



A *dvent*. A word from times long ago when “old” was spelled with an *e*... as in “ye olde days.” Those who use the word today often associate advent with old time religion and chocolate, as in, “Who opened the Advent calendar and stole all the chocolate!?”

But the true *advent* is worth knowing about and reclaiming. Advent literally refers to an *arrival* or *appearance*. Advent’s central referent is the *arrival* of God’s kingdom. The long-awaited reign of God’s hope, peace, joy and love *appeared* on earth in the person we worship as our blessed Hope, our Prince of peace, the Joy of the nations and Lover of humanity. This issue of *CWRm* begins by touching on those four themes—a cosmic, royal arrival embodied in the *advent* of our Lord Jesus Christ. □

inside

Arrival of Hope
– Eden Jersak **p3**

Arrival of Peace
– Brad Jersak **p4**

Arrival of Joy
– Laura Urista **p6**

Arrival of Love
– Kenneth Tanner **p8**

The Kingdom of Heaven
– Greg Albrecht **p8**

J.B. Roane & the Case of the Belated Apology
– Larry Parsley **p12**

Pure & Wonderful Grace
– Steve Stewart **p14**

Pastoral Perspective
– Brad Jersak **p15**

Advent, Arrival, Appearance

What Our Readers Are Saying...

Volume 9, Number 6
December 2018
www.ptm.org

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

A mother set free!

I so appreciate what you and your staff do to help us understand God's kingdom. You reach so many with the love of Jesus and this week, that was especially true for my 86-year-old mother. She is a wonderful, loving and giving Christian who is often plagued with fear that she is not living up to who she "should be" in Christ.

My mother often visits ladies in the nursing home, sends encouragement cards and gives needed items to shelters. She loves people wherever she goes. Yet she never felt that she was doing enough because of previous legalistic teachings.

But that all began to change when I spoke with her about the kingdom of God, both now and in the future. She was intrigued by the idea, so I had her read Greg's series on the kingdom. It changed everything for her! Here is what she said:

"Thinking about living in God's kingdom now puts a whole new spin on what we do and what is needed. It's now securely in my stream of consciousness. What an amazing concept!"

Your articles set her free from fear and she now sees that all she does flows naturally from her love for Christ and that's all she

needs to do. She was already on a mission with God and didn't even know it!

Thank you so much for sharing this good news and touching my mother's life through your words.

I thank God for you and your whole staff as you help set people free. May your ministry continue to thrive as you give hope to those burned out by legalistic religion!

Ohio

Thought-provoking issue

Thank you for the thought-provoking August 2018 issue of *CWRm*. Brad Jersak's article, "Space for All at God's Table," was cause for rejoicing! It also helped me recognize my own self-righteousness when I am intolerant of those I see as condemning and self-righteous. I get it now!

Laura Urista's article, "Love Is" shows how we receive God's love and the fruit of the Holy Spirit by utilizing the simple practice of daily prayer. I loved her "just breathe" idea for establishing a conversation with God. As always, Greg Albrecht encourages us, as *People of the Way*, to deliberately and consistently keep Jesus as the center of our existence. Again, so much to contemplate and pray about in *CWRm*.

Utah

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Arrival of Hope (not wishes)

Eden Jersak

My husband, Brad, grew up in Manitoba, Canada, and we used to make the long trek from the west coast of British Columbia to his hometown every other summer. Our three boys were veteran road trip travelers and the 22-hour drive became a treasure chest of family memories.

We found many ways to pass the time. We had sing-alongs and played road trip games such as “20 Questions.” We even combined them by singing the Canadian hit song, “If I had a million dollars...” and then asking each other, “How would you spend a million dollars?” We would hear each other’s elaborate plans and ideas of how to spend that sum—some thoughtful and others quite ridiculous. But when it came

down to it, it was just a wish. It was all in good fun, a way to keep everyone from going crazy while cooped up in a car for a long time.

The terms *hope* and *wish* are often used interchangeably in our world, but they are not the same thing. How does hope work—or is it just a Christian euphemism for wishing?

I don’t believe they are the same at all. Hope has an enduring quality to it. Hope is something that expresses our trust in someone or something. Of course, we need to be careful in whom or what we place our trust, but hope has been a lifeline for me personally when that line is anchored to my trustworthy God.

In this season of world history, hope has taken a

serious beating. Hope is a sacred commodity that is fast losing the battle against despair. You hear a lot of people feeling hopeless, but our hope cannot be invested in men or women, ideologies or philosophies.

Our hope must be solidly planted in Jesus.

In Matthew 12, Matthew quotes Isaiah 42:1-4, a Messianic prophecy about what he will and won’t do, and the power of hope attached to his name:

Look well at my handpicked servant; I love him so much, take such delight in him.

