

SPRING 2014

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

ESCAPING SHAME'S



HOLDING PATTERNS

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

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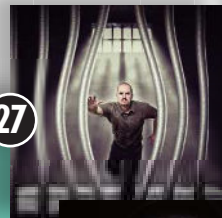
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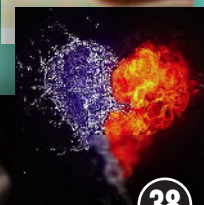
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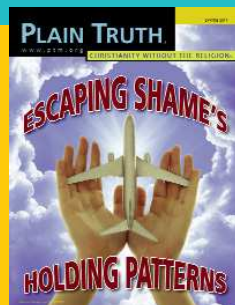


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The truth sets us free (John 8:32), and that

includes freedom from the shame-induced doubts that keep us from enjoying the fullness of our relationships with God and one another. Shame, guilt and doubt can produce an epidemic of social problems. But we can escape shame's grip by embracing God's grace, courageously accepting our imperfections and admitting our vulnerabilities while following Christ.

COVER IMAGE BY ISTOCKPHOTO AND MARV WEGNER—PTM

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Neighbors and Wise Men

Thanks for the article, "Neighbors and Wise Men" by Tony Kriz in the Winter 2013 *Plain Truth*. Tony, like most of us, certainly suffered from a religious concept of "us versus them" in the believe-right and do-right religious warfare and battlefield perspective.

How tragic that religion has such a skewed conception of "faith," that it could be considered a battlefield. I appreciated his transition confession, "I cannot continue to hold onto the 'battlefield' paradigm. It requires a shift in my spiritual thinking." Even more, I appreciated what might be identified as his redefinition of faith: "My role is to be open to His loving voice from sources as interesting and broad as His creative capacity."

YES! That is faith: openness, availability, receptivity to God's personal revelation of Himself to our understanding and experience. And this personal revelation is so often "caught" and "not taught," as Tony found out in Albania.

Oh, the liberation when we break free from the religious bondage of thinking that one can only hear from God via biblical statements that allegedly verify the propriety of the doctrinal positions advocated by our denominational heritage, and are delivered in religious settings by those judged acceptable to deliver such. This article is consistent with PTM's theme of freedom from religion.

Email

When I have talked with people who have a different idea about God I have had several similar experiences to that of Tony Kriz (author of "Neighbors and Wise Men" *Plain Truth*, Winter 2013). I really appreciate the willingness of the *PT* to think outside the box, which is where I am now. I am outside the religious box because the walls kept closing in on me! I got out just in time (really, I should say that God rescued me from my religious box). Thank God for ministries and magazines like yours!

Michigan

I could not put down "Neighbors and Wise Men" by Tony Kriz (Winter 2013 *Plain Truth*). His personal story of struggling with the teaching he had grown up with about insiders and outsiders—them and us—was so much like my own.

The fact that the Magi were not true believers like everyone else living around Jesus is amazing as well—yet they were the only wise men who came to worship Jesus. The "others" seemed too busy plotting to do away with him.

Texas



Christ Almighty—God With Skin

I enjoyed Brad Jersak's well-written article "Christ Almighty—God With Skin" in the Winter 2013 *PT*. The argument that "Jesus showed us exactly what God is like..." is well-stated. Dr. Jersak's comments about how the "sovereignty" of God has been misconstrued as "imperial dominance" is a much-needed corrective to so much of theological thought. Jesus, the "King of Kings," is indeed "not like any king we have conceived," via the imperial dominance theory of sovereignty. I agree with Dr. Jersak's argument to counter the concept of violent conquest and domination inherent in popular thoughts of "sovereignty" via "the crucified 'King of the Jews'" in an "upside-down kingdom."

California



Is God Playing a Cosmic Shell Game?

I needed to read this article by Monte Wolverton [Winter 2013 issue]. I am suffering like Mr. Wolverton. My husband also died not long ago. So many years

snuffed out—63 for us. All he has now is a lonely grave and a name that has died out, too. All I have are my memories. The nights are the worst. My heart hurts for Mr. Wolverton and I pray that God be with him in his grief. I don't know what I would do without PTM and I don't ever want to find out.

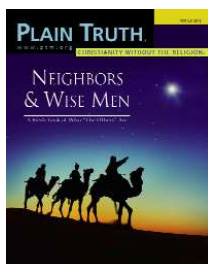
North Carolina



Home Alone at Christmas?

Loneliness is undoubtedly a painful psychological experience that most people have suffered through at some point in their lives. It is also true that “the company of...others doesn't completely resolve our sense of being alone,” for it is possible to “be lonely in a crowd.” Thanks to Greg Albrecht for this timely and encouraging article.

Email



Winter 2013 Issue

I don't mean to sound silly or trite, but it seems each new issue of the *Plain Truth* is better than the one before. The entire issue of the Winter *PT* helped my family truly prepare for and be inspired by the meaning and significance of the birth of Jesus our Lord. Thank you for all the work that you do to help us in our walk with Christ.

California

It's been a while since I read an issue of the *Plain Truth*. I read the Winter 2013 issue online, and I thought “Why haven't I been faithfully reading this magazine?” So I went back and read the past few years in your archives (free of charge by the way—thank you). I am not only back as a reader and a listener, I am back as a financial supporter of the work PTM is doing.

Florida



The Fall of Camelot

Great article by Monte Wolverton in the Fall 2013 *PT*. Thanks for the memories of JFK and the “let-down” following his assassination. I pray God will bless the efforts of PTM to help bring many people to Jesus Christ—the only perfect leader whom the world will ever see.

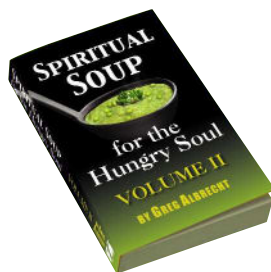
Maryland



The People, Not the Steeple

Thanks for the article about church attendance and what it really means to be part of the body of Christ (Fall 2013 *Plain Truth*). Here are a couple of my thoughts on this topic: 1) “The only *ship* that won't sink is true *fellowship!*” 2) “God wants fulltime custody, not weekend visits.”

Texas



Spiritual Soup Volume 2

Spiritual Soup Volume 2 is surely a recipe to help all the spiritual ailments we humans have to deal with. I keep the PTM/CWR staff in my prayers. I want to double my regular contribution this month, not because I am good, but because God has moved me to do so. Thank you for letting our Heavenly Father use PTM to benefit so many.

Arkansas

• For details about how to order *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul Volume 2*, please see page 18 of this issue.

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Escaping Shame's Holding Patterns

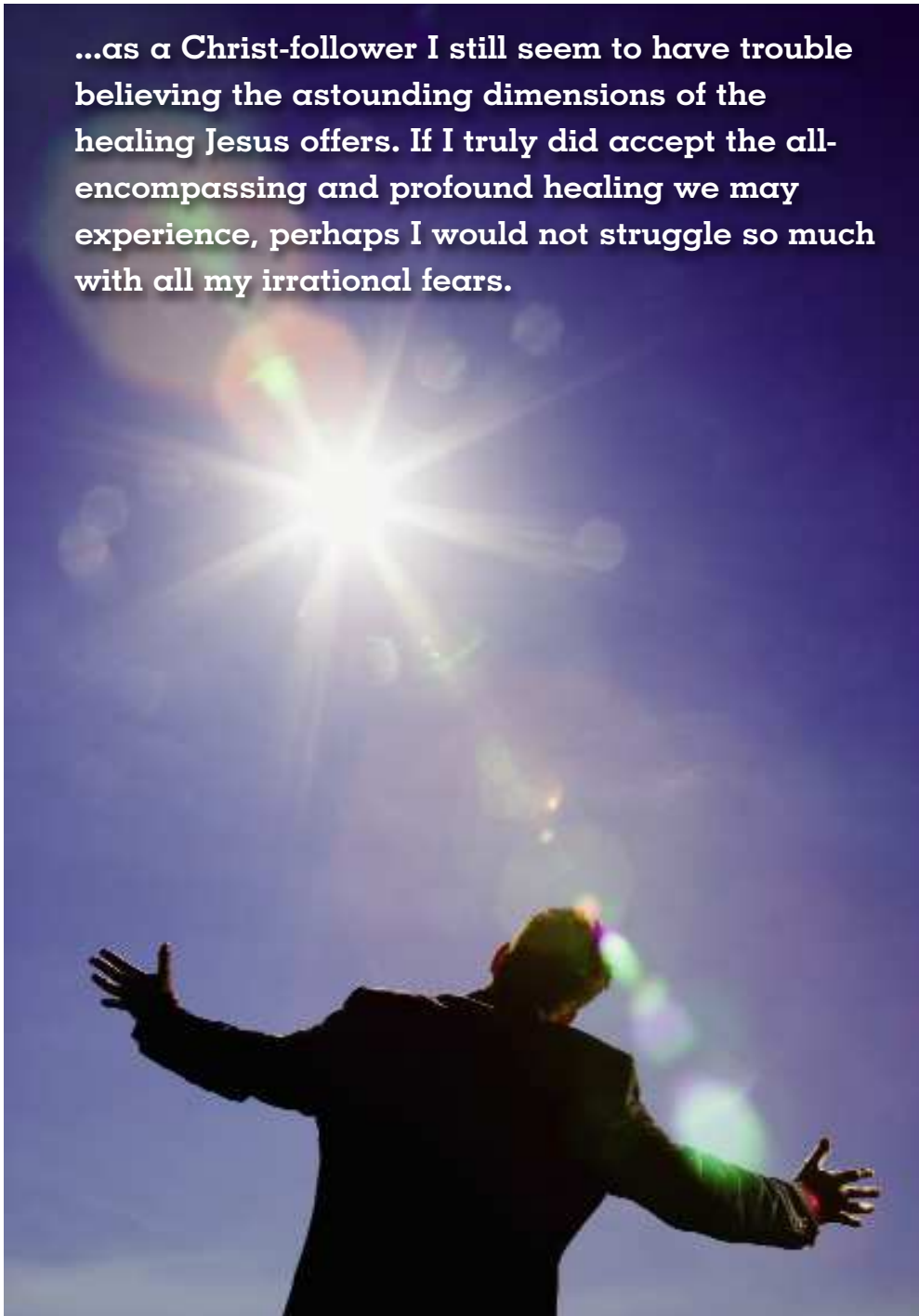
BY GRANT CORRIVEAU

I'm afraid. To be honest, I should say that I'm afraid pretty much all the time. Ironically, during my career as an airline pilot one of my most important tasks was to speak to my passengers to help calm their fears. If only they had known that I was—and still am—a scaredy-cat pilot.

But I am not alone. Everyone experiences fear. Fear can be rational and necessary. For example, though I am now retired from airline flying I still fear dying. So I maintain and fly my little home-built aircraft carefully. I'm also afraid of hurting others, so I try to conduct my life as considerately as I can. My list of



...as a Christ-follower I still seem to have trouble believing the astounding dimensions of the healing Jesus offers. If I truly did accept the all-encompassing and profound healing we may experience, perhaps I would not struggle so much with all my irrational fears.



lowering my voice an octave and assuming my most soothing “captain’s drawl.”

I also fear trying. I guess that’s because I’m afraid of failure. But oddly, I fear success too. The problem with success is that it raises expectations, making it harder to succeed next time.

What a tangled web of fears! My list of irrational fears grows to include things like fear of rejection, fear of trivial mistakes, fear of unfamiliar situations, fear of crowds and so on. None of these fears stem from truly dangerous situations that will actually harm me. Yet I experience anything from discomfort to stark terror when I encounter them.

By now you’re probably thinking that I spend most of my life cowering in a corner immobilized by fear. That only happens sometimes! Like most men, I don’t like to show fear so I’ve become skilled at pretending. I can camouflage my fears in so many ways. For example, I am generally an “over-achiever.” I ensure this by

rational fears extends to include fear of falling, fear of disease, fear of violence, fear of wild animals, and so on. It’s a long list.

But while I’m confessing, I should admit that I’m afraid of all sorts of irrational things too. For example, I’m afraid of public speaking. You might be

I guess when it comes to “accepting Jesus,” I’m just not there yet. And when I see the restlessness and unease across the world of Christianity, I suspect I am not alone.

surprised to learn how much effort it took for me to compose myself as I reached for that PA microphone while

favoring activities I know I can excel in. When facing less familiar tasks I over-prepare to ensure that failure is not an



Ironically, during my career as an airline pilot one of my most important tasks was to speak to my passengers to help calm their fears. If only they had known that I was—and still am—a scaredy-cat pilot.

option. Sadly and unwittingly, I often resort to anger to hide my fear.

It's strange to discover so much fear woven into my life, and it's stranger still that I'm

admitting all this to you. Usually I maintain a good show of bravado. It's what has been expected of me my entire life. Trust me when I tell you that openly expressing fear would not have helped further my airline pilot career! But recently I've begun to see how my irrational fears are keeping me from experiencing a richer life and how they ultimately stem from one huge underlying fear. This is the fear that I am unworthy of love.

This sense of unworthiness, called shame, is endemic in our

[Brown's] research over the past decade (studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness and shame) propels her three best-selling books. When I recently encountered her work, I began to understand my spiritual issues a little more clearly.

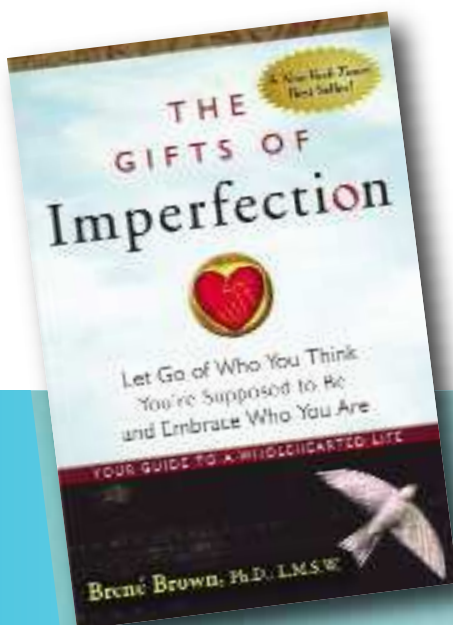
21st century western culture and is a huge impediment to me, as a Christ-follower. It diminishes my experience of "life to the full" as promised by Jesus (John 10:10). Believe it or not, I experienced a huge boost and incredible insight regarding shame and its effects on me through Dr. Brené Brown, an author, sociologist and researcher who does not overtly champion or push Christian causes and agendas in her writing. Let me explain.

What Is Shame?

"Shame is the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging."¹

Brené Brown, Ph.D., is a research professor at the University of Houston's Graduate College of Social Work. Her research over the past decade (studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness and shame) propels her three best-selling books.

When I recently encountered her work, I began to understand my spiritual issues a little more clearly. I also realized how



broadly shame affects all of us, as evidenced by her TED talk video² which has gone viral. (Viewership is currently over nine million.)

From a biblical perspective, according to Genesis, Adam and Eve originally had an intimate relationship with God. They were naked and they felt no shame. But after sinning, they decided to hide. Shame entered the picture. Today, faith-based Christianity tells me I'm okay thanks to

It's strange to discover so much fear woven into my life, and it's stranger still that I'm admitting all this to you. Usually I maintain a good show of bravado. It's what has been expected of me my entire life.

seem to have trouble believing the astounding dimensions of the healing Jesus offers. If I truly did accept the all-encompassing and profound healing we may experience, perhaps I would not struggle so much with all my irrational

shame at work within us, holding us back from God today, just as it did Adam and Eve. We struggle with the need to *do* something to re-establish ourselves in God's good graces. But nothing we *do* can earn God's good graces. Our best efforts fall short.

I've begun to see how my irrational fears are keeping me from experiencing a richer life and how they ultimately stem from one huge underlying fear.

This is the fear that I am unworthy of love.

This human dilemma draws me to Brené Brown's work. I believe her writings expand and illustrate biblical teaching as she offers much-needed insights into the relationship-destroying effects of shame. Her concepts, drawn from her research, align with the Bible's precepts and truth is truth, no matter where we find it.

Truth sets us free (John 8:32) and that includes freedom from the shame-induced doubts that keep us from enjoying the fullness of our relationships with God and one another.

Shame in its many manifestations also causes an epidemic of social problems. Let me summarize key points from two of Brown's books, while specifically concentrating on themes that illustrate biblical teachings.

I Thought It Was Just Me

In her first book, *I Thought It Was Just Me*, Brown describes her research, as she gathered people's relationship stories for analysis. These stories quickly evolved into a litany of life's most devastating moments,



Christ—that God can heal this breach within me—within all of us. Christ went to extraordinary lengths to provide and proclaim spiritual healing when he laid down his life. If we would all accept that powerful message, how profoundly it would change us.

