

PLAIN TRUTH®

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Who Killed Jesus?

By Greg Albrecht

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This showdown at high noon is God's love? The Lawman loves us so much that he will kill us and send us to an ever-burning inferno of eternal hellfire?

Did God Kill Jesus?

Suddenly, wearing a white hat, Jesus, the Son of God, jumps out from an alley.

It's high noon in Dry Gulch. Two lone figures are walking down the dusty street, getting closer and closer to their inevitable face-off.

According to religious interpretations, God the Father is the good guy on the streets of Dry Gulch. God is the Lawman—the quickest and fastest draw ever. Nobody ever gets the drop on God.

The bad guy? That would be, according to religion, you and me. God the Lawman has said “enough already.” He has called us out and we are approaching the gates of hell.

Our mothers told us if we didn't change our ways, we would pay a severe penalty. Our pastors and priests warned us about God's wrath. This is our Judgment Day, and Father God is the judge, jury and executioner.

The badge on the Father's chest reflects the noonday sun—lightning bolt flashes of intense light momentarily blind us. We are

resigned to our fate—this won't end well.

Thoughts are racing through our minds with each and every step of our death march. God has cut us so much slack over the years, maybe he has lost his patience and he is tired of us taking advantage of him. Maybe this time he just can't look the other way. We broke his laws and now his laws will break us. This time we'll have to pay for our sins.

God the Father, the Lawman, has had it “up to here” with bad guys like you and me who keep breaking his laws. Sure, we've been told the Father loves us, but Father God has to make us pay because he enforces law and order.

When the distance between us narrows to about thirty feet, Father God stops. We stop. The time has come.

We're staring death in the face—death in the unflinching, stern face of the Lawman whom we have been told loves us so much.

Just as the Father fires on us, Jesus jumps in front of us and takes the bullet. We can't believe it—we look down at Jesus who is lying in a pool of blood that would have been ours. The Father turns his back and walks away, returning back to his office in the jail.

The penalty has been paid. Jesus took our place. Justice has been served. The law has triumphed. God the Father intended to kill us, but Jesus took our sins on himself and God killed him instead.

Jesus saved us—from God!?

One thing is sure. Jesus is dead. We can see that. But now our thoughts are racing about the motive and the reasons behind his death. God the Father killed God the Son so that justice could be served and the penalty could be paid?

But God doesn't sin. Killing is a sin. If God shoots down Jesus in the streets of Dry Gulch, or crucifies him in Jerusalem, then God the Father is killing God the



The Universal Body of Christ

The teaching ministry of *Christianity Without the Religion* (CWR) offers weekly online sermons, with Christ-centered teaching, fellowship, prayers and communion. We minister modestly, without religious embellishments, primarily to individuals and small groups who are part of the body of Christ, rather than overflowing crowds in warehouse-like sanctuaries or in majestic, stained glass cathedrals.

We minister in the name of Jesus, remembering his promise in Matthew 18:20, *“For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”* We insist that the church is who YOU are, in Christ, far more than it is a physical location to which you travel or a building you attend.

We are **a different kind of a church**—because we have no specific building on a piece of land where we offer services. We do not offer to officiate at baptisms, marriages or funerals. We believe that the body of Christ is seen and unseen, dead in Christ and alive in Christ, on earth now and on the other side of eternity.

We are **a different kind of a church**—we have no connection whatsoever with any denomination. In fact, we believe in religion-less Christianity. While we embrace Christ-followers who choose to attend a brick-and-mortar church as well as listen to and read our messages, we reject any religious requirement that one must physically attend a building.

We remember the powerful, soaring and compelling last words of Stephen, recorded in Acts 7:48-50: *However, the Most High does not*

live in houses made by men. As the prophet says, “Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?”

We believe and know, as we rest in Christ, that our relationship with God is not governed or enhanced or improved by how hard we work, how long we pray or how much we give. God loves you and me right now as much as he ever has or ever will. Therefore, we reject the necessity and the presumed effectiveness of religious pills, prescriptions, potions, programs and performances.

Because we are members of the universal body of Christ, we join with our brothers and sisters around this world in coming to the Table of the Lord on the first Sunday of each month, as well as other special times of spiritual focus and feasting during the year. We come to his table (variously called communion, the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper and the mass) to remember Jesus, as he instructed us.