I’ve placed my Spirit on him; he’ll decree justice to the nations.

But he won’t yell, won’t raise his voice; there’ll be no commotion in the streets.

He won’t walk over anyone’s feelings, won’t push you into a corner.

Before you know it, his justice will triumph; the mere sound of his name will signal hope, even among far-off unbelievers. (The Message)

This passage is a goldmine of hope! Just read what Jesus won’t do! He won’t yell, raise his voice, walk over other’s feelings or push others into a corner. If we understand that to be a description of how Jesus operates, and if we follow him as disciples, doing what he does or doesn’t do, just imagine the hope that could be restored! What if we listened instead of trying to shout others down?



What if we moved peacefully instead of violently? What if we considered others' feelings instead of trampling on them? What if we raised others up instead of pushing them out of sight? What if? Then at the mere sound of his name, HOPE would be signaled through the nations!

This is how hope differs from mere wishes. Hope has a path, a way of being and has Jesus to follow. Wishes are like vapor, without real substance or form. **But hope appeared in the human life of Jesus Christ.** When we follow him, we follow hope, we help create hope, and ultimately restore hope to the world.

Ephesians 3:20 gives us even more hope!

God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working with us, his Spirit deeply and gently within us.

(The Message)

Let's stop just wishing things were different and instead, return to the path that Jesus walked and asks us to follow. Hope is fostered as we follow Jesus, who is our blessed hope.

Our hope cannot be in a particular outcome; our hope must be in a God that can do more than we ask or imagine! *"...while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ"* (Titus 2:13, NIV). □

Eden Jersak runs a publishing house called Fresh Wind Press.

Arrival of Peace

(satire of lament)

Brad Jersak chats
with John Lennon



WAR IS OVER! (If you want it) – John Lennon

No John, war isn't over. And *No*, we don't seem to want it. Thanks for offering, but we just can't. We can't afford an end to armed conflict—"it's the economy, stupid!"

I know, I know, the prophet Isaiah forecast the arrival of a Prince of peace, saying:

He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. —Isaiah 2:4

But you see, John, we weren't ready for a Prince of Peace. We wanted a divine warrior who would side with us to drive out and destroy our enemies. And when he didn't, we did to him what we've done with all you peace-mongers. We didn't use bullets, but you get the idea: the cross was our *No* to Jesus' way of peace.

Anyway, Christ couldn't have been referring to literal world peace, could he? His call to peace and nonviolence must have been figurative, spiritual—*peace in our hearts, right? Peace with God.*

I admit it: my heart doesn't feel peaceful if I pay attention to the human lives lost in war zones around the globe—especially children orphaned by violence or those who suffer hunger while they cower in the cold and the rubble again this Christmas.

But why so glum, John? Can't you join in the angelic festivities and sleep in heavenly peace?

If you were alive, I mean. Sorry.

You have a Bible question, John? You bet. I'm your guy. Isaiah 9:1-7... yes, I know it:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned.

You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as warriors rejoice when dividing the plunder.

For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.

Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. (NIV)

Your question, John? Fire away. (Sorry).

When was this fulfilled? Well, the child was born, the Prince of Peace appeared, the Gospel writers said Christ fulfilled the promise. **BUT.**

I don't know how to say this, John, but he came and God's people disarmed for a while. **BUT.**

Look, John, we need to be realistic here. Christ saved our souls but it's apparently up to us to save our butts, at least until he tries again. Better them than us. You understand. As Isaiah said,

"There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."
—Isaiah 57:21.

Yes, we've made sure of that.

But Brad.

John?

No. It's Me.

Lord?

Yes. PEACE IS HERE!

(If you want Me). —Jesus Christ. □

Brad Jersak is editor-in-chief of CWRm and lectures at the Institute for Religion, Peace and Justice (St. Stephen's University).





Arrival of Joy

Laura Urista

From a young age, we are taught that Christmas time is always filled with happiness, joy and fun. We are assured, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year!” We are inundated with advertisements about products, foods and experiences guaranteed to fill us with joy. We rush around, busy with extra activities meant to brighten the holidays for ourselves and others—addressing and mailing greeting cards, purchasing gifts, wrapping and hiding them. We search for the perfect tree, haul it into our house and spend hours decorating it. We purchase all the ingredients to prepare our favorite holiday recipes. Amid bright, sparkling lights and festive decorations, we enjoy delicious meals with loved ones and sing carols about “tidings of comfort and joy.”

Great Expectations— Bitter Disappointments

But during the holidays we are often filled with great expectations that only result in bitter disappointments. Perhaps you spend most of Christmas day putting together a new bike or special toy that your child so desperately wanted. But then she only plays with it for a short time and quickly gets bored.

