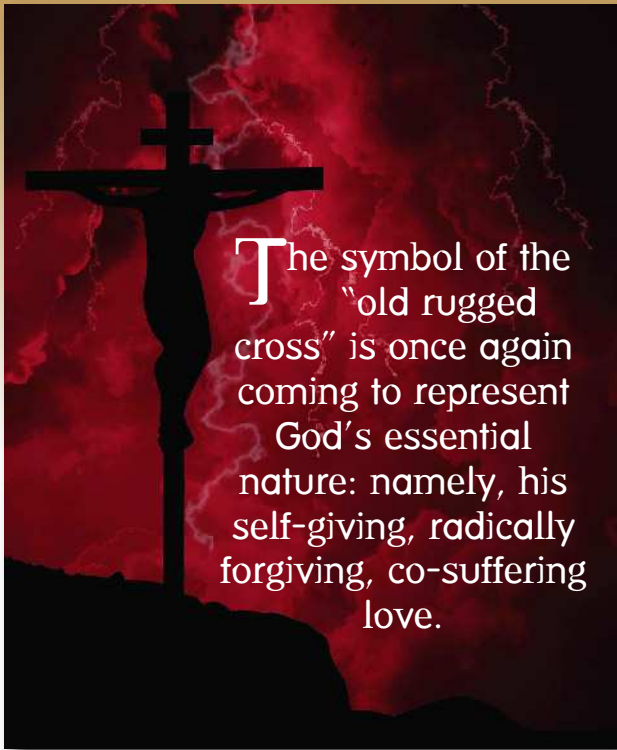
But it's more complex than that, because chapter 9 does seem to draw a parallel between the temple sacrifices (of sheep and bulls) and the heavenly sacrifice of Jesus.

Doesn't the author of Hebrews argue that *just* as the blood of animals was necessary for the shadow ministry of the earthly temple, *how much more* the blood of Jesus was necessary for the reality of the heavenly temple?

Not exactly. Chapter nine is not actually about forgiveness of sins through satisfaction of wrath *at all*. Rather, the chapter specifically recounts the *inauguration* of the two covenants. Moses' sacrifices purified the *old temple precincts* to initiate the old covenant, while Jesus' sacrifice purified the *new temple people* of the new covenant. As Santo Calarco shows at length in his essay, "This verse does not speak to the issue of the forgiveness of personal sins at all. Rather it refers to *the role of blood in the inauguration of priestly ministries*; earthly and heavenly."³

3. Ineffectual sacrifices

Again, the author draws contrasts to emphasize the superiority of Jesus' covenant. The most obvious is that the sacrificial system of Moses' law was *earthly*, while Christ's was *heavenly* (9:23-25). Moses'



The symbol of the “old rugged cross” is once again coming to represent God’s essential nature: namely, his self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love.

sacrifices had to be repeated in perpetuity, while Christ’s was sufficient once and for all (9:26-10:2). More importantly, Moses’ sacrifices didn’t even work. They were not only repetitious; they were ineffectual.

Note this well: under the law, *without* the shedding of blood, there is *no* forgiveness. But also, under the law, even *with* the shedding of blood, there was *no* forgiveness. Try reading 9:22 and then 10:4 together out loud:

(22) The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness...(3) But...(4) it is *impossible* for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

4. What is necessary versus what God requires

Now we could say (and I did) that while the rigors of the law required animal sacrifices, God’s wrath required a perfect human sacrifice. Is that what

Hebrews is pointing out? Not exactly. Or rather, not even remotely. First, God’s wrath is nowhere in view. Even euphemisms like “God’s justice” are completely absent in this context. This isn’t about that. At all. Second, there is a surprising chasm between “what is necessary” and “what God requires” (as in needs and desires). Was the death of Christ necessary to deliver us from the one who held us in

5. *From sacrifice to offering*
Further, and more subtly, the book of Hebrews deliberately moves from the language of ‘sacrifice’ of animals to the language of “offering” of Jesus. This is complex and I will leave the gory details to Michael Hardin (cf. *The Jesus-Driven Life*, Appendix 1 on Hebrews). The bottom line is that in Hebrews, even at the level of word usage, whatever sacrifice is being offered, it is first and foremost God-in-Christ’s *self-offering*—not a sacrifice to God in order to placate the angry deity, but rather a self-offering by a loving God to save an estranged people.

Certainly we can speak of the “sacrificial love” of God in

On the cross, in the face of human cruelty and bloodlust, God-in-Christ revealed his bottom line character: a mercy that endures *forever*—the loving-kindness that is *everlasting*.

bondage all our lives through death and the fear of death?

Absolutely. So says Hebrews 2:14-15. Christ had to die in order to enter the grave and overcome death—to emerge victorious from the grave with the keys of death and hades.

But was there anything in the character or nature or heart of God that required a sacrifice or payment in order to placate him—to somehow release God to forgive sin? No.

God is not enslaved by some higher goddess (*Justicia* or *Dike*) who can prevent him from freely forgiving—that’s the whole point of the book of Hosea. What was *necessary* for God in order to conquer death and what we imagine God *requires* to justify his own grace are entirely different questions.

Christ to speak of his lifework—surely laying down his life was exactly that. And yet Hebrews makes a deliberate linguistic move away from the language of OT *sacrifice* to the language of Jesus’ *offering*. Why does the author do this?

6. The Subversion of Sacrifice

This is where the author pulls out the stops in proclaiming a gospel that entirely subverts sacrifice. Hebrews does not settle for saying that Jesus is merely the superior sacrifice or the ultimate sacrifice. He sees in Jesus’ life and death an offering that exposes and negates the corrupt foundations of sacrifice altogether.

In chapter 10, the author of Hebrews harnesses the prophetic witness of the OT to

Know for a fact that “appeasement theology” persists and permeates much of Evangelical theology—broadly, popularly.

call into question the whole sacrificial system itself. Watch this: he puts the words of the Psalmist into Christ’s own mouth,

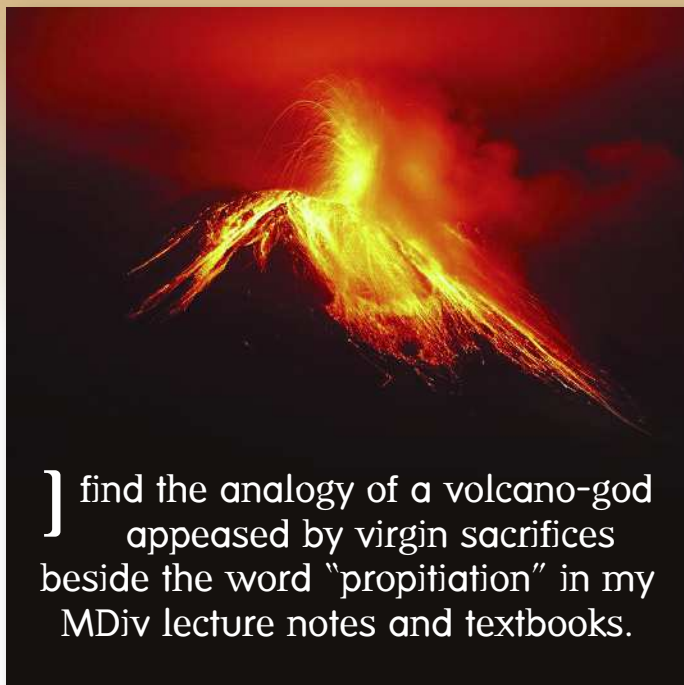
When Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you *did not desire*, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were *not pleased*. Then I said, ‘Here I am...I have come to do *your will*, my God’” (10:5-7).

So the blood of animals is *not* what God wanted (in spite of what *the law* demanded—vs. 8). Then what did what God want? I guess he would only be satisfied by the more potent blood sacrifice of Jesus.

Sort of, but not exactly. Not for any retributive reasons or punitive penchants. Verse 9 continues,

“Then he said, ‘Here I am, I have come to do your will.’ He sets aside the first to establish the second.”

What God desires (not demands) is the *offering of sacrificial obedience* (not sacrifice for sacrifice’s sake) *given in self-giving love and forgiveness*. This is not just the perspective of the author of Hebrews. The author is reminding us that already in the Psalms and Prophets, there is an ongoing, concerted anti-sacrificial critique. God doesn’t need or want animal sacrifices—the sacrifices he wants include a broken and contrite heart, a life of humility and obedience, and a



Find the analogy of a volcano-god appeased by virgin sacrifices beside the word “propitiation” in my MDiv lecture notes and textbooks.

society marked by justice and mercy.

Here’s a sample—*please don’t skim this part*:

Psalm 51

16 For You *do not delight in sacrifice*, otherwise I would give it; You are *not pleased with burnt offering*. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

Jeremiah 7

21 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, “Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat flesh. 22 For I *did not speak to your fathers, or command them* in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, *concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices*. 23 But this is what I commanded them, saying, ‘Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you will be My people; and you will walk in all the way which I command you, that it may be well with you.’”

Amos 5

21 “I hate, I reject your festivals, Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 “Even though you offer up to Me *burnt offerings and your grain offerings*, I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.

23 “Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.

24 “But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Micah 6

6 With what shall I come to the Lord

and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with *burnt offerings*, with yearling calves?

7 Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

8 He has told you, O man, what is good; And *what does the Lord require of you*, but to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? (emphasis added).

These are the desires and requirements of God. *NOT* the sacrifices associated with death and violence, but the offering of a God-honoring life. This kind of “sacrifice” was fulfilled most perfectly in the self-offering of Christ—in his God-pleasing life-and-death martyr-witness, even in the face of a corrupt temple establishment.

7. Jesus as High Priest

This signals a crucial shift in

the text. The blood sacrifice that secures forgiveness re-emerges throughout the rest of chapter 10. But from here on, Jesus is now seen as the High Priest who brings the sacrifice (vis-à-vis the victim being sacrificed). Why is this?

