

PLAIN TRUTH®

inside

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Following in Jesus' Footsteps

By Greg Albrecht

Many religious professionals and the religions they represent are all too willing to explain why God allows suffering.

- Some insist that God actually causes suffering.
- Many believe that “everything happens for a reason—God has a plan.”
- Some suggest that God’s plan is to let us suffer or even cause suffering in our lives so that faith might be produced in us.

While there are no easy answers to all of our “why” questions about suffering, here are three Christ-centered truths:

- Suffering is part of what it means to be human.
- Suffering is an inevitable part of life—God doesn’t have to “plan” it.
- Suffering happens “all by

itself” without any assistance or intervention from God.

The idea behind “everything happens for a reason—God has a plan” is that while we don’t know why we are enduring and experiencing distress and sorrow, God does—he is right on top of what is going on—“in control.”

It all sounds reasonable, doesn’t it? Reasonable, but not biblical. Makes sense, but it’s not true.

The Bible has nothing to say about this far-fetched idea, comforting though it might be. In fact, the Bible contradicts the idea that “everything happens for a reason because God has a plan.”

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his steps. – 1 Peter 2:21

1) *To this you were called...*

“To this” refers, in the immediate context, to unjust

suffering. In the preceding sentence (before he says “to this”), Peter notes the difference between suffering because of “doing wrong”—self-inflicted consequences—and suffering for “doing good.”

Peter calls suffering even though one does not deserve it “commendable before God” and then tells Christ-followers we were called “to this.”

There are plenty of people on television who will tell you that when you suffer you are “outside” of God’s will.

They are also fond of explaining suffering away by saying the person in pain doesn’t have “enough” faith.

To say that a person who is suffering is “outside” of God’s will and that they do not have “enough” faith is a denial of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ suffered unjustly—he was God in the flesh. Was Jesus, God in the flesh, “outside” of God’s will and did he suffer because he did not have “enough” faith?

2) ...because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example...

You can hear and read many people who will tell you that Jesus Christ suffered for you so you don’t have to.

You can read and hear plenty of people who will tell you all the ways that you should follow in the



Grace Brings Grace Home

Once upon a time there was a young girl who was abandoned right after she was born. This little baby girl was left out in the open, exposed to the elements, without any shelter. She was despised, vulnerable and very much alone.

She was left to die—she would never know what it was like to be loved and comforted and hugged and provided for—she would never grow up and enjoy wearing a new dress, having her hair done or going to a party.

But then a miracle happened.

A loving couple came by and rescued her—they loved her and gave her life, saving her from the certainty of death she would experience.

In the parable-like story told in the 16th chapter of Ezekiel, God rescues and saves a helpless, newborn girl who has been abandoned. I'm taking the liberty of naming her "Grace."

Grace grew into a beautiful young woman, and then one day a different kind of love came into her life.

Her Prince Charming didn't care that Grace had once been abandoned, he didn't care that Grace had no idea who her birth parents were.

This Prince Charming only saw Grace through the eyes of love. He promised Grace his love—he promised Grace all that he had by his own grace, and they entered into a covenant of marriage.

Her husband told Grace she was absolutely stunning—he treated her like a queen and her beauty became widely known.

But then it all went wrong.

Grace forgot where her love, wealth and beauty had come from. Grace, this beautiful bride, who owed all that she had and all that she was to her husband, betrayed him. Grace, whose life, blessings and beauty were a gift of God's grace, took advantage of God's love.

God's love is never earned or deserved...God's love and grace is stronger than anything you or I can do to either deserve it or to cause him to remove it.

It wasn't the first time nor the last when a deeply loved human being took advantage of God's love and grace.

Grace fell—she hit rock bottom. Ezekiel 16:15 says, "But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his."

The story of Ezekiel 16 is about God's forever commitment—even in the face of betrayal and infidelity.

Our story—your story and my story—is that we are the ones who have been found in a horrible place of abandonment and in need of rescue—and God has favored us with his grace.

We have nothing to offer God, but he is not looking for anything he can do for us.