Maybe family dramas and arguments at the table overshadow the perfect meal you spent days planning for and preparing. Perhaps a few

family members just decide to show up without letting you know, so you scramble to rearrange and find folding chairs. Beyond these temporary disappointments, perhaps a serious health crisis or the death of a loved one makes Christmas a less than joyful time.

This year marks the 20th anniversary of my dad’s passing. After struggling with Alzheimer’s disease for several years, Dad died the day after Christmas in 1998. So Christmas time is always bittersweet for me, especially if I reflect on so many “if onlys” and regrets—rehearsing memories I wish I could somehow change.

Count it All Joy?

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience (James 1:2-3, NKJV).

How can anyone be expected to remain joyful when disappointments and trials come along and suck the joy out of life? It seems like an impossible task, and humanly speaking it truly is impossible. But for Christ-followers, joy is so much more than a fleeting human emotion. Galatians 5:22 lists joy as the second fruit of the Holy Spirit, a fruit which comes from God’s love and the risen life of Christ dwelling in us.

This kind of joy provides an enduring sense of peace and confidence, knowing we are infinitely

loved by our heavenly Father and we are ultimately safe in him. Enduring joy is like a lens through which we glimpse God's eternal plan in every situation we encounter. Whether facing good times or bad, God's joy reminds us there is a bigger picture and that we are part of God's heavenly family.

Seen in this light, joy can permeate our thoughts even when we experience disappointments, heartache, pain, health concerns or even death. But because we are human, our minds are not naturally inclined to think on a spiritual level. We must intentionally focus our minds to meditate on spiritual things.

Think on These Things

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things (Philippians 4:8).

What is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy? These are the spiritual qualities or attributes of Christ. When we allow Christ to live in us and love through us, our natural, human responses and reactions begin to change for the better. We learn to filter our immediate thoughts and reactions, replacing them with the mind of Christ. We begin to act more like Christ and treat others the way we would want to be treated.

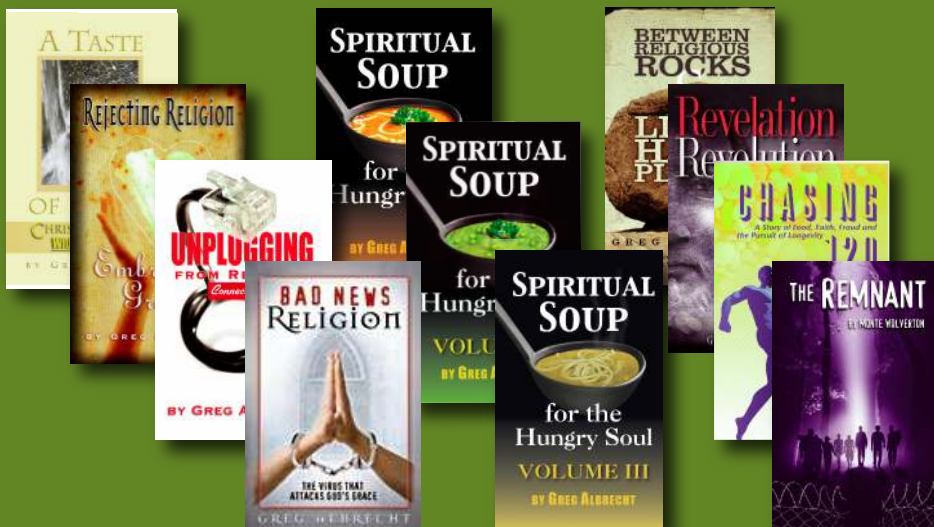
This change may happen gradually. We'll have ups and downs, but eventually, we will better understand the depth of God's love for us and for all his children. As we deliberately meditate and "think on these things," we will realize that the end of the story is about living happily ever after with the God who loves all his children beyond our human understanding. Then we can rest in and share God's ultimate "tidings of comfort and joy." □

Laura Urista is managing editor of CWRm.