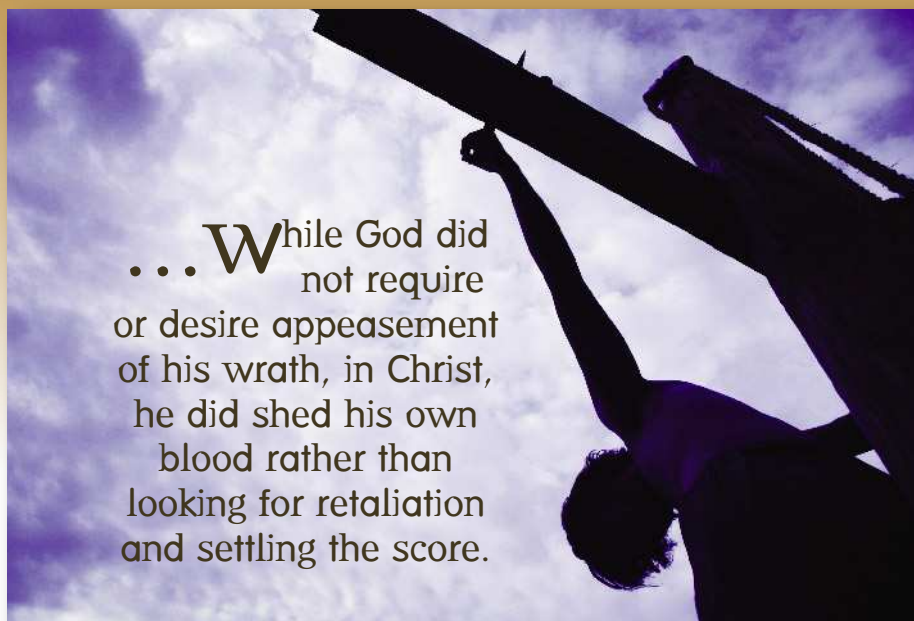
The shift is not at all random and should not be overlooked. Christ has given his whole life in obedience to God—doing justice, loving mercy, proclaiming peace, enacting grace—even to the bitter end, when religion and state do what they do: in a murderous self-preserving plot, they

If God is “satisfied,” it is not that his wrath is placated by a sufficiently torturous death, but rather, with the pleasure of a life that so beautifully reflected and ministered God’s own heart.

choose him as their scapegoat for execution. He becomes the innocent Lamb slain in their illegitimate and unholy sacrifice.

But what does Christ do? In obedience to and partnership with his Father, he overthrows the wickedness of their sacrifice by offering himself as the Father’s agent of redemption, extending forgiveness to all. Thus his blood comes to represent the self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love of God—and *not* the inherent need for appeasement through violence.

It is *this* blood—the gift of self-giving love—that Christ as High Priest uses to sprinkle clean the new temple and inaugurate the new covenant. It is with *this* blood—his offering of sacrificial forgiveness—that Christ our High Priest enters the Holy of Holies and offers to God. If God is “satisfied,” it is not that his wrath is placated by a



... **W**hile God did not require or desire appeasement of his wrath, in Christ, he did shed his own blood rather than looking for retaliation and settling the score.

sufficiently torturous death, but rather, with the pleasure of a life that so beautifully reflected and ministered God’s own heart.

Postscript

When the author of Hebrews says, “The law says...without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness,” on the one hand, he’s making a remark on what has been. In this article, I’ve asked, who requires it? From whom is it required? And why? We’ve seen that the Psalms and the Prophets, and now the book of Hebrews, seriously critiqued the Law’s claim as a wrong perspective. St. Paul goes on to call us to be “living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God” making our lives “spiritual acts of worship” (Romans 12:1). I’ve argued that Jesus’ life so fully embodied the kind of offering God is looking for that it ultimately led him to die as he lived—a life poured out in self-giving, radically forgiving,

co-suffering love. This, I would add, is what he meant by “Take up your cross and follow me.” This is what we mean when we sing, “There’s power in the blood.” Somehow, at least symbolically, yes, the shedding of blood is *necessary* and *inevitable* for those who carry that same cross and follow the Way of that same Lamb.

As Brian Zahnd put it to me, “When wrong has been done and forgiveness is a possibility, someone has to bleed and say, “I forgive.” **To follow Jesus is to forgive and bleed.**

Our answer leads us to see that while God did not require or desire appeasement of his wrath, in Christ, he did shed his own blood rather than looking for retaliation and settling the score. This is the cruciform God who would transform us into a cruciform and “Christo-form” people—those who emulate God’s Son in cruciform love. □

1. R.C. Sproul, “What do Expiation and Propitiation Mean?” *Ligonier Ministries* (Apr. 18, 2014).

2. Tim Challies, “The Just Wrath of a Holy God,” *Challies.com* (Aug. 14, 2012).

3. Santo Calarco, “Without the Shedding of Blood—Heb. 9:22,” *Clarion Journal* (Sept. 4, 2013).



CWRm

BRIAN ZAHND

Golgotha—Collision of Sin and Grace

“You killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead.” —The Apostle Peter, Acts 3:15

Golgotha is where the great crimes of humanity—pride, rivalry, blame, violence, domination, war and empire—are dragged into the searing light of divine judgment. At Golgotha we see the system of human organization that we blithely call “civilization” for what it is: an axis of power enforced by violence so corrupt that it is capable of murdering God in the name of what we call truth, justice and liberty.

Golgotha is also the place where the love of God achieves its greatest expression. As Jesus is lynched in the name of religious truth and imperial justice, he expresses the heart of God as he pleads for the pardon of his executioners. At the cross we discover that the God revealed in Christ would rather die in the name of love than kill in the name of freedom. Our Savior is Jesus Christ, not William Wallace.

The cross is both **hideous and glorious**, simultaneously ugly and beautiful. It’s as hideous as human sin and as glorious as divine love. It is a **collision of sin and grace**. But it is not a contest of equals. **In the end love and beauty win**. We call it Easter.

The cross is not a *quid pro quo* where God agrees to forgive upon receipt of his Son’s murder. The cross is *not* an economic transaction whereby God gains the capital to forgive. These legal and fiscal models for understanding the cross simply will not do.

Jesus does not save us from God; Jesus reveals God as Savior. Good Friday does not reveal a monstrous deity requiring a virgin to be thrown into a volcano or a firstborn son to be nailed to a tree. Good Friday reveals the depths of human depravity and the greater depths of God’s love.

Before the cross is anything else, it is a catastrophe. It is the unjust and violent lynching of an innocent man. It is the murder of God. God did not will the murder of his Son; he simply knew it would occur. When Jesus prayed for forgiveness on the cross he was not

acting contrary to the nature of God, he was revealing the nature of God as forgiving love.

Where do we find God on Good Friday? Is God found in Caiaphas seeking a sacrificial scapegoat? Is God found in Pilate requiring a punitive execution?

Or is God found in Jesus—absorbing sin, responding with forgiveness and reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19)?

The crucifixion is not what God inflicts upon Jesus in order to forgive, the crucifixion is what God in Christ endures as he forgives. The cross is where God absorbs sin and recycles it into forgiveness. Jesus died for us...not for God.

The crucifixion is not the ultimate attempt to change God’s mind about us—the cross is the ultimate attempt to change our mind about God. *God is not like* Caiaphas seeking a sacrifice. *God is not like* Pilate requiring an execution. *God is like* Jesus, absorbing sin and forgiving sinners.

The cross is not about payment—the cross is about forgiveness.

Good Friday is not about divine wrath, Good Friday is about divine love.

Calvary is not where we see how just God is—Calvary is where we see how unjust civilization is. As long as we think Jesus died for God instead of dying for us, we will never see the sinfulness of human civilization and the beauty of the divine alternative: the kingdom of God.

The justice of God is not retributive justice. In the end retributive justice changes nothing. The justice of God is entirely restorative. The only thing God will call justice is setting the world right, not punishing the innocent.

The bottom line is this: God did not kill Jesus, human civilization did. We did. Jesus absorbed the blow in love and forgave us. The Father vindicated his Son on Easter. Now Jesus calls us to follow him into the kingdom of grace, the kingdom of love, the kingdom of God.

Let us follow the Lamb. □

THE VERDICT

“Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out.” (John 12:31)

Christians are generally accustomed to speaking of the cross as the place and time where God enacted judgment on the world. But what does this actually mean, and what are its implications?

Usually, the cross as the *place* of judgment is understood to mean the physical location where God poured out his wrath upon Jesus. Here, *wrath* is understood as the punishment for our sin which God, in his justice, is obliged to mete out: namely death. And Jesus, the sinless Lamb of God, gamely hangs on the cross in our place and bears the brunt of God’s implacable justice so that we, in spite of our sin, can escape punishment.

And the cross as the *time* of judgment is understood as the point in history when God sovereignly intervened in human affairs to solve humanity’s sin problem as described above.

So there we have it: **time and place come together at the cross** as Jesus bears God’s punishment for our sin. This, then, is the judgment of the cross: a resounding verdict of “Guilty!” pronounced upon the human race by God, accompanied by an unappealable death sentence. The twist is that Christ comes

BY ROB GRAYSON

CWRm

IS IN... AND ALL HIS JUDGMENTS ARE MERCY!

in as an innocent victim to serve the sentence in our place.

This is what I believed without a second thought for most of my Christian life. Until I began, through a process of reading and thinking, to see some gaping holes in it:

- **Hole Number 1:** In this view, God is not free to simply forgive sin; he is beholden to a higher principle of justice that must be obeyed. This is a major philosophical and theological problem, because **if God is God, there clearly cannot be any higher principle than himself by which he is bound.**

- **Hole Number 2:** Following on from hole number 1, since God is bound by a higher principle of justice that must be satisfied, the only way he can forgive us is through some kind of transaction. His end of the transaction is that someone has to die, since the wages of sin is death. Jesus agrees to be that someone, so God can now forgive us because his perfect son has died in our place, thus balancing the scales of justice. The problem here is that this is supposedly the same God who elsewhere in scripture instructs us to *freely* forgive others, **even as we have been forgiven.** So God requires a different standard of his children—*free forgiveness*—than he himself is prepared to meet. Hmm.

