

# PLAIN TRUTH®

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

## Blessings—Why You... and Not Someone Else?



By Greg Albrecht

When I attended second and third grade in Rosenberg, Texas, most of my classmates didn't wear shoes to school because they didn't have any. Like most young people that age, I did not wish to be different—I wanted to conform and be like most of my friends.

So, on the way to school, I removed my shoes and put them in what I considered to be a safe hiding place, thus arriving at school barefoot, just like all my friends. Then on the way home I retrieved my shoes, and wore them home because my mother would not have been happy if she knew what I was doing (that was, of course, not the first nor the last time I tried to fool my mother). My ruse worked for a little while...but the tale about how my mother discovered my deception (don't children just hate it when that

happens?) is another story.

When I have related the story of *Shoeless Greg Albrecht*, some have asked me how old I was when I finally realized how God had blessed me to have shoes to wear. I smile and resist the impulse to inform them that my mother took me down that path a long time ago. In response to my story some have reminded me of the well-worn platitude about the person who "cried because he had no shoes to wear until he saw someone with no feet." Apparently these people thought it was their job to help me be appropriately thankful to God (in case I was not already) for how he blessed me with my shoes. Did God bless me with my shoes?

### Are Material Comforts a Direct Blessing From God?

My shoes were blessings—I absolutely agree, but **can I absolutely and**

**categorically claim that God went out of his way to bless me with shoes to wear?** My family lived from paycheck to paycheck, but at least we had a regular paycheck. We lived in a small apartment in a poor part of town while many of my friends at school were Hispanic, living in sub-standard, make-shift housing because their parents were poorly paid, itinerant farm workers.

These families had no money for shoes for their children.

Several decades ago I traveled around the world as a part of my job. I remember returning from many of these trips, visiting a third world country, and virtually kissing the tarmac as my plane landed in the U.S. I would often say to others, "I saw incredible suffering and poverty—I just never realized how blessed we are in this country."

Yes, we are blessed in North America. But are we "blessed by God" with physical comfort and possessions while he does not "bless" hundreds of millions of Christians around this world who live on less than \$10 a day? Is God blessing me, and you, with material comforts because we have done something to merit his blessings others have not? Some of those hundreds of millions of Christians who live on less than \$10 a day live side by side with adherents of other

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## The Stretch Marks of a Mother's Love

Several years ago, an ad agency created a campaign for their clients to impress upon the public at large how important mothers are. They created a set of calculations to help everyone determine how much they owed their mother.

The first measurements were all about the time and effort a mother invests in her growing baby during her pregnancy and during her labor when she gave birth.

The calculations asked each person to include the time their mother spent in labor delivering them—the amount of weight she gained carrying them and the diet she voluntarily followed while she was pregnant to ensure her new baby was as healthy as possible.

Finally, each person was asked to consider the stretch marks that would be etched on their mother's body for the rest of her life as a memory of her body stretching to accommodate them—her baby.

And those were only the calculations for carrying a baby and giving birth—in some respects when babies are born that's when a mother's work, her sacrifice and her love really begins, and never ends!

So how much do we owe our mothers? How much are the stretch marks of a mother's love worth? We can never repay our mothers, can we?

The love of a mother is truly Christ-centered—it's a love that is given without consideration of repayment—it's a grace that outdoes itself, day after day and week after week and year after year.

Here are a few lyrics from Country and Western singer Paul Overstreet's

song about mothers, titled "I Won't Take Less Than Your Love."

*"How much do I owe you?" to the mother said the son*

*"For all that you have taught me in the days when I was young*

*Shall I bring expensive blankets to cast upon your bed?*

*And a pillow for to rest your weary head?"*

*And the mother said, "I won't take less than your love, sweet love.*

*No, I won't take less than your love.*

*All the comforts of the world could never be enough.*

*And I won't take less than your love."*

What do mothers want for the stretch marks of their love? They simply want nothing less than our love. From a mother's perspective, the decision to have a child is like deciding forever to have your heart go walking around, exposed to the world, outside your body.