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Arrival of Love

Kenneth Tanner

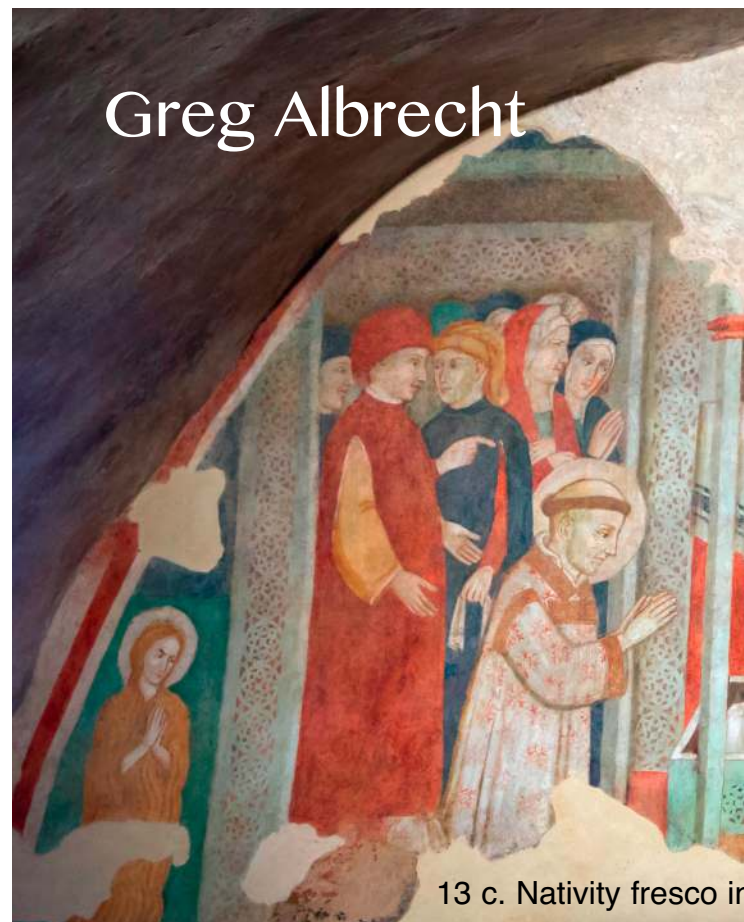
It is a great poverty to imagine that God takes a human body only that he might die. We cannot reduce the Incarnation in this way. If in Jesus Christ the Creator becomes what he makes, then God has bestowed on human flesh unimaginable dignity.

At the heart of this movement down to the creature is an unfathomable (and in human terms, impossible) love. We cannot become what we make. But God decides to become nothing in the universe but human. When the Son takes flesh from Mary, the most intimate connection is made between the divine life and human nature.

God does not become what he does not love. God does not become what he hates. God becomes what he makes and this is a love and a solidarity exceeded only by God's willingness to die also for what he makes. We must come to understand the infinite divine love involved in God becoming human. All theologies that do not marinate in this mystery will distort the Incarnation and the Cross, and will give us a false image of God and a false image of humanity.

The image of God and the image of humanity is the incarnate God, Jesus, nailed to wood. □

Kenneth Tanner is pastor of Church of the Holy Redeemer in Rochester Hills, Michigan.



A pastor was invited to give the guest sermon at a town several hours away. He drove up Saturday afternoon, intending to spend the night in a hotel and be rested for the Sunday morning service. Before he checked into his hotel, he noticed some letters he had placed on the front seat of the car. Some were urgent and needed to be mailed.

He had no idea where the post office was since he'd never visited this town before, but on the way to his hotel, he saw a ten-year-old boy riding his bicycle. The pastor stopped his car and asked the boy for directions. After the young boy told him how to get to the post office, the pastor told him that he should invite his parents to the Sunday service, because he would tell everybody how to get to the kingdom of heaven.

The young boy looked at him long and hard, then said, "How can anyone trust your directions to the kingdom of heaven—you don't even know the way to the post office?"

Speaking of directions, here are **four road signs that direct our steps toward the kingdom of heaven.** They won't get you to the post office,

KINGDOM OF HEAVEN



in Greccio, Italy

but they will help you on your journey with Jesus, the King of the kingdom.

1. Grace and peace to you from him who is, who was and who is to come (Revelation 1:4).

Jesus is the King of the kingdom. He came as God in the flesh, he remains with us and will return bodily once again. God's kingdom is both present with us now and also a future reality. It is already here—and not yet here in its fullness.

2. I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable

(1 Corinthians 15:50).

The kingdom of heaven is not a physical kingdom. It is not defined by physical dimensions, boundaries and limitations. But

the kingdom is real—it is certainly not pretend or imaginary. The spiritual dimension is far more true and authentic than the physical—of eternal significance rather than passing temporal limitations. By God's grace, we live in the kingdom of heaven now.

The kingdom now is limited, in the sense that it does not exercise universal domain or rule. Not everyone is part of the kingdom of God now. The kingdom now is the very real presence of **eternity now**. But the eternity of God's love that we experience now is an inheritance to be fully given and received in the future.

3. We will receive our full eternal inheritance of God's kingdom in the future.

The complete fulfillment of the kingdom, in its totality, is future. We will experience the

future kingdom when we are immortal—when we no longer age, decay or suffer disease and death.

The future kingdom will transform our earthly reality. In its future dimension, the kingdom of heaven will be, as the book of Revelation says, a new order of things—the old order of things will have passed away. The future kingdom of God will be universally present—it will be without limit and encompass the universe.

4. The kingdom of heaven is the presence of God. Jesus is the Prince of peace, and his presence in and with us is the peace and presence of God.