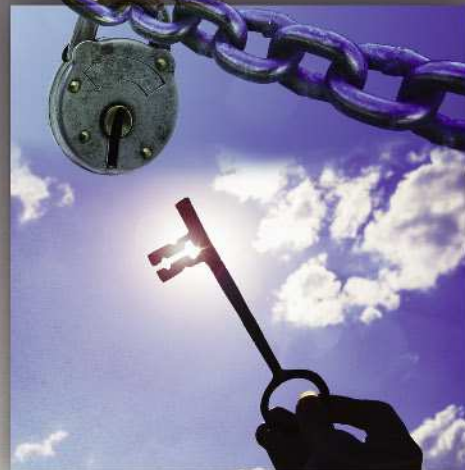
- **Hole Number 3:** This understanding makes God into a God who uses scapegoating to accomplish his purposes. *In this view, Jesus is a God-ordained scapegoat.* The groundbreaking

work of French philosopher and anthropologist René Girard has shown that scapegoating is a uniquely human phenomenon that lies at the very foundation of human society. Scapegoating is an evil practice because it shifts blame for a community's ills onto an innocent victim and then buries that victim so that life can go on as before. The innocent is made to pay the price for the guilty, so that the guilty can carry on unreformed. Do we really think the God who is supposedly the apex of love and compassion would endorse such a practice, let alone deliberately use it as a mechanism of justice?

- **Hole Number 4:** This view treats sin as a legal problem to be settled, an equation to be solved. In doing so, it shifts sin from the concrete to the abstract. Thus, the event of the cross does little or nothing to actually address the here-and-now reality of humanity's sin; it merely promises a clean legal record to anyone who puts their faith in Jesus.

I could go on, but I think those holes are already quite large enough.

In this legal view, then, the outcome of the judgment that takes place at the cross is this: humanity is found deserving of death *because God must actively mete out punishment to all sinners*; and God is not averse to engaging in the evil practice of scapegoating in order to see Lady Justice satisfied. This judgment, I contend, is as much an indictment on God as



it is of humanity. Both humanity and God are found wanting: humanity because of our sin and God because of his willingness—nay, his requirement—to deal out violent death in response.


Understanding the Judgment of the Cross

If not sin as a universal abstraction, what exactly was being judged at the cross?

Let me first make a statement, which I will then try to unpack: **the cross judges the world in that it proves that none of our violence or accusation was ever rooted in God.**

Humanity's number one problem is and always has been violence. Physical violence, verbal violence, mental violence. Violence expressed in war, in oppression, in racial hatred, in intolerance. Violence manifested in mistrust, suspicion, accusation and blame. We don't mind talking about *sin* because it's such an imprecise, abstract term that it's easy to hide from its implications. But as soon as we talk about *violence* in its many and various expressions, we are all implicated.

So what has this to do with the judgment of the cross?



FAR FROM REVEALING GOD TO BE
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Well, one of the main ways in which humanity has sought to justify its violence throughout history is by claiming it to be divinely sanctioned, or even divinely ordained. We can see this in various places throughout the Old Testament, and we can still see it in the world today. And if God, the ultimate authority, sanctions human violence, how can the cycle of violence ever be broken?

Answer: It can't, and so the world keeps on spinning ever faster along a trajectory of escalating violence. At the end of that way lies apocalyptic destruction.

What happened, then, at the cross? **Far from revealing God to be the ultimate dispenser of violence, the cross showed that God would rather die than engage in violence of any kind.**

The cross drew a sharp distinction between humanity and God. Humanity gravitates towards violence as the final solution for every problem, and is prepared to engage in scapegoating and lynching to preserve the status quo. God, on the other hand, eschews all forms of violence and, in going to the cross, *exposes* scapegoating as the structural evil that it is.

God is not judged and found wanting at the cross: on the contrary, he is decisively shown to be genuinely, truly, perfectly good and non-violent. What is judged is the world, the *kosmos*, civilization and the wicked systems of violence and injustice that underpin it. And, most importantly, humankind's favorite excuse for its violence—*God told me to!*—is forever obliterated.

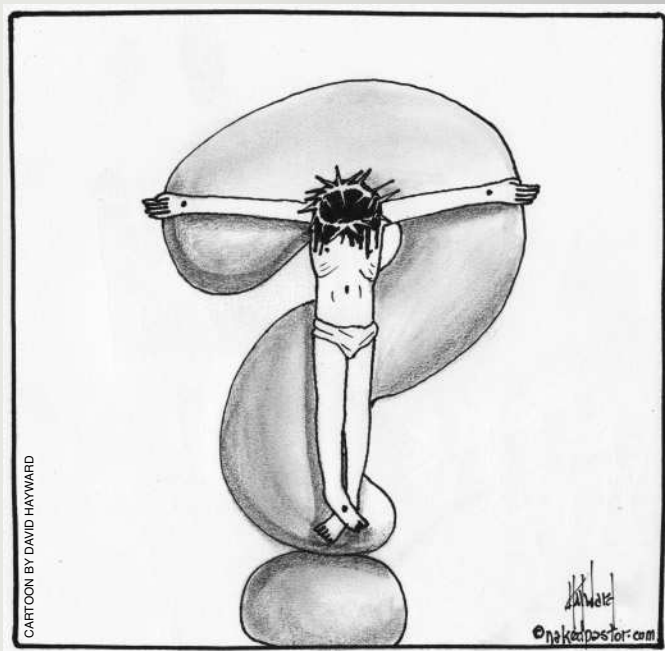
One final point: I believe the cross was and is a judgment that has power to transform individual and collective life in the here and now, not simply to leave the status quo undisturbed pending a post-mortem deliverance. And how does it achieve such transformation? By starkly revealing the problem of human violence and showing the only way in which the cycle of violence can be broken: free and unconditional forgiveness, first from God to humankind, and then from human to human. As he hangs on the

cross, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." And as he returns from the grave three days later, he announces not vengeance but peace. The cycle is broken.

The cross is a judgment, yes, but it is a judgment of light and life. The question is, are we prepared to see it that way, release our tight grip on violence and enter into the virtuous cycle of forgiveness and peace? □

Rob Grayson is a freelance translator from Coventry, England. Having recently undergone seismic shifts in his faith, he has a growing passion for amateur theology and likes to write about the deconstruction and reconstruction of faith, theology and Christian culture. You can read his blog at www.faimmeetsworld.com.

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" You can't exegete your way out of the despair in that universal question. The cross is a metaphor for the mysterious suffering of all humanity. It is where we cry, "It is finished!" but where we hope to hear, "This is enough!"



Jesus at the Gates of Hell

BY DANIELLE SHROYER

In theologian Jurgen Moltmann's autobiography *A Broad Place*, he has a chapter about his life as a prisoner of war, an incredibly formative and transformative experience for him. It is the reason we have his work today. It is a portrait of a German POW in World War II having conversion experience that leads to a theology of hope.

My heart is heavy today with some dear beloved beautiful friends who struggle with depression and I couldn't help but stop on this page and lift it up as my feeble prayer for them this morning. Here's an excerpt from Moltmann:

This early companionship with Jesus, the brother in suffering and the companion on the road to the land of freedom, has never left me ever since, and I became more and more assured of it. I have never decided for Christ once and for all, as is often demanded of us. I have decided again and again in specific terms for the discipleship of Christ when situations were serious and it was necessary. But right down to the present day, after almost 60 years, I am certain that then, in 1945, and there, in the Scottish prisoner of war camp, in the dark pit of my soul, Jesus sought me and found me. 'He came to seek and save that which was lost,' and so he came to me when I was lost.

There is a medieval picture which shows Christ descending into hell and opening the gate for someone who points to himself as if



he were saying. 'And are you coming for me?' That is how I have always felt. Jesus' God-forsakenness on the cross showed me where God is present—where he was in my experiences of death, and where he is going to be in whatever comes. Whenever I read the Bible again with the searching eyes of the God-forsaken prisoner I was, I am always assured of its divine truth.

There are **two really beautiful spiritual truths at work in these recollections.** The first is the description of how we actually live into our faith, which is not all-at-once but again and again and again. I grew up Baptist, so I'm familiar with the idea that this one big decision can be all you need to change your life. And *though I absolutely believe we have moments that do turn us around or awaken us, I also know it to be true that faith is lived out much like my marriage is: not at the altar one day, but every morning and all throughout the day, as I choose again and again.*

Discipleship really comes into focus in serious situations that force us to choose how we will respond. And we hope we will respond in a way that marks us as Jesus' followers. But then, sometimes we don't. Which is where the second part comes in (although I don't think he meant it as a one-two punch).

The second beautiful truth is of course that we have been found. We have all found ourselves lost at one point or another, and most honestly at many points along the way. We've found ourselves inches from falling into the pit of despair. When the shadows are

closing in and we lose sight of any way forward, Jesus seeks us out. Good shepherd that he is, he finds the one lost sheep who took a turn into the brambles and brings her back to the fold.

We are marked as his, which simply means: **there is Someone Who loves us and Who will always come for us.** Even when we get lost in the brambles. Even when we're sitting in a prison camp and the world seems to be falling in around us.

**...we have been found
...When the shadows are closing in and we lose sight of any way forward, Jesus seeks us out. Good shepherd that he is, he finds the one lost sheep who took a turn into the brambles and brings her back to the fold.**

Easter icons of Christ's resurrection rescuing Adam and Eve express that same quality of Moltmann's elated surprise. He asks: "Who, me? You're coming for me, Jesus? All this way? All the way down here in my hell?"

Yes. Yes he is. Yes he does. It's not yet Holy Saturday, when we proclaim what the creeds confess, that Jesus descends into hell and opens the gates, but Holy Saturday happens, as we know, all the time. In the most unlikely of times. Often, just in the nick of time.

