



Forgiveness... Who first?

by Greg Albrecht

Wouldn't it be great if you or I could hit a delete button and send the memories of all our hurts and pains somewhere far away, into the most remote recesses of our minds, and never, ever have to think of them again? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the hard drive in our brain suddenly crashed, and no bad memories survived?

Of course, such a notion is not only far-fetched; it is impossible. Memories of hurts and pains

inflicted on us by others haunt and torment us, and cause all kinds of emotions—guilt, shame, resentment and hatred. Looking back on our lives, hurts litter our journey like discarded trash on the side of some lonesome road.

As painful as our memories of being hurt are, they can fester and grow into resentment and hatred of those who either hurt us or had some part in our pain.

Nasty things can and do happen when we throw a pity party, swimming laps in a pool of resentment, endlessly replaying painful moments from our past.

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What Others Are Saying...

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

The Wounds that Heal

Thank you for the April issue of *CWR Magazine*. What an inspiring and beautifully illustrated article by Brad Jersak, explaining that sin is sickness—but Christ is the Divine Healer. I needed to read this, and I wish everyone I know could read it! I really appreciated the bolded statements on page 5: “Sin is more than a crippling sickness; it is fatal venom from the serpent’s bite... It infects and ultimately kills everyone... [but] Christ rescues us from the serpent, heals us of the fatal venom and negates the curse of death.” What incredibly good news!

Arizona

How Great is the Love

I just received the February *CWRm* with Greg Albrecht’s cover story, “How Great Is the Love?” I barely got started reading when God laid it on my heart to send you a donation. I just love your literature, and I’m very excited about the change in frequency of publication.

I keep saying that your articles and stories are getting better and better all the time. I get the distinct feeling that God is inspiring your staff and writers more and more as time goes on. Your literature is truly a gift and I thank you very much for it. God bless you all at PTM!

British Columbia, Canada

The Brilliant Light of Christ

The brilliant Light of Christ shines through from the words on every page of *The Plain Truth* and *CWR Magazine*.

Email

The work of PTM has helped me for many, many years, in being a godly light and loving the people I come in contact with. Thank you for helping me learn more about how God created us, all of our surroundings and all of the beauty around the world.

Nevada

Thank you to the CWR/PTM team for the help God is granting us through your inspired and inspiring articles in your magazines. I deeply appreciate what you are doing for us, especially during this present time of hatred, unrest and division in our nation. Thanks for helping us learn to shine the light and love of Christ in the world.

California

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Forgiveness... Who First?

Continued from page 1

Movies, music and stage plays deal with narratives of revenge, and fostering and growing grudges. From *Wyatt Earp and the OK Corral* to the *Hatfields and McCoy's*, American history is alive with such stories. In all these stories of revenge and vindication, individuals who experience life without giving or receiving forgiveness live in an emotional and spiritual prison cell. They are slaves to their guilt, shame and desire for retribution.

An unforgiving spirit poisons every relationship we have, as well as every part of our life.

It's been said that holding a grudge is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.

We have a need to let go of our past and to forgive real and imagined hurts caused by individuals who were involved, whether directly or indirectly. There's no delete button to *erase* it all—but there is a way to *heal* it all. There's a way to forgive others, but the solution does not ultimately come from human resources. There is a way to deal with the hurts and pains that live in our memories. The answer is found in God's love. God's forgiveness calls all prisoners from their

bondage and offers them true freedom in Christ.

But, forgiving others is not as simple as a brief prayer—nor does the solution arrive in our lives by attending a Sunday school class. The resolution of our hurts and pains has no easy answer. In fact, forgiveness may just be the most difficult task that God's love can ever accomplish and therefore, it's one of his most precious gifts.

God's love went through hell and back to produce forgiveness. *So forgiveness is love's ultimate power.*

Which Comes First?