Visible stretch marks are the scars of sacrifice and the labor—the ordeal a mother's body endured as it made room not just for one life, but one more—and prepared that new body for a life of its own.

Women who thought they knew all about love find out, as they become mothers, what love is really about and what it involves.

Many of you are mothers, and each of you has a story about each and every one of your children. You remember them—you pause over the old photographs in the albums and relive the memories of your children growing up.

As a mother, you don't begrudge the stretch marks of your love—your sacrifices and selfless service on behalf of your children is what mothers do—and you gladly gave

them your heart, your soul, your resources and your love. You gave your children time, talents and treasures. You gave them your all.

Mothers gain and lose pounds—mothers have scars and stretch marks, each one telling a story. Mothers lose elasticity of their skin and bodies as they age—mothers lose hair, teeth and muscle tone.

But mothers never lose the memories of their love, etched not only in their bodies in their scars and stretch marks, but also deeply in their souls and hearts as memories that will never end.

To you mothers out there, wherever you are—thank you! Thank you for the scars you bear, the stretch marks that are the trophies of your love.

Thank you for the commitment of your time—of your endless work washing clothes, folding them, making meals, packing lunches for school, sitting down and helping with homework, holding hands and wrapping your arms around the tears and hurts that were a part of your child's journey into maturity.

Thank you for helping us see a glimpse of the love of our heavenly Father, for not keeping track of all your efforts expecting that one day your child would pay you back.

Thank you for all that is grand, inspirational and majestic about a mother's love. Thank you for the stretch marks of a mother's love. □

—Greg Albrecht

*Join us for our complete Mother's Day sermon "The Stretch Marks of a Mother's Love" at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of May 14, 2017.*

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faiths—Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus—and those Christians often have far less in the way of physical advantages than their non-Christian friends and neighbors. If we assume that material comforts are direct blessings from God to us individually, then it would seem that God is directly blessing some Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus more than their impoverished Christian neighbors.

Jesus says that our Father in heaven “makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). Where do we find new covenant, Christ-centered teaching in Scripture that promises worldly comforts in return for our obedience and trust in God?

### Jesus’ Definition of “Blessed”

Many within Christendom have poured extra-biblical meaning into the word “blessed” to make it sound as if God is rewarding us with wealth and prosperity in direct response to what we are led to believe are our righteous deeds and efforts. If you are interested in a study of how Jesus uses the word “blessed,” I suggest you start with what we have come to know as the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12)—each one of the Beatitudes begin with the English word “blessed.”

The blessings Jesus describes in Matthew 5:1-12 are not at all what many Christians today describe as blessings—the blessings which are gifts of God’s grace are all about *poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, hungering and thirsting for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peacemaking and being persecuted because of allegiance to Jesus.*

These blessings Jesus describes are not 1) material blessings of health or wealth, nor are they 2) spiritual characteristics we have and possess, rained down on us from heaven because God is happy with our efforts (for more on the Beatitudes, see the issues of January/February, March/April, May/June and July/August 2016).

So, were my second and third grade Hispanic friends, who had no shoes to wear to school, less blessed (or even cursed) while I was more blessed? Were my shoes the proof of my being “blessed” in a way my friends were not?

**Why me and not them?** Would it be correct to say that God directly blesses us when we are brought into this world by parents who have the means to support us and that he directly blesses us because we are born in a particular place on this earth? Are those direct “blessings” from God?

Jesus’ ultimate concern for his followers was not a physical state of comfort and ease, for he advised those who believed and trusted him to “pick up your cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24).

Perhaps, in the spirit of his Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21), Jesus would ask of those of us who enjoy material comforts and possessions, “What did you do with them? Did you share what you were given—did you help others? Did you hoard your possessions and try to keep them for yourself—did you dig a hole



in the ground (Matthew 25:18) and hide your spiritual and physical wealth, assuming you could show it to me upon my Second Coming and thereby make me happy?”