Imagine a huge banquet table that stretches as far as our eyes can see—then it disappears into the horizon. You and I and billions of people (dead and alive) are seated at that table. Let’s imagine this huge gathering of the children of God, Christ-followers who are seated in the heavenly realms.

Can you see them? You might be surprised to see some who are seated near you—and as a matter of fact, some of them might be surprised to see you or me!

Can you see your fellow members in the universal body of

Christ? Here, at this most majestic and beautiful Table, are the rich and the famous, the poor and the unknown.

Here are those whom we might dignify as saints and definitely those we might regard as sinners. Old and young, lost and found, striving, thriving and grieving, addicted and sober, crippled and maimed, sick and oppressed. Our fellow guests at this table are male and female—black, yellow, white and brown.

Can you see these—the redeemed of Christ, for whom he died, whom he loves now and forever? Look, there are victims of abuse and those who have abused them. Murderers and their victims, crooks and con-artists and thieves alongside of pastors and teachers and yes...even politicians.

Here we are—the human family, together at the Table of the Lord. God shows no partiality—he does not respect those who have resumes filled with impressive deeds and achievements more than he does the poor, the homeless, the refugees and the disadvantaged.

Our presence at this table is not predicated on our perfect Sunday school attendance record—nor does it depend on how long and frequent our prayers are. Our presence at this table is by the grace of God. There will be no bill to pay for this magnificent feast, because the bill has already been paid. □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for the complete message “The Universal Body of Christ” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of March 4, 2018.

Continued from page 1

Son and punishing Jesus for crimes he never committed.

God is one—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—who perfectly and harmoniously love each other—so why would Father God kill God the Son? Does the Father love us or is Jesus really the one who loves us? Fine—“what a friend we have in Jesus.” But is the Father our friend too? This is confusing. God the Father seems like the embodiment of the saying, “With friends like him, who needs enemies?”

Is an outraged and wrathful Lawman more in love with his law than he is with us—leaving Jesus to be the one who really loves us because he sacrificially took the bullet with our name on it?

We stumble away from this awful scene of bloodshed and walk into the whitewashed church at the other end of town. We find a priest/pastor—and we ask him to tell us what just happened because we can’t figure it out. We listen, as this religious authority provides an interpretation of high noon in Dry Gulch:

“God the Father killed God the Son, who willingly took your place so that God the Father’s wrath would be satisfied. The Father would have killed you and been justified in doing so but Jesus took your place. Justice is served. The penalty is paid. Blood has been shed.”

The pastor/priest continues: *“You see, the cross of Christ is all about the legal demands we have failed to keep and the penalty Jesus paid in our stead.”*

We walk out of that church even more perplexed than when we entered. Are we to be assured that God’s anger is appeased because the blood of Jesus flows in the streets of Dry Gulch/Jerusalem? Can we now really believe God loves us, and will never, ever again go ballistic and lose his cool because he took out his wrath on his one and only Son?

The Cross of Christ—Anger or Love?

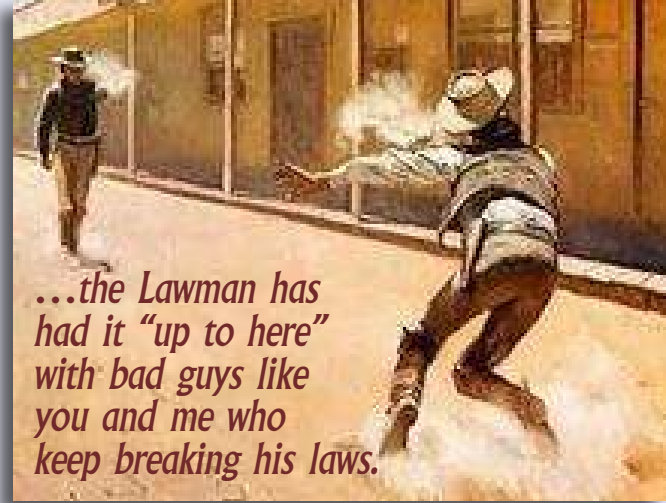
This is essentially the religious interpretation of the cross called **penal substitution**—God’s law was broken, he was offended, he got angry and someone had to die. Thankfully, Jesus was our substitute. It’s a warped and twisted idea isn’t it?