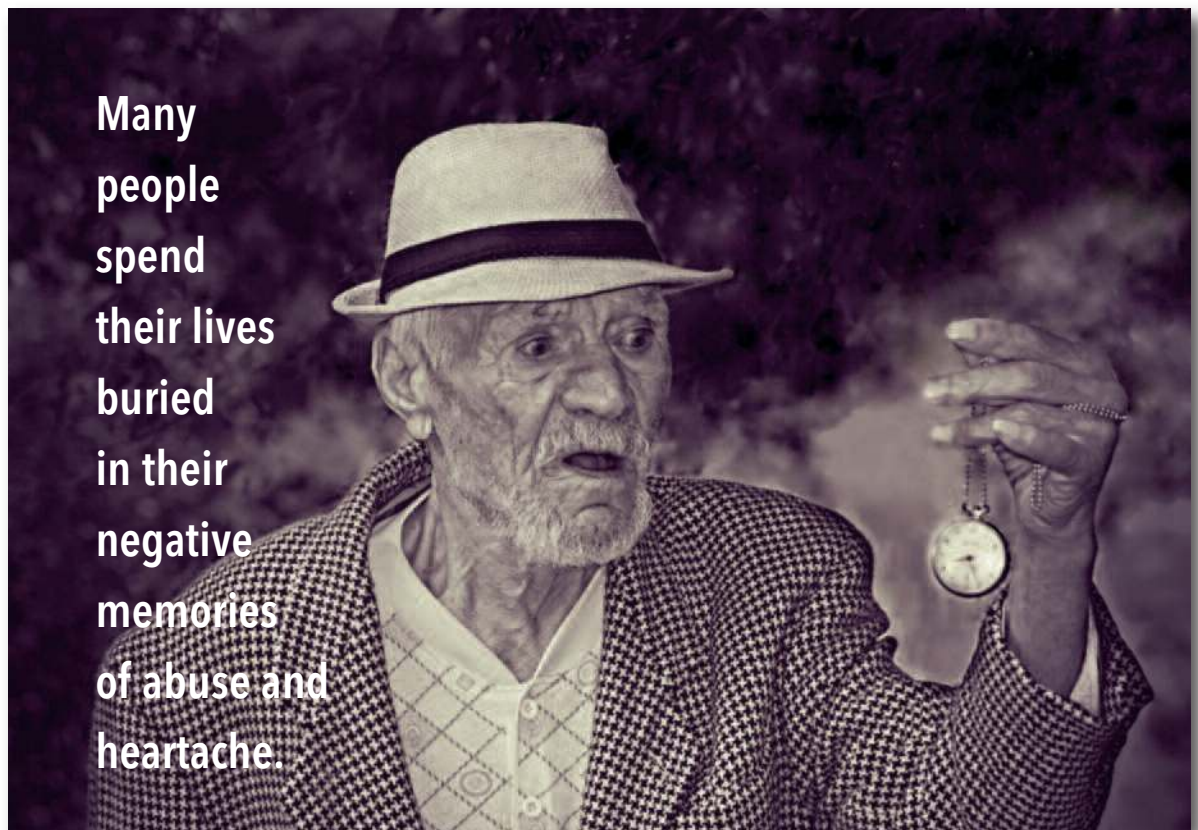
Of course, forgiveness flows in two directions—not only do we have a need to forgive; we have a need to be forgiven.

Many people spend their lives buried in their negative memories of abuse and heartache, with images of those people who hurt them emblazoned in their minds ... while never stopping to consider that they too occupy a similar place in other people's minds.

Being human means we need to forgive—others and ourselves—and we need to be forgiven. All humans suffer spoken insults and the sharp words of others. All humans inflict hurt and pain on others. Ironically, when we hurt and cause pain to others, we don't merely hurt those we think deserve to be hurt. More often we hurt those we truly care about—as the old song says, "You always hurt the one you love."

So, we both need to forgive

Many people spend their lives buried in their negative memories of abuse and heartache.



others and we need to be forgiven. But which comes first?

Most Christ-followers realize that God alone can forgive them—but when it comes to forgiving others, many Christians get the cart before the horse. They recall Jesus' words and conclude that forgiveness for others must begin within themselves before God can or will reciprocate and forgive them.

First we read that we should ask our heavenly Father to forgive our debts. No problem, because when we're honest with ourselves, we realize we have debts. Maybe we don't like to think about the sheer number or enormity of our spiritual debts, but we can't weasel out of the fact that we have them. But then Matthew 6:12 links the request for God to forgive our debts with what seems to be a

he contradicting himself? Is he really saying that God's love, mercy and grace are conditional, after all?

How We Forgive

The Lord's Prayer teaches us how to pray. The Lord's Prayer doesn't contradict the gospel; it explains more about the nature of prayer.

Prayer is both vertical and horizontal. Part of prayer is about our relationship with God, so it's vertical. But in the Lord's Prayer, Jesus also has us pray about other people, so there's a horizontal dimension as well.

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches us that our relationship with God empowers us, so that God's work will be displayed in our lives. Because we have been forgiven by God, and because we have received that forgiveness, we will also be enabled to pass that forgiveness on to others. There is no horizontal forgiveness unless and until there is vertical forgiveness. **Forgiveness emanates from beyond us, from another dimension—its origin is divine, not human.**

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus is saying that it's unthinkable for

Forgiveness emanates from beyond us, from another dimension—its origin is divine, not human.

Jesus once said, *For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins* (Matthew 6:14-15).

This passage seems to be clear instruction and dogmatic evidence that we must forgive others before we can expect God to forgive us.

These words of Jesus are his commentary on the topic of forgiveness, immediately following the Lord's Prayer. The only part of the prayer that he comments on is forgiveness—so much so that one Bible commentary has called these verses the "Forgiveness P.S."

Many have memorized the Lord's Prayer, and many pray it word for word on a regular basis. It *seems to leave no question* about where forgiveness must originate—and it *seems to leave no question* about how we are ultimately forgiven ... or not.