He is looking to lavish us with his love. He knows that his grace and love is risky—he knows that our fallen humanity makes us

incapable of being truly and forever faithful to him.

But then another miracle happened. This parable-story in Ezekiel 16 is the story of God's grace—in spite of infidelity God says to his wife, in verse 60, "I will establish an everlasting covenant with you."

Now, lest you misunderstand our message today and the clear message of Ezekiel 16, God's wife who prostituted herself suffered for her outlandish behavior.

She reaped the whirlwind of consequences, but God, her loving and forever forgiving husband, did not insist that she pay these penalties out of spite and vengeance.

God does not insist that we pay penalties because we offend and shame him or because he has conditions we must meet before he will take us back into his home.

His part in his commitment to us is to tell us up front—*I will always forgive you. I will never leave you nor will I abandon you—no matter what.*

God's love is never earned or deserved—and his love, regardless of how low we sink in life, never goes away.

God's love and grace is stronger than anything you or I can do to either deserve it or to cause him to remove it.

Thank God for his grace and love—*faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone!* □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for the complete message of "Grace Brings Grace Home" at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of March 22, 2020.

Continued from page 1

footsteps of Jesus just like they think they are.

However, they invariably leave out the part about *following him in his suffering*.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about health, wealth and prosperity. The gospel of Jesus Christ is about following Jesus.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about inspirational seminars designed to make you into a person who enjoys all the fruits of success (defined as excess). The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about having your best life now.

According to 1 Peter 2:21, the precise way in which Christ-followers follow Jesus is in suffering.

Peter says that Christ suffered for us—that's the emphasis of this passage. Yes, Christ died for us, but this passage is talking about the life of suffering that Jesus endured.

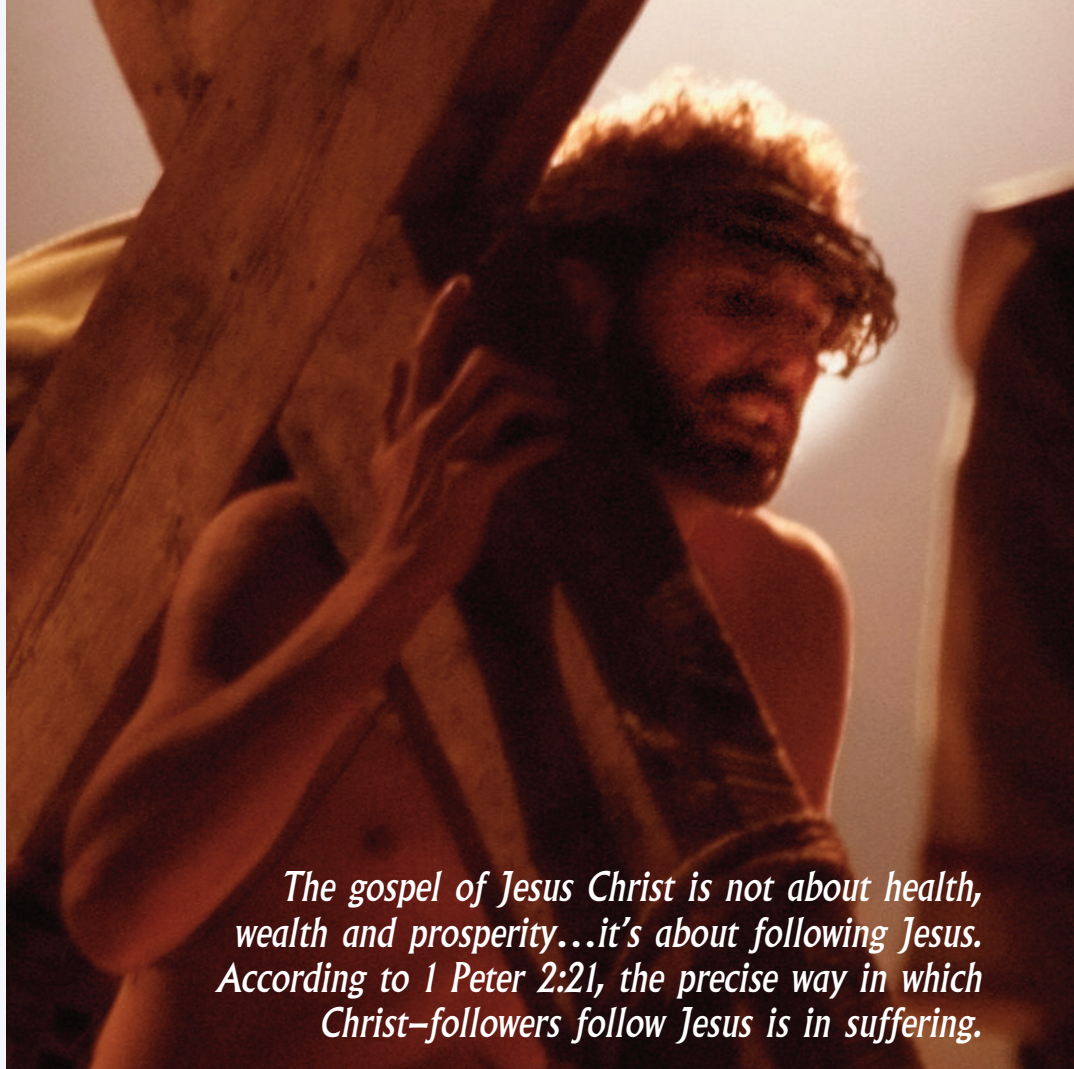
3) ... that you should follow in his steps.

