

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

The First Beatitude

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.—Matthew 5:3

The poor in spirit are *makarios*—the Greek conveys the enviable, blessed and happy peaceful state of one to whom God confers his favor. While some suggest *makarios* should be translated as *happy*, modern usage has devalued *happy* so that it falls far short of the blessed peace (Hebrew *shalom*) experienced by the poor in spirit.

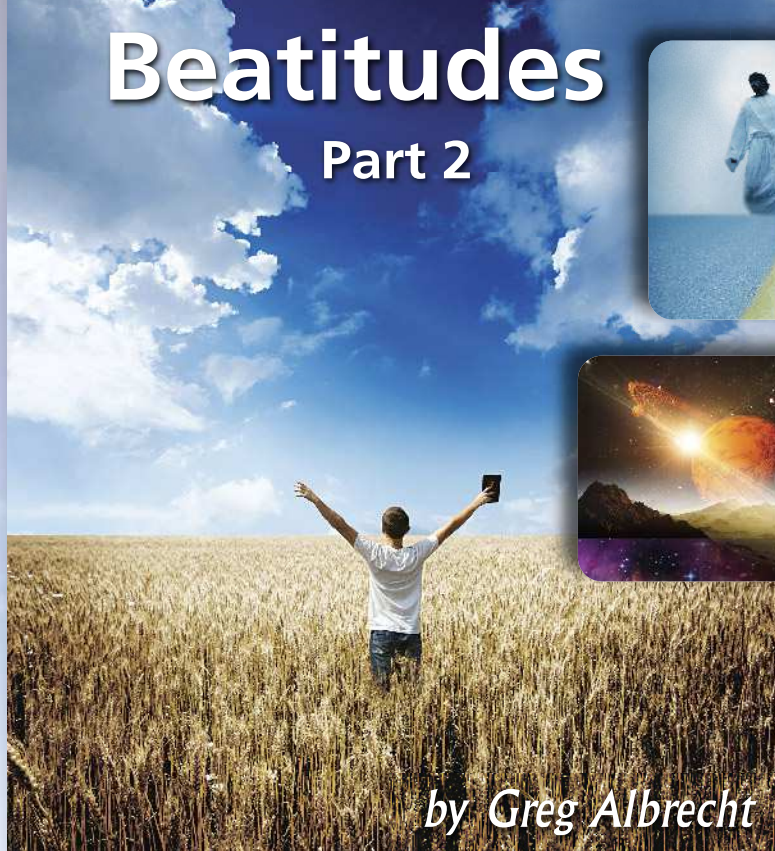
Because Jesus lives within them the poor in spirit do not think “highly” (Romans 12:3) of themselves—they are not overly impressed with human strength and self-sufficiency. Those who are, by God’s grace, poor in spirit, recognize their weaknesses and reflect Christ-centered humility that opposes spiritual arrogance and pride.

Far from being characteristics that are humanly produced, gained by human effort, these be-attitudes are God’s gift to us—they are his handiwork, lived in our lives through Jesus.

Human beings naturally want to be comfortable and secure. That’s what we think of when we think of being happy. But Jesus counters that notion by saying spiritual peace flows out of the gift of being poor in spirit.

Doing all of the right religious things—“going” to church

Beatitudes Part 2



(thinking of the body of Christ primarily as *a place we go* rather than *what we are*, by God’s grace), paying tithes or offerings, praying regularly, getting involved in church programs and outreaches, making sure you do all of the right

things in the right way and at the right places does not equate to being poor in spirit.

It is, of course, possible to be involved in beneficial projects and virtuous deeds and be poor in spirit—but anything one might perform or produce, even in the name of God, does not mean that



the direct result (*ipso facto*) of such work will result in one being poor in spirit.

God does not need nor is he obligated by our religious

performances. Sadly, it’s almost inevitable that the production of religious stuff makes people feel that God is obligated to them. We feel that God must reward our religious trophies, blue ribbons, diplomas, certificates and commendations. And that attitude leads to pride, which is the very antithesis of the attitude of Jesus, which is humility—the impoverishment of the human spirit.

The Second Beatitude

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.—Matthew 5:4

Assuming these eight blessings to be cumulative—let’s consider how *blessed are those who mourn* progressively builds on *blessed are the poor in spirit*.