Forgive us our debts, as we have also forgiven our debtors (Matthew 6:12).

condition. *AS we have forgiven our debtors.*

What? What's this? Doesn't the gospel of Jesus Christ tell us—doesn't it insist—that God's love, mercy and grace don't depend on our actions? Doesn't the gospel tell us that God forgives us in spite of who we are and what we have done, not because of it? Doesn't God's grace teach us that we are forgiven because of God's goodness and righteousness rather than our own?

For a Christ-follower, it is unthinkable to exclude anyone from the forgiveness we ourselves have received.

Yes, that's exactly what God's grace says. That's absolutely the clear and unequivocal message of the gospel.

So, what should we make of Matthew 6:12? *Forgive us our debts, AS we have forgiven our debtors.* Isn't Jesus turning his own gospel upside down—isn't

those of us who truly know we have been forgiven to do anything but forgive others. It is unthinkable and impossible for Jesus to live his new life in anyone without that person also participating in the process of forgiving others as they have been forgiven.

So, what seems to be a proviso—*forgive us our debts, AS we have forgiven our debtors*—is not a stipulation. It's not that we must first forgive others because unless and until we do so, God will not forgive us.

The notion that we must first forgive others before God activates his forgiveness toward us is a religious contrivance. Why? Because it is patently impossible for a human to earn anything from God. While it is an impossible stipulation, some within legalistic religion do

their best to make the Lord's Pray say just that.

No human being can fully and completely forgive another human being in the way Christ calls for unless God had first forgiven them. No horizontal source of forgiveness—no human capability to manufacture forgiveness—is sufficient to make the necessary deposit at our Father's heavenly throne to earn his forgiveness. No human act of forgiveness has the spiritual power or vertical thrust to reach into

God's eternity. No human forgiveness compels God to unleash his forgiveness.

So, which comes first? Our forgiveness of others, which in turn convinces God to forgive us? Or is it God's forgiveness, unmerited on our part, which then empowers us to forgive our own debtors?

We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19).

Because forgiveness is the epitome and absolute power of God's love, it is also true that **we forgive because God first forgave us.**

According to the Lord's Prayer, we persist in praying for God's forgiveness only because we've already fully acknowledged our need for it and received God's forgiveness as a free gift of grace. Receiving God's forgiveness entails accepting our own inability to have a relationship with God based on anything we can do or produce or earn.


Forgiveness is Relational

When we forgive, we forgive people—we don't forgive animals, at least not in the same way we forgive humans.

For that matter, animals don't forgive fellow animals. It's a dog-eat-dog world, not a dog-forgives-other-dogs world. With animals, it's survival of the fittest. Some assure us that humans live out the same creed—only those who are the brightest, fastest, smartest and most financially secure survive. And when humans behave like animals and treat each other like animals, that's true.

Forgiveness is one of the defining behaviors that distinguishes a child of God—who accepts the love of God—from those who do not.

We don't forgive objects, like trees or rocks, houses or cars.



Forgiveness is one of the defining behaviors that distinguishes a child of God.

When hurricanes, floods, fires or earthquakes leave us devastated, we don't normally think of forgiving a natural destructive act, though some dare label them "acts of God" or blame them on someone's sin.

So, forgiveness is relational. It's deeply involved with the messy business of what it means to be a human being and how we act and react toward other humans.

For a Christ-follower, it is unthinkable to exclude anyone from the forgiveness we ourselves have received. Sadly, our world is filled with those who refuse to forgive others because they have not yet admitted that they need to be forgiven themselves. While God always forgives, he will not force his grace upon those who are not interested in being forgiven. Thus, grudges are nursed, resentment is nourished and bitterness grows like a wildfire—because so many will not face their own need of forgiveness.

In the final and absolute sense, forgiveness is a gift of God. May we actively receive his forgiveness and fully embrace it, so that we too find the capacity to pass on that same forgiveness to others. □

Greg Albrecht is the president of Plain Truth Ministries.

Psalm 51

PARAPHRASE by GEOFF MARTENS

Father, you are so generous in love! Flowing in mercy and grace! Jesus, wash away my guilt, my shame, my fears, any wrong doing that I have done—my thoughts, my actions, my words. Thank you for always forgiving and forgetting my mistakes.

Create in me a clean, spotless, stainless heart. And help me to unlock every room for you to clean. Create in me a work of art. Create a miracle in me, something real, something beautiful. Thank you that you are not finished with me yet. By your power I can change, because you are not finished with me yet.

As I come out of the ruins, out of trying to have a flawless performance. As I sing my broken song, draw me deeper and deeper into communion with You. Be my life, my joy, my peace, my hope. Keep creating in me a clean, clean heart, because you are not finished with me yet.

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Father's Day has always held special meaning for me. I was born on Father's Day. At the time of my birth my dad had moved away to Ohio to start a new job. My mom had been advised by her doctor not to travel, so she and my four siblings Sandy, Bruce, Debby and Brian remained in North Carolina, near most of my dad's family.



The day I was born, Dad's sister, Aunt Bea, called my dad to let him know he had a new baby girl. But I was born with low birth weight, jaundice, lung trouble and I needed several blood transfusions. The doctor was afraid I wouldn't make it.