The path of following Jesus on the *Jesus Way* is not an easy path. It's been said that a mark of deep and true humility is to be condemned without cause and to not answer in kind. That is the mind of Christ. That is part of how he suffered for us.

Jesus did not revile or slander or accuse. He did not threaten. He didn't lash out at those who betrayed him and failed him. He did not demean those who did not understand him.

As Christ-followers, one of our greatest enemies is pride, while one of our closest friends is humility. In fact, our perfect Friend Jesus is "*gentle and humble in heart...*" (Matthew 11:29).

Jesus submitted to suffering. Peter is not saying we must find and devise ways to suffer so that we can prove that we are following him. Jesus set us an example about our response and attitude when we suffer... especially unjustly.



The gospel of Jesus Christ is not about health, wealth and prosperity...it's about following Jesus. According to 1 Peter 2:21, the precise way in which Christ-followers follow Jesus is in suffering.

Why Suffering?

There are times when we suffer because we are enduring the inevitable consequences of our own silly, immature, selfish behavior. God has nothing to do with it other than to allow and consent for us to make stupid decisions and then pay the penalty. When we pay the consequences of our behavior, it's not God's plan.

There are also times when we suffer because we are paying the price of someone else's self-centered and even lustful behavior. Someone else can cause us to suffer.

Once again, that's not God's recipe—he didn't cook up the results we are going through. It's not God's plan when a child is abused, a rape occurs or a soldier bleeds out on the battlefield.

There are times when we suffer because we are the victim of time and chance. When we are victims of a crime or of an accident—we

were in the wrong place at the wrong time—when a hurricane or a flood or an earthquake took place, or when a bridge collapsed, or when some other natural disaster occurred.

When religion suggests or insists that suffering is a penalty God inflicts on us, it transforms God, who is love, into a divinity somewhat like a Shakespearean witch. God is not brewing up "Double, double, toil and trouble" to inflict on humanity.

We suffer, no doubt, for many reasons. Of all forms of suffering, the most spiritually transcendent is when Christ-followers voluntarily do so as a consequence of their faith and truth in Jesus.

God's Promise...

In Christ, and because of Christ, who is *Immanuel* (God with us), God suffers with us and as he is near and dear to us, close to us and with us, we come to know the fullness of his love.

Neither Jesus nor any of the New Testament authors try to explain suffering—the gospel of Jesus Christ never tries to make sense of suffering in a way that would satisfy all our questions.