Continued on page 3



Death Swallowed Up

One of the great lessons and legacies of the empty tomb and the resurrection of Jesus is that our temporary world does not have the last word. Easter tells you and me that we are not disposable. Easter tells us that even while our bodies age and shrink and wither away—there will be a day when our bodies, like the body of Jesus, will be resurrected. God will never throw us away!

During the second half of the 20th century our consumer culture turned into a throw-away-culture the likes of which the world has never seen. Plastic bottles are one of the premier examples—use the bottle once and then throw it away. Paper plates, disposable diapers and styrofoam cups are all a part of our throw-away culture.

Several years ago my wife and I walked through a new store in our local mall called “Forever 21.” As we walked through the aisles and displays of clothing I checked price tags and was amazed at the rather inexpensive prices being asked for many of the articles of clothing.

But then I looked a little more closely—and I felt the fabrics. They all seemed cheap, as if they wouldn’t last. After we went home I did a little research and found that this is but one of many new retail outlets that offer what is called **disposable fashion**.

Garments considered to be **disposable fashion** are priced so inexpensively because they are designed to be thrown away after only a few wearings! The underlying value—it’s not made to last, so wear it a few times and when you are tired of it then throw it away.

And let me be fair—it’s not just

Forever 21 selling **disposable fashion**—items that are intentionally manufactured to have short life-spans are offered by many retailers. Our disposable culture increasingly desires convenience and immediacy over longer lasting value.

Disposable products and waste fill our landfills so that we in North America often have to ship the trash and debris we no longer desire to other countries—we have no room for all that we consider disposable.

Our disposable culture enthrones the immediate and the short-lived product or experience, and rejects the long-term. And this value of disposability is not just about products and services, it’s about people—about marriages, friends and family.

An entire generation has been raised to accept and pursue immediate gratification of short term relationships—popularly called “hook ups”—in favor of a long-term relationship. A disposable relationship is here-and-now, it is easy and temporary—it requires little commitment or effort, merely gratification—whereas a long-term commitment embodies work, trust, faith, fidelity and self-sacrifice.

Our culture seems obsessed with immediate benefit—ignoring and giving little thought to the future so that every ounce of pleasure can be squeezed out of the here-and-now.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ stands on the other side of the short-lived values and death of our consumer-driven throw away culture. As they invariably are, the values of the Kingdom of God are the polar opposite of the kingdoms of our world.

Easter tells you and me that God will never dispose of us. Easter does not deny either the inevitability of our physical death or the necessity of willingly yielding our “old man”—it tells us that following these two deaths we will be given a transformed, incorruptible body.

The good news of the resurrection of Jesus is that God is bigger than death—Jesus is alive and God has swallowed up death (Isaiah 25:6-9).

The Resurrection of our Lord brings us to our knees in humility and it staggers our minds with wonder and mystery about that which we cannot fully comprehend.

The Resurrection is not an academic exercise we undertake so that we might prove it, but rather it is an experience and belief that we live.

The Resurrection is not something we can analyze or solve—it is a gift of God’s grace we are called to live.

This is the day when we know that the power of God, his love, mercy and grace has determined that the graves will “give up their dead.”

This is the day that celebrates the life Christ lives within us by God’s grace—the life of our risen Lord—and that new life in Christ is eternal.

This is the day that renews our hope and faith, for hope and faith in Jesus can ever be extinguished.

This is the day that celebrates the reality that God has swallowed up death and Jesus is risen. His tomb is empty! He is risen! He is risen indeed. □

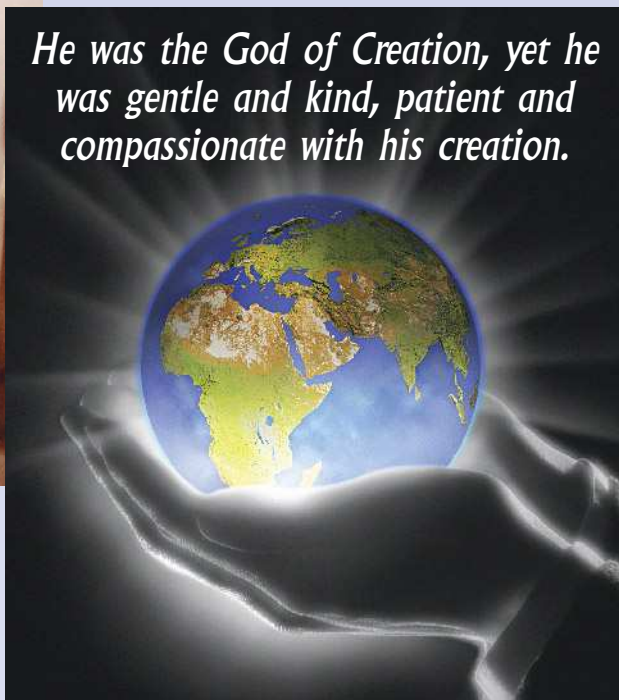
—Greg Albrecht

Join us as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord on March 27, 2016, for our Easter sermon, “Death Swallowed Up.”