Life can be so hard. Life can be hell. I have dear friends who struggle with depression, who battle ghosts of the past and

trauma that always seems to be lurking around the corner no matter how far forward they've come. It's easy to feel resigned to hell, like you have to stay there, like it's your rightful home address. The most holy thing God ever did was to meet us there and reach out his hand as we crouch there, nearly too afraid to whisper, to hope, "Are you coming for me?"



Yes. From the depths of hell to the height of Easter's heavens, his answer is always yes.

There is Someone Who loves us and Who will always come for us.

God. I don't think I'll ever get over the beauty of that. □

Danielle Shroyer is the author of Where Jesus Prayed: Illuminations on the Lord's Prayer in the Holy Land (Paraclete, 2015), The Boundary-Breaking God: An Unfolding Story of Hope and Promise (Jossey-Bass, 2009) and speaks often on issues of theology, church leadership and emerging communities of faith.



CWR_m

ZACK HUNT

COSTLY GRACE

The Importance of Doubt

We do a pretty good job of remembering Good Friday and celebrating Easter Sunday. But we don't seem to know what to do with the day in-between: Holy Saturday. It makes sense if you think about it.

We don't know what to do with Christians who struggle with doubt. We tend to either shove answers down their throats, criticize them for "weakness," or ignore their doubt. Like "Doubting Thomases" among us, Holy Saturday is an unwelcome guest we really don't know what to do with. It doesn't force us to confront the radical sacrifice of the cross, nor does it allow us to celebrate the joy of the resurrection. Instead, it commemorates a time enveloped by that feeling we're told *real* disciples shouldn't have: doubt.

Yet, on that first Holy Saturday, that's exactly how the first disciples felt. They hid in fear because they had just witnessed the death of their Lord and anticipated their own deaths to follow quickly thereafter. They couldn't see that resurrection was lingering just over the horizon. All they could see was defeat and despair and so they did what anyone of us would do in their situation: they doubted.

More than just losing faith, the disciples lost hope. The disciples weren't cowering in fear because they were struggling to agree with a list of intellectual propositions. They were cowering in fear because *they lost hope*. Their Lord was dead and they had no hope of him ever returning. *They lost hope* in the promise of his kingdom coming to earth as it is in heaven. *They lost hope* in his promises of life and salvation. *They lost hope* in themselves.

But they weren't alone in their doubt and despair. The biblical narrative is filled with stories of the people of God struggling with doubt and overwhelmed by hopelessness. In fact, we have only to turn to the Psalms to see this struggle with doubt on full display.

Maybe it's no coincidence that the words of the psalmist were some of the last words Jesus ever spoke: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1). It's almost like Jesus was taking on the cry of God's people, a

cry the disciples were surely echoing on Holy Saturday—a cry almost all of us find ourselves shouting at one point or another in our lives.

If Jesus really was echoing our own struggle on the cross, it seems that Holy Saturday is an important reminder that hopelessness and doubt are inevitably part of our story. When you believe incredible things like a God who became human and that the world will be made new, the pain of life and the physical absence of that incarnate God make it all but impossible to not struggle with doubt and hopelessness as we wait, seemingly forever, for that day when *the faith shall be made sight*.

We doubt and we lose hope—not because we're weak, but because our faith is so strong and what we hope for so extraordinary that when our faith is confronted with pain, death, war and everything else that stands opposed to the kingdom of God but which seems to rule the present day, we understandably lose hope that the kingdom of God will ever dawn.

That is why we need to rediscover the importance of Holy Saturday and the doubt that comes with it. Holy Saturday should also remind us that if Jesus was willing to let Thomas poke and prod him with his doubts even as he stood right before his eyes, then the Body of Christ must also be willing to embrace those who struggle with their faith.

We are a people who live between two resurrections. The first resurrection saw Jesus walk out of the tomb. The final resurrection will see all of us walk into a new world where death and mourning and crying and pain are no more. But as we wait for the final resurrection, it shouldn't come as any surprise that we occasionally find ourselves in the same place as the first disciples—feeling abandoned and doubting that the kingdom will ever come because everything we see around us says it won't.

A lot of days will feel like Holy Saturday, but like it was for the first disciples, Holy Saturday is not the final chapter in our story. Resurrection is coming, even if we can't see it—or don't believe it. **Resurrection is coming!** □

STRANGE LAND OF

BY GRANT CORRIVEAU

Big John leaned in, one massive hand on my desk and the other punctuating the air for emphasis: “Tell me—what does it mean when your doctor tells you not to sign any long-term contracts?”

He was beaming his usual ear-to-ear grin which made me suspect he knew something the rest of us hadn’t discovered. In his deep gravely voice he asked: “Do you know what just occurred to me? *Being born causes death*. Think about that.”

My friend paused for a second, then he boomed a hearty laugh that resonated from his barrel chest. He spun around and strode over to his own desk to resume his daily work as an instructor at our airline’s training academy. John was a master at guiding pilots into the mysteries of Boeing jets. If anyone was qualified to share insights about life and death he certainly was. As an ex-captain, now grounded by heart problems, he’d stared death in the eye and felt its cold grip more than once. His doctors finally stabilized his condition. Today he had just returned from his regular check-up to share this new morsel: *Being born causes death*.

While I’ve never forgotten John’s wry observation, it has become more poignant of late. Before I tell you why I should

warn you: I have some *bad news* and some *really bad news* and then finally some *really, really Good News*.

Bad News and Really Bad News

First, the *bad news*—I’m dying. I have cancer. Although the surgeon removed my prostate gland the pathology report indicates some rogue cells still remain and there has been metastasis into my lymph nodes. I’m facing an ongoing battle. I’m currently monitoring PSA levels and waiting to see if other forms of therapy might help. Not the news I was hoping for when this saga began, but there it is. *Being born causes death*.

Now brace yourself for the *really bad news*—you’re dying too. You and everyone else we know. Knowing this explains why I laughed when my doctor told me he was transferring my medical care strategy from curative to palliative. “Isn’t all medical care palliative?” I asked. “Being healthy is just the slowest way to die.” Cancer hasn’t really changed much. I was dying before the diagnosis and I’m still dying, but now I’ve been jolted into a face-to-face relationship with death, called “the last enemy to be destroyed” by Paul (1 Corinthians 15:26).

Death’s dark mysteries are no longer impersonal theological concepts for me. They loom large in my daily walk—so large that they threaten to topple my world. Death is bigger than my brain can handle. My consciousness

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DREAD AND DENIAL

A person is walking away from the camera down a path in a misty forest. The trees are tall and thin, and the ground is covered in fallen leaves. The overall atmosphere is somber and reflective.

cannot contain it, or cannot categorize, reduce or resolve it into a nice tidy bundle of things to believe that will make everything all right. Death often scares the daylights out of me as my mind reels with questions like: *Why do we have to die? And why do we resist it?* If it's inevitable (and it sure seems to be) and if heaven or the after-life is as wonderful as we're told, then why on earth do we strain so hard to avoid going there?

The Reality of Death

Jesus once referred to death as sleep (John 11:11-14). When Jesus' disciples didn't get it he said more clearly: *Lazarus is dead*. Viewing death as a form of sleep is reassuring. It's something we can awaken from as Jesus illustrated more than once. Jesus holds the keys to life and death. So why doesn't he abolish it? Does dying serve some useful purpose?

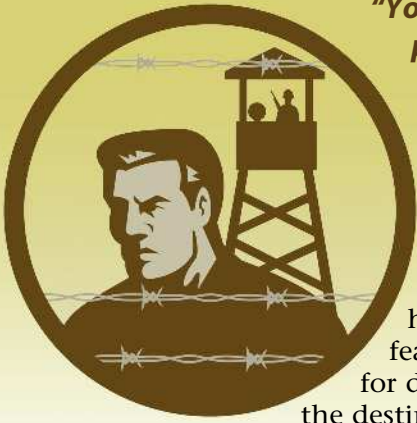
I've seen how death strips us of everything that defines us. Power, prestige, athletic and intellectual ability, beauty, strength, wealth, talent—you name it. Death is the one and only experience that renders all humans absolutely equal. Power can't deny it, money can't buy it off, sex can't seduce it away—none of the strategies we use to feel better about ourselves or hold sway over other people can ward off death. The Bony Finger points at each of us eventually.

I tried to talk with a friend about death, but he responded

a bit too glibly that he's not afraid to die. A lot of people I know claim that. But I don't really believe them. I used to say that too—before my cancer diagnosis. Then suddenly I felt that tug deep in my bowels and that weakening of the knees and spinning in the brain. Fear of death isn't anything we know in our heads, it's a visceral reaction. It is entangled with our self-preservation instincts which are ingrained within every fiber of our being and work beyond our control. *The reality of death propels us into the strange land of dread and denial.*

So, in this *strange land of dread and denial*, how can I avoid either extreme and how can I better understand death? The dead do not talk about it and neither do most of the living. We keep death as far away from our daily lives as possible. A philosopher once said, "If you want to know what water is like don't ask the fish." The fish knows little about water because he has nothing to compare it with. That is until he enthusiastically lunges at a bug on the surface and finds himself tumbling in an alien fluid called air that he didn't know existed. The frantic gasping for breath of a fish out of water seems akin to my initial cancer diagnosis. I am suddenly floundering in strange realms—gasping.

Perhaps this is what the author of Ecclesiastes was warning us of when he wrote: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a



“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

—James Stockdale, US Naval officer who survived seven-and-a-half years as a POW in North Vietnam.

house of feasting, for death is the destiny of everyone; the living should take this to heart” (Ecclesiastes 7:2). But how do we do that? He also wrote that God set eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11) and that is where my struggle seems to originate. Something within me cries that I am meant to live forever. Death says otherwise.

Acceptance or Rage?