When we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10), we are inviting the peace and presence of God to progressively



about property: location, location and location. Likewise, Christless religion focuses on what can be seen and observed.

By contrast, God's love transcends the religious emphasis on external conformity.

Christless religion is interested in filling the pews and the chairs, the parking lots and the offering plates. God desires to transform every human being with his love.

Christless religion tells its followers that heaven is compensation—the wages given to those who earn heaven. But the kingdom of heaven is not compensation—it is a gift. We do not gain the kingdom of heaven through our attempts to be righteous. Righteousness is given to us by God's grace.

In Romans 3:21-22, Paul teaches that the righteousness of God is made known apart from the law and its regulations—the righteousness of God has no human origin. Paul says the righteousness of God is given through faith in Jesus Christ.

God's righteousness is not demands placed upon his children. God's righteousness is his love, God's gift of himself, his very nature, to all humans who accept his invitation to receive it.

God's righteousness—his love—is not limited to a physical place or particular rituals, ceremonies or creeds. God is present with you wherever you are, regardless of location.

One of the most detailed references to the kingdom of heaven in the Bible is found in the book of Revelation. It describes the new heavens and the new earth, the New Jerusalem which comes down to

and relentlessly unfold on earth as it perfectly reigns in heaven.

I like that word "reign" because it sounds like the refreshing liquid that comes down from above, the gift of rain that enables and fosters life. Without literal *rain*, there is no physical life—without the *reign* of God there is no spiritual life.

Now, having considered our road signs on the kingdom of heaven, let's turn our attention to **four illustrations of God's love** that magnify and illuminate his kingdom.

God is love and his kingdom is the rule and reign of love. The predominant feature of the kingdom and reign of God is love—not just any kind of love—but the love of God.

When we walk toward the kingdom of heaven, we are constantly moving away from

this present evil age, out of darkness into his wonderful light. The many ways in which God's love is declared illuminate our path—**four illustrations of God's love** specifically help us see and observe the kingdom of heaven. These four manifestations put "meat on the bones"—visible traits and hallmarks that help us identify God's kingdom and observe it in action.

1. God's love transcends the religious, obsessive fixation on external deeds.

God's love transforms your heart, not simply your outward compliance to external regulations.

Christless religion is somewhat like that old real estate proverb—when buying a home people are often advised to remember the three most important factors

this earth from heaven. There is no temple in the kingdom of heaven—because *we* are God's temple, where God dwells in the age to come (Revelation 21:22).

2. God's love is forgiveness.

Forgiveness is one way in which God's love is difficult—so difficult that we cannot forgive as he forgives, apart from God's grace.

I recall a story about a little boy who got into a fight with his big brother. Before their mother could separate them, the big brother had inflicted a black eye and bruises all over his younger brother.

For the rest of the day, their mother tried to reconcile her two sons—she tried to get them both to apologize to each other. The big brother was willing—he came out of the fight virtually unscathed. But the little brother was seething—he became more and more bitter as the day went on.

As part of their discipline, both boys were sent to bed early. When the mother went into her youngest son's room to tuck him in and kiss him good night, she asked him, "Why don't you forgive your brother before you go to sleep? You know the Bible says that the sun shouldn't go down while you are still angry."

The young boy still had no intention of forgiving his brother, and that bit about the sun not going down confused him. He thought for a few moments and then responded, "But Mom, how can I keep the sun from going down?"

It's a great question, isn't it? We are no more able to forgive those who God calls us to forgive than we are to stop the approach of night. And that's the very point—

if all we have is our own power to forgive, we will always fall short.

God's love, however, is all about forgiveness. Forgiveness characterizes God's kingdom—both his kingdom now and his future kingdom in all its fullness. When we live in Christ and he lives in us, we are citizens of the kingdom and God's forgiveness fills us.

3. God's love is Christ-centered, not self-centered.

God's love is empathy and compassion. Jesus Christ came to reveal the Father. God's love was seen in Jesus' earthly ministry, filled with empathy and compassion. He embodied and perfectly illustrated the love of God.

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being (Hebrews 1:3). We see the love of God revealed and demonstrated in the birth, life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus. *The Son is the image of the invisible God* (Colossians 1:15).

In Christ, God provided the ultimate demonstration of his love for us, by laying down his life for us. Philippians 2 talks about the humility of Christ. When he lives his life in us, he enables us to lay aside selfish ambition and vain conceit and truly look at the interests of other people as equal to those of our own.

God's love is not simply being kind to people we like—God's love is universal. So, as Jesus lives his love in us, we become truly caring and giving to all people—whether or not they are particularly likable.

God's love is the opposite of self-centered, self-important and

self-serving humanity. For that reason, it takes a miracle of God's grace for us to be a part of his kingdom.