This gift of meekness is the humility of Jesus Christ, not borne out of weakness, but borne out of the incredible strength of Jesus.

He was the God of Creation, yet he was gentle and kind, patient and compassionate with his creation.



Continued from page 1

Christ-followers rest in him, trusting him—and God enables them to recognize their spiritual poverty. The recognition of our absolute need of God is an important building block of our relationship with God.

In many of his epistles Paul explained that we cannot live in Christ unless and until we die to Christ, so that we may live in him. So again, assuming that “blessed are they that mourn” builds upon “blessed are the poor in spirit” we can see that when God leads us to see and believe how dependent we are in him, then we mourn. Christ in us empowers us to mourn when we realize how proud and presumptuous we once were to assume that God would be obligated to bless us because of

what we considered to be righteous deeds that we performed.

When we are poor in spirit, spiritually, we recognize our absolute need of God, and that leads us to mourn, to grieve—we mourn and grieve the kind of people we used to be—the pride and arrogance and independence from God that so described our lives.

We mourn, wondering why and how we could have ever been so impressed with ourselves. And the mourning Jesus is talking about is one of the strongest words for “mourn” used in the Bible—this word might be used to speak of the emotions felt when one loses a loved one.

Spiritually, we mourn the life we once led and how empty and vain it was—and God comforts us with new life in Christ.

Within contemporary Christendom, feel good/think and grow rich/health and wealth religion is relentlessly expounded in huge mega-churches, with multiple thousands seemingly hanging on every word of someone who is adorned in polished finery—expensive suits and fancy watches. Looking at the external veneer of such preachers and teachers, one can’t imagine such a person ever having a problem.

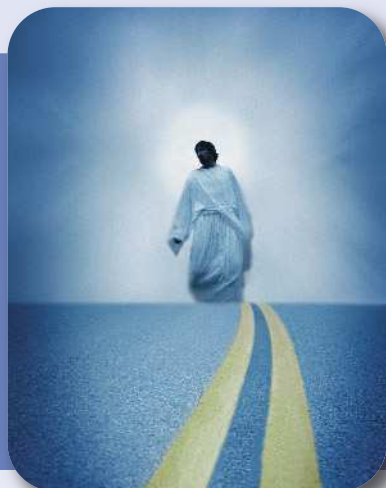
These salesmen of what is called *the prosperity gospel* seem to have God in their hip pocket. They urge us to claim blessings from God, to demand them, to “have our best life now”—but this Beatitude, this blessing from God about mourning, seems to point us in the opposite direction.

This blessing about mourning leads us into the direction of suffering—and all who live in Christ will suffer, all who are Christ followers will, by definition, pick up their cross and follow him. God says we will mourn, and we will be comforted.

The Third Beatitude

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.—Matthew 5:5


The person who is blessed and given the gift of meekness is someone who has surrendered his or her own desires and goals so that they are willing to live by God’s grace, rather than their own self-serving self-sufficiency. Meekness, a



OUR PATH: THE JESUS WAY

THE JESUS WAY—WHAT JESUS IS ALL ABOUT

The *Jesus Way* is our focus for 2016-17. We begin this theme as we fix our attention on the captivating content of Jesus’ teachings—what he taught and what he thought “following him” would look like in practice.



...think and grow rich/health and wealth religion is relentlessly expounded in huge mega-churches, with multiple thousands seemingly hanging on every word...These salesmen of the prosperity gospel seem to have God in their hip pocket... but this beatitude, this blessing from God about mourning, seems to point us in the opposite direction.



gift of God, is a submissive and trusting attitude toward God. Those who are blessed and given the gift of meekness trust in God to provide for them rather than presuming their own efforts to be the final determining factor as to the success or failure of their life. The person who is blessed and given the gift of meekness is anything but weak—he or she is strong in the Lord.