But as a Christ-follower I still

fears. I guess when it comes to “accepting Jesus,” I’m just not there yet. And when I see the restlessness and unease across the world of Christianity, I suspect I am not alone. Something within each of us blocks our ability to accept Jesus’ offer of reconciliation on his terms. I believe that this is

where relationships failed, leaving the story-teller feeling helpless, depressed, worthless and ashamed. This led to Brown's conclusions about the power of shame:

"...shame is a silent epidemic [playing a] role in a wide variety of mental and public health issues, including depression, anxiety disorders, addiction, eating disorders, bullying, suicide, sexual assault and all types of violence, including family violence...

We use shame as a tool to parent, teach and discipline our children. Television shows promising cutthroat alliances, backstabbing, hostile confrontations, exclusion and public humiliation consistently grab top ratings. And at the same time...we struggle to understand why the world feels so scary, why politics have turned into blood sport, why children are suffering higher levels of stress and anxiety, why popular culture appears to be sinking to all-time lows and why a growing number of us feel alone and disconnected."³

After describing the immense



Christ went to extraordinary lengths to provide and proclaim spiritual healing when he laid down his life. If we would all accept that powerful message, how profoundly it would change us.

worthless, confirming our worst fears. It pulls the rug out from under us. It either leaves us feeling helpless and unable to respond, or so deeply threatened that to survive we deny responsibility.

By contrast, *guilt tells us that we have done something wrong, but leaves our sense of worthiness intact*. This worthiness empowers us to face our guilt

resilient to shame believe in their worthiness. Brown calls these people *The Wholehearted*.

What do they have in common? They simply believe, for a variety of reasons, that they are worthy.

Christ-followers recognize whole-heartedness as a central expression of God's grace, produced by God in and through our life in Christ. The more deeply we believe in the worthiness of God, and the reality of his love, and the more we yield to the life Jesus lives within us, the more we become resilient and whole-hearted. No matter how much we fall short, we rest in Christ, and "rest assured" that God still loves us. We should never let go of the assurance that God loves us. This is truly a gift of his grace.

The Gifts of Imperfection

Brown's second book, *The Gifts of Imperfection*, is a practical

Shame tells us that we are worthless, confirming our worst fears. It pulls the rug out from under us. It either leaves us feeling helpless and unable to respond, or so deeply threatened that to survive we deny responsibility.

toll shame exacts on us Brown explains the critical difference between shame and guilt. She shows why in the long run, seeking to change ourselves, or others, by shaming doesn't work.

Shame tells us that we are

and take appropriate action.

Brown describes how healthy people handle shame by developing shame resilience. They still experience shame—that's normal and healthy—but shame does not derail them. People who are the most

“Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are. Choosing authenticity means cultivating the courage to be imperfect, to set boundaries, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable.”

Brené C. Brown —*The Gifts Of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are.*



workbook on shame resilience which leads us on a journey along ten guideposts towards whole-heartedness.

Brown states: “If shame is the universal fear of being unworthy of love and belonging, and if all people have an irreducible and innate need to experience love and belonging, it’s easy to see why shame is often referred to as ‘the master emotion.’ We don’t

have to experience shame to be paralyzed by it—the fear of being perceived as unworthy is enough to force us to silence our stories.”⁴

Brown’s differentiation between “fitting in,” and “belonging,” is brilliant: “Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging, on the other hand, doesn’t require us to change

who we are; it requires us to be who we are.”⁵

I view this as an explanation of how God the Holy Spirit lives within the lives of Christ-followers.

As one of my mentors once pointed out, the Holy Spirit does not wipe us out to live within us, but rather he joins with us and grows us into more of who we are meant to be.



Choosing authenticity means cultivating the courage to be imperfect, to set boundaries, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable.”⁶

She explains the importance of vulnerability and authenticity with this cautionary note: “If



Brown describes how healthy people handle shame by developing shame resilience. They still experience shame—that’s normal and healthy—but shame does not derail them.

you trade in your authenticity for safety, you may experience the following: anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction, rage, blame, resentment, and inexplicable grief. Sacrificing who you are for the sake of what other people think just isn’t worth it.”⁷

• **Cultivating Self-Compassion: Letting Go of Perfectionism**

Brown claims that “Shame is the birthplace of perfectionism.” She explains that perfectionism is not about

focused—*How can I improve?* Perfectionism is other-focused—*What will they think?*”⁸

When Brown interviewed people who demonstrated high shame-resilience, she found that: “First, they spoke of their imperfections in a tender and honest way.... Second, they were slow to judge themselves and others.”⁹

Becoming authentic people who are aware of human limitations and imperfections, and slow to judge both ourselves and others is, of

Three Keys to Wholeheartedness

Here are three of Brown’s guideposts toward wholeheartedness:

• **Cultivating Authenticity: Letting Go of What People Think:**

“Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we’re supposed to be and embracing who we are.

The more deeply we believe in the worthiness of God, and the reality of his love, and the more we yield to the life Jesus lives within us, the more we become resilient and whole-hearted.

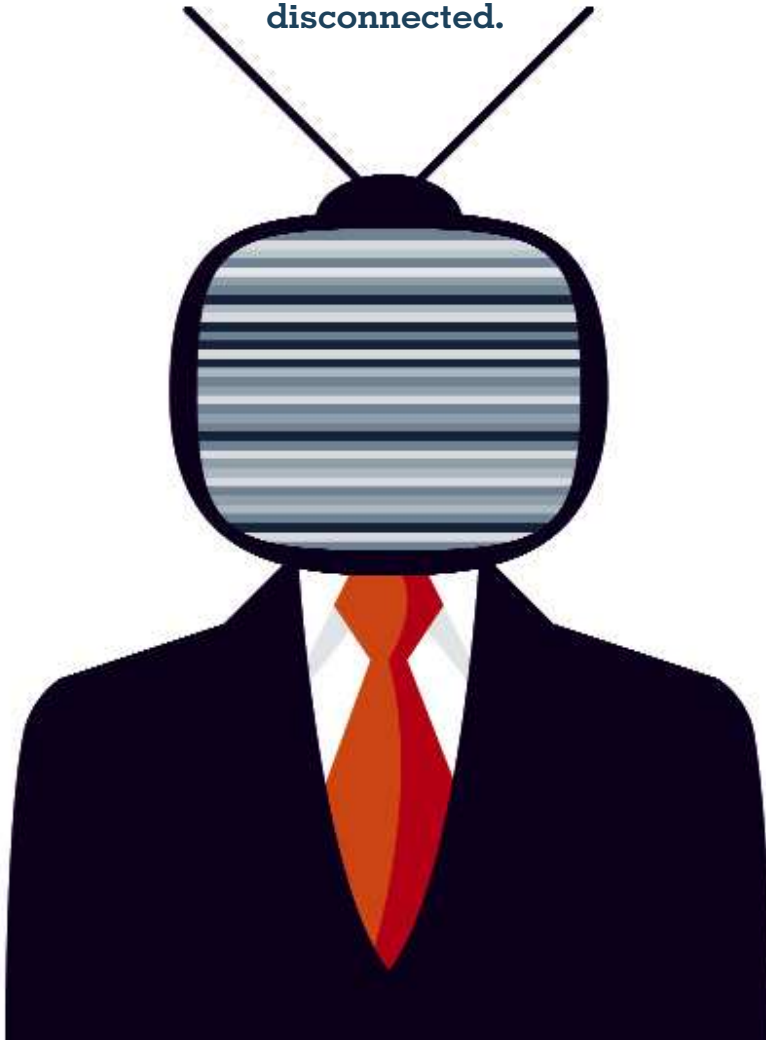
striving to be our best. It is not about healthy achievement. Rather it is the damaging belief that “...if we live perfect, look perfect, and act perfect, we can minimize the pain of blame, judgment, and shame.... Healthy striving is self-

course, a common theme of Jesus’ teachings.

• **Cultivating Intuition and Trusting Faith: Letting Go of The Need For Certainty**

Here, Brown offers some challenging ideas for Christians. Based on her

Television shows promising cutthroat alliances, backstabbing, hostile confrontations, exclusion and public humiliation consistently grab top ratings. And at the same time ... we struggle to understand why the world feels so scary... and why a growing number of us feel alone and disconnected.



research, she defines faith this way: *“Faith is a place of mystery, where we find the courage to believe in what we cannot see and the strength to let go of our fear of uncertainty.”*¹⁰

She points out how fundamentalism demands certainty instead of faith and quotes theologian Richard Rohr: “My scientist friends

have come up with things like ‘principles of uncertainty’ and dark holes. They’re willing to live inside imagined hypotheses and theories.

But many religious folks insist on answers that are always true. We love closure, resolution and clarity, while thinking that we are people of ‘faith’! How strange that the

The Gospel in Other Clothing

Lately I see God at work in unusual places, beyond the limits of any humanly approved “Jesus club” or church. For example, I see Christ in people as they express unselfish love for others through ongoing disaster relief efforts. I see Jesus in joy-filled family reunions. I see him in the many acts of kindness people extend to strangers. All this happens without any obvious mention of God, yet I sense his presence.

I was wondering how this could be when I stumbled upon one of God’s Old Testament declarations: “‘Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel?’ says the Lord. ‘Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?’” (Amos 9:7, NRS). This passage (and others in both Testaments) challenge the notion that God is the exclusive property of any one group.

Now I’m even asking myself if Jesus limits himself to working exclusively through what we know as the church, as I’ve been told. Answering this requires me to dig for a deeper



...it's encouraging to think that no matter how badly the visible church messes up, God's presence is at work everywhere, even among those who have rejected him.

It's as if he comes to us dressed in different clothes, apart from the trappings of religion.

understanding of what church is. The church we see with our eyes is incomplete. The church seen by Christ must be more extensive and expansive than the visible church we see.

We are all continually bathed in his message of love, expressed in many ways. It's as if he comes to us dressed in different clothes, apart from the trappings of religion.

But is God so magnanimous that he's willing to work without recognition and registered trademark protection? Does he speak freely through scientific works, studies, and other non-religious sources, without demanding credit?

Does he constantly reach beyond the limitations that we would impose on him when we claim to control and dispense the Gospel? I believe so.

For example, Brené Brown is a social scientist, popular in the media, who makes no faith-based claims. But I see in her work the elaboration of Christ's promise that we are meant to experience life to the full (John 10:10). Christ is present and active in academic circles and governments but in ways often unbeknown to us.

I see in [Brené Brown's] work the elaboration of Christ's promise that we are meant to experience life to the full: (John 10:10). Christ is actively working in situations where the visible church has been excluded, for one reason or another.

Meeting with Nicodemus, Jesus revealed that God goes where he wants to go, beyond our ability to perceive directly. (John 3:8). God works in many places, in many guises, beyond our understanding and we must look for evidence of his presence beyond names on buildings or mere words.

I'm still weighing the implications of this new perspective. For example, it's encouraging to think that no matter how badly the visible church messes up, God's presence is at work everywhere, even among those who have rejected him.

By using the clues which the apostle Paul called the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) I catch glimpses of Jesus everywhere. Recalling that God is love (1 John 4:8) I suddenly see the gospel all around me, all the time.

Seeing Christ-in-action like this and perceiving *the gospel in other clothing*, is an exciting way to view the world. Such a Christ-centered perspective fills us anew, each and every day, with awe and reference for God's immense love, power and compassion. □



Because I am a follower of Jesus, I see Brown's books as practical guides helping to remove the roadblocks that shame has erected in my life. These roadblocks hinder me from embracing the fullness of life in Christ.

Help My Unbelief

Ultimately a Christ-centered life is about so much more than praying, studying the Bible or singing hymns. It is about the courage to live vulnerably, authentically and joyfully, because we

know that we are loved and valued by God.

It's about accepting this love and grace offered to us through Jesus Christ. When Brené Brown, or anyone for that matter, whether from an overtly Christian perspective or not, elaborates a biblical theme, I see it as the presence of God's Spirit at work in the world.

Because I am a follower of Jesus, I see Brown's books as practical guides helping to remove the roadblocks that shame has erected in my life. These roadblocks hinder me from embracing the fullness of life in Christ. Her most helpful insight is her conclusion that the key to breaking shame's hold is belief:

"...Those who feel loveable, who love, and who experience belonging simply believe they are worthy of love and belonging."¹⁴

I believe that the more deeply we believe in the worthiness we have been

given, by God's grace, the more we will be able to abandon irrational fears and more completely, without reservations, embrace the fullness of life in Christ. I believe that shame resilience and whole-heartedness hold the keys to experiencing more of what this life is all about—"Perfect love drives out fear." (1 John 4:18). Thanks to Brené Brown, I'm beginning to understand many practical aspects of how that works. □

1. Brown, Brené. I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't): Making The Journey From "What will people think?" to "I am enough." New York: Gotham Books, 2007. 5.

2. http://www.ted.com/speakers/brene_brown.html

3. Brown. I Thought It Was Just Me, xix

4. Brown, C. Brené. The Gifts Of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are. Center City, Minn.: Hazelden, 2010. 40.

5. *Ibid.*, 25

6. *Ibid.*, 53

7. *Ibid.*, 53

8. *Ibid.*, 56

9. *Ibid.*, 59

10. *Ibid.*, 90

11. *Ibid.*, 90

12. *Ibid.*, 126

13. *Ibid.*, 126

14. Brown, C. Brené. Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead. New York, NY: Gotham Books, 2012. 220.

Grant is a retired airline pilot who enjoys terrifying himself in his small home-built aircraft. He takes courage to embrace his fears from the old aviation adage that: "There are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots."

very word 'faith' has come to mean its exact opposite."¹¹

In her conclusion to *The Gifts of Imperfection* Brown invites us to join her in a... "Wholehearted revolution. A small, quiet, grassroots movement that starts with each of us saying, 'My story matters because I matter.' A movement where we can take to the streets with our messy, imperfect, wild, stretch-marked, wonderful, heartbreaking, grace-filled, and joyful lives...."¹²

This description of her whole-hearted revolution sounds so much like my own experience of following Jesus, when she goes on to say that: "One minute you'll pray that the transformation stops, and the next minute you'll pray that it never ends. You'll wonder how you can feel so brave and so afraid at the same time. At least that's how I feel most of the time...brave, afraid, and very, very alive...."¹³

God in Broken Vessels



Editor's Note:

The book title *Midnight, Jesus and Me: Misfit Memoirs of a Full Gospel, Rock & Roll Late Night Suicide Crisis Psychotherapist* may seem a little ponderous and cumbersome—but this title accurately identifies the source of the insights offered within its pages. With the permission of ECW Press Ltd. we share the following excerpt as an honest, authentic perspective of yet another human being, made in God's image, who is struggling to make sense of it all.

Let's get this over with. I have committed theft, set mine eyes upon false gods and a time or two coveted my neighbor's ass. I've been guilty of both murder and adultery in my heart. I have forgotten the Sabbath. I have loved self far more than neighbor or God. I have been guilty of all these things since the hour I first believed. Sometimes I wonder if I even believe at all.

I doubt too much. I think too much. I'm too much of a contrarian. Every time I try to be spiritually confident or cool, I put my foot in the mop bucket. A part of me has always wondered if God just looks at me and shakes His head.

Sorry, Lord. Guide me, oh Mercy and Grace. Each day, trying to do better.

So it helps me to see firsthand that the church is constantly stepping in the mop bucket too.

Truth is, I sort of need the hypocrite guy who can't quite get his actions and beliefs on the same page. The narcissistic little preachers and showboat singers and

Ponzi scheme evangelism programs that impress no one outside the fold. Bandwagon mentalities and bait-and-switch sales pitches. Pop culture ripoffs, sappy songs and tacky t-shirts. All the distant, distracted, professionally religious and politely practiced church staff.

You see some nutty stuff working in a church, some really crazy people. And then, if you watch, you see some of those same crazy people do beautiful things. The arrogant deacon feeds the hungry, the hypocrite cares for the sick, the religious

God in broken vessels, the Almighty come to earth as a man, existential Jesus choosing that troublemaking Peter—*of all people*—to build his church upon, Jehovah the carpenter, the one they called Mary's bastard, crucified between criminals and promising Paradise to the thief who pleaded *Remember me*.

The emperor is naked; children and scoundrels shout the news; *Long live the King*. God help us all to be naked and unashamed, to watch and listen, to laugh at our-

Knowing that the beautiful shiny church-y people are just as messed up as the rest of us—well, it gives me a strange kind of hope.

bigots band together to serve the poor. And I realize that whether I am at a bar or a psych ward or a megachurch—people are just people and in the dark, lonely places we are all pretty much the same, frightened and confused and mostly feeling like we're doing the best we can. Knowing that the beautiful shiny church-y people are just as messed up as the rest of us—well, it gives me a strange kind of hope. The feeling that maybe I can make it after all. That maybe Grace really is amazing.