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God (John 1:12-13).

To be a part of the kingdom of heaven, now and future, we must undergo a foundational transformation. In John 3, Jesus describes it as a spiritual rebirth. When we enter the kingdom of heaven we become, by God's grace, something completely unlike what we were before.

4. God's love is forever.

God's love is unlike so much humanly produced love, here today and gone tomorrow. God's love doesn't depend on flighty, fluctuating and fickle human emotions and desires.

Hebrews 13:8 tells us that *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever*. God loves us just as much today as he did yesterday and just as much today as he will tomorrow.

God's love does not depend on how well we measure up—God's love depends on his nature—he is the great, generous, giving and gracious God.

God's love is forever. He will never leave you or me, he will never abandon us. He will never walk out on us. He will always be there.

God's love is always and forever, just like his kingdom. □

Greg Albrecht is President of Plain Truth Ministries.

J.B. ROANE AND THE CASE OF THE BELATED APOLOGY

Short story by LARRY PARSLEY

Thornton bought me a cup of coffee at the same Dairy Queen where he found my business card the previous day, pinned up a little crooked on a bulletin board next to the men's room.

J.B. Roane – Pastor for Hire.
Available for odd jobs of a spiritual nature.

Thornton's coveralls looked like they'd seen more than a few errant drips of coffee and splashes of ketchup. The small talk we tried to make was awkward. He struck me as a direct man, momentarily at a loss for words.

"So Rev. Roane, you're some kind of pastor, is that right?"

"Yes sir," I said, "some kind. I had my own church up till a few months ago."

"Did they fire you?"

"Not in so many words," I said.

"Immorality? Not that I'm judging—"

"No, much more mundane than that."

"I'd like to hire you for a job. It's a little out of the ordinary. I should be able to do it myself, but dang it, I just can't." When I asked how I could help, he said he didn't want to talk about it here, nodding his head slightly in the direction of the teenage girl refolding the one-dollar bills into their slot in the cash register.

We agreed on a fee and he made a quick trip to the men's room. He waved at the cashier on the way out, and we climbed into his ancient Dodge pickup. A potted bouquet of carnations sat between us, and they looked to be recently assembled. As his tires threw a handful of gravel wheeling out of the parking lot, he commenced his story.

"I have loved Maureen since she first moved to my high school in 10th grade. I asked her to wait for me

before I shipped off to Korea, and she did. We married three days after I got back. Her father-in-law set me up at his small engine repair shop, and I took the whole outfit over 10 years later when he died. That little business did pretty well in this small town, and I ended up hiring a woman named Janelle to help me keep the books. It was Maureen's idea. She had met Janelle at church and felt sorry for her, being a single mom and all. She thought Janelle could use the money and that the business could use the help."

Thornton never looked over at me, even when we were stopped at a red light. He seemed determined to get through it.



"Now, I don't like to talk this way, but you probably need to know that Janelle was quite attractive. Not that it matters, but so was Maureen, and I would have told anybody who asked that I was a one-woman man. I've replayed it a thousand times in my mind, and I can tell you I don't think anything would have ever happened if I had not unexpectedly walked in on Janelle one day in the office and seen her crying. She said her boy Lucas had tried out for Little League, but he didn't know which hand to put his baseball glove on. None of the coaches wanted him on their team, and she was heartbroken."

Thornton's pickup was of a vintage where, if you didn't turn the blinker off, it would keep going until Jesus returned to earth.

"Maureen and I never had kids, though Lord knows we tried. And with her permission, I began to go over to Janelle's house a couple nights a week, so I could teach Lucas a thing or two about baseball. That's all it was. Sometimes Maureen would come with me, and she and Janelle would sip ice tea on

the front porch while Lucas and I played catch in the front yard. I'm telling you, Preacher, in my heart of hearts I truly only wanted to help that boy."

I nodded my head once in firm agreement.

"One night we played catch till past dark, and Lucas asked if I'd come in and watch a movie with him. It was Janelle, then Lucas, then me, sitting on her sofa, watching some old Disney movie. Lucas fell asleep 20 minutes into it, I mean dead asleep, so I carried him up to his bed. When I got back to the family room Janelle asked me to sit back down so I could finish my lemonade—"

Thornton finally looked over at me. "Preacher, that was the worst decision I ever made. We both found ourselves in a weak moment and did what we should've never done. All that next week at the office we could barely look at one another. The week after that, she gave her two weeks' notice and ended up working at Rayburn's Grocery in their produce department. I lied to Maureen and said that Janelle just wanted to work at a place where there were more people she could talk to on a daily basis."