Jesus doesn't deny the fact of suffering, he doesn't ignore it, he doesn't gloss over it—nor does he try to act like it doesn't exist in the life of a Christ-follower.

God doesn't shield us from all suffering. He doesn't provide special immunities and vaccines against suffering for those who follow Jesus Christ.

Jesus faced the reality of suffering and he invariably promises to always be with us in our suffering. The gospel of Jesus Christ speaks of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who hurts with us—of God who is always there, always forgiving, never condemning—always embracing, never rejecting—always with us, never apart or distant.

God pours his love into our hearts even in the middle of our sufferings.

- Nothing in the Bible leads us to conclude that suffering indicates the absence of God.
- Nothing in the Bible leads us to conclude that God directly causes suffering.
- God doesn't cause suffering

and there are no easy answers about why suffering happens.

- In the midst of our suffering, we rest in Christ, who is our divine Hope.

Reflections of a Christ-centered Pastor

A pastor, whose face was plowed with deep furrows of character that witnessed to decades of both stress and joy, as he prepared to retire, spoke of lessons learned—specifically about suffering.

“You know, when I first became a minister, I never gave much thought to my personal suffering—some I served were suffering but for some reason I didn't think I ever would. In fact, I thought that anything in my life less than perfect would have caused those in my congregation to stop looking up to me.

“But as the years and decades passed, I discovered that picking up my cross and following Jesus involved pain, hurting and hardships. I found out that being a Christ-follower means experiencing and enduring difficulties most people associate with loss and defeat.

“I have come to see that suffering and pain is part of being in Christ. I learned that self-sacrificial service is about being

honest, vulnerable and humble. I stopped pretending to be perfect some years ago. It was obvious I had failed in the perfection department.

“At the beginning of my ministry I was concerned that people might not look up to me because of my failures and flaws—was I ever wrong! Thank God he shifted my focus—I realized that my job was to direct people to Jesus Christ, and look up to him and follow him!

“Next week will be my last sermon I give as a full-time pastor. I was given the assignment and topic for this sermon many years ago.


“As a young pastor I gave a sermon about suffering. After the sermon a gentleman about the age I am now thanked me for the sermon, but he said it could become a much better sermon if I would wait about 40 years and give it again.”

Our prayer:

Dear Lord,

Thank you for suffering for me.

Thank you for allowing me to follow you in your suffering. Thank you for always being with me as I follow you. Thank you for comforting me with the assurance that nothing is going to happen to me today that you and I can't handle together. □



Grace Based
Christ Centered
Living Faith

PTM.org

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION

WITH GREG ALBRECHT
& BRAD JERSAK

Walking in the *Jesus Way*



By Brad Jersak

John the Beloved distilled the *Jesus Way* to this: “And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love” (2 John 1:6).

By the end of the first century, the *Didache*, a very early Christian catechism / manual, summarized the *Jesus Way* as *walking in love*. It opens this way, recalling the words of Christ:

There are *two ways*, one of life and one of death, but a great difference between the two ways. The *way of life*, then, is this: First, you shall love God who made you; second, love your neighbor as yourself, and do not do to another what you would not want done to you.

The teaching is this: Bless those who curse you, pray for your enemies, and fast for those who persecute you. For what reward is there for loving those who love you? Do not the Gentiles do that? But love those who hate you, and you shall not have an enemy...

If someone strikes your right cheek, turn to him the other also, and you shall be perfect.

If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two.

If someone takes your cloak, give him also your coat.

If someone takes from you what is yours, ask it not back, for indeed you are not able.

Give to everyone who asks you and ask it not back; for the Father wills that to all should be given of our own blessings (free gifts).

See how difficult *walking in love* can become? It sounds impossible—like “take up your cross.” Exactly. But Jesus meant it—walking in his footsteps of love is a real way of life. In his own words, “This is my command: love one another, in the same way that I loved you” (John 15:12).

A “command”? Yes. A tall order, yes, but it is, after all, *the Jesus Way*. Would you rather hack your own trail through the jungle of life with a machete of self-effort? No thanks. Rather, to walk *the Jesus Way* is to follow the Christ—the divine human—by the *Grace of Abba* through the power of the Spirit.