It helps me see that from Moses to the Revelator John, from Adam to the last man who will ever live—we are all screwups, stumbling through, rising and falling back to dust, lusting and loving and trying and killing and giving and living and dying and wondering why.

selves and confess that the only thing we are sure of is how little we really know. To admit that Mercy and Grace and Hope and Faith and God and Heaven had better be far larger than we have made them out to be.

I love the silly crazy beautiful broken busted-up church. But I don't know if I should work in one. □

Excerpted from Midnight, Jesus & Me: Misfit Memoirs of a Full Gospel, Rock & Roll Late Night Suicide Crisis Psychotherapist, by J.M. Blaine. © J.M. Blaine, 2013. Published by ECW Press Ltd. ecwpress.com.

J.M. Blaine is non-fiction editor of the L.A. literary collective The Nervous Breakdown, feature writer for the Nashville Contributor and a former contributor to The Wittenburg Door. Blaine is a licensed crisis interventionist and lives in Nashville, Tennessee.



Just Seeds

I've been thinking about what Paul said in Galatians 2:20. He was crucified with Christ but it was okay because, while he no longer lived, something far better happened. Paul said that Christ lived his life through him. Consider John 12:23-26 where Jesus said: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, 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. Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me."

That sounds like a downer...and a marvelous text for a preacher wanting to motivate church people to serve, to give, to sacrifice and to change the world. I get that, but it doesn't work and, in fact, isn't what Jesus said at all.

I once heard a chapel speaker use this text in a harsh, condemning way. Among other things, he said to students worried about their cars needing repair, "Who promised you a car?" To those with no money, working day and night just to get by and feed their families, "God didn't promise you a rose garden" and on and on.

Once the students were "eating dirt" because they felt so guilty, he asked them to stand before God and the student body, committing themselves to missions. A bunch of students stood. I didn't. Can you believe that? I wanted to jump up and yell, "You know something? You're a twit!" and then walk out. But I was a professor seated on the front row, so I remained silent.

Jesus didn't say those words in John to make us feel so guilty that we would live in obedience, be sacrificial and

finally be involved in missions. Instead he gave his disciples some good news. A seed doesn't *decide* to die and to work hard at it. A seed is cast to the ground, dies and then produces a harvest. When Paul said he was crucified with Christ, he wasn't telling us something we need to do; he was defining *who we are*.

Jesus said we are seeds—insignificant, generally dirty and weak—and in losing our lives, we would be free. Crucified people are dangerous. They don't have anything to prove and they never have to pretend. Because of Christ, they don't have to look good, be famous, impress anybody or win races. Seeds are just seeds and they grow because it's their very nature. I don't know about you, but I think that is a relief!

Jesus also said a seed that is dead and buried "produces many seeds." Every time I've pretended to be something I'm not and tried to work hard for Jesus I've looked silly. Not only that, I've truncated the Jesus who wants to naturally live through me. There is great freedom in being just a seed and watching growth.

Here is the best part. Jesus said that because of being crucified we would be where he is and the Father would honor us. That's called love and it's why we were created. It's being missional without any agenda but his. It's showing up, knowing that we are always deeply loved, fully acceptable and incredibly powerful. There isn't any pride in that. Whoever heard of a seed being proud of being a seed? A seed is just a seed which died so that the farm would have a great harvest.

We've been crucified with Christ and are, as it were, seeds cast by the Sower so there would be a harvest. You don't work at that. You just rest in who you are. He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown

Crucified people are dangerous. They don't have anything to prove and they never have to pretend.



You're Giving Up *What* for Lent?

But now that you know the real God—or rather since God knows you—how can you possibly subject yourselves again to those paper tigers? For that is exactly what you do when you are intimidated into scrupulously observing all the traditions, taboos and superstitions associated with special days and seasons and years. I am afraid all my hard work among you has gone up in a puff of smoke! (Galatians 4:9-11, The Message)

It was one of those days with too many errands to run. Already pressed for time, I bumped into a casual acquaintance in the grocery store. Several years ago, when he first found out I am a minister, he started to call me a “man of God.” When I tell him he’s a man of God too he just waves me off by saying, “You know what I mean, Greg!”

When my friend saw me he did what he usually does—he tried to say something spiritually significant. I could tell he was in a hurry, but he was conflicted. He didn’t want a long, involved conversation, but he was face to face with a “man of God” as we waited in the check-out line.

So he asked me what I was going to give up for Lent. I think he thought his throw-away question would enable both of us to give quick responses, collect our groceries and head for the parking lot. I’m sure he expected me to say something like “going to movies” and then he would tell me he was giving up something like “coffee” and we could both be on our way.

Maybe I should have said something else, but silly me, I responded “You don’t want to know what I’m giving up!”

He said, “No, really...tell me. I’m fascinated hearing what people give up for Lent—especially men of God.”

“OK, but first I have to clarify. Believe me, I’m not trying to be cute or clever. 1) I don’t think Christians are obligated to give up anything *for* Lent, and 2) when I decide to give up something, I don’t do it *for* Lent.”

He rolled his eyes, as it seemed to dawn on

him that this conversation was 1) going to take longer than the quick-and-easy sound bite he originally planned, and 2) maybe even lead him into a theological trap. He sighed, “OK—I’m ready, tell me more.”

“What I am giving up is the hardest thing of all. Way harder than giving up peanut butter or chocolate or my favorite television program. I am giving up religion—all of it.”

The look on his face told me he didn’t get it. My friend looked genuinely uncomfortable with a person he considered to be a “man of God” telling him that religion qualifies as something that should be given up.

I knew he wanted out of this discussion, so I attempted a gracious conclusion: “Tell you what, give my shocking statement some thought and the next time we see each other we can talk more. Or you can email me for further discussion...whatever. Great seeing you.”

As I suspected, my friend never did ask for a further explanation, but had he done so my answer would have gone something like this:

Giving up something *for* Lent is a religious contrivance that, like all religious innovations, is *all about us*. That’s the foundational problem with religion and all of its ceremonies and rituals—it’s *all about us*. The self-orientation of Christ-less religion is perhaps its greatest indictment.

Religion has to be *all about us*, because that’s the only way Christ-less religion can survive. The moment the spotlight shifts the authority and credibility of religion starts to melt like an ice cream cone on a hot day in August. The moment that the Light of Christ shines in dark places religious stuff becomes irrelevant and the big business of religion loses its market share.

Why *should* or *must* we give up something for Lent? The core of the answer revolves around the primitive notion (alive and well in Christ-less religion today) of pleasing and appeasing the gods. God, or the gods, says

such a proposition, is pleased and appeased by our suffering.

According to religious folklore, God especially needs to be appeased just before Good Friday. After all, the religious folklore continues, Good Friday is the day that God the Father took out his wrath on Jesus, God the Son, instead of us.

And every spring the memory of what happened makes the Father irritable at best. So, give something up for Lent! Show Father God you care!

That entire proposition is twisted, contorted and convoluted—and has little if anything to do with our relationship with our loving heavenly Father. Even though I have sworn off religion “for Lent,” I have been religiously giving up religion for a number of years, and I intend to continue this ritual (of course, my annual re-enactment is just that, for my initial act of surrendering to God’s grace was the *de facto* time when I gave up religion once and for all!).

When my friend heard me, someone he respects as a man of God (or at least he did up until that point!) saying that I was giving up religion for Lent...well, to him it was like I was saying “the emperor has no clothes!”

His grave misgivings were right on target! The emperors of religion are buck naked!

Giving up religion for Lent takes the wind out of the sails of Christ-less religion—it questions the fundamental assumptions and prejudices behind compliance to religious traditions and customs. That’s why I keep giving up religion for Lent.

Christ-less religion thrives on the assumption that God’s primary disposition toward us is characterized by a big frown and a furrowed brow.

Big business religion “works” best when its followers are convinced that God is upset and perhaps even angry with them, and that their job is to 1) appease him, and then, once the Father settles down and is

snoring on his heavenly couch, 2) tiptoe around, making sure he doesn’t wake up. Assumption—we have the best chance to please God when he is sleeping on his couch!

Christ-less religion operates somewhat like a pest-control business. Religion indoctrinates its fol-

Giving up something for Lent is a religious contrivance that, like all religious innovations, is all about us. That’s the fundamental problem with religion and all of its ceremonies and rituals—it’s all about us.

lowers into thinking that the only way to get rid of their “sin infestation” is to get on a program that exterminates sin.

The deeper a person buys into religious propositions, the more such an individual will think of big business religion like a pest control business. Sin exterminators have long lists of things that need to be given up for Lent.

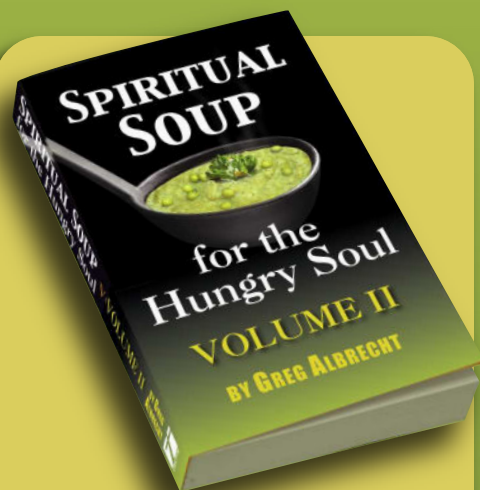
When God’s grace transformed me, sin extermination no longer occupied a primary role in my life. Embracing God’s grace, and yielding to my risen Lord, who lives his life within me, is now at the top of my list.

Because of God’s grace, I don’t endlessly worry about what I need to give up for Lent, hoping that in some way God will be gratified with my efforts.

God is gratified and pleased because of Jesus, and because Jesus lives in me and I in him, I realize that my spiritual house has been declared “termite-free”!

The work of sin extermination is done—my role, and your role, is simply to accept the work of the Divine Exterminator. □

—Greg Albrecht



SOUP’S ON!

Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul Volume 2 is now available. Like *Soup #1*, *Soup #2* features 48 messages, organized seasonally, providing spiritual nourishment and food for thought throughout the calendar year.

PTM has already mailed a complimentary copy of *Soup #2* to many of our dedicated and generous Friends and Partners. It’s another way for us to provide Christ-centered spiritual nourishment—AND it’s a way of saying THANK YOU!

Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul Volume 2 is available to the general public for \$20. However, we are offering it to those who receive the hard copy edition of *Plain Truth* for a gift of \$15 or more to the ongoing work of PTM.

Soup #2 is a great collection of rich, satisfying, inspiring and Christ-centered spiritual meals—to receive your copy of *Soup #2*, send a donation of \$15 or more to Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA

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Or you may order online at our secure website:

www.ptm.org/soup



CWR/PTM



Meeting Us at Our Worst

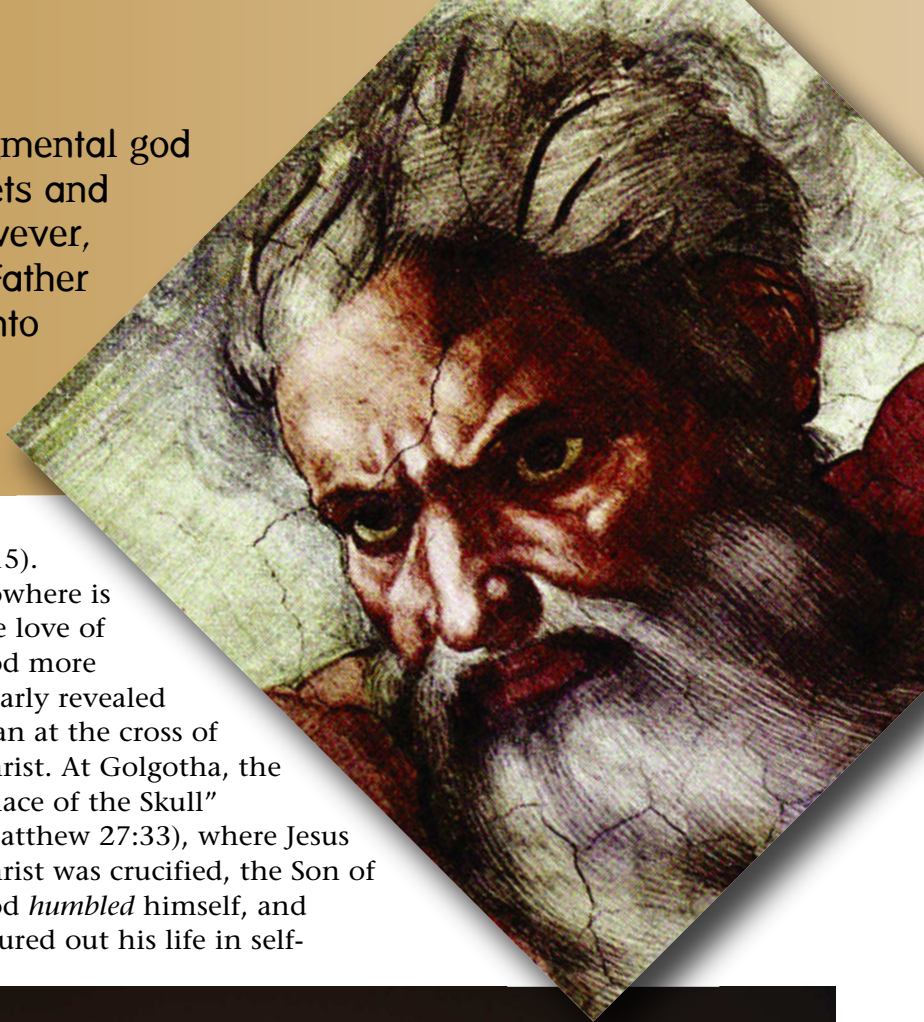
by Martin M. Davis

I regularly attend a twelve-step support group where “God” is a common subject of discussion. When experienced participants share their belief in a loving, forgiving God, newcomers, who continue to struggle with alcohol, drugs and other addictions, often lower their heads in shame and sadly proclaim, “God could never forgive someone like me; I have done too many bad things.”

Often reared on the bad-news preaching of shame, condemnation and ultimate hell-fire, they believe in a harsh, angry god, a vengeful judge who reels in disgust at the sight of them. They fall victim to

...in his determined purpose to save us, not in the midst of our morality, goodness and white-gloved decency, but in the midst of our immorality, badness and red-handed indecency.

Contrary to the angry, judgmental god portrayed by the prophets and preachers of religion, however, scripture recounts a loving Father who sent his beloved Son into the world to save sinners...

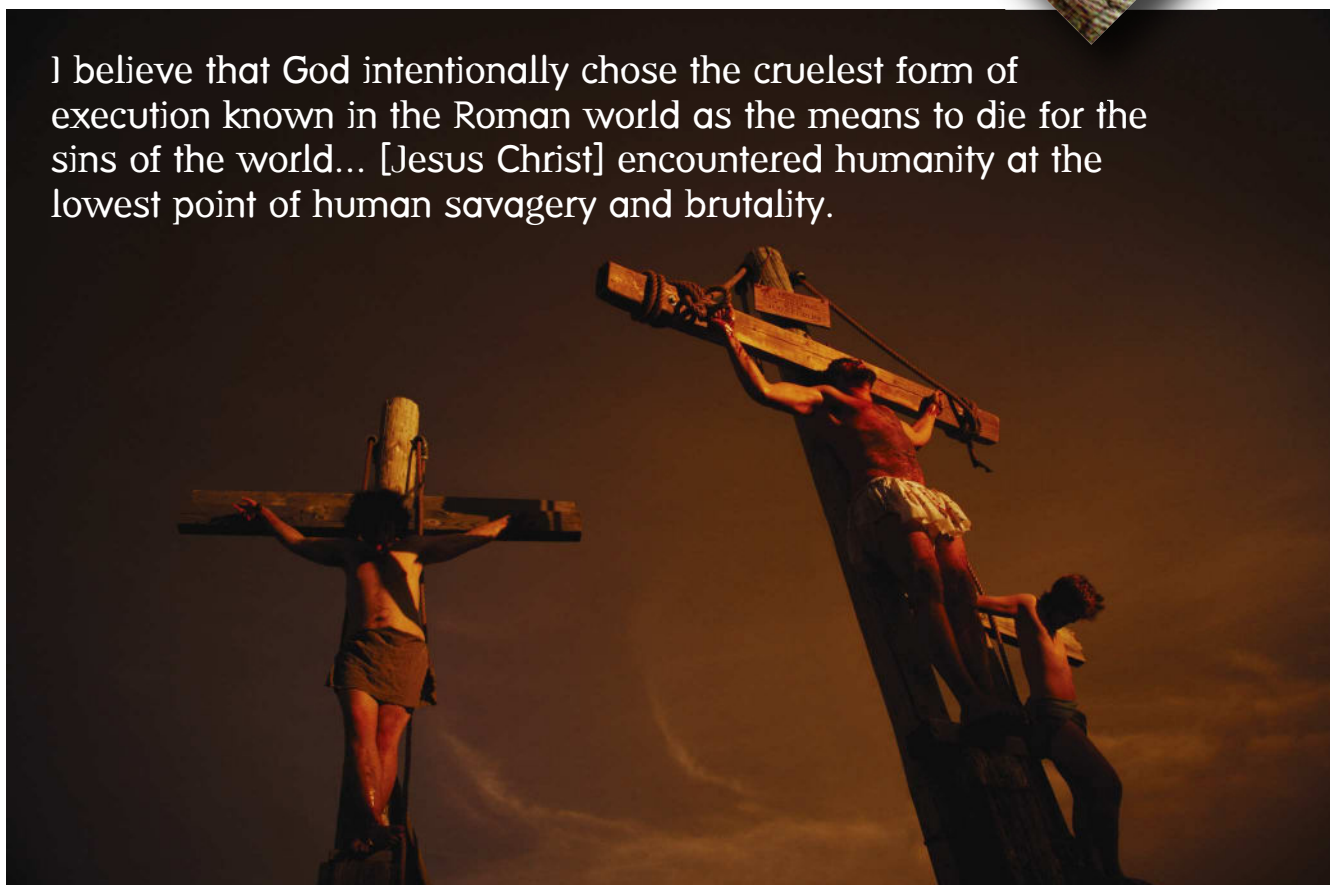


the all-too-common delusion that their standing with God is related to their performance, whether good or bad.