The vast majority of North American churches today teach their members that the cross is the ultimate symbol of God’s anger. God is angry with us because of our sins, they say—and since the wages of sin is death then we deserve to die. But Jesus, thankfully, came to stand between us, so that we would not be tortured forever in hell by the wrath of God.

Consequently, much of Christendom has corrupted the central meaning and focus of the cross. If you buy into **penal substitution** as a way of understanding the cross of Christ, you must believe that God the Father puts his love for laws ahead of his love for us. That’s

preposterous—but that’s what many churches teach!

But when you fully comprehend the gospel of Jesus Christ, you realize that the gospel is good news because God is love—he never has lost his cool, he never has gone ballistic, and his primary inclination toward you and me is not anger and wrath but love and grace.



...the Lawman has had it “up to here” with bad guys like you and me who keep breaking his laws.

What is the Significance and Meaning of the Cross of Christ?

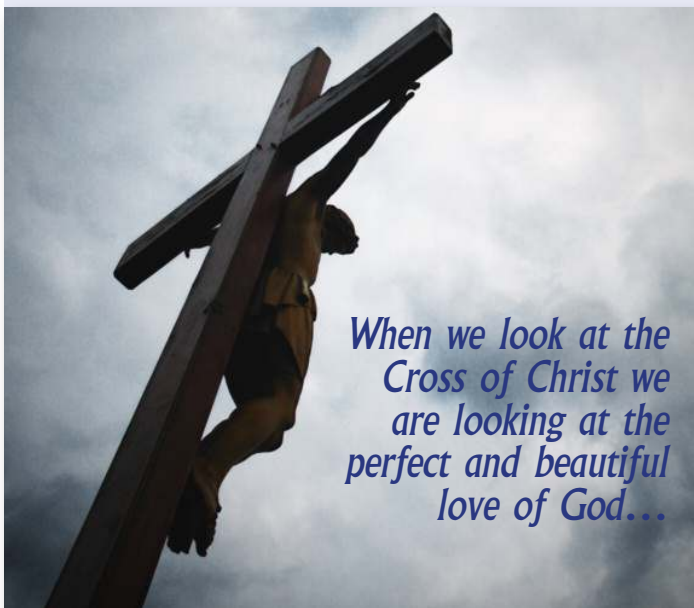
Jesus died, but the Father didn’t kill him. Jesus died, willingly, as a lamb led to the slaughter, because of the hatred and vengeance of humanity. God the Father did not kill Jesus. Jesus did not save us from the wrath of the Father. **People killed Jesus.**

Human civilization killed Jesus because he was such a threat to the status quo. **Rome and religion killed Jesus.** Human authorities, civil and religious, killed Jesus. Jesus revealed the fullness of God—he revealed the Father and all his love. Out of the united and supreme love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit Jesus accepted all human hatred, lust, violence and bloodshed for all time—absorbing it without retaliation or revenge.

On his cross, God (in the person of Jesus) opens his arms to everyone—to every warmonger, every racist, every addict and all the homeless, diseased and dying. God spreads his arms on the cross in welcome to the poor, the prophets, the prostitutes—even to the pompous priests who arranged for his brutal torture and execution.

Theologian Jurgen Moltmann points to the cross of Christ, telling us “This is God and God is like this.” **God is not Pilate requiring an execution of Jesus. God is not organized religion demanding the crucifixion of Jesus.**

When we look at the Cross of Christ we are looking at the perfect and beautiful love of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is the love of God who returns good for evil.



When we look at the Cross of Christ we are looking at the perfect and beautiful love of God...



In return for torture, beating and gruesome execution, Jesus gave forgiveness.

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

Who was it on that cross? It was God in the person of Jesus on that cross. Who killed Jesus? The Father didn't kill Jesus because God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is ultimately and absolutely defined as love. God did not kill God.

People killed Jesus.

Our Loving Father

We humans can easily fathom and get our heads around God as perceived through the prism of laws and punishment. That is the most popular perspective and identification of God within Christendom. Throughout all world religions, “the gods” are seen as the judges and we humans are viewed as shameful, guilty perpetrators. Christendom at large characterizes God as disenfranchised from and angry with us, because we are sinners who will never measure up to his holiness and justice.