That was the beginning of a special bond between me, my dad and our heavenly Father. Dad told me later that he had prayed so hard that day, and how much he wanted to see his new little girl. He dedicated my life to God if he would just let me live. Dad told me I was the best Father's Day gift he ever received.

Growing up, all of us kids had nicknames. Sandy was Skumpy, Bruce was Rufus, Debby was Pumpkin and Brian was Mr. Magoo—not because he had vision problems, but because he always seemed to be in trouble or getting into some crazy situation!

My nickname was "Lollipop." As a little girl, I loved to hop in my dad's lap and listen to his

stories or hear him sing. We didn't have the proverbial "two nickels to rub together," but our family was rich in love. In so many ways, my mom and dad showed us how deeply they loved us.

When I was about two years old, we moved from North Carolina to my mom's hometown in North Dakota, near my Grandma Olga (Dee

rather than preaching at me about a bunch of rules I wasn't quite living up to.

Grandma Dee Dee loved to listen to religious radio programs back in the early 60s, and she introduced my dad to a radio program that eventually changed all our lives.

The radio preacher taught that Christians needed to observe a strict seventh-day Sabbath, and

The Best Father's Day Gift

Laura Urista

Dee). Grandma Dee Dee was a very sweet Christian lady. She attended the Baptist church in town, but she believed every church helped the town and she donated to all of them. Her example has been an inspiration to our family and others over many years.

In many ways, Grandma Dee Dee was my hero, someone who showed me what it means to show unconditional love. She showed Jesus' love in action,

to follow the old covenant dietary (kosher) rules—and my dad totally bought in.

At the time, my parents owned a hotel and café in town. Because of his newfound beliefs, my dad suddenly stopped serving pork and shrimp, he took out all the cigarette machines, and he even closed the café on Saturdays—the busiest day of the week!

People around town began to think my dad was crazy. Finally, my dad sold the hotel and café,



packed up Mom and us four younger kids, and moved us over 1,000 miles away to a small town in Texas where we had no friends, no relatives and Dad had no job or prospects for work. All so my parents could enroll us kids in a private school founded by that radio preacher, because Dad believed it was “God’s school.”

When Rules and Laws Overshadow Love

I always admired my dad for his zeal to do what he believed God wanted him to do. Dad would demonstrate his faith and love for

God by the way he lived. But sometimes it seemed to me that Dad cared about being right with God and keeping the letter of the law more than he cared about showing mercy and affection to our family—especially to us kids.

As a teenager, there were times when I thought my dad was unfair and out of touch. He was basically clueless about what life was like for his teen-aged daughter. I knew he loved me, but Dad became increasingly distant and strict in my teen years. Instead of calling me “Lollipop,” I was more often “young lady.”

Now that I’ve raised teenagers of my own, I understand his intentions a little better, and I realize everyone has had similar experiences to a degree. But I distinctly remember one time when I had been away for three weeks at a summer camp in Minnesota. I was so excited to see my dad again. All I wanted to do was give him a big hug. But all Dad seemed to notice was the pink nail polish I was wearing. He grabbed my hand as I tried to hug him and snarled, “Take that off right away, young lady!”

Where was my hug? Where was my “Welcome home, “Lollipop”? It seemed laws and rules were getting in the way of our loving relationship.

After high school, I moved away from home to attend college. At the end of my junior year of college I married my husband, Juan—two years later our son Tim was born.

When you have kids of your own, you begin to appreciate the sacrifices your own parents made for you. As little Timmy grew, and a few years later our daughter Tawny was born, I wished I had gotten to know my own dad better. I desperately wished I could get back to that special, intimate relationship of “Daddy” and “Lollipop.”

Unfortunately, that was just about the time Dad began to exhibit the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease. I felt so cheated. I was finally at the point in my life when I wanted to spend time with my dad and I deeply wanted to get to know him better. I actually *wanted* to hear his old stories again, and I wanted him to tell my kids those same stories. But it was too late.

At first Dad was just confused, forgetting what he was talking about or even who he was





Book Review, Ken Abraham, *When Your Parent Becomes Your Child: A Journey of Faith Through My Mother's Dementia* (Thomas Nelson, 2012).

New York Times best-selling author, Ken Abraham's book, *When Your Parent Becomes Your Child*, is a heartfelt personal diary of Ken's "journey of faith through [his] mother's dementia." Using a blend of facts and humor, Abraham journals his experience of dealing with his mother, Minnie—from the first apparent signs of her dementia to her departure from this life. He details the challenges of learning to recognize and understand Minnie's new quirks and behaviors—as well as the gradual toll dementia took on Minnie's aging body.

Ken often flashes back, sharing a vivid picture of who Minnie was and how the disease gradually changed her. Throughout the book, Abraham shares valuable medical research and facts on dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

For more information about the early warning signs of dementia, coping strategies, and finding a local support group, visit the Alzheimer's Association website (www.alz.org). □

talking to. I soon realized I'd never get a chance to have a real conversation with him again. My mom took care of Dad for as long as she was physically able, but eventually Dad had to go into a nursing home.