Contrary to the angry, judgmental god portrayed by the prophets and preachers of religion, however, Scripture recounts a loving Father who sent his beloved Son into the world to save sinners (John 3:16; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy

1:15). Nowhere is the love of God more clearly revealed than at the cross of Christ. At Golgotha, the "Place of the Skull" (Matthew 27:33), where Jesus Christ was crucified, the Son of God *humbled* himself, and poured out his life in self-

I believe that God intentionally chose the cruelest form of execution known in the Roman world as the means to die for the sins of the world... [Jesus Christ] encountered humanity at the lowest point of human savagery and brutality.



At the cross, God meets us in the hidden-most corners of our hearts, carefully and lovingly entering the secret places where we have hidden away the things of which we are most ashamed...



emptying love for all humanity (see Philippians 2:8).

Public Display of Affection

Crucifixion was the cruelest, most sadistic form of punishment known in the Roman world. Because it was so obscene and degrading, Roman citizens were not to be crucified; rather, this horrific

form of execution was reserved solely for slaves and the lowest form of criminals. By the time of Jesus, crucifixion had been refined and perfected, so as to render maximum pain and prolonged suffering to its victims. Not only was it designed to be physically unbearable, crucifixion was intended to be a form of ritual

humiliation, for its victims were stripped naked before they were put to death. Crucifixion was meant to be a *public* spectacle, a form of execution that would render not only maximum pain but also maximum shame and humiliation to its victims.

By dying on a cruel Roman cross, the Son of God not only made himself accursed (Galatians 3:13), he willingly made himself the brunt of

At the cross, God freely chose to meet us in the utmost depths of our darkness and depravity. At the cross, Jesus Christ, God in human flesh, meets us at our worst and embraces us in loving forgiveness!" (Luke 23:34)

public ridicule and ritual humiliation. He became the subject of mockery—a laughing stock, a pathetic public spectacle, a joke, a would-be king crowned with a ludicrous, make-shift wreath of thorns (John 19:19) in order to free all humanity from the bondage of sin and death.

I believe that God intentionally chose the cruelest form of execution known in the Roman world as the means to die for the sins of the world. By willingly enduring the brutal agony, shame and humiliation of crucifixion, Jesus Christ—the fully divine Son of God and the fully human son of Mary—encountered humanity at the lowest point of human



Our Need for Forgiveness

The cross of Christ is the answer to our deeply-ingrained need for forgiveness. At the cross, God has met us in the darkest depths of our sinfulness *and forgiven us!* He has taken upon his own shoulders the heavy weight of human brutality, savagery and depravity in his determined purpose to save us, not in the midst of our morality, goodness and white-gloved

decency, but in the midst of our immorality, badness and red-handed indecency. God sovereignly and freely chooses to save us in the midst of our sinfulness and hard-hearted rebellion, where, with gritted teeth, we have willingly shaken our angry fists in his face and nailed his beloved Son to a cross!

As we sit at the foot of the cross, pondering its meaning, we learn that God willingly meets us in the heart of our darkness, embracing and loving us in the midst of our guilt and shame. At the cross, God meets us in the hidden-most corners of our hearts, carefully and lovingly entering the secret places where we have hidden away the things of which we are most ashamed, in order to bring the healing power of forgiveness to our deepest wounds. At the cross, we realize that God graciously loves us in the middle of our

The crucified Son of God draws all humanity to himself (John 12:32, 33), where with waiting arms stretched wide, he invites us to receive God's love and to allow our hearts to be re-created by it.

savagery and brutality. At the cross, God freely chose to meet us in the utmost depths of our darkness and depravity. At the cross, Jesus Christ, God in human flesh, meets us at our worst and *embraces us in loving forgiveness!*" (Luke 23:34)

The Maximum Display of Love

By forgiving us, even in the midst of the unspeakable cruelty of crucifixion, God demonstrates his love for sinners (see Romans 5:8). The unbridled brutality and savagery of the cross facilitates the *maximum* expression of God's love for humanity. The *depth of human depravity* displayed at the cross is countered by the *depth of God's love* expressed at the cross. God does not take the easier, softer

way of loving us when we are loveable, as might a parent who finds it easier to love a well-behaved, obedient child than a recalcitrant, rebellious one. Rather, God takes the way of the cross in order to demonstrate his infinite love for humanity, a love not conditioned by performance, but one that embraces and enfolds us even in the heart of our darkness.

At the cross, God shows his steadfast determination to save us in the midst of our sin by willingly taking upon himself the epitome of human ugliness, brutality and savagery—all for us and for our salvation. At the cross, we see that the depth of God's love is deeper than the depravity of human sin.

failed marriages and broken homes; our addictions and compulsive behaviors; our broken dreams and failed ambitions; our dishonesty and hypocrisy; our secret sins; our ruthless misuse of others, and our relentless pursuit of money, power and prestige.

The End of Religion

God's love and forgiveness, graciously conveyed in the face of the barbaric, heinous brutality of the cross, proves that God's love for human beings is not dependent upon moral effort, religious performance or good works done to gain divine approval. The crucified Jesus encounters human sinfulness at its worst, takes it upon himself, and bears its awful penalty on behalf of all humanity (see Romans 3:23). At the cross the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), thereby rendering nil all human religious effort to atone for sin or merit favor with God. The cross of Christ precludes all

Freeing us from religion's onerous demands to please or appease an endlessly demanding deity, releasing us from moral effort and self-improvement programs designed to make us "worthy," ...



The cross leaves no room for religious effort; the cross leaves no atoning work undone; at the cross, "It is finished!" (John 19:30).

claims to meritorious standing in the sight of God, for our standing is solely the result of unfathomable grace, expressed in the crucified Jesus' prayer of forgiveness (Luke 23:34). In short, the cross means the end of

religion, where religion is defined as the human attempt to please or appease God in order to gain divine favor or atone for sin. The cross leaves no room for religious effort; the cross leaves no atoning work undone; at the cross, "It is finished!" (John 19:30).

The crucified Son of God draws all humanity to himself (John 12:32, 33), where with waiting arms stretched wide, he invites us to receive God's love and to allow our hearts to be re-created by it.

Freeing us from religion's onerous demands to please or appease an endlessly demanding deity, releasing us from moral effort and self-improvement programs designed to make us "worthy," the crucified Jesus invites us to lay the heavy burden of religion at the foot of the cross, where we may be transformed by the

power of his love. □

Martin M. Davis is an ordained minister in All Nations Christian Church International. You can visit his theological blog at www.martinmdavis.blogspot.com.

SPECIAL 2013 YEAR-END REPORT:

"It is so obvious to us that God is blessing this work—we see your efforts, your commitment, your sense of direction and we thank God that we can share in this continuing mission. Humanity needs the hope PTM faithfully provides." California

PTM brings Christ-centered peace and comfort to those in desperate need. In 2013, PTM helped many escape the idea of an angry, vengeful god ready to send those who displease him to an ever-burning hell. PTM helps people around this world come to know God as a loving, forgiving, heavenly Father. *More than ever, the world is full of anger, fear and violence*—and sadly, Christ-less religion contributes to the anxiety many are currently experiencing. But our heavenly Father is neither the author of performance-based religion nor the guilt and shame it produces. He truly desires a personal relationship with all his children. At PTM, our work and your support is validated when we receive letters like this:

Christianity Without the Religion Bringing hope and peace of mind to thousands each week

Every week, thousands of PTM's friends know they can count on the teaching ministry of Greg Albrecht for inspiration, encouragement and hope. Greg is a missionary to religious refugees and spiritual prisoners. Whether online or through audio cassettes or CDs, CWR is ready when you are!



I have been living the faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone life for about five years and I have been a happier and more-thankful-than-ever, more-hopeful-than-ever, more-peaceful-than-ever person every day I continue living. God is such a good God! I tell people about this beautiful, marvelous and best news every chance I get. I still have some hang-ups from living the religious life, but I'm getting freer every day, and I keep praising God for your ministry. Alberta, Canada

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 people whose lives have changed, as God has used PTM/CWR to open their eyes to his amazing grace.

Thank you for all you have done in my life. When I first started listening to CWR and reading The Plain Truth, I was trapped in a legalistic swamp. Like so many others, I swallowed the Kool-Aid of Christ-less religion, and I was enslaved. I truly believe God used PTM to rescue me from the mess I was in. That's why I will continue to financially support PTM as you help others. New York

I am bewildered by religion, but thanks to you I am starting to understand more about God and my relationship with Him. PTM has been so helpful to me, patiently listening to me and responding carefully, with compassion. Other ministries have given me canned answers, but your responses are obviously personal, about my particular situation. Not only that, but you pray for me! Your ministry has been and still is such a help and comfort. Delaware

I just read the "Front Page" article on your website and was very encouraged by it. Being reminded about how God will go to any lengths to bring us back to him was just what I needed. Australia

I am so thankful that God has given you to us. I am 81 years old, but I am young in Christ. I am so amazed at the incredible teaching and understanding I am receiving from PTM—I am growing ever closer and nearer to our Lord Jesus Christ. I spent 37 years in a legalistic, authoritarian religion before God rescued me. Now he is using PTM to help heal me and provide spiritual food I so desperately need. I continually pray to God to always inspire you and direct you by

the Holy Spirit for the sake of the people he is bringing out of religious bondage and for those whom he has already saved, but now need your help as they grow in Christ. Keep up his work! **Illinois**

For a long time now I have been reluctant to open, let alone study, the Bible. I'd had enough of Bible study; it being a requirement at the church I used to attend. I came across PTM several years ago and I became intrigued by your online resource entitled CWR Bible Survey. Wow! I am amazed, humbled and grateful and I actually look forward, despite a busy schedule, to the time I am able to devote to the CWR Bible Survey. **Manchester, England**

My brother and I are blessed and honored to be a part of the ongoing work of PTM. I can't tell you how moved we were when you recently took the time to pray for us. It is so obvious to us that God is blessing this work—we see your efforts, your commitment, your sense of direction and we thank God that we can share in this continuing mission. Humanity needs the hope PTM faithfully proclaims. We always ask God to provide rich blessings for the work of PTM and as we are able we will continue to monetarily support the ministry of PTM. **California**

Newsmakers of 2013

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 2013. When you support PTM, you are helping us to proclaim the gospel of God's amazing grace!



New "Front Page" Feature on Website

After reviewing how people "find" our website and its many resources, we decided to include a new weekly feature called "Front Page." The variety of topics offered at "Front Page" are easy for search engines to categorize and offer, so that more people find PTM resources when looking for information on a particular subject.



Ed Dunn

In October 2012, Ed Dunn joined the Plain Truth Ministries Board of Directors. Ed comes to PTM with nearly 20 years of experience in the corporate retirement planning world. In varied roles, Ed has had leadership opportunities in both the small, entrepreneurial and large consulting and business environments. His work has focused in the areas of business operations, management and client services, as well as team consulting and sales. Ed holds a Master's degree in Business with emphasis in Human Resource Development from Azusa Pacific University. Ed also recently started a Masters of Divinity program at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.



Tony Kriz

PTM was delighted to see Tony Kriz grace our pages with his cover story in the Winter 2013 *Plain Truth*—adapted from Tony's book *Neighbors and Wisemen: Sacred Encounters in a Portland Pub and Other Unexpected Places*. Tony is "Author in Residence" at Warner Pacific and he holds a doctorate in Spiritual Formation. Tony teaches faith and culture in numerous religious and academic settings. Tony (known by many as "Tony the Beat Poet" in Donald Miller's best-selling book *Blue like Jazz*) has lived in many cultures, including among Muslims in Eastern Europe and with post-Christian communities in the Pacific Northwest.



Brad Jersak

In 2013 PTM welcomed Brad Jersak to our editorial team as an associate editor of *The Plain Truth*, *Christianity Without the Religion Journal* and other PTM publications. Brad is a seminary professor, speaker, author and editor from British Columbia, Canada. Brad recently received his PhD in Theology from Bangor



Ruth Tucker

Plain Truth columnist, church historian and professor Ruth Tucker has written a new book titled *The Biographical Bible*.

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

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.

If you regularly donate to the work of PTM—thank you! If not, why not contribute today? We offer three easy ways:

- 1) Visit our secure website at www.ptm.org/uni/Donation
- 2) call us at 800-309-4466
- 3) Mail your contribution to Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129

"No Sheep Left Behind"

On March 16, 2014
CWR/PTM continues
its tradition of
celebrating an annual

Day of Prayer for Religious
Captives. We select a Sunday several weeks before Easter
as a special time to think about and pray for spiritual
prisoners and captives of institutionalized religion.

Many of our readers, friends and partners around this
world are themselves spiritual refugees who by God's
grace have been rescued from religious salt mines and
chain gangs.

It is therefore the high calling and privilege of CWR/PTM
to not only pray for but to actively pass on the grace of our
Lord, which he has lavished on us, to others who find
themselves in a spiritually dark and toxic place, as we once
were. The following is a "Sneak Peek"—a sermon summary
of the message CWR will air on March 16. —the Editors

In Luke 15:1-2 we read that the religious curmudgeons of Jesus' day noticed that he was attracting big crowds. Remaining true to one of the founding principles of Christ-less religion, these grumpy old men seemed to never lose an opportunity to find fault, criticize and condemn.

These righteous-in-their-own-eyes religious authorities comforted themselves with the observation that Jesus was spinning his wheels with these crowds who were composed of "sinners"—the *wrong kind of people*.

From our 21st century vantage point we might say, "well, who isn't a sinner?" But in this first century religious setting of Judaism, sinners were not only people who had done wrong things, but sinners were also the *wrong kind of people* 1) because of the color of their skin, 2) because of their religious beliefs, 3) because they were blind, crippled and lepers, and 4) because they were engaged in occupations that were deemed to be less than respectable by the good, religious folks of that day.

These religious authorities saw the *wrong kind of people* as irrevocably lost, without hope or cursed perhaps



for good reason—and therefore they were not worthy of any efforts to help or serve. While Jesus responds to his religious critics in all three of the parables in Luke 15, in this message we will exclusively focus on the first parable, that of the one lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7).

While I am quite certain that Albert Einstein didn't intend one of his statements to be interpreted in the way that I do, I nonetheless love to quote it as a commentary on God's extravagant love, and how we humans often simply don't get God's grace. Einstein once said, *Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.*

Christ-less religion believes that there is a limit as to the efforts that should be invested in helping and serving. In fact, the world at large believes there is such a thing or person as a "lost cause."

Oscar Wilde, the Irish writer and poet whose work was extremely popular in British society some 130 years ago, once said, *Nowadays people know the price of everything but the value of nothing.* From what I understand of his life and writings, I don't think Oscar Wilde was trying to share a spiritual truth—but in the context of Jesus' parable of the one lost sheep, that observation is right on target.