As a society we view death as a monstrous overwhelming and invincible enemy so terrifying

Huxley: *A belief in hell and the knowledge that every ambition is doomed to frustration at the hands of a skeleton have never prevented the majority of human beings from behaving as though death were no more than an unfounded rumor.*

But when this “unfounded rumor” crashes down upon us then dread floods our senses leaving us trembling like a deer in the headlights—frozen—unable to act. Sadly both dread and denial steal away our final days and prevent us from living life to its fullness. I am determined that this not happen so I must move on from Why? to What Now? —

I STILL TREMBLE WHEN WAITING FOR TEST RESULTS AND MY MOODS TOO FREQUENTLY SWING WITH EVERY TWINGE OF PAIN THAT REMINDS ME OF MY DISEASE. I AM AFRAID TO LET GO OF THIS LIFE BECAUSE WHATEVER I’M ASCENDING INTO IS KNOWN BY FAITH ALONE AND FAITH CAN BE A STRUGGLE.

that, like Harry Potter’s arch villain, his name must not be mentioned. How do I handle such a beast? Should I face the inevitable and embrace him or should I rail against him? Do I bow out gracefully or “rage, rage against the dying of the light?”¹

I don’t think I’ll discover pat answers to mysteries that have persisted since the beginning of time but I see how, in this *strange land of dread and denial*, we humans react to death in one of those ways. Denial is expressed brilliantly by writer and philosopher Aldous

Given my prognosis, *how now shall I live?*

James Stockdale² was an American Naval officer who survived seven-and-a-half years of brutal captivity in a North Vietnamese prisoner of war camp. He once described how some of his fellow prisoners died—he called them the optimists: *...they were the ones who said, “We’re going to be out by Christmas.” And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, “We’re going to be out by Easter.” And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then*

I’VE DECIDED THAT THIS SO-CALLED STOCKDALE’S PARADOX IS THE KEY TO ESTABLISHING A FOOHOLD IN THIS STRANGE LAND BETWEEN DREAD AND DENIAL. I NEED TO AVOID THE TRAPS OF FALSE OPTIMISM AND LAY HOLD OF AN AUTHENTIC FAITH BY WHICH I WILL PREVAIL IN THE END.

*Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.*³

Stockdale concluded: *This is a very important lesson. You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end—which you can never afford to lose—with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.*⁴

I’ve decided that this so-called Stockdale’s Paradox is the key to establishing a foothold in *this strange land between dread and denial*. I need to avoid the traps of false optimism and lay hold of an authentic faith by which I will prevail in the end. How to do this?

Confronting my current reality means embracing the harsh facts of my illness and my own mortality. But how do I deal with the dark clouds of gloom that threaten to plunge me into depression? I recall times during my career as an airline pilot when I had to leave on a long trip that I wasn’t looking forward to. I love flying airplanes but sometimes I fought a deep reluctance about leaving the familiarity of home to face the rigors of travel, irregular schedules, bad weather and the many other job challenges; and always those lonely monotonous hotel rooms. The shadows would lift only when

I was en-route to the airport and the transition to my “other life” was underway. Transitions can be hard.

Traversing the Road Not Yet Taken

Now I face the most mysterious transition of all. Thankfully others have walked here before and they have blessed me by sharing what they learned. Their “travel tips” are found in materials supplied by doctors, hospice organizations, illness support groups and organizations. They comprise the practical things we can do to ensure our suitcases are packed, our passports are up-to-date and we’re ready for the voyage in this *strange land of dread and denial*.

Of course as a follower of Jesus, I’ve looked for examples of how he faced his own death. At one point near the end of his ministry Jesus explained to his disciples the violent destiny awaiting him in Jerusalem. Peter took him aside and tried to dissuade him. Jesus reminded Peter that he was ensnared in a human perspective rather than God’s (Matthew 16:21).

Like Peter, I get caught up in what I know, taste, touch and feel in the here-and-now. When I manage to imagine a higher perspective that is perhaps a little closer to God’s, I feel more of His peace.

Later on when Jesus was awaiting his arrest in Gethsemane he prayed so earnestly that he sweated *drops like blood...* (Luke 22:39-44). It’s strangely comforting to know that even Jesus-the-man wrestled for his faith.

I still tremble when waiting for test results and my moods too frequently swing with every twinge of pain that reminds me of my disease. I am afraid to let go of this life because *whatever I’m ascending into is known by faith alone and faith can be a struggle*. Jesus’ death and resurrection was not captured on video, not uploaded on Youtube, was attested to by only a few reporters and are continually denied, berated and undermined by critics, doubters and even my own experience.

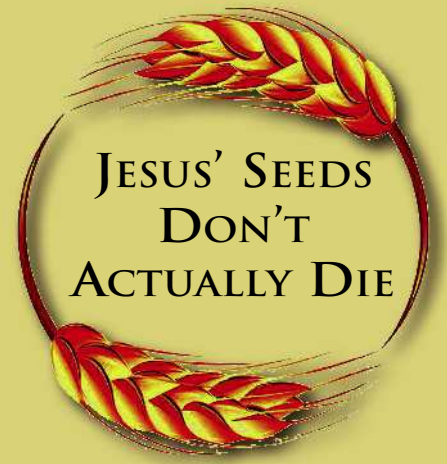
Job asked, *If a man dies will he live again?* (Job 14:14). Not that I’ve ever seen. Everything I know tells me that the dead stay dead. Ultimately my hope in a higher life is completely reliant on faith.

But this is no time for empty jargon and ceremony, cold technical doctrines or vain ideals that don’t persuade me to my core. If I want to avoid the discouragement that destroyed Stockdale’s “optimistic” comrades, then the only hope that will suffice must be profoundly true and dependent upon something better than my feeble ability to believe.

Grace=Resting in Peace

The deepest conviction of faith and the most profound assurance I’ve found after more than fifty years of poking into the many nooks and crannies of religion, faith and philosophy is God’s grace as expressed in Jesus Christ.

God’s grace assures me that when I’m at my weakest I don’t have to do or achieve anything. I can just rest. I need only trust.



In Christ, death is no longer the termination of life. It is at most a suspension (or transition) as we look forward to the final resurrection.

“Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds” (John 12:24).

Jesus wasn’t a mistaken biologist who thought seeds actually die. He knew they do *not* die. That’s his point. In God’s good time, seeds sprout and flourish.

Jesus’ resurrection would ensure that those who pass away don’t truly die. They “fall asleep” and later “awaken.” The Great Anthropologist knew that people don’t actually perish, any more than seeds do.

Athanasius clarifies this in *On the Incarnation*: “Have no fears then. Now that the Savior of all has died on our behalf, we who believe in Christ no longer die, as people used to die, to fulfill the threat of the law. That condemnation has come to an end; and now, by the grace of the resurrection, corruption has been banished; each of us is set free from our mortal bodies in God’s good time, so we may receive a better resurrection. Like seeds cast into the earth, we do NOT perish in our dissolution, but like them shall rise again, death having been brought to nothing by the grace of the Savior.” *Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory?* (1 Corinthians 15:55).

—the Editors

I HOPE THAT EASTER MIGHT BRING EVERYONE TO A DEEPER AWARENESS THAT THIS LIFE ITSELF IS A TERMINAL CONDITION. BEING BORN CAUSES DEATH.

A Rich Mullins song now drops onto the platter of my inner jukebox and underlines this realization:

*So hold me Jesus, 'cause I'm shaking like a leaf
You have been King of my glory
Won't You be my Prince of Peace?*⁵

I may never fully experience that inner *peace that passes understanding* (Philippians 4:7) that I've heard about (obviously it would be nice), but still I can draw assurance knowing that none of this is under my control.

The next song on my inner playlist is from the rock opera Jesus Christ Superstar: *To conquer death you only have to die. You only have to die.*⁶

My doubts and fears and questions could tug at me right up to the moment I expire—and only resolve later. I'm okay with that because I've realized that **my faith does not hinge on my ability to believe anything or do anything.** Rather it all hangs on Jesus' own faith and on his resurrection and his promise of a wondrous life beyond the grave.

The Really Really Good News

Here then is the *really really Good News* I mentioned earlier. **It does not depend on me.** Jesus saves—not me, not you—Jesus.

This is not trivial. It means that Jesus promises to hold my little version of *I Am* intact while navigating the great chasm between this life and eternal life. My inabilities, limits, shortcomings, and human weaknesses will never stand in his way. This is the one and only thing I cling to now. It's all I have. In the face of death I can do nothing—but God can and will (Philippians 2:13).

My prayer now is that I might truly live out my remaining days completely occupying this *strange land of dread and denial*. In this quest I am inspired by Paul's emphatic reminder: *I am convinced that neither death nor life...will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8:38-39).

I remember again Big John's smile and ready laughter; his purposeful way of living each day with joy and humor. He did so authentically, as someone who knew his days were numbered, yet was determined to make the most of them. It seems to me that Big John had taken to heart what was written in Ecclesiastes hundreds of years ago:

I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all

their toil—this is the gift of God (Ecclesiastes 3:12-13).

As I write these words Easter is only days away. A **terminal diagnosis makes this Easter more meaningful than ever.** I hope that Easter might bring everyone to a deeper awareness that this life itself is a terminal condition. *Being born causes death.*

Embracing our predicament without resorting to dread or denial could just be the first step that moves us to change our world—for the better. Better because we'll live with a truer sense of our place in the world...*we are but grass...we bloom and die* (1 Peter 1:24).