*It is a huge mistake to attribute material comforts we enjoy as a result of the country in which we live as a distinct and unique “blessing” from God—for what word or term do we then use to describe the state of the vast majority of the world who do not enjoy such comforts? If blessings from God are physical advantages, then how do we understand and describe the lack thereof? It is an even bigger spiritually flawed proposition to point to material goods and possessions and describe them as blessings from God given to you or me because we obey him and please him.*

Before you think I have gone completely off my rocker, I assure you I absolutely believe that “...every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father...” (James 1:17). All goodness (all health, all benefits, all enjoyment and yes, all wealth) ultimately derives from our Creator—without him we are nothing and we have nothing. Life itself comes from God. All blessings, material and immaterial, physical and spiritual, come from God.

**But I have started to avoid dogmatically proclaiming some fortuitous circumstance that I enjoy as a direct, distinct and**



**unique blessing from God.** I do thank God for spiritual and physical gifts I enjoy, but I do not emphatically announce to others that they are direct “blessings” from God, as if I have the insight to determine them to be something he gives me and withholds from others.

I am grateful—and in my gratitude I believe God will progressively reveal my true blessings, compared with the “fool’s gold” that can so easily distract me. In terms of my health and wealth, I can well say that I am living far better than I deserve (but of course, “deserve” has nothing to do with it, as Clint Eastwood’s character in the movie *Unforgiven* says).

I am enormously thankful, but I am not certain exactly why I enjoy the spiritual and physical life I do while others, whether near or far spiritually or physically, do not.

### **Why Me?**

The “why me?” question is not normally posed by those who find their lives to be better than others—it is more often asked by those who find their problems and challenges profoundly disturbing, as if God does not care about them at all. “God is good all the time” is another popular platitude in Christian circles, often said without thinking. For many, “God is good all the time” seems to have become code for “things went my way.” Fact is, God gives no guarantee that we will ever, in this earthly existence, fully understand and comprehend the mysteries associated with his love, mercy and grace. We are not capable of grasping why God seems to answer some of our prayers the way we want him to and then seems to absolutely refuse to respond to others.

In 1991 Gerald Sittser was a father of four whose mini-van was hit head on by a drunk driver. He woke up from the twisted wreckage to discover three members of his family had died: his mother, his wife and his four-year-old daughter. *A Grace Disguised*—the book he wrote about his search for answers



*Remember back in elementary school when teams were picked at recess? The captains...always chose those who they felt would help them win—that’s logical.*

out of this senseless and horrific accident—remains one of the classic stories of God’s grace helping us through suffering, even while never providing all of the answers we desire.

But “why me?” can also be asked when we consider the benefits, privileges and opportunities we have had and now have, when contrasted with others we may know and many others we may know of. Why, for example, does God choose to “grace” you and me with his grace, while others seem to be lost on the waves of the sea of abusive religion, with all of its legalisms and authoritarianism?

Remember back in elementary school when teams were picked at recess? Everyone would line up and then the captain of each team would take turns making a choice. My memories of such times are of two captains who were popularly chosen, or who, by virtue of their size, age and ability (or all three) appointed themselves.

Then the captains started choosing people for their teams. They always chose those who they felt would help them win—that’s logical. Games are all about winning. So when sides were

chosen, the fastest, strongest, most popular and most athletic were chosen first. The clumsy or awkward kids were left for last.

As each person was chosen they stood next to their captain, until finally there was one last *un-chosen* person standing alone. I always felt sorry for the last person to be chosen. In fact, they weren’t actually chosen like everyone else, but instead, as the last kid left they joined the team who had the last chance to choose. The last person “chosen” knew he or she became a team member by default.

My memories are that this last person, the only one not chosen, didn’t purposefully stride over to their team, nor were they enthusiastically welcomed. This person usually shuffled over to their captain and teammates, well aware they were more of a handicap than a gift.