Most people, when thinking about the practical implications of Jesus' story, conclude that abandoning either a physical or spiritual flock of sheep (the parable says that the shepherd left the 99 in a place of danger—"the wilderness") in order to rescue one lost sheep to be a fool's errand. Many might respond to this parable by saying, "Okay, it's a warm, fuzzy story of compassion, but regaining one lost sheep while you lose ten or twenty who wander off while you are gone is preposterous! It doesn't compute—it doesn't make sense."

But God doesn't define his love and grace numerically or by percentages. If Jesus had defined spiritual success by the way we humans count physical or spir-

God's grace insists that every lost sheep is worthy of what humans might determine to be God's outlandish and extravagant love.

itual success, then the shepherd in our parable would never have left the 99 to go after one—he would have stayed with the 99. God's grace insists that every lost sheep is worthy of what humans might determine to be God's outlandish and extravagant love. Those who are unfortunately enslaved to Christ-less religion often look down on "sinners" as undeserving of God's grace.

We conclude with thanksgiving for God's grace, which leads us to realize that apart from God we would be among those who Oscar Wilde observed as *...knowing the price of everything but the value of nothing.* □

JAILBREAK!



THE MEANING OF THE CROSS

BY BRAD JERSAK

...God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance! (Romans 2:4)

I once prayed for a man who lived with a heinous crime, secretly afflicting himself with self-loathing and condemnation. When he finally confessed his sin, I directed him to the cross where Jesus spoke the words, "I forgive you." The man retorted, "That's too easy!" But then this man realized that Jesus' response to the charge of 'cheap grace' is, "No. No, it wasn't." Forgiving us cost Christ everything. Deep sobs shook this man when he realized that Jesus had given himself completely to forgiving him. God's grace entered his heart and transformed him in ways his self-hatred never could.

The cross. It stands as the apex of Christ's self-giving love and his decisive act of radical forgiveness. Listen carefully as Jesus speaks these words to you: "I forgive you. There is nothing—*nothing*—that my blood cannot wash!" The



AT THAT TABLE, WE FIND THAT THE WINE OF HIS BLOOD AND THE BREAD OF HIS BODY MEET OUR DEEPEST NEEDS, HEAL OUR DEEPEST WOUNDS AND FORGIVE OUR DEEPEST SINS.

TRUE REPENTANCE IS SIMPLY OUR “YES, PLEASE” RSVP RESPONSE TO DINE ON HIS GOODNESS AND GRACE.

cross of Christ reveals God’s supernatural mercy; it initiates and generates genuine repentance; and it wins our hearts to the love of God.

Repentance: Remorse or RSVP?

But know this: condemnation, ac-

cusation and judgment often masquerade as “repentance.” Even as you turn to the kindness of Jesus, a religious voice will insist, “Earn this.” How? “By feeling shameful enough about your sin and about yourself.” Christ-less religion turns

the focus back onto us—what we have done and what we must do! Many a preacher has led us to obsess about our wickedness. Such individuals, who are themselves held in captivity, demand that their listeners experience guilty torment.

This self-indulgent pseudo-repentance often points the Pharisaical finger, regarding our forgiveness as *too easy*, our grace as *too cheap*, and our Prodigal Father as *too nice*. I reply:

Our forgiveness was not “too easy”—it cost Jesus everything.

Our grace is not “too cheap”—it is an absolutely free gift.

And our Father is not “too nice”—

THE CRUCIFIXION AND THE CROSS

When we read the New Testament accounts of Christ’s death, we are struck by both the ugliness of the crime and the beauty of the One who endured it. We note the irony of how an instrument of torture becomes a work of art.

Readers may find it helpful to distinguish between the *crucifixion* and the *cross*. The *crucifixion* was the sinful act of evil men who murdered the Son of God. The *cross* refers to the self-giving, servant-love of Christ, in which he extends mercy and forgiveness to

...THE CRUCIFIXION IS WHAT WE DID TO HIM—WE TOOK HIS LIFE. THE CROSS IS WHAT CHRIST DID FOR US—HE GAVE HIS LIFE.

the world. In other words, *the crucifixion is what we did to him—we took his life. The cross is what Christ did for us—he gave his life.*

The New Testament does not strictly use the words this way, but doing so helps show us both perspectives. In Jesus’ parable of the tenants (Mark 12:1-12), the owner of the vineyard (representing God) expects the tenants to respect and receive his beloved son (vs. 6), but they murder him (vs. 7) and the owner is actually furious (vs. 8). This is Jesus’ prophecy of how the temple authorities would

conspire in his death. So too, in retrospect, Stephen the martyr indicts the religious leadership, saying, “Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him” (Acts 7:52). Thus, Jesus and the witnesses in Acts saw the crucifixion as an ugly homicide.

But when we speak of the *cross*, we refer to the great love that Jesus has for us in giving his life (1 John 3:16). The *cross* is how “God showed his love among us” (1 John 4:9-10). When Paul says he will only “boast in the cross of our Lord,” he is referring to all Jesus did through his death for us.

This distinction also clarifies what God the Father is doing *and not doing* on Good Friday: he is *not* a co-conspirator in the *crucifixion* of his own Son, nor does he get any pleasure out of betrayal, punishment and killing. Rather, the significance of the *cross* is that “God was *in Christ*, reconciling the world to himself....” How? By graciously, mercifully, lovingly “*not counting people’s sins against them*” (2 Corinthians 5:19, my emphasis). The cross of Christ means that our Lord and Savior has conquered Satan, sin and death on our behalf. □

...CONDEMNATION, ACCUSATION AND JUDGMENT OFTEN MASQUERADE AS "REPENTANCE." EVEN AS YOU TURN TO THE KINDNESS OF JESUS, A RELIGIOUS VOICE WILL INSIST, "EARN THIS."

How? "BY FEELING SHAMEFUL ENOUGH ABOUT YOUR SIN AND ABOUT YOURSELF." CHRIST-LESS RELIGION TURNS THE FOCUS BACK ONTO US—WHAT WE HAVE DONE AND WHAT WE MUST DO!

he is unfailing love whose mercy endures forever!

Repentance-as-remorse knows neither the power of sin nor the power of the cross alone to deal with sin. Sin mocks our remorse as pitiable and in fact feeds on it. Just ask the addict who has lost everything and lives in powerlessness of self-hating regret every day. Ask the household where domestic violence rears its ugly head and a thousand remorseful apologies never break the cycle. Fact: beating

ourselves up never ever breaks the chains of sin.

Repentance-as-remorse also knows nothing of the power of the cross, insulting the blood of Christ by supposing somehow to supplement it. Regret, remorse and repentance never atone for our sin.

Only the cross of Christ—God's ultimate demonstration of forgiving love—accomplishes that. As the great hymn says:

Oh precious is the flow, that makes me white as snow,

No other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus.

True repentance (*metanoia*—turning) comes when "sinners" like us hear the invitation to Christ's banqueting table—a beautiful picture of the cross—and we turn to taste his kindness, mercy and grace. At that table, we find that the wine of his blood and the bread of his body meet our deepest needs, heal our deepest wounds and forgive our deepest sins. True repentance is simply our "yes, please" RSVP response to dine on his goodness and grace.

Victorious Jailbreak

The cross also served as a victorious jailbreak! On the cross, with that simple phrase, "Father, forgive them," Jesus broke the power of the law to condemn us to its death sentence. He defeated the jailor and rescued us from his bondage (Galatians 3:23-25; Ephesians 4:7-8; Colossians 2:13-15). Hell's prison gates fell off and now—already—we are free to abandon our cells. Name your prison: Is it fear? Is it anger? Is it guilt? Come on out!

Charles Wesley's great hymn describes this Gospel emancipation beautifully:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;*

*Thine eye diffused a quickening ray
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

(Continued on page 31)

MANY A PREACHER HAS LED US TO OBSESS ABOUT OUR WICKEDNESS. SUCH INDIVIDUALS, WHO ARE THEMSELVES HELD IN CAPTIVITY, DEMAND THAT THEIR LISTENERS EXPERIENCE GUILTY TORMENT.

“AN ATONING SACRIFICE FOR OUR SINS”?

“This is love: not that we loved God, but he loved us and sent his Son as an *atonement sacrifice* for our sins (1 John 4:10, my emphasis).”

Without a doubt, the Bible uses the language of “sacrifice” to describe Christ’s saving work on the cross. However, *sacrifice* has often been grossly misunderstood, ascribing pagan notions to the meaning of the cross.

For example, “penal substitution” is a popular tradition that sees Jesus’ brutal suffering and violent death as a sacrifice made to appease the wrath of an angry God. This view presumes that God could not simply forgive sin. The demands of justice required full payment of the sin-debt. How? Only by punishing sin sufficiently to satisfy God’s wrath. So Jesus’ blood was offered up to God as the only sacrifice able to pay the penalty for our sins. He was punished in our place so that God could truly forgive.

Unfortunately, this theology makes God look like the gods of pagan religion. He’s angry, he needs to be appeased and he demands a sacrifice. The only difference is that the sacrifice of Jesus is bigger and

better than casting a virgin into a volcano to settle down the boiling lava. It’s just the Mercedes model of the same old religious system.

For a more exclusively Christian understanding, the Gospel proclaims these unique features:

- We don’t offer the sacrifice to God; God’s sacrifice is offered to us.
- The offering is not an expression of God’s wrath, but of God’s love.
- The Father is not pleased with the punishment of his Lamb, but with his Son’s servant-love, even in death.
- Sin is not paid for per se; it is freely forgiven—but this forgiveness was costly, because it even included forgiving the murder of God’s Son.

Romans 12:1, addressed to believers, helps us understand the sacrifice of Christ: “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” Paul is not suggesting that believers need to be punished, but rather, to offer our lives to the service of God’s mercy, just as Jesus did. □

...“PENAL SUBSTITUTION” IS A POPULAR TRADITION THAT SEES JESUS’ BRUTAL SUFFERING AND VIOLENT DEATH AS A SACRIFICE MADE TO APPEASE THE WRATH OF AN ANGRY GOD. THIS VIEW PRESUMES THAT GOD COULD NOT SIMPLY FORGIVE SIN..

THE ONLY DIFFERENCE IS THAT THE SACRIFICE OF JESUS IS BIGGER AND BETTER THAN CASTING A VIRGIN INTO A VOLCANO TO SETTLE DOWN THE BOILING LAVA. IT’S JUST THE MERCEDES MODEL OF THE SAME OLD RELIGIOUS SYSTEM.

How might this look in practice? Each person's story is unique. For some, encountering Christ is as sudden as the conversion of Paul, when he got "knocked off his high horse" and "blinded by the light" on his way to persecute believers. For others, like the apostle Peter, there's a process (sometimes slow,

RELIGION HAD SENTENCED THIS WOMAN TO MORAL TORMENT—DISQUALIFIED AND DISABLED HER. "BUT WHEN THE KINDNESS AND LOVE OF GOD OUR SAVIOR APPEARED, HE SAVED HER, NOT BECAUSE OF RIGHTEOUS THINGS SHE HAD DONE, BUT BECAUSE OF HIS MERCY" (TITUS 3:4-5).

sometimes painful) where the "darkness turns into dawning, and the dawning into noon-day bright." Eventually, our eyes are drawn by God's love and fixed on Jesus, who "for the joy set before him...endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). Did you know that *you* are the joy set before him? *You* are the reward of his life-giving love!

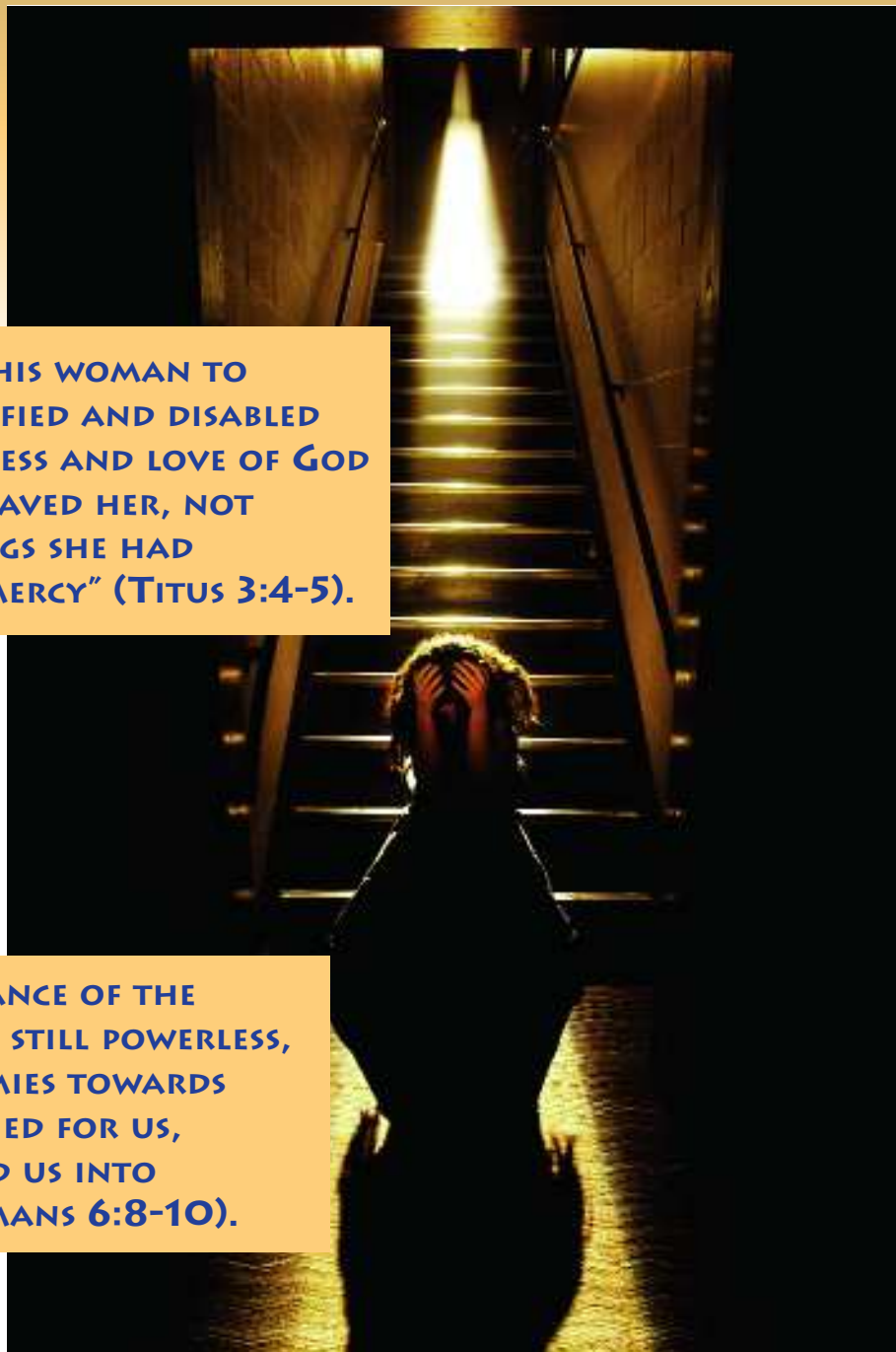
THIS, THEN, IS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CROSS: THAT WHILE WE WERE STILL POWERLESS, UNGODLY SINNERS AND ENEMIES TOWARDS GOD, JESUS HAD ALREADY DIED FOR US, FORGIVEN US AND WELCOMED US INTO FRIENDSHIP WITH GOD (ROMANS 6:8-10).

Whether suddenly or gradually, subtly or dramatically, it was his initiative. God's grace alone, revealed in Christ's life and death (*not* the threat of condemnation) authors and perfects our faith.

Let the Sun Shine In

Peter Helms was a member of the original European cast of the stage musical, *Hair*, about four decades ago. He was a young seeker, looking for love, peace and joy in the music and magic of the hippie scene, a culture famous for spiritual, sexual and narcotic experimentation.

Peter was into all of that at the



time, longing for something to quench his thirsty soul. He thought of trying Transcendental Meditation, a form of eastern mysticism made popular by the Maharishi Yogi. But entry required three days of sobriety from drugs and alcohol...and Peter just couldn't do it. Still, he carried on with the highs and lows of nightly performances.

One day after the show, Peter and a fellow cast member noticed two very conservative-looking

ladies standing outside the theatre, handing out tracts. They seemed friendly and even invited Peter and his buddy to a home-cooked dinner.

Peter remembers that first meal as a surreal experience of overwhelming love. The ladies offered to pray for them and he thought, "Why not, man! This could be groovy!" With that prayer, Peter felt God's tangible love fill the room with a "high" that surpassed any drug.