On the other hand, the gospel reveals God more accurately understood as our heavenly Father, who truly loves us beyond our wildest expectation or imagination. The intimacy and bond of love between parent and child is the relationship that by far and away prevails when God reveals and illustrates the way he feels about us and the invitation he offers us. We're not talking about anger—

we're talking about love.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, God is portrayed as a father, not as a judge. But although the son received his father's love, he didn't expect it, did he? When the son decided to go home, he started to rehearse the speech he would give to his father when he finally arrived home.

He would tell his father he had sinned and he was not worthy to be his son—the son decided to ask his father to just accept him as a hired servant, a day laborer, and give him a job so that he could pay off his debt.

If the father of the Prodigal Son was the God that much of Christendom would have us believe, then when the son returned home, the father in the parable would have said, *“Your sins need to be paid for. Right now you are no son of mine. Get out there in the fields and work and pay off your debt. Then maybe when you realize what you turned your back on we might talk about you being my son again.”*

But the father didn't mention one word about sin—the father didn't mention anything about the son paying off his debt—nothing at all about signing a contract guaranteeing he would never be a foolish son again.

No, instead of bringing out

overalls, boots and a shovel, the father brings out a robe and a ring. Then the father throws a celebration, replete with eating, singing, drinking and dancing.

What happened on the cross was an epic, once-and-for-all demonstration of the greatest love story ever told. God in the person of Jesus took human hostility and hatred, he absorbed it with all of the torture and violence humans could dish out. Jesus turned the other cheek. Jesus did not respond with retaliation—nor did he become angry. **God was not, is not and will never be filled with and identified by wrath.**

In return for torture, beating and gruesome execution, Jesus gave forgiveness. In return for human abuse, Jesus offers his open arms in embrace. In return for evil, Jesus responds with love and goodness.

So I ask you, the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ—was it all about the wrath of God and the *penal-substitution* he “needed” to satisfy his laws? Or was it all about the love of God revealed through Jesus Christ? □

FAKE NEWS?

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FILLING IN THE BLANKS

CWR/PTM

Pascha!

Victorious Cross, Empty Grave and Living Lord

by Brad Jersak

The first time I heard of “*pascha*” (pronounced and sometimes spelled *paska*), my beloved mother-in-law, Eleanor Wiebe, baked it for me. What she offered was an oven-fresh loaf of sweet bread, crowned liberally with rich, creamy icing. *Pascha* bread comes to us as sort of a holy dessert from Eastern Europe, where it is baked to celebrate Easter.

In fact, it is so named because many European Christians prefer to call Easter itself “Pascha,” especially if they’re picky about the pagan roots of the word “Easter.” So *pascha* can refer to both the bread and the holy day.

Christians in Eastern Europe see in this bread the symbols of Easter. Inside the *pascha* loaf, they may include a swirl of yellow and white batter that is supposed to represent the resurrection of Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Curiously, Grandma-close-by, as my sons call her, blended food and faith in another way. She would ask if we’d like to come by her place for *pascha* (the bread) at “*faspas*.” Eventually, I realized this after-church light meal got its Low German name from “*vespers*,” which means “evening prayers.”

Praying had become eating—fine by me!

Bring on the *pascha*!

Pascha Passover

Now, calling the Resurrection festival “*Pascha*” seems odd, because *pascha* originally comes from the Aramaic word for *Passover* or *Passover Lamb*. The original *paschal* lambs were slaughtered in Egypt at the first Passover (Exodus 12).

Their blood was brushed onto the Hebrews’ doorposts to protect them from the angel that would slay all the firstborn of Egypt. Seeing the blood, the destroying angel would “pass over” their homes as they would eat the roast lamb in peace and safety (Exodus 12:23).

Again, note how faith and food come together around a shared table—a table commemorating God’s covenant of grace. So it is today; so it has been ever since Abraham and Sarah welcomed angels for a meal and received the promise of a covenant son (Genesis 18).

Now, back to *Pascha*: Eventually, the apostle Paul will identify Christ with the *paschal* (Passover) lamb. “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us keep the Festival...” (1 Corinthians 5:7-8).