The *Jesus Walk* is a faith pilgrimage in the company and in the strength of triune Love. As the carol says, “their law is love and their gospel is peace.” Yes, sign me up for that, please.

THE WAY OF THE CROSS

On second thought...“Love each other as Christ loved us”? Give me a moment, please...But Christ laid down his life for us. Is John saying his followers will also lay down their lives?

“This is my command: love one another, in the same way that I loved you. No one has a love greater than this, to lay down your life for your friends.”—John 15:12-13

I get it now: the *Jesus Way* conjoins the *way of love* with the *way of the Cross*. The *Jesus Walk* is the Way of sacrificial love—*cruciform* (cross-like love) and *kenotic* (self-giving love), just like him.

But the Cross? That’s supposed to be a done deal. Why does Christ say, “If any of you want to come after me, you must say no to yourselves, and pick up your cross every day, and follow me” (Luke 9:23)?

Are Christians called to be crucified? Literally, hardly ever. Okay, we talk about “dying to self,” which means something like letting go of self-centeredness and ego. But it’s more than that.

I believe Christ intends the cruciform love of *Abba* revealed through him to become flesh in those who follow him on the *Jesus*

Way. Remember, cruciform love refers to God's self-giving, radically forgiving, co-suffering love. Those who've read *A More Christlike God* or articles I've posted about the Cross will recognize that three-fold refrain. It is typically how I summarize the nature and way of triune Love.

But now we add to that this truth: Christ-followers who truly follow—who walk the *Jesus Way*—will also manifest his love in our lives, “on the ground,” so to speak. Christ claimed his disciples would be known and recognized by this love (John 13:35). They are identified with Christ as they exhibit his cruciform love in this world...

By the *Grace* (transforming energies) of the indwelling Spirit, love becomes a law of nature—our *new* nature. We must not reduce this to an abstract righteousness declared in some hypothetical heavenly verdict. The love-righteousness of Christ-in-us must and will “show up” as the *way we walk—the Jesus Walk*.

THE WAY OF LOVE

John, the apostle of love, is utterly insistent on this point. His logic is unequivocal:

First, God is love because that love did not hunker down in God's heart in the comfort of Paradise. Triune Love is a divine verb Who entered

space-time history through the Incarnation.

Divine Love necessarily appears and acts or it is not love at all. That act of love is Jesus Christ—the eternal Word enfleshed as perfect, cruciform (cross-like) Love.

John the Beloved extrapolates: divine Love—Christ in us—is only real when it actualizes—when it appears and acts in the tangible world of our relationships.

Love shows up or it isn't love. John leaves no room for a heaven/earth, heart/hand, feeling/action dualism. As my firstborn once said to his youngest brother, “At some level, you are what you do.” Your identity and your walk—your faith and your love—are indivisible.

At the same time, John is no naïve perfectionist who believes we've already arrived. John knows this is a way, a walk, a journey. The “finished work” of the Cross has not finished working on me. For John and for Christ, the *Jesus Way* is a path we're walking one day at a time in fits and starts, stumbles and recoveries. Perhaps at best we're staggering forward, but as we imperfectly hear and follow—*imitate*—Christ's faithful footfalls, life is the venue where we're learning to love.

According to John, those who live this way—the *Jesus Way* of love—

know God. Here he is verbatim:

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God, and *all who love are fathered by God and know God*. The one who does not love has not known God, because God is love.”—1 John 4:7-8 (NTE)

The next verse doesn't start with “but” or “if.” No caveats or flinching. John sets aside the question of whether we identify ourselves as Christians or not. He doesn't care who we presume to include as “saved” or exclude as “lost.”

For John, *those who love know God*. *Those who do not love, do not*. Period. To be blunt—and John is very blunt—you may be a confessing “Christian,” but without love, you don't know God, because God is Love. Confessions and claims to the contrary are lies.

He says, “If someone says, ‘I love God’, but hates their brother or sister, *that person is a liar*. Someone who doesn't love a brother or sister whom they have seen, *how can they love God, whom they haven't seen?*” (1 John 4:20).