Everyone longs to be chosen. Young people in school want to be chosen for athletic teams. When a young person is nearing the end of their high school education, if they have the support and help that others may not have, they yearn to be accepted by the college to which they apply. Young men long to

*“Blessed” is a loaded term. It blurs the distinction between gift and reward. It can be used as pure gratitude on our part toward our loving, heavenly Father. But “blessed” can also be used (and it often is) with the inference that something received was deserved by our efforts.*

hear the girl of their dreams say “yes” to their proposal of marriage. When we apply for a job, we hope and pray the employer says “yes.” But not everyone is chosen for the team—some are left out. Some who wish to marry another hear that person say “no” and they live with that rejection, sometimes for the rest of their lives. Many who apply for a job find the job is taken, or will be taken, by someone else of the employer’s choosing.

When we find ourselves being accepted and being chosen, we might look at those who have not been and experience “survivor’s guilt.” We were chosen—perhaps rescued. We have an opportunity, but others were not and are not.

*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.* (John 15:16)

### **How Jesus Chose His Disciples**

During the lifetime of Jesus, young boys would go to school to learn the Torah, also known as the Law of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament which form the foundation of the old covenant law. They attempted to memorize the entire Torah by heart by the age of 10—if they failed in this and other scholarly goals, then they would go into a family business so they could start to learn a trade.

The best would remain under the instruction of a rabbi, and they would now attempt, by age 14 or 15, to memorize the entire Old Testament, from the first book of Genesis to the last book of Malachi. Those who achieved this goal would then be sent to study with a senior rabbi—this group was regarded as the *crème de la crème*, the very best, the chosen few.

This group of selected, promising young men, rabbis in training, lived with this senior rabbi, they traveled

with him, and they endeavored to follow him in every way—he was their religious mentor—they wanted to be just like him and do everything he did.

Then came Jesus. Jesus of course, among his many titles, was the Master Teacher—the Rabbi of all rabbis. In Mark 1:16-20, we read about Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee, and calling Peter and Andrew and James and John from their career of fishing, inviting them to follow him so that they could fish for men and women.

Here is Jesus beginning to choose his team. What *didn’t* he do?

He didn’t go to the local seminary on career day to consider hiring the best of the best, who had memorized the entire Old Testament. Instead, he headed for the rank-and-file day laborers—fishermen, who were rough and ready, used to getting their hands dirty, and who had comparatively little formal religious training.

Jesus was not primarily interested in the academic achievements of his disciples. He wasn’t looking for the *crème de la crème* of the top rabbinical students.

In fact, Jesus chose all twelve of his disciples with full awareness of their character defects and deficiencies. None of them were qualified by virtue of their training, academic preparation or character to be a disciple of Jesus Christ—nor are we. You and I are not qualified for the high honor of being invited to be a Christ-follower.

*“...giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins”* (Colossians 1:12-14).

### **Why You and Me But Not Others?**

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay them? For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen* (Romans 11:33-36).

Being chosen by God to receive his grace, to be a part of his kingdom on earth now, as well as on the other side of eternity forever, is an incredible honor. *Why you and me but not others?*

No answer to that question is fully satisfactory. God makes choices, it seems. God reveals himself in his own time and in his own way, when and where he wishes, without consulting or informing us or providing what we would consider adequate rationale for his decisions and choices.

**1) Remember, it’s not about you and me.** We were not chosen because we were qualified—we were chosen even though we were not qualified at all. Sometimes, once we have been chosen we get the idea that we need to do more, to improve and work harder so that we can prove our worth to Jesus. It wasn’t about what we brought to the team to begin with, and it’s not about what we need to do once we have been chosen. It’s about what he has already done.