And no wonder, since Matthew, Mark and Luke all link the Last Supper to Christ’s final Passover meal (or the “*Seder table*,” as observant Jews call it). John’s Gospel goes a step further, making the crucifixion coincide with the slaughter of the Passover (*paschal*)

lambs on “the day of preparation” (John 13:1; 19:31). In either case, for Christians, Christ has become the great and final Passover Lamb.

Pascha Easter

But then wouldn’t you expect *Pascha* to be associated more with Good Friday than with Easter, since we equate the crucifixion of Christ with the slaying of the Passover lamb? How is it that *Pascha* becomes the Eastern name for Easter, rather than for Good Friday? I can think of two good reasons.

First, it’s possible that *Pascha* was conjoined to Easter because the Jewish Passover focuses not only on how the lamb’s blood spared the Israelites from the tenth plague of Egypt, but more so as God’s decisive act that ensured their exodus out of bondage.

The analogy is this: just as God through Moses freed the Jewish slaves from Pharaoh and Egypt, so now God through Christ freed all those who were in bondage to sin, Satan and death. That is, the Jewish Passover celebrates their freedom from slavery to Pharaoh, just as the Resurrection guarantees our freedom from *Hades*.

Again, think of Paul’s words: “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 1:13-14).

Second, *Pascha* celebrates **both** the gift of the paschal lamb (by Jesus' death) **and** our deliverance from bondage to death (by Jesus' resurrection). In other words, *Pascha* begins with our perfect Lamb, slain on the cross, and culminates in the Resurrection, our great exodus from the kingdom of darkness. Moses' "let my people go," is fulfilled in Jesus' "follow me!"

"But thanks be to God," Paul proclaims, "who always leads us as captives in Christ's triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere" (2 Corinthians 2:14).

So *Pascha* is **the great both/and** of Christ's death and resurrection—of **Good Friday and Easter Sunday**. They're an inseparable reality and a single feast in practice. You can easily hear both elements in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:14-15).

Here we see the power of the Lamb slain (Jesus' death) and the great Deliverer (Jesus' resurrection), expanding God's grand Exodus project to include **all** people and rescue us from **every** kind of bondage.

Pascha combines the three days from Good Friday to Easter Sunday into one weekend feast, but also refuses to divorce them as concepts. We ought not think of Good Friday independently of Easter, because the Cross includes more than Christ's death—it points to Christ's victory over death. And we ought not think of Easter as simply resurrection Sunday, but as the proof that on the Cross, sin and death were truly "finished." I believe when Paul says, "I glory in nothing but the

cross of Jesus Christ," he is not speaking of the crucifixion alone, but of the whole package.

Who Me? I'm No Slave!

Of course, most of us don't see ourselves as slaves. We're free, right? Whoa...*déjà vu!* I just remembered this conversation from John chapter 8:

So He said to the Jews who had believed Him, "If you continue in My word, you are truly My disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

"We are Abraham's descendants," they answered. "We have never been slaves to anyone. How can you say we will be set free?"

Jesus replied, "Truly, truly, I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. A slave is not a permanent member of the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:31-36).

This passage holds a few surprises for careful readers. To begin with, Christ is speaking to Judean believers. Before the conversation is over, they will think he is demon-possessed (verses 48, 52) and pick up stones to kill him (verse 59)! Talk about a chat going sideways. But did it really? Or did Christ unveil an unbelief that was already there (verses 45-46)?

More surprising still, can you believe their denial? "We have never been slaves to anyone." Really? The history of the Jews includes slavery in Egypt. Then

Assyria. Then Babylon. Then Greece. And now in their lifetime Rome had occupied Judea and installed its own governor. These Jewish believers seem like an addict who honestly believes there's no problem. "I'm fine; I could quit any time."

But aside from these surprises, did you know that the key phrase here, *You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free*, is etched on the lobby wall of CIA headquarters! I suspect that bastion of secrecy and intrigue is not what Christ had in mind.


Pascha Freedom

No, in fact the freedom of which he speaks is found in the capital-T Truth: Christ himself, who will set us free. From what?