Given the finality of death, its reality and in my case, its immediacy: *how now shall we live?* Perhaps we will be compelled by the immediacy of finding our true priorities. Perhaps we will discover something worth laying down our lives for—whether that be all at once or one day at a time. Perhaps we will discover more deeply what Jesus meant when he said...*you will know the truth and the truth will set you free* (John 8:32). □

1. Do not go gentle into that goodnight; Dylan Thomas, 1914-1953

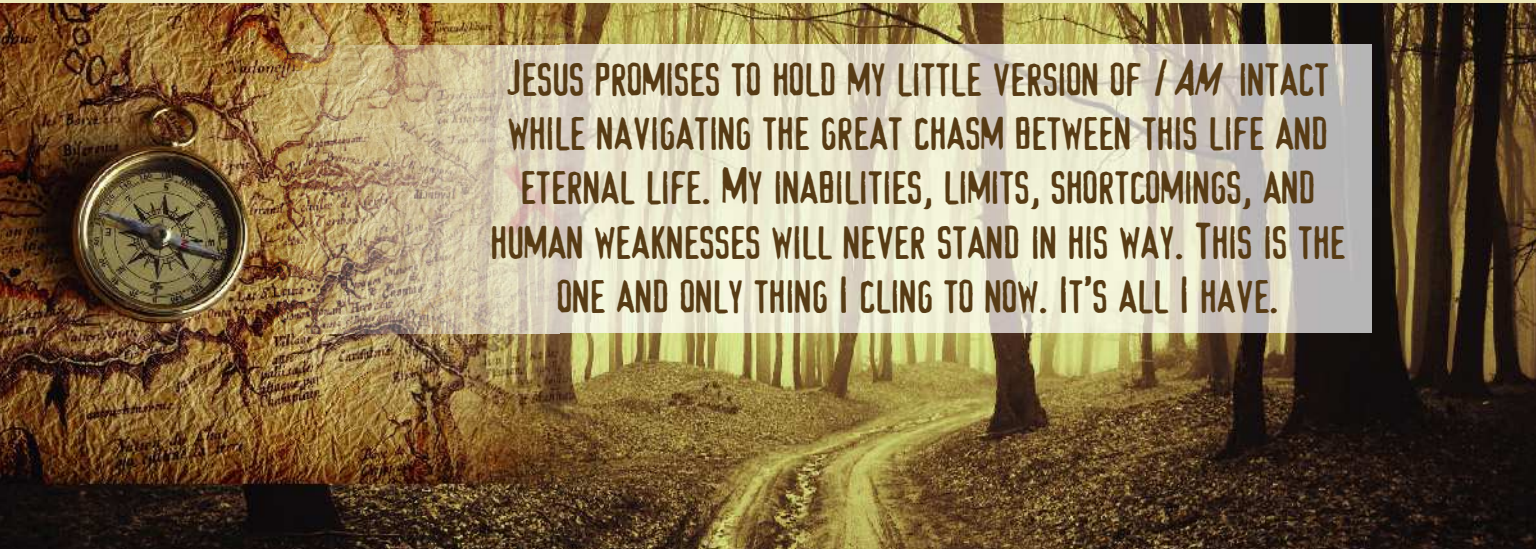
2. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Stockdale; referenced March 31, 2015

3. http://www.jimcollins.com/lib/goodToGreat/ch4_p83.html, referenced March 30, 2015

4. *ibid*

5. Hold Me Jesus; Rich Mullins; *A Liturgy, a Legacy, & a Ragamuffin Band*

6. Poor Jerusalem; Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber



JESUS PROMISES TO HOLD MY LITTLE VERSION OF *I AM* INTACT WHILE NAVIGATING THE GREAT CHASM BETWEEN THIS LIFE AND ETERNAL LIFE. MY INABILITIES, LIMITS, SHORTCOMINGS, AND HUMAN WEAKNESSES WILL NEVER STAND IN HIS WAY. THIS IS THE ONE AND ONLY THING I CLING TO NOW. IT'S ALL I HAVE.

Grant Corriveau is a retired airline pilot, part-time writer and full-time husband. He has been on a life-long journey of revelation with the God who turns out to look exactly like Jesus Christ. Grant now hopes to appreciate what that really means.

P.S. from Grant Corriveau

When I talk about “fear of death” I’m referring to the process by which we descend, one step after another from our state of health and independent ability, towards an endpoint where we are left with only One Thing.

This descent is by nature always shocking, painful and frightening. I’m reminded of my mother saying, as she faced the last few weeks of her death by Lymphoma, “I’m not afraid of dying (the endpoint), I just don’t want to suffer too much along the way.”

One of my cousins once described her experience at a local “spiritual awareness weekend.” At the beginning the guru had everyone write down a list of the ten most important aspects of their lives. These could include favorite activities (hiking, jogging), talents (playing a musical instrument, singing, writing, drawing, painting,) relationships (with spouses, children, best friends), characteristics (long hair, blue eyes, good health, bright smile, lovely teeth, strong muscles...). Anything at all that they could think of that helped them enjoy their lives and contributed to the richness of their lives and actually defined their individual identities.

He had them think for a few minutes and order the list from most important at the top down to least relative importance at the bottom.

Then he said: “Imagine now what your life would be like if the tenth item on the list was taken from you.” He then sent them away for a

sufficient time frame so they could meditate deeply about this loss and the impact it would have on them. Then they came together to process and share what they were experiencing.

Over the course of the next two days this procedure continued, working to the top of the list. Needless to say there were tears and heartaches as the exercise progressed as people dealt with the emotional impact of these losses.

Finally, on the last day, after all items on the list had been “erased” from their lives, their guru asked them to consider one last question: “Now, what do you have left?”

I was moved thinking about how such an exercise might play out in my own life. It certainly seemed like a great way to help us realize what is precious to us and that we should be

spouse of many decades descends into Alzheimers, or we do... and once-loved best friends become strangers.

No matter what it is that defined us and delineated all that we found precious in this life (a career, a hobby, a skill, an interest) is ultimately at some point, removed beyond our grasp and we will never enjoy it again.

That is the process of death that I refer to. And along the way, there may be both great physical and emotional pain and grief—unimaginable grief. How will we deal with this? Job is very instructive here. His wife (understandably in her heart-rending grief) counselled Job to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9). I imagine that the temptation to “curse God” can be great, knowing God has the power to save us from tough circumstances but isn’t.

What a miracle then when we

I AM SO GRATEFUL AND COMFORTED TO UNDERSTAND THAT GOD’S GRACE IS BIG ENOUGH TO DEAL WITH ANY KIND OF REACTION I MIGHT HAVE IN DYING.

grateful for what we have for as long as we have it.

But now I’ve realized that this exercise is a good description of what life (via death) ultimately does to us. As we age we slowly lose everything. Our physical abilities and independence are replaced by weakening muscles, losses in eyesight, reduced endurance, lessening of all our faculties.

If we were great singers in our youth, we must contend with the challenges of hitting notes that are no longer in our range, and the quivering that happens from muscles no longer able to hold steady.

Our relationships are likewise challenged as we age. Children grow up, move away, are unable to visit as much as we’d like. In some worst-case scenarios, the people we love are taken from us by disease, accidents and death. Our loving

consider how frequently people manage to do just the opposite. I’m amazed when I see dying people who, in the midst of this never-ending, unremitting loss, turn towards God, not away. I’m reminded of Job’s response to the news that his sons and daughters were all killed in the same accident: “The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised” (Job 1:21). I am so grateful and comforted to understand that God’s grace is big enough to deal with any kind of reaction I might have in dying. Even should I or anyone succumb to Job’s wife’s heart-breaking feelings of abandonment and anger and “curse God,” I know that God is big enough to handle this too. I rest assured that he is nearby us all as our lives slip away, whether slowly and painfully over many years, or suddenly, unexpectedly. □



MORE THAN MAGAZINES

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ONGOING WORK OF PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

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SPECIAL 2015 YEAR-END REPORT:

“Thank you for all the work you do at PTM/CWR. I love all your resources and publications. You all are wonderful—just what the world needs now!!! I pray that you will ‘keep on keepin’ on!”—Louisiana

PTM brings Christ-centered peace and comfort to those in desperate need. By God’s grace, in 2015, PTM helped many escape the wrong-headed teaching of an angry, vengeful god, ready to send those who displease him to an ever-burning hell. Through this ongoing ministry many realize that God is not mad at them! *More than ever, the world is full of anger, fear and violence*—much of it produced by Christ-less religion.

But our heavenly Father is neither the author of performance-based religion nor the violence, hatred, guilt and shame it produces. At PTM, our work and your support is validated when we receive letters like this:

The spiritual blessings I have received through CWR/PTM are too numerous to count. Thank you for your faithfulness to Christ. I will pray earnestly for everyone at PTM. May God bless you all. Tennessee

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YOU ARE HELPING TO BRING THIS MESSAGE OF JOY, HOPE AND FREEDOM TO UNTOLD THOUSANDS!

When God uses PTM to help open someone’s eyes—to bring profound joy to someone who has lived life in fear and anxiety—he’s using your support and contributions to make a lasting difference.

The comments below tell what your support means to many whose lives have changed, as God has used PTM/CWR to open their eyes to his amazing grace.

*Thank you so much for the sermons, books, magazines and other resources you send to me. Thank you for your prayers and for all the work you do in helping to direct us toward God. **Minnesota***

*Thank you so much for your loving ministry. You are more Christ-centered than anyone else I know. I particularly enjoy the shorter articles in the new Plain Truth magazine. **Colorado***

*I consider PTM my church, as I grew up in legalistic churches. PTM has freed me from the fear that was brought on from the effects of legalism. I appreciate all PTM offers. I don’t know what I would do without PTM! **Wisconsin***

*Your books have had a HUGE impact on my life, and I cannot thank you enough for this work. **Canada***

*I want to thank you for all the magazines and other resources you send me. They are truly spiritually uplifting and I am overjoyed when I receive them. It is almost like I am hearing from God. **Louisiana***

*Your work helps me in so many ways! I especially appreciate the hope you impart and the confidence we need so that we do not fear the future. Thank you so much! **Washington***

Thanks for all the magazines, monthly letters and CDs—great sermons. All of your articles and books are well-written and easy to understand. Not a bunch of religious “mumbo-jumbo.” We pray for CWR/PTM. Keep up the good work! **Georgia**

Thank you for your help in making Scripture’s message clear and a source of joy! **Maryland**

A few years ago I set up automatic contributions to PTM because this ministry blessed me so much after I left the Jehovah’s Witnesses. PTM has been my church since then and has helped me to grow. I had to stop my automatic contributions for a while, but I am happy to report that I can start up again. In addition, I will send more when I can. Thanks so much for all the hard work you do, and may Christ continue to bless this worldwide work. **Massachusetts**

All the great articles in your magazines make me think! They help bring us back to Christ and that’s what we need. Thank you for being led by the Spirit! **New York**

Newsmakers of 2015

PTM collaborates with many other grace-based ministries, pastors and teachers—a network of Christ-centered people and organizations. Here are just a few of the people with whom PTM has been privileged to work in 2015. When you support PTM, you are helping us to proclaim the gospel of God’s amazing grace!