**2) It’s all about him.** When we accept and believe that our place on his team is all about him, then we are free to serve without constantly looking over our shoulders, worried about whether he or someone else will condemn us. When we absolutely embrace that our place on his team is because of him, and him alone, we are free to serve him without constantly being concerned whether we are measuring up and making the grade. Jesus made the grade, he passed the test, he is qualified and he is giving it all to us, because of his grace. □



# A Covenant... Not a Contract!

by Greg Albrecht

**T**here is probably no other human endeavor quite like marriage—sadly, many of these partnerships that begin with such hope and expectation regularly fail. One of the reasons marriages fail is because many see marriage and the entire relationship through the eyes of a contract rather than through the perspective of a covenant.

Marriage, an example of a human covenant, can help us to understand the divine relationship God offers to each of us. He offers us the *new covenant in Christ*, not the *new contract in Christ*. **It's a covenant, NOT a contract!**

- A contract is a legally binding agreement between two parties, a business agreement which stipulates that work be performed or services rendered in exchange for a price.

- A contract stipulates that if one party scratches the back of the other, then the other party will return the favor.

- A contract is the way human beings interact. Contracts are the way we do business—contracts are at the heart of human economies.

- Contracts are based on the principle of *quid pro quo*—you do something for me and I'll do something for you. And of course, according to our performance-based contract

economy, if you fail to do something for me then I am not obligated to do something for you. Should you fail to perform your duties then I am released from my requirements to do mine.

But, a **Christ-centered marriage is a covenant**—and, of course, **our relationship with God, in and through Christ, is a new covenant**.

If a couple perceives their marriage as a contract, then they will each be keeping score to determine whether their partner owes them—whether they have done more for their partner than their partner has done for them.

When a marriage is nothing more than a business relationship (and by the way, in some very real ways a marriage is a business relationship), then it becomes a matter of keeping score.

But when a marriage is based on a Christ-centered relationship, then spouses lay aside their human desire to keep score, and instead serve their mate, without ever expecting a return in kind.

Christ-centered marriages are based on promises, trust, love and grace—so that when one partner stumbles, the other is not quick to condemn and find fault (as is the case with a contract), but quick to forgive and reconcile.

For many people, their relationship with God, as Christ-less religion explains it to them, is basically an assurance, assuming

they obey and perform enough good works, that they will not be tortured forever in an eternal hell.

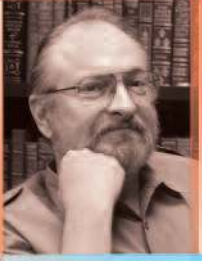
That's "contract Christianity." You do something for God and God will respond and do something for you. **But contract Christianity is oxymoronic**—that is, the two words are contradictory. Authentic Christianity, as given to us in and through Jesus Christ, by God's grace, is not a contract—it's a covenant.

- A covenant is not an exchange of goods and services—it's an exchange of lives, a sacred promise based on trust. A covenant is not a legal deal, it's a pledge of faith.

- To live in the new covenant with God means that you have exchanged lives—Jesus has given you his life, on the cross, and you surrender yours to him, and Jesus then lives his risen life in you, so that, as Paul says in Galatians 2:20, *We are crucified with Christ and we no longer live, but Christ lives in us.*

- Salvation therefore, is not a contract—it's not an exchange of your good deeds and good works for God's blessings and favors.

Salvation is a covenant, a promise—it's free, because it's given by God's generosity which does not depend on human accomplishments. According to the new covenant in Christ, we do not earn or merit God's love—he gives it to us because of his promises, because of his goodness and because he loves us unconditionally. □



## Dog's Grace

**E**ighteen-year-old Kirby stands at the kitchen door, yawning. The smells of eggs, toast and bacon have pulled him out of bed. The last item has his eyes wide with anticipation. I hand him a piece and he carefully takes it. He creaks back into the living room to savor his pre-breakfast snack.

Kirby, in case you wondered, is a dog—the older of our two aging Rat Terriers. His sister Meg is a mere 16 and thinks she's still a puppy, but Kirby is encountering many of the same physical challenges we all deal with later in life—hearing loss, cataracts, arthritis, respiratory ailments—you name it.