In this text, it's sin. In the Hebrews passage above, it's death and the fear of death. Indeed, even behind iron-gated communities within walled-off borders, we cannot really say we are free until we are free of fear.

And that seems to be something no government, no secret service and, might I add, especially no religion can offer. Freedom from fear comes through Christ alone, whose blood can wash anything and whose life can restore anyone.

This *Pascha*, as we again behold the cross of Christ, the empty tomb and devour the *Paschal* feast, let's embrace afresh the truth that Christ, our Lamb and Deliverer, has freed us *from* fear and freed us *to* love. □



Pascha is the great both/and of Christ's death and resurrection—of Good Friday and Easter Sunday.



Fearful Places

In Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas visited the city of Lystra. Their time in Lystra started successfully with the healing of a crippled man, but then everything went south. The people thought Paul and Barnabas were gods and tried to worship them. Not only that, Luke wrote, “Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city” (Acts 14:19-20).

Christians go back to the city—to the place of pain, dark and fear and “kiss the demons on the lips.” But it isn’t just geographical “places” to which we return, it’s also places of the heart.

Counselors talk about repressed memories, and while I’m not sure I agree with a whole lot of that, there are places in our hearts we lock up because they are so painful. Sometimes it’s a place of shame or abuse, or a person—other times a memory.

In Isaiah 65, God says, “See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create, for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.” (vs. 17-18).

That is a covenantal and national promise and hope—but it’s also the way of God. It’s a pattern of joy and release from the past. Paul wrote, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here!” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

So where am I going with all this? Among some other good things that happened when Jesus found us, there is the surprising realization that our past shame has been erased. And not only that, we are free to revisit it without fear. We are new creatures and, because we are, we can walk toward the dark knowing that we are now bathed in the light of his love.

I have a pen pal in Australia named Noel, who is an executive in the Lutheran church. His wife, Kirsten, writes the most delightful

children’s stories I have ever read (*Bearen Bear and the Bunbury Tales*). In a statement on her webpage, Kirsten wrote, “A truly good story is one which wraps you up in its Word and carries you out of yourself to a place of restoration and healing like you never thought possible.”

Of course, the really Good Story is the one Jesus gave us, and it takes us to a place of restoration and healing so that the fearful places of the past are no longer fearful and the dark not nearly so dark.

I got an email from Noel in which he told me about his recently diagnosed cancer. It is particularly difficult for Noel because his first wife died of cancer several years ago and that was a very dark time.

But his email was surprisingly upbeat. He talked about God’s faithfulness and the hope doctors had given him because his cancer had been discovered early and the prognosis was good. In his email, Noel talked about his cancer in the same way he talks about a new discovery in a theological book. What’s up with that?

Let me tell you, because of Christ, Noel had found that no matter how dark the past or the future, no matter how profound the pain, and no matter how deep the wounds, he could go there and face his demons. Those demons didn’t matter to a new creature in Christ.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear.... The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18). Are there places in your life you don’t want to return to because they are just too dark and too painful? Are there dreams at night that turn into nightmares when they reference the pain and trauma in your life? Me too! You don’t have to run from the fear anymore.

Here’s a principle I’ve learned in dealing with the dark and fearful places in your life: You take the first step, Jesus will take the second step, and by the time you get to the third step, you’ll know it was Jesus who took the first step and walked the whole way with you. He asked me to remind you. □

—Steve Brown



Quotes & Connections



"Freedom ends when Jesus Himself is lost to view, when He cannot get a hearing through the ecclesiastical setup, when He is ignored in favor of the legalizing, moralizing, philosophizing, so we erect new temples to an unknown god." —Brennan Manning

"The love of God melts away everything that is bad, everything that is sordid, everything that leads to despair. It banishes the night and vanquishes death. But this love is not human love as we understand it. It loves enemies and rejects no one. God's love strides unswerving through everything, like a hero, and will not be insulted, despised, or rejected; it marches through the world with the helmet of hope on its head."
—Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt
(*Everyone Belongs to God*, page 92)

In the final scene of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis talks about life in Narnia, lived by the characters he depicted, saying, "All their life in this world and their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read; which goes on forever; in which every chapter is better than the one before."

"Most people are afraid of freedom. They are conditioned to be afraid of it." —Herbert Marcuse

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