Panel of the *Tauberbischofsheim Altar: The Crucifixion* by Matthias Grünewald, circa 1523-25

Before long, Peter wanted to know more about this Jesus. One day, he found himself standing in a French museum, standing before Matthias Grunewald's painting, "The Crucifixion," awestruck before that odd mix of beauty and brutality. As Peter gazed in meditation before the cross, he felt Jesus say, "I forgive you."

Peter was undone. In heartfelt gratitude, he wept uncontrollably as the Holy Spirit opened his eyes to

HELL'S PRISON GATES FELL OFF AND NOW—ALREADY—WE ARE FREE TO ABANDON OUR CELLS. NAME YOUR PRISON: IS IT FEAR? IT IS ANGER? IS IT GUILT? COME ON OUT!

this mystery: Jesus' death was an act of eternal love, specifically for Peter! Zero condemnation—just mercy and grace!

Intoxicated with supernatural love, Peter immediately introduced half a dozen other show members to Jesus, most of whom offered the rest of their lives to freely giving what they freely received. Peter continues

...STANDING BEFORE MATTHIAS GRUNEWALD'S PAINTING, "THE CRUCIFIXION," AWESTRUCK BEFORE THAT ODD MIX OF BEAUTY AND BRUTALITY. AS PETER GAZED IN MEDITATION BEFORE THE CROSS, HE FELT JESUS SAY, "I FORGIVE YOU." PETER WAS UNDONE.

to minister to this day throughout the world under the auspices of *Faith-builders*.

Religion Condemns—Jesus Forgives

A woman from my city had undergone five abortions. Unfortunately, the message she heard through religion was how wicked abortion is ...and, she surmised, how wicked she was. The condemnation of her conscience soon turned on her health, inflicting her with clinical depression and chronic fatigue.

One day, as a friend prayed with her, the woman visualized Jesus standing with her in the abortion clinic, holding her hand. No judgment, no condemnation. Just those words, "I forgive you!"

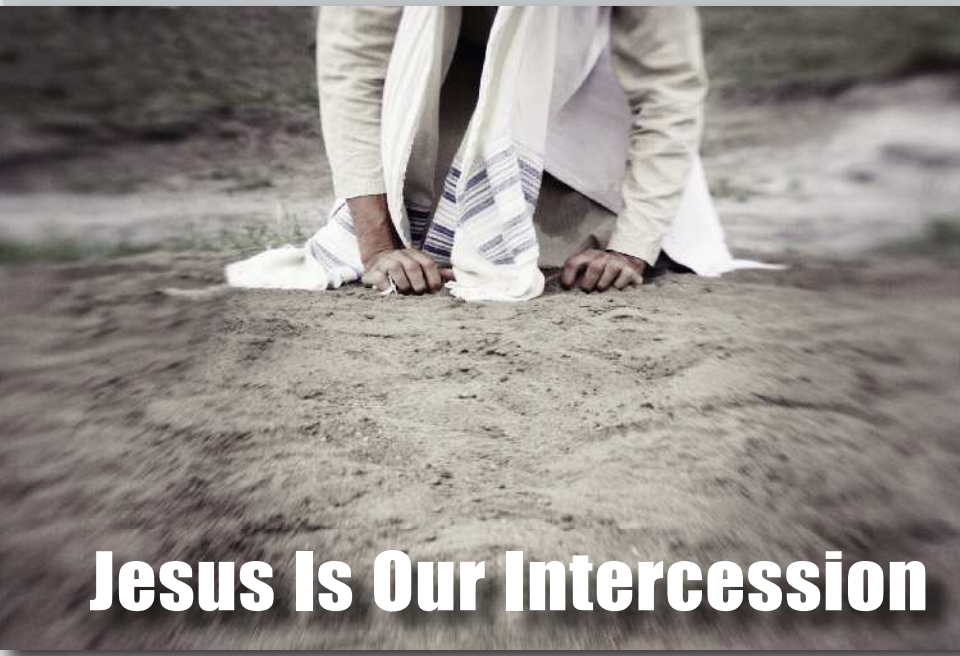
She began to shake as years of guilt and shame left her body. She came to peace and after that, she was free! Her depression and her fatigue were gone!

Religion had sentenced this woman to moral torment—disqualified and disabled her. "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (Titus 3:4-5).

This, then, is the significance of the cross: that while we were still powerless, ungodly sinners and enemies towards God, Jesus had already died for us, forgiven us and welcomed us into friendship with God (Romans 6:8-10). We conclude with lyrics from Mumford and Son's song, "Roll away your stone," recalling the parable of the prodigal son.

*It seems that all my bridges have been burned,
But you say that's exactly how this grace thing works
It's not the long walk home that will change this heart,
But the welcome I receive with the restart. □*

Plain Truth senior editor, Brad Jersak, and his wife, Eden, live in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. Brad is a faculty member at Westminster Theological Centre (UK) and facilitates seminars in local churches around the globe.



Jesus Is Our Intercession

There is a common understanding of Hebrews 7:25 that gives the impression that Jesus is not at rest, seated on the throne on high after his resurrection, but rather is engaged in eternal intercession, praying to the Father, more or less pleading for humanity, forever and ever.

This unfortunate perspective also gives rise to the idea that God is still looking for someone in the earth to intercede and “make up the hedge, and stand in the gap” to plead with God along with Jesus who is pleading in heaven, to basically...not wipe us all out in one way or the other. This misunderstanding of God and his nature is also unfortunate.

In the KJV Hebrews 7:25 reads:

Wherefore he is able also to save to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.

Preconceived Notions

We have to remember the historical context and grid of understanding that the KJV translators brought with them in regard to “Christian practices” such as prayer. Think Church of Rome minus the Pope. Think strong performance, works, duty orientation.

The phrase “to make” was added by the English translators, and it gives the impression of something yet undone, as if some sort of prayer is continuously going on by Jesus, interceding as if his finished work (sacrifice) really wasn’t enough to realize all of God’s longing in and for humanity. Some very literal translations could go like this:

He is able, the ones coming through Him, to God, always living for the purpose of pleading for them.

Or

He is able the ones coming, to and through him to God, always living for the appeal on behalf of them.

The significant point (without getting bogged down in a bunch of Greek technical stuff) is, his eternal life, *his resurrection life, is what is doing the appealing*, pleading, etc., not his prayer. *Christ in resurrection is the intercession.*

Only God has eternal life. It’s a quality of his existence, his deity. It is his to share and give, and his to withhold. There is now, not only at the center of the universe, but in union in the Godhead, at the right hand of the Father, a resurrected God-Man. We might say that the resurrected Jesus is a representative human, present not only “before God” in some petitionary mode, but “in God” in perfect union.

The intercession spoken of in Hebrews 7:25 *is not something we* (you, I or Jesus) *do*. No, the intercession is God’s own life in a man.

He has found his rest in the man he was looking for in Isaiah 66:2. That is the intercession. That is the “pleading.” That is the rest. God need look no further than himself in Christ Jesus. The Sabbath rest of Genesis 1-3 has come full circle. God took humanity out of the question when he made a covenant with Abraham (he was asleep). He made a covenant with himself (Hebrews 6), and that covenant has come full circle...his own rest...in a resurrected God-Man.

Because of our union with him, John 14:3 “that where I am, you may be also” is not talking about heaven. He is talking about oneness in the bosom of the Father on the throne of the universe. By God’s grace, you and I are in that place, also. United with him by the indwelling Spirit of sonship. We are not “absorbed into deity,” changed into “God” or “gods” but we who are joined to the Lord are one Spirit.

Because of our union with him, John 14:3 “that where I am, you may be also” is not talking about heaven. He is talking about oneness in the bosom of the Father on the throne of the universe. By God’s grace, you and I are in that place, also.

Our union with a resurrected God-Man by the Spirit means that you and I, and every other believer, are the Sabbath of God in him. Jesus is our Sabbath rest. He finds his rest in us, in Christ. □

Stephen R. Crosby and his wife, Rita, have pioneered and pastored local churches in the United States and ministered to churches, seminars and Bible schools in nations on four continents. Dr. Crosby is an adjunct professor for Christian Life School of Theology and the author of eight books. Find out more at www.stevencrosby.com.

“...I WILL GIVE YOU REST.”

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:28-29, my emphasis).



BY GREG ALBRECHT

Growing up on a farm in south Texas I learned a “whole bunch” of colorful terms and idioms giving me early linguistic skills in “speaking Southern.” Here are a few examples:

- **This ain’t my first rodeo**—I’ve been there and done that!
- **Don’t call him a cowboy till you seen him ride**—don’t judge worth/value by outward appearance.
- **Hissy fit**—an emotional outburst, somewhat like a temper tantrum.
- **Walkin’ in tall cotton**—doing well, similar to another idiom, “ridin’ high.”
- **Fess up**—confess, admit your mistake/error.
- **Ya’ll**—contraction of “you all.”
- **Comin’ up a cloud**—rain is on the horizon.

I will always remember one of my older cousins telling me, after a long, hard day of picking cotton, that he felt like he had been “**rode hard and put away wet.**”

Many Texas/Southern idioms seem to deliberately break rules of grammar, and perhaps they are more memorable as a result. The original meaning (today there are other definitions) of being *rode hard and put away wet* was related to riding horses. Those who have spent time around horses know that failing to groom, walk, water and feed

a horse after a long ride is abusive and can endanger the horse's life.

Being *rode hard and put away wet* is an apt description for what Christ-less religion does to its "horses." Rest in Christ brings life, whereas legalistic, Christ-less religion is a life of condemnation, forever living on death row. Religion is a relentless, abusive and brutal taskmaster—those who follow the dictates of religion can never do enough and never work hard enough.

When legalistic religion is through with you, I assure you, you will be *put away wet*. You will be thrown away like a used Kleenex.

The businesses and institutions of Christ-less religion are happy to send broken down old horses that once carried burdens imposed by religious taskmasters to the proverbial glue factory. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 16) tells us about a man who was beaten by robbers and left "half dead" in the road. Not long after the crime, when two religious professionals traveled down the same road and saw the man who had been *rode hard and put away wet* they "passed by on the other side" (Luke 10:31-32).

By contrast, as Matthew 11:28-29 tells us, Jesus invites anyone who has been *rode hard and put away wet* to come to him, "and you will find rest for your souls." Of course, rather than speaking of Christ-followers as horses, both Old and New Testaments liken us to sheep and Jesus as our "Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4) who is the "Shepherd and Overseer of our Souls" (1 Peter 2:25). So that we might more deeply appreciate and give thanks for the spiritual care and nourishment Jesus provides let's briefly examine eight words in

Matthew 11:28-29 that describe how he heals us, nurtures us and gives us rest for our souls.

- Jesus invites us to "Come..."

Coming to Jesus is an invitation, not an enforced mandate. We have a choice. We are invited, but we are not coerced. "Come" is an invitation to intimacy. Jesus is not inviting us to watch and observe him from afar. "Come" is a call and in-



Being rode hard and put away wet is an apt description for what Christ-less religion does to its "horses."

invitation to leave what you are doing—leave your religion, leave your superstitions, leave your false gods—leave the spiritual bondage you are enduring, and "come."

- Jesus says "Come to me..."

The invitation from God the Son is to come to him, not to religion, not to regulations and programs and activities and deeds and de-

mands. "Come to ME...!"

Jesus does not invite you and me to come to a religious institution, to religious authorities or ceremonies, rituals or creeds. He says "come to ME." He's inviting us over to his place—to his house—to eat at his table. In the context of the religion of his day Jesus did not invite his followers to "come to Moses." He doesn't invite us to gather manna and eat with Moses, he invites us to receive the Bread of life. "Come to ME..." does not beckon us to come to the old covenant, to the Ten Commandments or to the Sabbath.

"Come to ME..." is direct, intimate and personal. No middle men or women—no laws or regulations or promises or guarantees or rituals or ceremonies. Jesus says, "Come directly to ME!"

- "Come to me, all you..."

Some believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is limited—they believe that many humans will never be invited to enjoy a grace-based relationship with God. Some denominations and religious methodologies actually teach that God has determined and predestined some humans to be lost—that is, never to be invited to enjoy an intimate and personal relationship with God, on the basis of his grace.

Jesus says "all"—he doesn't mean "some"—he doesn't mean just those of a particular denomination or group or only those who observe particular parts of the old covenant or certain cherished religious traditions.

He invites "all" to come to him. That doesn't mean all will come to him, but it does mean all are invited.



You better believe Christians work—but in the new covenant our production is dictated by God... We are his handiwork, and he uses us as his tools.

relationship between spiritual work and rest.

The old covenant places emphasis on work first, and then rest. Work for six days and then rest on the Sabbath. First, work hard at obeying and following commands and then, the old covenant promises, a reward or payment will follow. But the old covenant was pre-Christian—it was religious, rather than Christ-centered, and it was the way it was by God's design. God started revealing himself in and through the religion of the old covenant, and then progressively moved toward the new covenant. Religion based on law leads to the necessity of the cross of Christ and his glorious resurrection.

Those who labored under the old covenant worked six days first, and then came payday. You worked hard all week long and then came the seventh-day Sabbath. First you worked six days and then your efforts earned you the rest of the Seventh day. By contrast, early Christians started to worship on the first day of the week—first they rested, and then as they rested

- “Come to me, all you who are weary...”

If you feel as if you have been *rode hard and put away wet* be assured that Jesus would never have used or abused you in such a way. Rather, Jesus is the one who will, when religion has had its way with you, take care of you and, as the Good Samaritan, nurse and nurture you back to health.

The Authorized King James Version of 1611 translated this Greek word for “weary” as “labor”—it’s the kind of effort we consider a blue collar, working man or woman doing. Jesus is speaking of hard, manual labor that causes sweat. This labor causes muscles to tire and backs to ache.

This word in the Greek describes severe physical exhaustion, but Jesus uses it to describe a spiritual condition of being weak, enervated, debilitated and feeble. “Weary” is used to describe the spiritual condition which results from human beings attempting to please God on the basis of their work.

- “Come to me, all you who are weary and *burdened*...”

The idea behind this word “burdened” is of someone who is loaded down with a heavy weight. “Burdened” is a passive word. Those who have been deceived by religious propaganda that God will bless them if they just work harder, try harder, do more, pray more

and give more are definitely *burdened*.

Religion is the premise that relationship with God is based on the burden of human performance. The presupposition of a religious, works-based relationship with God is simply this: **First**, we do something for God, and **then** we can expect something from him. That old covenant spiritual recipe of *working first and then resting* is the basic spiritual economic principle by which humans attempt to relate to God.

The gods of all religions are depicted as rewarding their faithful followers *after* they work. Pathetically, 2,000 years after Jesus’ earthly life this basic spiritual economic principle of the old covenant re-

Those who have been deceived by religious propaganda that God will bless them if they just work harder, try harder, do more, pray more and give more are definitely burdened.

mains the primary way in which Christendom teaches humans to relate to God.

This is not to say that when we come to Christ and rest in him we live a life of spiritual leisure, forever reclining in resplendent luxury, with angels fanning us with palm fronds, feeding us peeled grapes and strawberries dipped in chocolate. The gospel of Jesus Christ helps us understand the dynamic

Jesus empowered them to work the remaining six days of the week.

Of course, in addition to those who, by virtue of “keeping” a seventh day Sabbath, trying to work first, hoping to receive a reward, there are others who “keep” and “obey” a Sunday, first day Sabbath, for the same reasons.

The principle behind coming to Jesus and resting in him is this: First, we yield to Jesus. We accept

the basic premise that all our righteousness is but rags. We admit that we are unable to earn anything from God. We throw ourselves on his mercies. But that doesn't mean we retire to the couch and wait for those peeled grapes and strawberries dipped in chocolate. When we come to Christ and rest in him we are saying "Yes" to God's grace. We rest in Christ, and live by God's grace because of Jesus' work on our behalf, but that doesn't mean we never work again.

When we rest in Christ God assigns us our work. He empowers us and enables us, as Christ lives in us, to be his "workmanship" or his "handiwork" (Ephesians 2:10). Christ followers work *because* they rest in Christ, not so that they may eventually rest in Christ. Christ followers are transformed and saved from religion BY grace FOR the work God will perform and through their lives. We still work and produce under the new covenant, but how and when and why we work are the defining issues.

- Jesus says "come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest."

Giving is the grace of God. Jesus' invitation is an invitation to grace. Grace is a gift, it is not payment for work performed, but it is a completely undeserved gift.

Jesus is inviting us all to a spiritual, eternal and abiding rest given, not a physical, here-today-and-gone-tomorrow rest earned. This is a forever rest, a complete rest—not a partial 24 hour rest.