Thornton's right blinker was still flashing, but I wasn't about to stop his story. "Every time Maureen and I would go to church after that, every Sunday, I'd be laid up with guilt, as much over withholding the truth from Maureen all these years as for my indiscretion. But how could I break her heart by telling her? Selfishly, I knew I couldn't afford to lose her. So I kept my dang mouth shut."

Ours was now the only vehicle at a four-way stop. But Thornton didn't seem in any hurry to push on the gas pedal. "I can't take it no more. I knew I had to do something, and when I saw your business card at the Dairy Queen I took it as a sign from the Lord."

"Look Thornton," I told him, "I'm here to help. If you feel like God wants you to spill the beans, then I'll do whatever I can to help you tell it." After that, he was quiet for a good five minutes, as if he'd just run a mile and needed to catch his breath. He pulled the Dodge off a farm-to-market road and, without any sort of explanation, pulled into a cemetery called BeulahLand. Thornton navigated what looked to me like a maze of little unmarked streets, then put the truck in park. He grabbed the pot of fresh carnations and led me out toward a lonely looking tombstone:

**Maureen Douglas McAlister
Beloved Wife of Thornton
March 18, 1931–May 17, 2016**

He doffed his hat and leaned down slowly to place the carnations next to the headstone, fussing with a couple of the blooms that had fallen over. Then, more slowly, he plopped down on both knees, and I reached over to steady him on the trip down. "Baby," he said, and then shook his head. After the longest minute, he looked up at me and said, "You talk to her."

I cleared my throat, mainly to buy some time to figure out what in the world to say on an occasion like this one. Then, before I totally figured it out, I started talking: "Mrs. McAlister,

I'm not exactly sure how news gets around up there in heaven, but there's a good chance you already know this story we're here to share today. In fact, you may have known it for a good long while. Your beloved Thornton is the sorriest he can be to have to share it with you. And I'm sure he would want you to know that it is absolutely no reflection on you." Thornton, eyes shut tight, nodded vigorously.

I then relayed the story of that regrettable night at Janelle's, as tastefully and truthfully as I could, with as few words as were absolutely necessary. And with that confession out of the way, I added this little postscript. "Ma'am, I trust you now reside in a place that was built, brick by brick, by forgiveness. I don't know you, but hearing Thornton talk about you makes me assume that you're the kind of person that would not want for Thornton to bear this terrible burden of guilt for one more minute than he has to. Please receive his apology, in Jesus name, Amen."

Thornton was way too old to be down on his knees for that long. I quickly reached down to grab him by the arm and help him to his feet. But as I turned to climb back into the truck, he grabbed my arm. "We got one more apology to go," he said. I should have seen that one coming, I guess, as we plodded four rows over, to Janelle's freshly dug grave. □

Larry Parsely first posted a version of this story at Mockingbird Ministries blog (mbird.com).

“There will never cease to be poor in the land.”

—Deuteronomy 15:10.

Over 200 Bible verses speak about the poor. In both Testaments, God reminds us about his special care for the poor. Jesus spoke of the poor over 20 times. And the verse most commonly quoted is John 12:8.

“For you will always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me.”

Though accurately quoted, Jesus’ meaning is often profoundly misunderstood. In the context of all he taught, Jesus’ point was *not* that concern for the poor is unnecessary.

Jesus was affirming that we would care for the poor in imitation of his example and witness.

After all, Jesus didn’t just care about the poor—his entire life, from birth to death, was an identification with them.

In his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus said, *“Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of God.”* The life of the extremely poor was marked then, as it is now, by social, economic and physical vulnerability that often made simply surviving a daily and crushing struggle.

At least in part, Jesus was saying that the poor find the presence and reality of God in the midst of their struggles in ways that the comfortable will never know.

For many years, I have had opportunities to lead groups to other nations, to meet and to serve the needy. I tell them, “We are not taking Jesus to the poor; he is already there.” I believe this is true.

I need the poor more than they need me. Why is that? First, the poor are a reminder of God’s grace to me. The poor man or woman is like a mirror who reminds me of how often Jesus has rescued me from my many self-made disasters.

Second, according to Matthew 25:31-40, when



caring for the poor, I minister to Jesus himself. Authentic spiritual intimacy with Jesus cannot help but lead me to the poor, the widow, the outcast and the fatherless. For these two reasons alone, the poor are a great gift to me.

My favorite author, Jean Vanier, writes, *“The poor call us to love and awaken within us what is most precious: compassion.”*

Compassion is one of the great forces of the cosmos. Compassion, love and forgiveness express not only God’s heart, but the very way he moves in all of His creation. When I choose compassion, I am moving with and in him.

Later in his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus says, *“Be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate”* (Luke 6:36, NLT). Compassion is most precious. It is foundational to following Jesus, to experiencing his life in us.