Zack Hunt

Zack is a writer, blogger and youth ministry veteran living in Connecticut with his wife and two children. A recent graduate of Yale Divinity school, Zack blogs at zackhunt.net. In the Fall 2015 issue of CWRm we published Zack’s article “Are Bible Verses the Worst Thing Ever?” We are pleased to announce Zack as a new columnist for CWRm.

Beginning with this issue, Zack will write a regular column for CWRm (*Christianity Without the Religion magazine*), titled “Costly Grace.” Zack will be one of two new CWRm columnists, including Cindy Brandt with her new column (“Outside In”). We continue to offer a column by pastor and author Brian Zahnd (“Axis of Love”), as well as “The Beautiful Gospel” column, written by CWRm Editor-in-Chief, Brad Jersak.



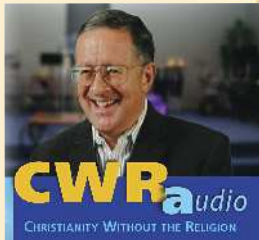
Peter Youngren / World Impact

Peter Youngren is well-known across Canada for his TV ministry and around the world for his campaign appearances to crowds of tens of thousands. Several years ago, Peter started reading Greg’s first book, *Bad News Religion*. Reading *Bad News Religion* caused Peter to read several more of Greg’s books. Peter then contacted Greg and asked him to visit his campus in Toronto. Last November Greg taught eight classes at World Impact Bible Institute (*Revelation Revolution* was the text for the classes). While in Toronto Greg taped two programs on Peter’s TV program *You Are Loved*, and gave two sermons at Toronto International Celebration Church.



Cindy Brandt

Cindy is a different kind of missionary, based in Taiwan, author of the book *Outside In—Ten Christian Voices We Can’t Ignore*. She blogs at cindywords.com. “Outside In” is also the name of Cindy’s new column for CWRm. Cindy has recorded several videos for CWRv to air in 2016.



CWRa and CWRb

In 2015 we expanded radio coverage of CWRa (*Christianity Without the Religion audio* weekly teaching ministry) to several radio stations across the U.S and began airing in Northern Ireland. We also expanded the reach of PTM/CWR on the Internet with CWRb (*Christianity Without the Religion blog*), hosted by Brad Jersak.



CWRvideo

In 2015 we launched CWRv—a quarterly video magazine offering several Youtube-like interviews and statements from various authors, pastors and ministry leaders about seasonally relevant topics.

Plain Truth Ministries brings hope and encouragement to thousands burdened by legalistic religion—and YOUR FAITHFUL SUPPORT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE!

In 2016, look for—

- ▶ “Remnant” by Monte Wolverton, published by PTM under our new imprint, CWRpress.
- ▶ PTM’s continuing commitment to faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone.
- ▶ MANY changed lives as PTM continues to minister to the least, the lost and the last.

PTM is your ministry! We rely solely on the support of our individual Friends and Partners to keep bringing hope to untold thousands of hurting people. We have no big corporate or institutional sponsors—it’s up to you and others like you! So if you’ve been helped—help others with a gift to PTM! Your prayers and regular financial support help bring the comfort and healing of the gospel.

Thank you for being a faithful and dedicated CWR/PTM Friend and Partner!



CWRm

CINDY BRANDT

Kissing Evangelism Goodbye

I went to the mecca of Evangelicalism for college, where I received a scholarship from none other than the Evangelical Pope, Billy Graham, for my work in street evangelism—speaking to strangers on the street to convert them to Christianity. Post graduation, I became a missionary, the Protestant equivalent of sainthood.

I recall that girl on fire, and marvel at her earnest faith. If I could, I'd reach back and massage the knots out of her high strung shoulders, weary from the weight of her neighbors' eternal destinies. I would wistfully explain that the first person she witnessed to, that gentle, drunken, homeless woman named Kathy, needed more than my rehearsed Roman Road to salvation. Then I would break the Temporal Prime Directive and reveal that one day, she would be more interested in being evangelized than evangelizing.

The truth is, I'm just better at being evangelized. It's probably why I was so easily converted at the tender age of twelve. Young Christians are expected to share their *testimony* of how God changes their life. By my twenties, I'd given my testimony a gazillion times.

But my own story bored me—because I didn't know how to tell it right. I had been given a script to impose onto my story. The arc goes like this: I was a sinner, met Jesus, then my life was transformed. I tried to squeeze my life into that script, conjuring up forced evils for my young life (*before the age of 12 the worst thing I'd done was eat a piece of chocolate during a 30-hour famine fundraiser*).

I have always been far more interested in other people's stories, perhaps because I've been exposed to many cultures. The diversity of our human experiences is truly incredible, and I am genuinely drawn into the lives of those around me. What I came to discover is how much the world craves a listening ear. The biggest problem with evangelizing is that we enter relationships with a prescribed intention, and that stands in the way of listening well. You can't listen well when you

are carrying an agenda or looking to fortify your own position.

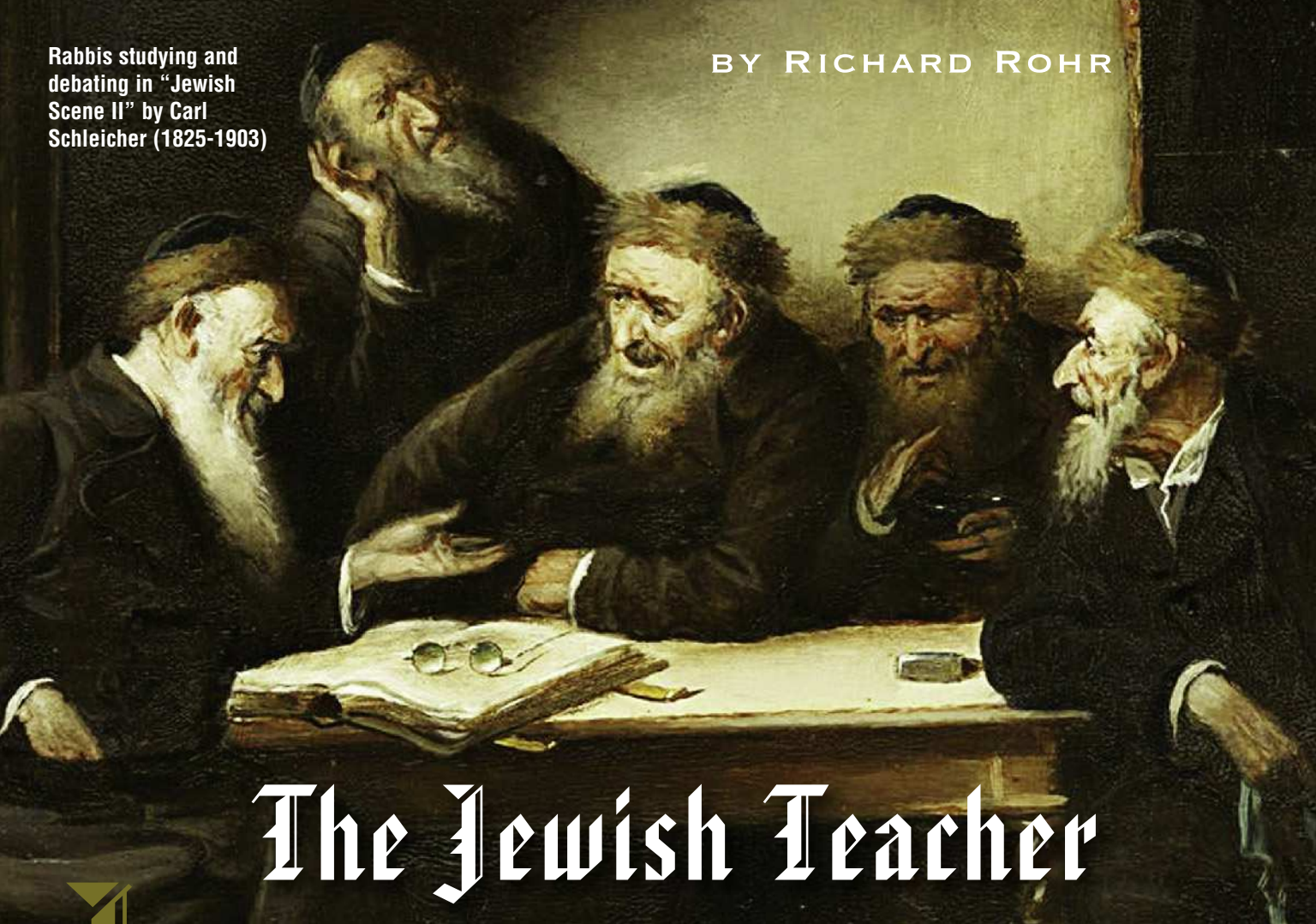
But if you want to be evangelized, you learn to listen deeper, trying to uncover truth. You search for the beauty in your neighbor to find points of connection—you are seeking to be saved by them. You become the student, longing to learn from, instead of preach at. You voluntarily place yourself in the inferior position of need and find that your own vulnerability compels others to shed their masks. Your courage to admit uncertainty disarms, until all that is left is raw honesty and frailty of our common human condition.