It is true that the meekness of Jesus is often understood by the kingdoms of this world as weakness, but that's only true because the kingdoms of this world value brute strength, intimidation and the power of oppression.

This gift of meekness is the humility of Jesus Christ, not borne out of weakness, but borne out of the incredible strength of Jesus. Jesus alone, the Creator of the entire universe, Lord of all, can provide this meekness.

The meek are meek because Jesus imparts his own meekness to them—he lives out his own meekness as he lives his risen life within them. Remember the meekness of Jesus:

- He was the God of Creation, yet he was gentle and kind, patient and compassionate with his creation.
- He embodied humility, simplicity and service.
- He who was eternally rich came out of the riches of heaven so that we, spiritually poor, might become co-heirs with him.
- In his meekness, his humility and self-determined service, Jesus loved his enemies, and returned goodness to those who treated him badly.
- He emptied himself so that we might be filled.
- The Lion became the Lamb.
- Humans are born so that they may live, but Jesus, the Eternal Son of God, God in the flesh, was born to die—so that humans might be transformed and spiritually reborn, never to die.
- He came to us as a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, for our sake. He came to serve us, rather than to be served by us.

As we conclude this second article in our four-part series about the Beatitudes, let's once again reiterate:

- Far from being characteristics that are humanly

produced, gained by human effort, these eight *be-attitudes* are God's gift to us—they are his handiwork, lived in our lives through Jesus.

- These eight blessings are actually the very mind and heart of Jesus himself.

- These eight blessings are not rules for better living. They are not religious prescriptions

for happy, successful Christian living. **These eight blessings are gifts of God**, rather than goals God intends for us to achieve as a result of our hard work and effort.

There's an old story about a young boy from Kansas who was visiting Washington D.C. with his family, and after the family visited the Washington Monument the little boy was so impressed that he told one of the security guards that he would like to buy it and take it home.

So the guard stooped down and looked the little boy in the eye, and said, "Well, how much money do you have?" The little boy pulled out a quarter from his pocket, and the guard said, "That's not enough."

The little boy said, "I thought you would say that, so I have some more money in my other pocket." He pulled out a dime and two pennies.

The guard stood up and said, "Son, you need to understand three things: 1) 37 cents is not enough to buy this monument. 2) 37 million dollars would not be enough, because the Washington Monument is not for sale. 3) My third point is a question—can you tell me where you live and where you were born?"

The little boy proudly said, "I was born in Kansas and I still live there with my family."

The guard smiled at him and said, "That's my third point. You are an American citizen and the Washington Monument already belongs to you. You can't buy it because it's already been given to you."

If you've joined us for the first two parts of this four-part series on the Beatitudes you know that the beatitudes are eight blessings, mentioned by Jesus at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount.

These eight blessings are gifts of God's amazing grace. Like the little boy learned when he tried to buy the Washington Monument, we need to realize that we can never buy or purchase these eight gifts of God's grace.

If we have been spiritually transformed, if we have accepted God's grace, we have already been given these blessings. If we are alive in Christ *we are being renewed day by day* (2 Corinthians 4:16) and we are maturing in Christ so that these blessings will grow in our lives. □

THE CROSS AS CONQUEST

by Brad Jersak



For the first thousand years of Christianity, Christ's victory was the central theme in the preaching of the Cross. This metaphor is found across the New Testament, the church fathers and throughout Christian worship. Jesus proves himself to be the promised Redeemer-King who rides forth to vanquish Satan, sin and death and bring every principality, power, ruler and authority under his feet. He conquered death by death and reigns over his Kingdom of love by love—not just someday, but already, his kingdom is “in our midst.”

The victory of Christ is at least three-fold: Jesus conquers at the Cross, through his resurrection and again, by his love.