Compassion does not come naturally to me. I believe it in my head, but oh, how often I am aware of my own hard-heartedness! The more I insulate myself from the poor, preferring my own comfort and convenience, the colder my heart becomes. My wife sometimes admonishes me to get out of the house and go to the poor. There I find Jesus and I remember deeply who I really am in him. I am like the prodigal who “came to his senses”—this is a different kind of homecoming, where compassion is once again awakened in me.

I need the poor so much more than they will ever need me. That is why Jesus’ promise that they will always be with me is his pure and wonderful grace. □

Steve Stewart is the director of Impact Nations.



“What lesson is God teaching me?”

What lesson is God teaching me? I hear this question frequently, most often as a desperate plea from people going through great trials and tragedies in life. When something goes horribly wrong—when life grinds our nose in the dust, we might wonder if God is trying to teach us some mysterious lesson.

It’s almost as if once we learn the lesson, we can move forward. Honestly, while the quest for answers is an expression of genuine humility, I think the question itself smuggles in extra painful assumptions that we would do well to discard.

If we think that God imparts wisdom through any circumstance, no problem. But if we view our painful circumstances and afflictions as a lesson sent by God, then God becomes the first cause of every trial. Then, when the tragedies start accumulating, it becomes harder and harder to trust that God is good and that God can be trusted. Then God becomes the cruel headmaster and we’re reduced to either the class dunce who fails to pass the test or the victim of a bully teacher’s cruel pedagogy. This inevitably leads to distrust and resentment.

For these reasons, I recommend moving on to healthier premises and a better question.

Here’s one approach, based on my chapter, “God is Good and Sh*t Happens” in *A More Christlike God*.

1. Sh*t happens. Slips happen. Injuries happen. God never causes them. Ever. No need to blame God or blame yourself. Why not simply blame the fragility of human bodies in a hard world?

Our loving God doesn’t manipulate human freedom. Our choices open and close doors—God works with, around and through them, even when we make bad decisions. The lesson? As my 12-step sponsor says, “Sometimes the toilet seat is just up. It doesn’t mean anything.”

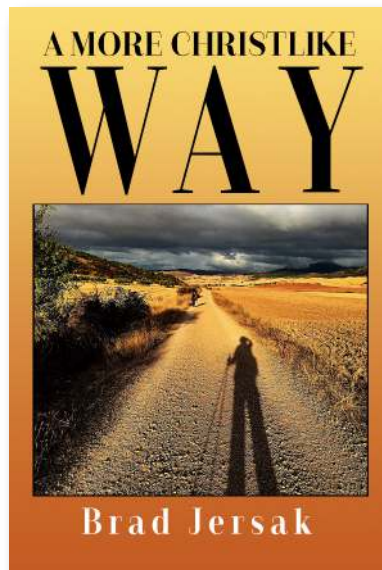
2. God is good. We can assume that. Assume that God is for you, that Christ cares about your

life and that the investment he brings to the table is YOU and his great love for you. God’s care doesn’t levitate you whenever you slip—life doesn’t and can’t work that way. But Trinity’s care *does* include real caregiving—it must. How so? That is my question:

3. “God, open my eyes to your care for me today.” What does God’s care look like in this situation? These questions seem better to me than the “lesson” question because they assume Christ’s care and draw our attention to God’s ways of caregiving with which we can participate willingly. But the lesson question diverts us from recognizing the ways of God’s care and may even cause us to resist God’s active participation in our lives.

Indeed, a good prayer exercise of self-reflection might be, “How did I welcome your care today? And how did I resist it?” From there, we are empowered to surrender and to sync up with God’s goodness in our lives. If a lesson is to be learned, that alignment with God’s mercy might just be it. □

Brad Jersak was a pastor and church-planter for 20 years prior to becoming editor-in-chief at CWRm.



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—Week of December 30

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This has been an eventful year for editor-in-chief Brad Jersak. *A More Christlike God (AMCG)*, written by Brad and published by CWRpress, has now been translated into German and Dutch. It enjoys steady sales and growing readership. *AMCG* has been welcomed and recommended by church pastors and college professors. In 2019, CWRpress plans to publish a natural sequel to *AMCG*’s Christ-centered themes, titled *A More Christlike Way*.

Brad is a much sought after speaker and gradually becoming a more recognized face of CWR/PTM to a growing number of readers and listeners.

This past year Dr. Jersak taught at colleges in Canada and the United Kingdom, addressed conferences in the United States and Canada and was invited to speak in churches across North America, the UK, Germany and New Zealand.

When they are able to take a break from their travels, Brad and his wife Eden make their home in beautiful British Columbia.

Brad and Eden are a wonderful and important part of our team—a vital part of the ongoing ministry of CWR/PTM. Readers and listeners of the many ministries and resources of CWR/PTM look forward to a exciting year of opportunities and ministry from Dr. Jersak.