His long life has been punctuated by several illnesses, including near-fatal valley fever, pancreatitis, a rare auto-immune disease and pneumonia. But Kirby doesn't seem to give any of this a second thought. We still go for short rambles through the woods nearly every day as well as a late night walk down the street (his eyes are sensitive to bright light).

It's not like I drag him off on these expeditions against his will. Once he gets his joints warmed up, he creaks along with joy and confidence, sampling smells along the way. Sometimes he even scampers, careening down the trail and hopping and tripping over fallen branches.

By contrast, if I had Kirby's afflictions, I would likely be in a blue funk over my loss of hearing, eyesight and mobility, added to loss of hair and memory. Did I mention loss of memory? I would grow more and more depressed as I wondered about my physical state ten years from now. I would slide

into melancholia as I over-pondered my inevitable demise.

Dogs (at least Kirby) just don't do this. Author Dean Koontz put it this way: "When you have dogs, you witness their uncomplaining acceptance of suffering, their bright desire to make the most of life in spite of the limitations of age and disease, their calm awareness of the approaching end when their final hours come. They accept death with a grace that I hope I will one day be brave enough to muster" (from *A Big Little Life: A Memoir of a Joyful Dog*).

Why can't we muster this animal-like grace? Or more accurately, why do so many humans have so much trouble accepting the same gift that a kind God has given our supposedly less intelligent animal friends? Instead of enjoying grace and faith, we wallow in anxiety.

"Now hold on there," you might say, "Dogs don't have a sense of past and future in the same way we do. They lack self-awareness. They know nothing of North Korea, terrorism, rising sea levels or shrinking retirement funds."

True that. Animals pretty much live in the here and now. And yet that's exactly what Jesus advises us to do, in a passage that almost sounds irresponsible, but absolutely is not.

*Look at the birds. They don't plant or harvest or store food in barns, for your heavenly Father feeds*

*them. And aren't you far more valuable to him than they are? Can all your worries add a single moment to your life?...Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. So don't worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own worries. Today's trouble is enough for today (Matthew 6:26-27, 33-34, NLT).*

Even though this gem of advice points the way to anxiety-free living, it's one of the most ignored by Jesus' nominal followers. Christendom is notorious for promoting devastating guilt and hand-wringing worry.

Meanwhile, many non-Christian ideologies have made an art form out of clearing the mind of anxiety through various practices and techniques. Yet Jesus offers us this freedom from worry as a gift. We just need to accept it, lay aside our anxieties, have confidence in him and take one day at a time.

It's a gift so simple even my dogs can accept it. Why should it be so hard for us? □

—Monte Wolverton



Monte's sweet rat terriers, Kirby (L) and Meg (R)



## Quotes & Connections



The love described in 1 John 4 is "...incomparably the greatest psychotherapeutic agent—something that professional psychiatry cannot of itself create, focus or release."—Gordon Allport (1897-1967) Dr. Allport spent virtually his entire academic career at Harvard, as an under grad and then graduate student, and then on the Harvard faculty from 1930-1967. He is regarded as a founding figure of personality psychology.

Vincent Van Gogh, who tried preaching before he set his hand to painting, said he was more interested in blossoming, rather than blossoms. So, it seems, is God.

William Rogers (1913-2001), who served as Attorney General under President Dwight Eisenhower and Secretary of State under President Richard Nixon, was once asked what kind of a husband he would have been had he married Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013). Thatcher was known as the "Iron Lady" and served as Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1979-1990. Rogers said, "I would have been sure to have dinner waiting for her every evening when she came home."

"For God, the Lord and Fashioner of all things, who made all things, and assigned them with several positions, proved Himself not merely a friend of mankind, but also long-suffering [in His dealings with them.] Yea, He was always of such a character, and still is, and ever will be, kind and good, and free from wrath..."  
—Epistle of Methetus to Diognetus, Chapter VIII 2nd Century AD

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