The last time I saw my dad alive was in the summer of 1995. Our whole family got together at the nursing home for my parent's 50th wedding anniversary. By then Dad was in a wheelchair and barely able to utter even a few words. I remember watching him stare intently at the birds in the cafeteria atrium and whistle old familiar tunes. But the dad I remembered and loved so much was basically already gone.

The Incredible Love of My Heavenly Father

Dad died three years later, in December, 1998. This year marks the 19th Father's Day I've spent without him. When my dad passed away, I began seeking a deeper relationship with my heavenly Father. I realized that I knew a lot about God, a lot about facts of the Bible, but I didn't

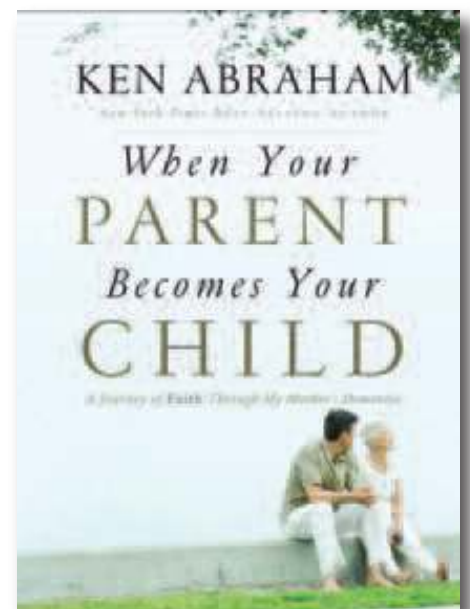
know God as a real person. Like Jesus' "Abba," I wanted to know God as my loving Daddy.

Rules, regulations and rituals had gotten in the way of my relationship with my heavenly Father, as they had with my earthly Dad. In the last few years, I've been learning what Jesus "came to show us the Father" means. So many of us have been raised with the idea that God is like the bad cop and Jesus is like the good cop.

We think God the Father is sitting on his judge's bench with a giant gavel in hand, ready to sentence us to a terrible punishment if we don't live up to his perfect, holy standards.

And then we think of Jesus as God the Son—the kind, merciful, loving healer who came to take our place and suffer the punishment we deserved and should have received. What's up with that?

Scripture actually shows us that God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one—One in nature, one in essence—and One in love!





That is the one true nature of *Elohim* ... the triune Lord: AGAPE—deep, profound love.

“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God IS love” (1 John 4:7-8, my emphasis).

Last April, our first granddaughter Heather was born. But even before I saw the first ultrasound image of her, I knew I loved her beyond measure. Before I even knew she was a girl or if she would make it to full term, I knew that I loved our “little peanut” with all my heart.

In the same way, God has loved each of us from the very beginning.

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be” (Psalm 139:13-16).

Our Heavenly Father is the same “Abba” or “Daddy” to whom Jesus prayed. He is kind, loving and merciful beyond anything our human hearts can fathom or measure:

“I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:16-29).

If we come to truly realize and internalize how deeply we are loved by the Father, it will change the way we feel about ourselves and consequently how we feel about others. It will impact how we treat them. Actions truly speak louder than words, and how we treat others speaks volumes about the love of God that flows through us.

It means the world to me that my “Daddy” considered me his best Father’s Day gift ever. And I know without a doubt, thanks to the immeasurable love of our heavenly Father, I will see my “Daddy” again one day. And when I see him, he’ll embrace me in a big hug and say “Welcome home, Lollipop.” □

Laura Urista is managing editor of The Plain Truth and CWR Magazine and grandmother to baby Heather.





The Charm of Beauty in an Ugly Age

My heart is heavy these days for the church. Are we just a religious version of our ugly age or can we actually be the alternative counterculture of Christ? Can we develop the spiritual maturity to be a Christlike community of radical love and mercy? If not, we'll become as superfluous as a Blockbuster video rental store ... and suffer the same fate.

If the church in America is to recover any relevance, it won't be through a public emphasis on **the true** (Christian apologetics) or **the good** (Christian ethics), but through an emphasis on the long-neglected third prime virtue—**the beautiful**. What we desperately need is a renaissance of Christian aesthetics. In a post-Christian culture adverse to claims of superior truth or superior morality, beauty still holds the prerogative and charm to win hearts. If we can be so formed in Christ that we begin to live beautiful lives, we will gain a new hearing; if not, we deserve to be ignored.

Yet in the midst of this era of ugliness, there is hope—the hope that Fyodor Dostoevsky's enigmatic maxim will turn out to be a prophecy:

"Beauty will save the world."

Why is the life of Christ universally considered beautiful? Because of his mercy, his welcoming demeanor, his tenderness toward the weak, his generous forgiveness of sinners. Everyone (except the self-righteous Pharisees) recognized the winsome beauty of Jesus. Today everyone likes Jesus. Everyone! Even atheists like Jesus. I can't think of a single serious person who is a critic of Jesus.