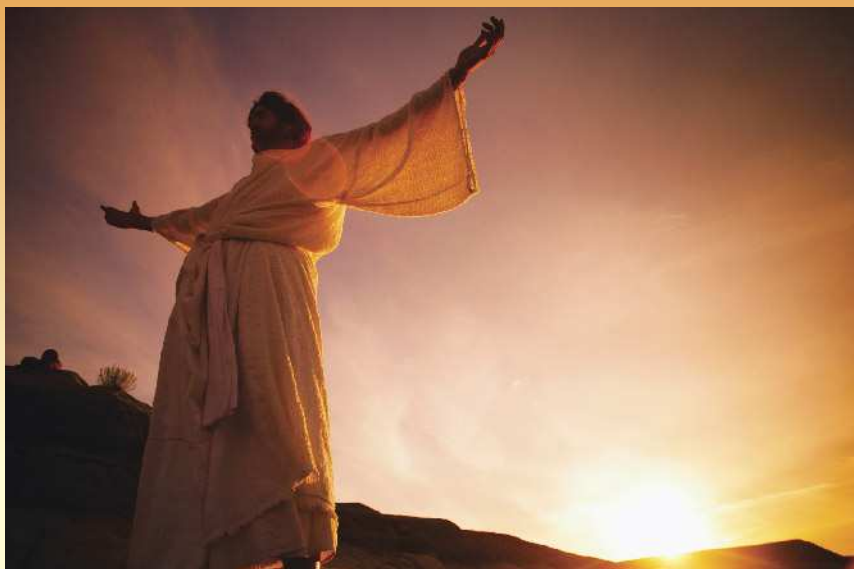
a) **At the Cross:** Paul writes to the believers in Colossae:

*When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He **forgave us** all our sins, having **canceled the charge** of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having **disarmed** the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, **triumphing** over them by the cross (Colossians 2:13-15, my emphasis).*

There is the victory of the Cross; reverse engineering the process is simple enough.

Who does Jesus defeat? The powers and authorities. How does he defeat them? By disarming them. What weapons did he take from them? The legal charges and debts held against us. How did he disarm them of these legal charges and debts? By cancelling them. How did he cancel them? By forgiving all our sins. The result? God made us alive (raised us) with Christ.

The Cross, especially symbolizing forgiveness, is what defeats the enemy, because without those charges, those laws and those debts, the accuser's got nothing on us. When on the Cross, Jesus Christ asks his Father to forgive us, for complete pardon... and he does! And the enemy's armaments and arguments dissolve in his hands.



Let none fear death; for death of the Saviour has set us free. He has destroyed death by undergoing death. He has despoiled hell by descending into hell. He vexed it even as it tasted of His flesh...

O death, where is your sting?

b) Through the

Resurrection: This victory is assured on behalf of both the living and the dead. This victory is especially focused on the utter defeat of death and *hades*. St. John Chrysostom's Paschal homily (4th century) illustrates the victory metaphor and the church's reflection on it better than I could ever describe. Let's pause to worship with him:

Let none fear death; for death of the Saviour has set us free.

He has destroyed death by undergoing death.

He has despoiled hell by descending into hell.

He vexed it even as it tasted of His flesh...

O death, where is your sting?

O hell, where is your victory?

Christ is risen! And the tomb is emptied of its dead; for Christ having risen from the dead, is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

We could stop there, but let's add one further note of victory, proclaimed by Paul:

Then the end will come, when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he "has put everything under his feet." (1 Corinthians 15:24-27)

c) By his Love: This same victory is now ours, with the all-powerful might of God identified clearly as love itself, the very nature of God:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...No! In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,

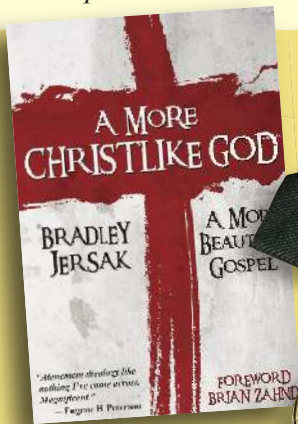
neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35, 37-39).

This Cross-shaped love is higher than the heavens are above the earth, broader than east is to west, and deeper than the deepest sea. It brings into willing surrender and worshiping submission every subject in the heavens, earth and under the earth. Look bigger and further than the reach of the Hubble telescope, smaller and closer than the discovery of quantum particles like the Higgs Boson...his love is there and it reigns, holding all things together in the care of a good and merciful King! □

Excerpted from *A More Christlike God*, by Senior Editor Brad Jersak.

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All Is Vanity

I've just finished, as part of my daily Bible readings, the book of Ecclesiastes. If you read Ecclesiastes for your devotional time, make it in the morning. If you read it just before going to bed you won't sleep very well. In Ecclesiastes there are texts like:

"I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven. It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with. I have seen everything that is done under the sun, and behold all is vanity [futility] and a striving after wind..." (1:13-14).

"I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold all was vanity [futility] and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun..." (2:11).