Jesus says "I will give you rest"—not "I will reward you for your hard work and give you some time off to rest." He is saying, "I will give

you rest" not "OK, you worked six days, now you get one day off, but tomorrow, it's back to the salt mine. Another six-day cycle of making sure you earn what you get."

Jesus says "I will give you rest." The rest he gives is Himself. He is "Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark



The businesses and institutions of Christ-less religion are happy to send broken down old horses that once carried burdens imposed by religious taskmasters to the proverbial glue factory.

2:28)—he is the Sabbath-rest of the new covenant (Hebrews 4:9).

- "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. For my *yoke* is easy ..."

Yoke, of course, is an archaic agricultural term used to describe the implement that is used, some-

what like a harness, to keep two oxen together as they work together, pulling a load. It is, itself, a harness, if you like—it directs activity.

So Jesus invites us to be yoked with him, in him—for what purpose? So that we may, as we live in his rest, work! Yes, you heard me correctly. First we rest, then we work! You see, once we trust in and accept God's grace, once we yield to Jesus, Jesus takes up residence in our lives (Galatians 2:20) and empowers us to work and produce (Ephesians 2:10).

Don't fall for lamebrain ideas advanced by law keepers who cannot fathom God's grace. They say that those who feel they are "under grace" are actually permissive, lazy and completely misunderstanding God. They miss the boat, entirely. God's grace does not propose that our life in Christ is either work or rest. God's grace insists that our life in Christ is both grace and work, but only in the right order. Work first and then grace/rest is the wrong order. That's why the gospel is good news!

God's grace insists that rest in Christ comes first, and then our work, as assigned by God, follows. God's grace insists that our work apart from our rest in Christ is meaningless and worthless.

You better believe Christians work—but in the new covenant our production is dictated by God. He makes of us what he desires. He is the Master Potter, and we are the work of his hands. We are his handiwork, and he uses us as his tools.

God's grace insists that the only work that matters is the work of Jesus on his cross, on our behalf. Because of his cross, we may put the works of religion aside, resting in him—for Jesus is our rest. □

RAZING HELL



by Sharon Baker



I THINK AND JUDGE IT BEST FOR YOU TO FOLLOW ME, AND I SHALL GUIDE YOU, TAKING YOU FROM THIS PLACE THROUGH AN ETERNAL PLACE, WHERE YOU SHALL HEAR THE HOWLS OF DESPERATION AND SEE THE ANCIENT SPIRITS IN THEIR PAIN, AS EACH OF THEM LAMENTS HIS SECOND DEATH.

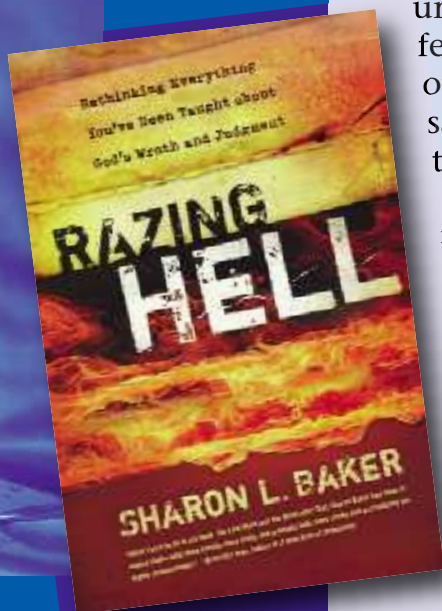
—VIRGIL, IN DANTE'S INFERNO, CANTO 1

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.
—Revelation 20:14

Editor's note:

Careful readers of *The Plain Truth* know that while we absolutely insist on the centrality of Jesus Christ, and the complementary, core necessity of proclaiming God's amazing grace, we also stand against religious innovations however meritorious good religious folks may believe them to be. The widespread belief in an eternal torment in hell awaiting those who don't seem to measure up to religious values and ideals is one of the most treasured and revered weapons in the arsenal of Christ-less religion. The threat of eternal torment in hell is a club Christ-less religion uses to keep its followers in line—justifying this manipulative teaching by saying “it's for the good” of individual Christians. Holding the feet of Christians over an imaginary ever-burning hell is an effective religious contrivance—but is it true? Does the end (keeping people on the straight-and-narrow) justify the means (an incredibly monstrous lie)? We are grateful to John Knox Press, for its permission to reprint two excerpts from *Razing Hell*, Sharon Baker's formidable challenge to cherished religious dogmas about hell and the mythology that has grown to be so deeply believed. The first excerpt we share is from Baker's Introduction.

When I was twenty-six, I found out I was going to hell. Young, impressionable, and without a strong faith, I listened intently as the pastor of a church I was visiting described in graphic detail the torturous, unquenchable flames that would burn human bodies—including, I presumed, mine—forever and ever. He spoke of worms eating away at decaying flesh, total darkness without the presence of God, and worst of all, no release from those horrors for all eternity. I certainly didn't want to be one of those unfortunate many to feel the flames licking at my feet soon after leaving life in this world. So I took out the proper fire insurance and asked Jesus to save me from my sins and, therefore, from eternal torment in hell. Whew!



That was twenty-five years ago, and hell is still a hot topic. Almost 60 percent of Americans believe in hell. So do 92 percent of those who attend church every week. After that first shocking revelation about hell, I believed the pastor and never questioned its reality, its justice, or its duration. How many of us have grown up hearing about and believing in the existence of hell, a fiery abyss that eternally burns without destroying, tortures without ceasing, punishes without respite, where the only thing that dies is the hope of release or reconciliation? If the number of students and friends who come to me with questions about it serve as an indicator, most of us have cut our teeth on this picture of hell.

Lisa did. We've been good friends for twenty years. We raised our kids together and grew up as Christians side by side. Lisa is one of those friends who often says what no one else dares to say or asks the questions no one else dares to ask. We talk on the phone often, usually about a controversial theological topic, and lately the topic has centered around—you guessed it—hell. An inquisitive and thoughtful student and friend, Brooke, asks troubling questions too. Hell bothers her, yet she lacks alternatives. She was raised in an intellectual and educated environment and thinks about things that normal teenage girls wouldn't give a second thought. Eric, a senior ministry major in college and a very



...I took out the proper fire insurance and asked Jesus to save me from my sins and, therefore, from eternal torment in hell. Whew!

bright student, hates hell too; but he just cannot let go of the ideas he has always been taught. He wants to work as God's servant, furthering the kingdom of God by winning souls to Jesus. And hell, as bothersome as it is to him, tends to make unbelievers listen. He wants to believe differently but fears the consequences.

The idea of hell haunts my friend Lisa and my students Brooke and Eric. Along with many others, they question the justice of it all—eternal punishment for temporal sin. They don't understand how a God, who is love, can send so many into eternal torment. They are not alone. As I began to study the Bible for myself all those many years ago, it staggered my senses to think of billions upon billions of people, the majority of all those who have ever lived throughout history's millennia, burning forever and ever in hell.

I teach theology at a Christian liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, and every semester a handful of students struggle with traditional Christian doctrines like hell. Yet other students get upset if they think I am trying to take hell away from them by explaining alternative views. They hate hell, but at the same time they

will deny what I am about to say, also objected to tampering with the doctrine of hell. When I asked her why, she said that these traditional doctrines brought her comfort in her old age.

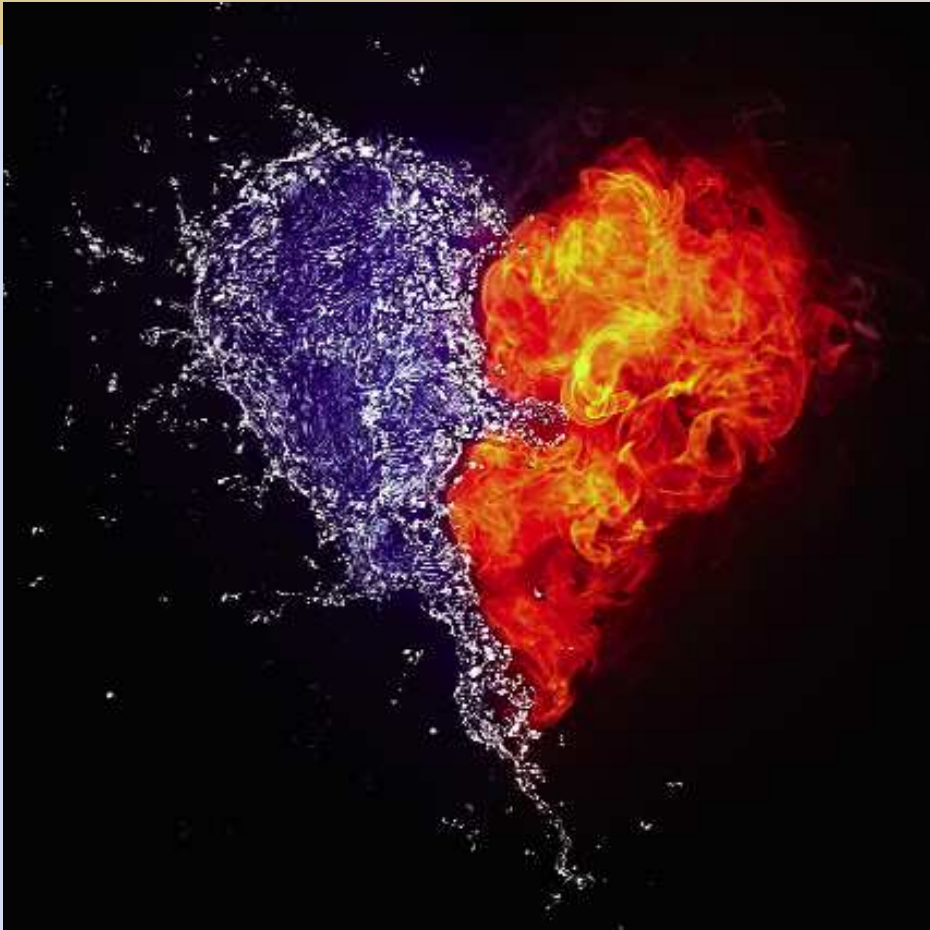
"Comfort?" I asked, a bit astounded. "How can the idea of billions of people engulfed in the flames of eternal torment be a comfort?" She couldn't put her finger on the reason. Now I know that my mother doesn't relish the notion of eternal punishment—at least for most people—and neither do most of us. For some reason,

however, we feel that if we start tinkering with one traditional doctrine, our entire belief system may cave in around us. Some of you may feel that the authority of the Bible is at stake. But this doesn't have to be the case. As long as we base our tinkering on sound biblical interpretation, we won't find ourselves sliding into heresy. In fact, we may actually develop theological and biblical ways of thinking that are more consistent with our image of God as a loving creator who desires to liberate us from sin and evil. So together, in conversation with others like Brooke, Lisa, and Eric, we will search for an alternate and biblical view of hell. And we aren't alone in this search.

Some...may feel that the authority of the Bible is at stake. But this doesn't have to be the case.... In fact, we may actually develop theological and biblical ways of thinking that are more consistent with our image of God as a loving creator who desires to liberate us...



...I am very concerned about remaining faithful to Scripture; but I'm even more concerned about remaining faithful to the God of love, who desires the salvation of all people (1 Timothy 2:4),



Many others have gone before us who just couldn't harmonize the knowledge of the love of God through Jesus with the image of God as a merciless judge who sends billions of people to hell.

Although no formal doctrine of hell existed in the early church, some of our ancient church fathers sought to correct ideas of eternal punishment with their interpretations of Scripture. Irenaeus, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nyssa strenuously and publically objected to notions of hell that depict God as an angry judge, waiting to throw the wicked into eternal torment for temporal sins. They held the work of atone-

ment through Jesus Christ worthy of such high praise and having such significant value that they believed redemption in Jesus' name would continue on to the last judgment and beyond.

They couldn't believe that God would limit the opportunity of salvation to the temporal realm, especially if the possibility for repentance remained an option even after the death of the body. For these venerable old saints, eternal hell could not be an option for a God of love, the God who through Jesus Christ died to reconcile *the world* to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19).

If the idea of hell haunts your dreams and disturbs your sleep, if you ever wonder at the justice (or injustice) of it all or about the God who deems it necessary to send the majority of humanity, beloved humanity, created in God's image, to burn there forever just because people found themselves raised in the wrong faith or had never heard of Jesus, this book is for you. Or if you grew up in a tradition that either dismissed hell as a malicious myth or did not talk about hell at all, you will resonate deeply with the content of this book. It may open up new ways for you to think about God and what awaits us when this life comes to an end.

Hell should evoke nightmares; it should stir our hearts to abhorrence, plague our minds with questions about its legitimacy; and awaken in us a sense of injustice. It did so for Lisa, Brooke, and Eric, and it does so for me and always has. Hell haunts me deep down inside, where I fear to tread and fail to admit uncertainty lest ripples of doubt disturb my secure little world of faith, lest someone find out and think me less Christian and more heretic. Brooke, eyes wide with apprehension, said, "We don't dare talk about it!" I say it's time we do. We all need a safe space to contemplate tough issues, to consider our questions, and to give heed to our doubts; here is

that space. We will talk about our troubles and questions concerning hell, but we will also discuss alternative views, different ways of thinking about hell that are consistent with a God of love, justice, mercy, and compassion, who desires the salvation of all creation (1 Timothy 2:4).

As you read, be assured that I have no intention of doing away with hell. I can't. I have too high a respect for the authority of the Bible as God's Word. And we do find references to fiery judgment and eternal punishment in the Bible; we'll talk about those in detail later. So I am very concerned about remaining faithful to Scrip-

Many others have gone before us who just couldn't harmonize the knowledge of the love of God through Jesus with the image of God as a merciless judge who sends billions of people to hell.



Hell should evoke nightmares; it should stir our hearts to abhorrence, plague our minds with questions about its legitimacy; and awaken in us a sense of injustice.

ture; but I'm even more concerned about remaining faithful to the God of love, who desires the salvation of all people (1 Timothy 2:4), whose grace is exceedingly abundant beyond all we can think or even ask for (Ephesians 3:20), and who loves enemies, even the Hitlers, the Idi Amins, and the Osama bin Ladens of the world (Matthew 5:43-48; 1 John 4:8). Our traditional views of hell as a place of eternal punishment where

unbelievers dwell in undying flames contradict this image of God. This concerns me greatly.

I am also concerned about the good news, God's good news, the good news about God's *grace*. Our traditional focus on hell as an evangelistic tool does not genuinely communicate the very heart of the gospel. If we receive Jesus as Savior because we want to escape the eternal fires of hell, we miss the entire point of the good news.

What *is* the point, you may ask? We'll discuss it in the last chapter; but suffice it here to say that salvation has almost everything to do with transforming the world for God's glory and little to do with eternal destination for our personal comfort. So in writing this book, I hope to reconsider our image of God and, as a result, to rethink our traditional views of hell and to shift our motivation for evangelism away from avoiding doom and gloom to truly preaching the good news of God's grace and living as an active member in God's kingdom.

Editor's note:

With Sharon Baker's Introduction in mind, we now must skip over many of the well-researched, penetrating questions she has about the idea of eternal torture in hell. While there were many other portions of her book we considered for a further excerpt, we felt that "Judgment Day in a Hypothetical Hell" (beginning on page 115 of her book) might best serve you, our readers, and perhaps encourage you to purchase a copy of Razing Hell for further study.

Judgment Day in a Hypothetical Hell

Picture a person who has committed much evil in his life, someone who rejected Jesus while living, someone who may have abused a spouse or child, or a person who perhaps committed terrible acts of terrorism against innocent people. Imagine a person, any person, whom you would like to see get what's coming to him (or her)—and it's judgment day. For the sake of the illustration, let's call him Otto: an international leader who has launched preemptive wars and terrorized nations with his arrogant dominance, leading to the death of thousands upon thousands of men, women, and children. He prepares to go into the presence of God. His attitude

God's love and mercy, both acting as judgment, are so extravagant, so abundant, so incomprehensible that they completely overwhelm Otto.

smacks of rebellion, anger, and hatred because he knows the time for payback has arrived. He just knows that God is going to judge harshly and throw him in eternal torture as punishment, and he hates God for it.

Otto comes into the throne room of God. Glaring flames of fire, so bright and hot that he cannot see, confront him. His anger and rebellion turn to sheer terror. He moves closer to the flames, and as he does so, he realizes that the blazing fire is God.

The closer he gets to God, the more deeply he feels, not God's hatred or judgment, but God's love. It is a love of such magnitude that, with its abundance, it acts as wrath, judging him for his deficiency, and with its purity, it serves as a hell, punishing him for his depravity. God's love and mercy, both acting as judgment, are so extravagant, so abundant, so incomprehensible that they completely overwhelm Otto. Then he hears a voice from the fire. He does not hear, "You evil, vile murderer! I am going to get you now. Revenge, punishment, and torture forever and ever!"