Friedrich Nietzsche, God bless him, tried to be a critic of Jesus, but he couldn't keep it up and seems to have actually been a grudging admirer.

My hope is that the church can be inspired to try to imitate the winsome beauty of Jesus. When the church carries the grace, the mercy, the unconditional love and radical forgiveness that characterizes Christ, that's when she bears the beauty that belongs to the bride of Christ.

In depicting a society of people intent on following the peaceful way of the Lamb, John the Revelator bounces back and forth between the twin metaphors of a bejeweled city and a beautiful bride. Then John combines them so that the Bride, in

concert with Spirit, calls to those languishing beside the burning lake to come into the beautiful and verdant city (See Revelation 21 & 22).

Whenever I think of these images from the finale of Revelation, I am reminded of the recurring line in Bob Dylan's "Shelter from the Storm," conjuring a compassionate woman speaking to a weary and beleaguered traveler:

*Tw'as in another lifetime, one of toil and blood
When blackness was a virtue
and the road was full of mud
I came in from the wilderness,
a creature void of form
"Come in," she said,
"I'll give you shelter from the storm"*

All ten verses make me think of the bride of Christ as she ought to be.

"Shelter from the Storm" helps me imagine the church, not as a raging warrior, but as a gracious hostess, a hospitable innkeeper. Some metaphors serve us as better than others. Now is a time for us to lighten up on militaristic metaphors and lean into hospitality metaphors. Instead of culture-war hostility, we need radical hospitality. It's time for us to live up to the ubiquitous church marquee that claims, "Everyone welcome."

Instead of contributing to the hateful rhetoric of our ugly age, could the church instead be a shelter from the storm?

Instead of a furrowed brow of disapproval, a clenched fist of anger, or a wagging finger of condemnation, could not the church instead present to the world a compassionate countenance of grace?

Instead of being sucked into the destructive dualism of reactive people, could the church instead become a contemplative people seeking to reconcile all things in the love of Christ?

Instead of ratcheting up culture war polemics, could the church instead speak the first words of the risen Christ, "peace be with you"?

If so, we can enact the beauty of Christ in a way that will be conspicuous in an ugly age.

So together, let's ask the Holy Spirit to help us make Christianity beautiful again. □



CWRm

GREG ALBRECHT

“Did ‘all people’ receive the Holy Spirit on Pentecost?”

Q Does Acts 2:17 mean that “all people” from the Day of Pentecost forward have received God’s Holy Spirit, whether or not they have repented, believed and accepted God?

“In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams” (Acts 2:17).

A The meaning and implications of Acts 2:17 are fascinating. Peter was citing what the Old Testament author Joel had written hundreds of years prior—giving it context and contemporary relevance and application. God was pouring out his Spirit on “all people”—what does that mean specifically?

Briefly, we should remember the verse begins with the statement that this event, this pouring out of the Holy Spirit, would happen “in the last days.”

Some allow that phrase to sidetrack them, and given their general predisposition toward thinking “the last days” are the months or perhaps a year or two immediately before the Second Coming of Jesus, they just decide that whatever this means it will happen then.

This is a great example of a doctrinally ingrained belief being read into a passage, then allowing one’s theological predisposition or indoctrination

to dictate and derail what Scripture is teaching.

There is no question that Peter is claiming that the listener in his immediate audience were living “in the last days.” Beyond that, the New Testament generally treats the phrase “last days” as referring to the times just following the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Back to the your question about this passage: was the Spirit poured out “on all people” some 1980 years ago? What about the record of history over the last 1980 years or so? Millions and millions of people have lived and died since then, and there seems to be little or no evidence that the Holy Spirit was poured out on all of them.

I believe the best, but certainly not only, explanation for what Peter meant by “on all people” is reached by the following two basic rules of hermeneutics (the way we interpret Scripture):

1) We should do our best to determine the context of the original audience, its culture and its setting—the ideas that permeated their thinking.

2) We should realize that whatever meaning we reach now is valid only if it builds in some way on the meaning the original audience would have understood when they first heard the message or read the passage in question.

Given the first principle, who

was it that constituted Peter’s first audience in Acts chapter 2?

They were all Jews. They understood the world and God in terms of the old covenant. Peter was giving them a new revelation, and this passage is part of the “new wine” of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Thus, Peter may have been saying “all people” to emphasize the equality of all the new covenant people of God.

As Paul explains later, we are *all*—Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female—one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28). Jesus has broken down the walls of religious exclusivity so that now “all people” have equal access to God (Ephesians 2:11-20).

Those passages, among many others, may be the intent of the phrase “all people” used in Acts 2:17. Up until that point, Peter’s audience on Pentecost consisted of Jews who may have only thought prophets, priests and kings could experience a direct one-on-one relationship with God. But those days, Peter seems to be saying, are over.