I'm not dismissing the Great Commission mandate to go and make disciples. But that mission will differ between remote Tibetan tribes and pluralistic Western cities. Increasingly, our mission must distance itself from colonial proselytizing. As the Pope recently said, "*The church grows by attraction, not proselytizing.*"

Proselytizing limits the wildly beautiful story of God and God's people into a sample script. The world needs more conversions, but *at least as many need to take place within the Church as outside of it*. Are we willing to offer and receive a plethora of stories that diverge from a single narrative? Can we make space for stories from minority groups, the global south, the Left and the Right, rich and poor, mega churches and struggling congregations?

Our best hope for connectedness lies in having our stories heard. We earn our right to speak when we have spent hours listening to their truths and being changed by their beauty. *People join us and believe in our God when we thread the Great Commandment into the Great Commission: love your neighbor as yourself*. In these days of soul-crushing social media noise, there is no greater love than disciplined, focused listening. People hunger to be heard, understood and connected. Our stories are waiting to be heard.

Listen to other people's stories as if your salvation depended on it, because I think it might. Therefore go, and be evangelized. □



The Jewish Teacher

I think the very best key by which a Christian can interpret Scripture is to interpret Scripture the way that Jesus did! It almost sounds too simple, doesn't it? Yet, ironically, this has not been the norm at all. So what do I actually mean by such advice?

First of all, Jesus approached the Hebrew Scriptures with the assumption that God had been speaking to humanity through an entire history of dialogue with his people Israel. (The universal message always begins with a very concrete situation or what has been called "the scandal of the particular.") Jesus heard the voice of God inside of one concrete context, exactly as we all must do. But he also had the added advantage of the

Jewish practice of *midrash*.

Midrash is a way of interpreting Scripture that fills in the gaps, questioning and imagining a multitude of possible interpretations.

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Spirit of God to open up the reader, instead of closing down the possibility of being changed by latching onto one final, closed and forever certain interpretation.

invariably say, "It could mean this, and it could mean that, and let's think about it this way for a while." This open-horizon approach was still in vogue for most of the first 1300 years of

Christianity, where as many as six levels of interpretation and numerous levels of truth were perceived in any one Scripture text. We have actually gone backward with the recent and childish notion of “biblical inerrancy,” where the one inerrant interpretation always just happens to be *mine!*

Pope Francis is returning us to the much older and more mature tradition in his notion of

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a “hierarchy of truths” (*Joy of the Gospel*). Not all truths are created equal, or of equal importance. Something might be true merely on a psychological level or a historical level or a mythological level.

For some sad illogical reason, fundamentalists think the historical level is the “truest” one. “Did it really happen just that way?” That is actually one

of the least fruitful levels of meaning. Even if it did happen just that way, our capacity to understand even that truth is still filtered through our own cultural and personal biases, which are largely unconscious. *There is no such thing as a value-free interpretation of anything.* It does not exist on this earth, but only in the perfect mind of God.

Jesus is presented in the Gospels as a classic wisdom teacher. The four Evangelists allow him to draw from the wisdom of other traditions (e.g., Luke 16:19, the story of the “Rich Man and Lazarus” is a retelling of a common Egyptian and Mid-Eastern story), and also to create his own stories, which we waste time trying to prove if they “really” happened just that way.

Jesus did not actually quote the Hebrew Scriptures very much, but when he did, he clearly took liberties with them! If we really want to follow his lead, we must begin with Jesus’ assumption that a loving God is trying to communicate with us, even through each little story, verse, or parable. I think that is what Jesus means by blessing “purity of heart” and that these are the ones who will “see God” (Matthew 5:8).

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Jesus selectively emphasizes the texts that reveal his God as good, faithful, inclusive, and merciful, and he creates stories—and concrete healing events—to communicate that very point, such as The Good Samaritan, The Prodigal Son, and The Publican and the Pharisee. Each of these stories and healings are true on many different levels. *That is exactly what makes them inspired stories!* Jesus consistently ignored passages that reveal his God to be punitive, exclusionary, imperialistic, small or tribal.

Such a *biased reading*, which shares in the chosen biases of Jesus, will be endlessly fruitful and life-giving for the individual and for all the world. For the “dirty hearted,” the merciful passages will just be something to ignore or argue about, and the punitive passages will be marked with a florescent high-lighter. Mercy is at the very top of the Christian hierarchy of great truths, and everything falls apart whenever mercy is displaced by anything else. □

Adapted from *Hierarchy of Truths: Jesus’ Use of Scripture* by Richard Rohr, www.cac.org.

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God Is Not the Witch

No Christian thinker has synthesized the rich and varied imagery of the gospel into a single beautiful picture as did C.S. Lewis in his classic novella, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. Through Lewis' children's fantasy, the New Testament themes—redemption and reconciliation, substitution and sacrifice, ransom and victory—coalesce into one of literature's greatest plotlines. After all, it is a retelling of the greatest story ever told!

Spoiler alert: I'll summarize the epic climax shortly!

Plot: Four English adolescents pass through a magical wardrobe into the strange world of Narnia, which has fallen into a deathly winter through the dark magic of the witch, Jadis. The witch succeeds in luring one of the boys, Edmund, into her evil clutches and deceives him into betraying his siblings.

The great lion Aslan—Lewis' Christ-figure—conceives a plan to rescue Edmund, but Jadis claims eye-for-an-eye justice to demand Edmund's execution. Aslan secretly bargains for Edmund's life by offering his own in exchange. Jadis is delighted; Aslan's death will be her final victory. She and her minions tie Aslan to 'the Stone Table' (representing the law of condemnation). They shave his mane, mock and beat him, and finally, Jadis delivers the fatal wound with a stone knife.

Wondrously, though the Witch can kill Aslan, she cannot take his life! Aslan is resurrected, the stone table is broken, Edmund is redeemed and the witch is destroyed!

This is the Beautiful Gospel as C.S. Lewis imagined it. This famous fiction captures essential truths of Christ's saving work as understood by the first apostles, evangelists and theologians. But the tale also underscores Lewis's corrections of the most popular 'atonement theory' of his time (or ours).

In his letters (to Bede Griffith), Lewis refers to the Anselmic theory (after Anselm of Canterbury) and says it "was not to be found either in the N.T. or most of the fathers." In *Mere Christianity* he describes it:

"According to that theory God wanted to punish men for having deserted and joined the Great Rebel, but Christ volunteered to be punished instead, and so God let us off. Now I admit that even this theory does not seem quite so immoral and silly as it used to; but that is not the point I want to make. What I came to see later on was that neither this theory nor any other is Christianity. The central belief is that Christ's death has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start."

Yet neither Lewis' letters nor his non-fiction compare to the beauty and clarity of the gospel preached in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. To summarize:

1. In the story, God appears only as Aslan—the Incarnation of God in Narnia.
2. In the story, God never demands the death of Edmund or of Aslan. The witch does. **God is not the witch. God is Aslan.**
3. In the story, the witch thinks she has cornered Aslan into satisfying the wrath of the Stone Table. But she has not and he does not. **There is no law higher than Aslan.** He *willingly* gives himself to save the victim, he *breaks* the Table and conquers both death and the witch.
4. **The Table** is not God's intractable wrath. It is **the law of retribution and condemnation**, broken by the deeper "magic" of sacrificial love. If the Stone Table can be broken, then it is not one of God's eternal attributes.
5. The witch could and surely did *execute* Aslan—but she was wrong to believe she could *take his life*. Like Christ, Aslan alone has the power to lay down his life, and therefore, the power to take it up again. She never took his life. He gave it, but not to her and not to death. He gave it for love to ransom everyone. The witch (like Satan and death) fell into her own trap and found Aslan to be very much alive.

C.S. Lewis provides an important corrective to ideas of the Cross that mistakenly cast God into the witch's role. But more importantly, he expresses the Beautiful Gospel in a way that even children can see it, even if some theologians cannot. □

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Freedom from Oppression and Impoverishment G.B. Shaw wrote of “human insects groping through...darkness by the feeble phosphorescence of their own tails, yet ready...to reveal the will of God on every subject...” Week of March 6

This Too Will Pass All the agonies of our lives will one day pass, but by the same token, so too will the ecstasies. “All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers...” Week of March 13

The King of a Rather Strange Kingdom On Palm Sunday, remembering Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem on a donkey, we are reminded that we worship and follow a different kind of a King. Week of March 20

Death Swallowed Up Join us for our annual Easter service, as we collectively give thanks that we are not disposable, but rather God renews and transforms us, saving us from death and the grave. Week of March 27

“We Had Hoped...” We expect God to be strong, but in Christ he became weak—we want him to be rich, but he became poor that we might become rich in his grace. Week of April 3.

Grace Brings Grace Home God’s love and grace is stronger and more resilient than anything you or I can do to either deserve it or to cause him to remove it. Week of April 10

Sin Has Been Done Away With! Many believe that certain parts of the old covenant have been “done away with”—but Hebrews 9:26 says that Jesus has come to “do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” Week of April 17

Proof Text Alert! Taking a quotation or a few verses out of context in order to “prove” an already presumed-to-be true teaching or practice is a widely-followed abuse of the Bible. Week of April 24

The Narrow Door While Jesus said the entrance to eternal life is through a narrow door, many misunderstand, assuming the necessity of their effort and works to enable them to barely make it through a narrow space. Week of May 1

Forever and Ever Amen We celebrate Mother’s Day by considering a mother’s love, and even more, by focusing our thoughts on the endless, eternal, boundless love of our heavenly Father. Week of May 8

Grace is Senseless, Irrational and Absurd Christians of all stripes think that good human behavior is the key to their relationship with God—and thus many believe that God’s grace is senseless, irrational and absurd. Week of May 15

Is That All There Is? What is the purpose of life, anyway? After you have done all you can possibly say, contribute or do, will you be left asking, “Is That All There Is?” Week of May 22

Running With the Wind While it is true that Christ-followers encounter resistance as we journey with Jesus, the greater truth is that our journey is more aptly described as “Running With the Wind.” Week of May 29