Why so harsh, John? Practically condemning! Probably because we need some sharp rhetoric whenever the name of Christ gets co-opted and associated with unChristlike ways, especially religious hate.

It's as if John foresaw our day, when Christian faithfulness is frequently associated more with *being against* rather than *standing with*, self-righteousness rather than humility, condemnation rather than compassion, and hate rather than love.

John must have been up against the same serious missteps that plague Christianity on a grand scale today. For John, any so-called “faithfulness” that divorces love and truth or love and faith is a blasphemous perversion and proof that we simply don't know God.

Conversely, John is entirely generous to those who live in the *Light* and on the *Way of Love*. For John, *anyone who loves knows God—anyone? Anyone who loves!* □

Adapted from *A More Christlike Way* (pp. 56-59), by Brad Jersak.



Divine Love necessarily appears and acts or it is not love at all. That act of love is Jesus Christ—the eternal Word enfleshed as perfect, cruciform (cross-like) Love.



Fences Are for Dogs

I just finished putting up a couple of sections of five-foot chain-link fence to contain a new puppy—and improve the security of our home. At first, I got a hefty estimate from a fence contractor—but for about 20 percent of that amount, our local mega-hardware store had all the materials and instructions. So I built the fence myself, a little at a time, sustaining only minor injuries.

I'm told our new dog (a Decker Rat Terrier) will probably be able to scale the fence by the time he matures. Until then, the yard is secure. We didn't have much trouble with our late dogs. As they were both aging, with failing eyesight and arthritis, they had little desire to run off. Most days they moseyed in and out through the doggie door to our living room without incident. A few times they followed their noses down the street, but they always came back or were easy to find.

I expect our new puppy will be much more rambunctious. Terriers were originally bred to keep homes and farms vermin free. Vermin hunting requires hyper-alertness, agility and independent thinking, so in general it takes more effort to train terriers than their more docile cousins. Because of their doggedness, you can be sure they will find ways to escape and do their own thing, which is why we need a good fence.

Actually, I'd rather not have a fence. It's a lot of work. I would much prefer to have a nice talk with my dog, after which he would understand and agree with my intentions, remain in the yard and stay out of trouble. But he's an animal. Animals, kids and even some adults who pose a danger to themselves and others need fences.

Fences are a little like laws and rules. In a perfect world we would all behave sensibly and we wouldn't need any restrictions. But if you've driven in traffic recently, it's clear that we do NOT live in a perfect world and we absolutely need regulations—not just for traffic but for nearly every other aspect of society.

And then there are religious fences. It's instructive that God gave one nation a highly regulated system of commandments, ordinances and rituals, along with blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience—religious fences to keep folks out of trouble. Yet the system never really worked.

The people found ways to dig under, climb over and cut through the fences. At the same time their religious leaders were building extra fences and barriers to make sure their followers couldn't escape. That didn't work either, resulting in a religiously enslaved population.

About that time Jesus entered the picture—inside the fence. He revealed God to us. Religious fences were rendered obsolete. We

A lot of folks *like* being confined by religious fences. It just feels so safe and comfortable in there.

no longer need them. Humans are free to live in accord with God's grace and to follow Jesus. He offers us as much freedom as we can handle (2 Corinthians 3:17; Galatians 5:1).

It all seems so simple—and *graceful*—yet two millennia later, institutional religionists are still complicating the matter by throwing up a maze of unnecessary fences and barriers (allegedly to protect the people, but actually to protect the religious institutions!).

Unfortunately, a lot of folks *like* being confined by religious fences. It just feels so safe and comfortable in there.

What can we do about it? 1) we can stop building our own religious fences, 2) we can boldly walk out of religious fences others have created for us and 3) we can help our fenced-in friends find freedom. The last one may get a little dicey, and it isn't for everybody. But we can drop a gentle hint when the time is right.