"For of the wise as of the fool there is no enduring remembrance, seeing that in the days to come all will have been long forgotten. How the wise dies just like the fool! So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity [futility] and a striving after wind..." (2:16-17).

"What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun? For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity [futility]..." (2:22-23)

That's in the Bible?

I'm trying to process Ecclesiastes. To make it worse, I'm also reading about the relationship between Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, both Swiss theologians. They had great respect for each other and were close friends. Both are seen as

among the leading theological minds (maybe *the* leading theological minds) of the 20th century.

If you bring those guys up in casual conversation and people think you're really smart, you owe me. You don't have to add that the books they published are useful in a number of ways, including the fact that you can stand on them in a flood and remain dry. What does this have to do with what I'm saying? Just stay with me and I'll get there.

Both Barth and Balthasar were adversarial and angry about modern culture and the efforts on the part of some Christian scholars to "reconcile" Christianity and the world. They both taught that Jesus Christ was revelation from "outside" and he did not just speak truth to the world; but was in fact, the Truth.

Barth wrote: "We must always be putting the question, 'What is the evidence?' Not the evidence of my thoughts, or my heart, but the evidence of the apostles and prophets as the evidence of God's self-evidence." Barth pointed to Christ as the center of God's definition of himself.

Balthasar wrote something similar: "Jesus Christ is not a 'principle' or a 'program' but a man of flesh and blood...Jesus does not merely announce a true doctrine...in his very existence he is Truth revealed by God...not merely materially expressed symbols of God's attitude toward the world; they are his very attitude...no mere feeling but purpose, action and commitment."

In other words, they wrote that

the world (as bad as it is...and it is) is always defined by Jesus and the place where it is defined is in the fact that God came into a dark world, loved us enough to sacrifice himself for us, and then got out of the grave so we could too.

When I started writing this, I was feeling kind of down from reading Ecclesiastes, but I'm better. Do you know why? Because of a light in the darkness: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace" (John 1:5,16).

Don't ever kid yourself about the darkness. Ecclesiastes is in the Bible because God wanted us to remember the pain, the temptations, the failure and the darkness. There is nothing worse than a "Disney World" Christian who "tiptoes through the tulips with Jesus." Life is hard, and sometimes it gets really hard. It's certainly not for sissies. But when it gets dark enough, you can see light. In fact, it's only in the dark that the light makes any difference.

Then of course, it isn't all dark. After reading Ecclesiastes, I found myself thinking that the "preacher" who wrote it needed to be a bit less wise and dark, and to go get a milkshake. But then, he didn't know about Jesus.

Don't ignore the tears. They are real. But don't forget about the laughter either. You're loved without condition. You're forgiven and that includes it all. You've been promised home forever. The dead Messiah got out of his grave and said we would too.

He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown



Quotes & Connections



"Much of my criticism of religion comes about when I see it not only affirming the system of normalcy but teaching folks how to live there comfortably. Such religion just increases our 'stuckness' in the old world, as does a lot of poor psychotherapy. Cheap religion teaches us how to live successfully in a sick system.... That's why many people need more and more therapy or addictive religion as they 'adjust' to a sicker and sicker environment. If we do not question the underlying lies, we can psychologize and theologize forever. As a general rule, we don't need more and more of what doesn't work.... If it worked, we wouldn't need to keep increasing the fix." —Richard Rohr, *Everything Belongs*

"Why grace? Because some days, it's the only thing we have in common. Because it's the oxygen of religious life, so says a musician friend of mine, who tells me 'without it, religion will surely suffocate you.' Because so many of us are gasping for air and gasping for God, but fleeing from a kind of religious experience that has little to do with anything sacred or gracious." —Cathleen Falsani, *Sin Boldly: A Field Guide for Grace*

"Sad, indeed, would the whole matter be, if the Bible had told us everything God meant us to believe. But herein is the Bible itself greatly wronged. It nowhere lays claim to be regarded as the Word, the Way, the Truth. The Bible leads us to Jesus, the inexhaustible, the ever unfolding Revelation of God. It is Christ 'in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,' not the Bible, save as leading to him." —George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons "The Higher Faith"*

Happy Easter! from the Albrechts

*May the grace of
our Lord Jesus
Christ be with you
as we all celebrate
the resurrection of
our Lord.*

*With our love,
Greg and Karen
Albrecht
and grandchildren*



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