Given the second principle, we ask, **what does this passage mean for us today?** It means virtually the same now as it did then. The 21st century is still the “last days” and, by God’s grace, in and through the work of the Holy Spirit, “all people” may have such a direct relationship with God now. □

Reflections on

A More Christlike God

by Amber Hamilton

I grew up in a Christian home. My parents used to be on staff with a parachurch ministry to youth, and my dad now leads the men's ministry at a church in Baltimore.

This past year brought such immense suffering to our family (my husband and I have four boys) that it shattered everything I have ever known or thought about God.

Over the past three years my body has basically fallen apart. I have had three surgeries, including a disk replacement in my neck, and I have developed chronic migraines.

A year ago this September I looked at my husband and said, "I don't believe in God anymore. I don't know how I can. He has abandoned me in my darkest hours. I cannot believe a loving God would do that 'for His glory.' If he did, he has a self-esteem problem and I don't want to be a part of it."

This was the message I had inherited growing up—that God caused suffering so we could show others how steadfast in our faith we were and then people would say, "Wow! That's amazing! God is so good!"

What? I abandoned my post as a Christian. It was a devastating break-up but I didn't know how to stay in that place of belief anymore.

Over the coming months as I continued to deal with daily

debilitating migraines, I couldn't shake the reality that there was a God. And it dawned on me one day that even if I didn't believe in God, that didn't change my circumstances. It just left me

with no hope. So, I began a very slow journey back to God, knowing that I couldn't go back to my Evangelical faith as I had known it before.

That's when I stumbled upon



Brad Jersak's *A More Christlike God* through an interview he did with Peter Enns. It couldn't have come at better time.

It has been, hands down, the most influential book in my life, ever.

His overarching theme is that Jesus is everything God wanted to say to us and Jesus was, without exception, the most loving, inclusive, radical person who ever lived. Brad talks about how God is never the cause of our suffering, but rather, our suffering is rooted in the evil of this world.

And Jesus suffers *right alongside of us*. In my darkest moments, he had not abandoned me. He wept with me in the dark, in the hospital, when I couldn't pick up my baby because my arms were weak from the pain. He was there, weeping with me.

And then, the most beautiful part was that God began to transform my heart with his love. Not in a cliché way but in a real and tangible way. My view and understanding of the mystery of the Divine that we call God exploded. God is so much bigger than we have ever imagined. He loves us much more

"A More Christlike God has been, hands down, the most influential book in my life, ever."

than we can ever believe. And I believe there is a place at the table for every one of us—no matter what.

I still deal with the migraines on a daily basis. They aren't as debilitating as they once were and I have amazing doctors. God hasn't yet healed me from this illness. But he has changed me and opened my eyes to a much bigger understanding of Him—one with

adequate space for my pain and suffering. One with more than enough space for us all to come and be loved

and accepted—no matter what.

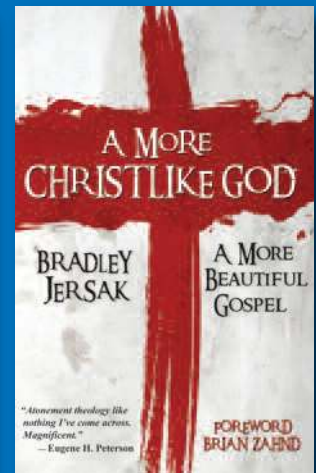
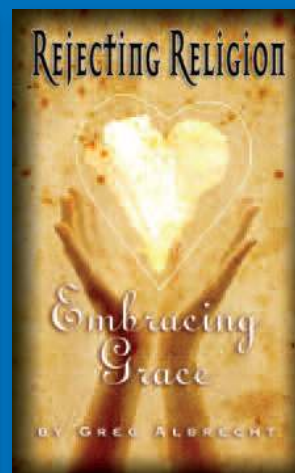
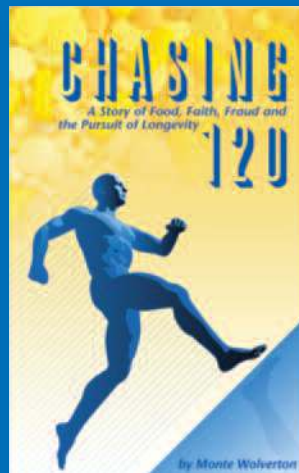
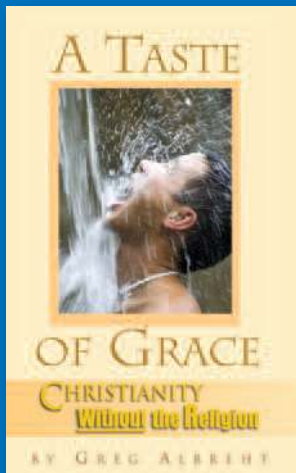
All that to say, I am so grateful for this book and even the journey that brought it about. It has brought refreshment to my soul and in Brad's words, "I don't hate God anymore."

Brad, thank you for sharing your journey and what you have learned. □

Amber Hamilton lives in Virginia Beach, VI. She and husband Mike have four boys. Amber lives at the beach, where she loves to bury her toes in the sand whenever possible. She enjoys playing the guitar, singing and yoga.