Meanwhile, back in our yard, I fully expect our new dog will try to get around my fence one way or the other. Those will be teachable moments, as much for me as for the dog! □

—Monte Wolverton



Quotes & Connections



"I think good preachers should be like bad kids. They ought to be naughty enough to tiptoe up on their dozing congregation, steal their bottles of religious pills...and flush them all down the drain. The church, by and large, has drugged itself into thinking that proper human behavior is the key to its relationship with God. What preachers need to do is force it to go cold turkey with nothing but the word of the cross—and then be brave enough to stick around while [the congregation] goes through the inevitable withdrawal symptoms."—Robert Farrar Capon, *The Foolishness of Preaching*

"Those Christians who are very strict in their observances think a good deal more of the Sabbath than of man, a great deal more of the Bible than of the truth, and ten times more of their own creed than of the will of God. Of course, if they heard anyone utter such words as I have just written, they would say he was and is an atheist."—George MacDonald

"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

MISSION STATEMENT

Plain Truth Ministries proclaims Christianity without the religion. We express our Christ-centered ministry as *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone.*

HOW TO SUBSCRIBE

For an electronic subscription go to www.ptm.org/sub. The Internet allows us to serve readers around the world. Archives of *Plain Truth* are available at www.ptm.org. Printed copies of *Plain Truth* are a benefit mailed to generous, regular PTM Friends and Partners. If you would like to contribute go to www.ptm.org/give.

TO UPDATE YOUR ADDRESS

Be sure to notify us immediately of any change in your address by calling us at 1-800-309-4466, visiting our website at www.ptm.org/contact or writing to *The Plain Truth*, Pasadena, CA 91129.

TO SEND A LETTER OR E-MAIL

Write to *The Plain Truth*, Pasadena, CA 91129, or email us at managing.editor@ptm.org.

The editors reserve the right to print or not print comments so addressed, in whole or in part, as deemed in the public interest, and to print your name and edit the letter for clarity and space. We will protect the confidentiality of correspondence that we deem to be of a personal nature. Correspondence published by Plain Truth Ministries does not necessarily reflect the opinions of Plain Truth Ministries.

EDITORIAL STAFF

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Greg Albrecht
EDITOR/ART DIRECTOR: Laura Urista
EDITOR: Brad Jersak
PUBLISHING AND CIRCULATION DIRECTOR: Dennis Warkentin
ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Monte Wolverton

COPYRIGHT & POSTAL INFO

The Plain Truth is published six times a year by Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129. Copyright © 2020 Plain Truth Ministries. Printed in U.S.A. All rights reserved. Volume 85, Number 2: March 2020. Unless noted otherwise, scriptures are quoted from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. *The Plain Truth*® is a U.S. trademark.

SUBMISSIONS

The Plain Truth does not publish unsolicited manuscripts. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited artwork, photographs or manuscripts.

PLAIN TRUTH MINISTRIES

The Plain Truth is published by Plain Truth Ministries (PTM). If you are interested in learning more about PTM, visit our website at www.ptm.org (and email us) or write us at Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129.

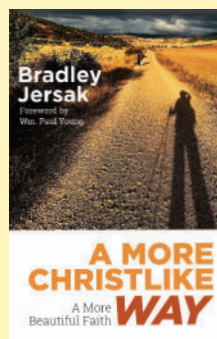
CONTRIBUTIONS

Plain Truth Ministries gratefully accepts contributions (tax deductible in the U.S.) to further the ongoing work of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. We accept donations in U.S. funds by check, money order or credit card. Please call us at 1-800-309-4466, visit our secure website, www.ptm.org/give, or write to us at Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129.

Audio books now available at Amazon / Audible.com and iTunes!

A MORE CHRISTLIKE WAY

"*A More Christlike Way* sets forth a vision for following Jesus that is in keeping with the kind of faith that first turned the world upside down two thousand years ago."
—Brian Zahnd, Word of Life Church



The CWRpress sequel to Brad Jersak's award-winning book, *A More Christlike God*

"I don't think I've ever read a book that made my heart sing louder."—Jonathan Hodges



Available at Amazon.com, ptm.org/books or by calling 1-800-309-4466