Instead, he hears God say with sorrow forged from love, "I have loved you with an everlasting love. But look at your life; what have you done?"

Totally undone by God's unorthodox approach, Otto falls to his face, still afraid but with his hatred replaced by remorse. As his life flashes before his eyes, he sees all the victims, mothers crying for lost sons, children begging for the return of their murdered fathers, the eighteen-year-old boy dying alone on the battlefield, crying for his mother. Otto hears their screams, sees their bloody and battered bodies, listens as they cry out for mercy. And he knows he gave none. Yet here he stands in the fire of God, receiving what he never

gave. He looks to his right and sees his victims. Still in the fire, God makes him go to each one and lay his hand upon their hearts. As he does so, he feels all of their pain, all of their disappointments, all of their fear, and knows that he has caused it all. Within the crowd of victims, the last one he has left to touch, he sees Jesus.

When he places his hand on Jesus' heart, he not only feels the pain, sorrow, and the disappointment he has caused Jesus; he also feels the unconditional love that Jesus has for him, Otto. All the while the fire of God burns, devouring Otto's wickedness and evil deeds.

Lest you think he gets off too easy, this is hell for him. With gnashing teeth and uncontrollable weeping, his heart breaks, and he cries out in utter remorse, in unmitigated repentance, knowing he can never undo the damage he has caused. Seeing his repentance and the unendurable and seemingly unending pain he feels as the fire burns off the chaff of his evil deeds, the victims are vindicated. The one thing victims most often wish for is that their offender feel

"You see how wrapped up we are in the traditional sense of justice as retributive? But when God serves justice, the goal becomes reconciliation and restoration."

remorse and know the terrible pain he has caused them. Otto's immense remorse and pain at the knowledge of his sin against them satisfy this need.

George MacDonald, one of my favorite theologians, explains the pain of the fire, which I call "hell," saying that "the fire of God, which is His essential being, His love, His creative power, is a fire unlikely in

its earthly symbol in this, that it is only at a distance it burns—that the further from Him, it burns the worse." The farther a person stands from God in that day, the more pain the fire causes as it burns away the impurities. Otto doesn't get away with murder; he doesn't get to take a walk without suffering any consequences. He burns in God's eternal fire. The more he burns, the closer he gets to God, until finally he stands next to God, purified, free from sin, and ready to hear God's words.

Then Otto hears God say, "I forgive you. Will you be reconciled to me and to those you have wronged?" Barely able to answer, Otto nods his head in utter disbelief. Much to his astonishment, God asks Otto's victims to draw near to Otto and to put their hands on his heart. As they touch him, each one feels Otto's pain, his fears, his disappointments; they can hear his cries as a child, know his shame as an adult, and understand who he was as an evil ruler. Themselves forgiven and embraced by the love of God, they extend that same kind of grace to Otto, forgiving him his sins against them. At last Jesus stands before him, touches Otto's heart, and says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love, and I forgive you. Will you enter into my kingdom and be restored to God?" And Otto accepts. He has been judged by the fire of love; he has walked through

the fire of God's wrath; he has been purified by the fire of God's mercy. He receives forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration, and he enters the kingdom of God, tested by fire, forgiven by grace.

The possibility exists, however, that Otto does not accept God's offer of restoration, or that after the testing by fire, nothing remains of him at all. Nothing. In

order to preserve human freedom, which God gave to us at creation, we must allow for the possibility that some people will still reject God. The fire does not eliminate the gift of human freedom.

Those who say no to God's yes, however, end up in the "lake of fire," which annihilates them—another topic reserved for the next chapter.

"I love the story!" Brooke said when she heard it. "But doesn't he get off too easily in this hypothetical hell? Shouldn't he suffer just a bit to make up for the suffering he caused other people?"

"Well," I asked her, "what if Otto had made a deathbed confession and received Jesus as his Savior a minute before he died, after which he is ushered into God's kingdom. Couldn't the same be said in that scenario? And yet Christians aren't traditionally troubled by that notion."

"Oh, right. I get your point," she said quietly.

"You see how wrapped up we are in the traditional sense of justice as retributive? But when God serves justice, the goal becomes reconciliation and restoration. God's justice doesn't demand retribution in which Otto must suffer a certain amount in order to pay back his victims for the harm he caused, but instead truly seeks to restore relationships in love."

"I like that," Brooke conceded. "We see justice in a whole new way. It's going to take some getting used to!" □

Excerpted from Razing Hell, by Sharon Baker. © Sharon L. Baker, 2010. Published by Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville Kentucky. www.wjbooks.com.

Sharon L. Baker is Assistant Professor of Theology and Religion and Coordinator of the Peace and Conflict Studies Program at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania. She has published numerous articles and speaks frequently on nonviolent atonement and hell. She appeared in the movie, Hellbound. Baker received her PhD from Southern Methodist University in 2006. She is the mother of four grown boys.

HELLBOUND?

AREA 23A AND KEVIN MILLER XI PRODUCTIONS PRESENT "HELLBOUND?" DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY BEN EISNER
EDITED BY SIMON TONDEUR ORIGINAL SCORE BY MARCUS ZUHR ADDITIONAL MUSIC BY ARI NEUFELD AND CREMATORIA
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER DAVID KRYSKO PRODUCED BY DAVID REMPEL & KEVIN MILLER WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY KEVIN MILLER
HELLBOUNDTHEMOVIE.COM



If God is our pure, all-loving creator, can he really turn his back on sinners and allow them to suffer for eternity in hell? Where did this vision of hell come from? Is it possible we've got hell wrong? Or are recent challenges to the traditional view merely an attempt to avoid the inevitable? "Hellbound?" is a feature-length documentary that seeks to discover why we are so bound to the idea of hell and what our views on hell reveal about how we perceive God, justice, the Bible and, ultimately, ourselves.

www.hellboundthemovie.com



Meals of Tender Mercies

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

More than a year ago I read in the paper that Ruth's Chris Steak House would be coming to Grand Rapids. Ruth's Chris? What kind of a name is that? But besides the odd tongue twister—or a tongue lisper—I sensed an interesting story. If that were the case, my husband and I would have a good excuse to abandon our mostly vegetarian diets for medium-rare steaks. The good news is that the story is interesting. The bad news: we can't justify such high prices. We actually have sufficient funds available on our Visa card to pay the check. But we are always watching our expenditures.

Imagine reading the online menu: "our best" steak "starting at \$42.95," and that's the entrée only. The spinach au gratin will set you back another twenty dollars.

Though born in 1927, more than two decades before me, I identify with the late Ruth Fertel in many respects. She grew up a tomboy—hunting, fishing and horseback riding. After she married, she and her husband raised their two sons in Baton Rouge and opened a racing stable. Divorce, however, turned her into a single mom with two young boys and no money (been there, done that with one son). Minimum wage jobs put food on the table, but no money is left for college funds. She was in a dead-end situation, one she feared might be passed on to her sons.

Then in 1965, she spotted an ad in the classifieds—a steak house for sale near where she was living in New Orleans. She mortgaged her house, purchased the restaurant for \$18,000 and used the remaining \$4,000 for supplies, and soon she was serving her first customers.

Here she is a business owner, not having a clue what she is doing (been there, done that, too). The steak house she bought had

failed six times before. Any business guru would have probably said, here comes the seventh. But they would have underestimated Ruth.

The restaurant would have continued under the name "Chris Steak House" except for a kink in the road. A decade after she opened it burned down. This forced a relocation. But a contract clause did not permit her to transfer the name. No problem. She simply rebuilt, tagged her first name onto the original name and kept serving up mouth-watering steaks. Today there are more than one hundred franchised restaurants worldwide, all using the same unique broiler designed by Ruth.

Having given birth to my own small business, now nearly twenty years old, I know how difficult it is to start and maintain such an enterprise. Everything goes wrong—and all at once. Ruth had barely begun and Hurricane Betsy came along, September 1965. She was able to reopen in a week, the only problem, no electricity. Most people would have shut down then and there. Not Ruth.

Though feisty, she was no match for a hurricane. So, when the steak orders arrived, she simply broiled them up and distributed free meals to both victims and relief workers. The local bishop even cooperated by temporarily suspending his meatless Friday imperative.

It was this spirit of generosity that fired up loyalty to her little establishment. In the months and years that followed she was often forced to turn paying customers away. She expanded to new locations, and in 1992 sold the company for \$160 million.

I would have enjoyed hearing Ruth tell about those difficult early days and the pleasure she found in passing out free meals of tender mercies to those in need. And, I like to think that if she were still alive and in charge today, steaks would start at less than \$42.95! □

—Ruth A. Tucker

I would have enjoyed hearing Ruth tell about those difficult early days and the pleasure she found in passing out free meals of tender mercies to those in need.

Is God Punishing You?

Does God punish us – or do we punish ourselves?

Christ-less religion tells us that God insists on seeing us suffer, so that he can be vindicated – so that his honor and good name can be restored! That's some other god, but not God revealed to us in the person of Jesus!

Jesus is the Light of the world. He doesn't impose darkness on us – but he allows us to make the decision to walk in darkness.



When we continue to walk into the shadows of darkness our guilt and shame increase. But the good news is that Jesus, the Light of this world, will take away our shame and guilt.

God's love is larger and stronger than our sin will ever be. Don't ever let anyone convince you otherwise!



Christianity Without the Religion

Plain Truth Ministries

www.ptm.org





“Perfect” Solutions?

I don't believe God has “perfect” solutions for each of us in this imperfect world (although I'm sure he is aware of the best possible outcomes).

How surprising the future can be, especially when it becomes now! We think we know what to expect. We might face the future based on our past experiences or the experiences of others. We might have a fuzzy or even a clear picture in mind. We might imagine how we will react, what we will do, what we will say, who we will be. But when the future comes, then suddenly (more often than not) we are totally wrong. Quoting a line from Monty Python, “And now for something completely different.”

Confused? Either you have no idea what I'm talking about, or you know all too well what I'm talking about. Major life transitions rarely happen in a way that is orderly, planned and under our control. Because of that, the first thing a Christian might ask in one of these transitions is, “Is this God's will?”

I believe we ask this question because we imagine God has a little manila file folder for each of us (or perhaps a record in a database, if he is computer literate) where, in his spare time, he has jotted down our optimal life situation at any given instance—an individually tailored plan that will make us perfectly happy. The problem is that he hasn't shared this plan with us. Not even a peek. Yet we believe if we take a path that somehow bypasses his perfect plan for us, the result would be a less-than-perfectly-happy outcome.

So, we ask God to reveal his perfect plan to us, which, of course he never does, because it isn't his job to make sure we're perfectly happy all the time. So, if we wish to move ahead with life, we must go back to the hard work of information gathering, decision making and asking God to be there with us as we do so.

My wife, Kayte, died not long ago. Several months later I became re-acquainted with a wonderful longtime friend. Our relationship quickly blossomed, and by the time you read this, we will have celebrated our wedding with friends and family. Of course it will be a second marriage for both of us.

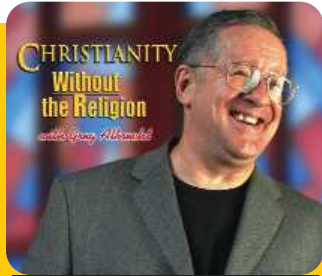
I have recently learned that later-in-life marriages can be far more complicated. We aren't just marrying each other, but we are uniting two families. My new wife and I each already have kids and grandkids, and suddenly we are inheriting from each other new kids and grandkids and a mother-in-law—enough people to pack our living room. Beyond that, I suddenly have four new sisters and brothers in law, and innumerable nieces, nephews, grandnieces and grandnephews. I'm still trying to get my head around all this, while Kaye is trying to keep track of all my cousins (yes, her name is very similar to that of my late wife, Kayte. I have to be careful every time I speak or write Kaye's name).

On top of all this adjustment, three days after our engagement, Kaye slipped and fell down a ladder into her cellar, fracturing a vertebra, breaking a bone in her hand and sustaining a large bump on her head. After a week in the hospital, three weeks in a rehab facility and eight weeks of physical therapy she is doing extremely well. She was initially worried that this wasn't a good way to begin our life together, because I wasn't seeing her “at her best.” The experts, however, tell us that marriages often fail because couples haven't seen each other at their worst. I guess we've seen each other both ways.

Which brings me back to my thought of a few paragraphs earlier. I don't believe God has “perfect” solutions for each of us in this imperfect world (although I'm sure he is aware of the best possible outcomes). I believe he lives with and in us as we navigate our imperfect lives with all their sometimes disappointing (and sometimes delightful) twists and turns, over which we often have little or no control (and even if we did, would that really make things any better?)

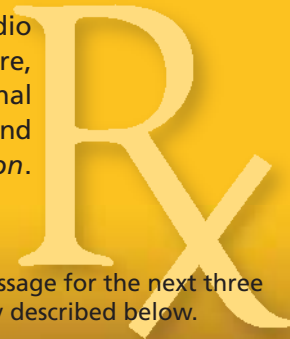
The best we can do is thank God for the richness of our lives and do everything we can to keep him at the center. □

—Monte Wolverton



The Perfect Prescription for Legalism

Join Greg Albrecht at www.ptm.org for a Christ-centered audio teaching ministry. You'll find the freedom of authentic, pure, genuine Christianity—Christianity without walls or denominational barriers—Christianity without humanly imposed rules, rituals and regulations. You'll find *Christianity Without the Religion*.



WARNING: CWR may cause the following side effects:

- Lowered tolerance for legalistic, self-serving, Christ-less preaching.
- Insatiable appetite for Christ-centered teaching.
- Increased peace of mind as you grow in God's amazing grace.
- In some cases, spontaneous outbursts of joy, punctuated by exclamations like, "Free at last, free at last!"
- If it takes you more than four days to recover from a religious meeting or gathering, be assured it wasn't CWR!
- CWR is not for everyone. Ask a religious professional—or better yet—ask someone who has suffered at the hands of one—if CWR is right for you!

Each weekly message for the next three months is briefly described below.

Be sure to join us at www.ptm.org for services every Sunday morning—or anytime throughout the week for *Christianity Without the Religion*.

He Must Become Greater—I Must Become Less Join us as we consider the remarkable, gracious, Christ-centered words of John the Baptist, as he said that Jesus must become greater while his own ministry must lessen. Week of March 2

Forgiveness—The Rubber Hits the Road C.S. Lewis once observed that everyone thinks forgiveness is a good idea until they have someone to forgive. That's when the rubber hits the road. Week of March 9

No Sheep Left Behind Jesus' parable about the lost sheep doesn't make any sense—it doesn't appear to be a responsible action for a shepherd, pastor or anyone else. Why did Jesus leave the 99 and go after one lost sheep? Join us for our Day of Prayer for the Captives, the week of March 16.

He Touched Me When Jesus healed a leper he gave a bear hug to someone who was considered untouchable, even by religious priests. Join us as we consider the significance of Jesus' embrace. Week of March 23

Running With Horses A great tragedy of modern Christendom is the idea that Christianity means having your best life now. When Jeremiah complained about trials, God told him that he hadn't run with the horses yet. Week of March 30

Extravagant Love A dinner in Jesus' honor is sandwiched between the death and resurrection of Lazarus and Jesus. With the smell of death in the air, Mary, Lazarus' sister, pours out an extravagant act of love. Week of April 6

"Save Us Now!" Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time in his earthly ministry to the acclamation of crowds calling out "Save us now!" A few days later a crowd in Jerusalem screamed, "Crucify him!" Week of April 13

Easter Is Disturbing! Easter is a mystery because it transcends our predictable world. The resurrection of Jesus can be disturbing because it insists on a God who is, in Christ, unending and rupturing the natural order of things. Week of April 20

Belief Behind Closed Doors The disciples were huddled together out of fear when Jesus offered them peace. He invites us out of a world bent on knowing only that which can be known by human senses. Week of April 27

YOUR Kingdom Come HIS kingdom is 1) for everyone, 2) does not depend on our prayers or efforts, 3) is a kingdom like no other and 4) is past, present and future. Week of May 4

Mothers and Grace If you've ever munched on cookies you thought you purchased, only to discover you were eating someone else's cookies, you appreciate the question: "What do we have that we did not receive?" Week of May 11

Retribution...OR Restoration...? God is concerned with relationship, expressed as restoration, redemption and reconciliation; rather than religion, often defined as retribution, rules, revenge, and retaliation. Week of May 18

Destroyed But Not Defeated As Christ-followers, when we give our best in the face of overwhelming odds, we are assured that because of Christ we might be destroyed but never defeated. Week of May 25