CWRpress

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Wishful thinking? Or Blessed Hope!

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus (Titus 2:11-13 NASB)

Paul's epistles to his pastoral protégés, Timothy and Titus, include some of the New Testament's boldest texts when it comes to placing our hope in Jesus Christ.

For example, Paul tells us about what God wants. "He desires **all people** to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). Some theologians don't believe this. They would rather Paul had said, "all Christians" or "all of the elect." But he didn't. This is one case where "**all**" means **all**.

Not that everyone will somehow enjoy salvation magically or automatically. There are some specific means to this end.

One of those means, in Paul's view, is prayer. To this end, Paul says, "I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for **all people** ..." (1 Timothy 2:1).

And while prayer is necessary in Paul's model, he knows there is other work to be done as well.

"We labor and strive for this, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of everyone, especially of those who believe" (1 Timothy 4:10).

The labor to which he refers is the mission of sharing the good news of God's love and grace for everyone, to everyone, expressed most beautifully in the gift of God's Son, Jesus.

Why did Paul consider this striving? For the very religious, whether Jewish hardliners or Gentile idolaters, the good news stood as a

threat to status quo spirituality, resting as it did in their own righteousness.

The love and grace of God subvert every such system, and that meant sharing it got Paul in a lot of hot water. Some say half his ministry years were spent in various prisons.

Paul says, on the one hand, that God-in-Christ is the Savior of **all** (and "all" still means **all**). So why say "*especially*" for those who believe? Quite simply, because those who already believe God loves them can enjoy that love today.

Those who believe God has forgiven them can enjoy freedom from guilt and shame right now. Those who believe in God's Son have already stepped into the joy of the eternal life to come.

So, Paul is into praying and preaching now

because the world suffers now. The world suffers from not knowing and not believing the grace and love that is already theirs in Christ.

In addition to praying for and preaching to everyone, everywhere, that they would receive the beautiful gospel,

Paul believed this saving Grace had *already appeared to all people* (Titus 2:11) as a person—none other than Christ himself. **Jesus Christ IS the grace** that has appeared, in the flesh, for the whole world.

He is also the "**blessed hope**" that *will appear*. That is, we don't just hope that Christ saves—Christ IS the Hope who certainly *will save*.

No, our hope is not merely the wishful thinking of those who cross their fingers for good luck.

Our Hope is as firm and sure as the cross of Christ and his good news. Our Hope is a living Person, the Grace and Salvation who has appeared and will surely appear again.

So, we join our hope to those Christians who first prayed, "*Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!*" □

"Our hope is not merely the wishful thinking of those who cross their fingers for good luck. Our hope is as firm and sure as the cross of Christ.

Our Hope is a living Person, the Grace and Salvation who has appeared and will appear."

All are welcome and invited to join us at **CWR audio**, where we believe church is who you are, God's people by God's grace, not a place where you "go."

- **TIRED** of hearing of the monster God who threatens to punish you?
- **SICK** of humanly imposed rules and regimens that put behaving ahead of belonging?
- **DONE** with bad experiences with people who called themselves "the church"?

Come and join Greg Albrecht, the voice of CWRaudio—we're about all Jesus all the time! The following guide lays out each weekly CWRa sermon for the next two months. Please join us and invite a friend!

CWRaudio *Summaries*

JUNE 2017

Regrets—I've Had a Few The gospel in a nutshell: beyond our limited capacity to believe, or to even dare hope for—Jesus knows all of our regrets, and he loves us anyway! *Week of June 4*

Spares Us the Indignity of Indiscriminate Acceptance! Morality based on religion is outraged and offended by God's indiscriminate acceptance of righteousness and virtue outside of the realm of rituals, rites, routines and regulations. *Week of June 11*

Our Father's Love Greg was reminded at a memorial service about the love of God that Jesus lives in us—it's a love that God gives us first before any and all other considerations. *Week of June 18*

We Need a Bigger Boat Many characterize their religious church or movement rowing away from the sinking ship of "the world"—they are "saved" and the ship of this world is going down, and anyone not on board their lifeboat deserves to be lost. *Week of June 25*

JULY 2017

To What or To Whom Do We Owe Allegiance? It's a time immemorial dilemma for religion—does the nation in which one is a citizen and the religion of which one is a member dictate who God is and how he is worshipped? *Week of July 2*

What is and Who is the Church? The church—the universal body of Christ—is far more about who we are than it is where we go, what building we attend, what ceremonies we perform or those we don't. *Week of July 9*

Giving With a Cheerful Heart We will discuss what the Bible says and what it doesn't say about giving. *Week of July 16*

What is God's Plan For Your Life? Many seem to be absolutely certain about specifics of God's will and do not hesitate to dogmatically share their views with others. *Week of July 23*

Treasure in a Jar of Clay Join us as we learn about the lessons embedded in a spiritual fable titled "The Very Persistent Gappers of Frip." *Week of July 30*