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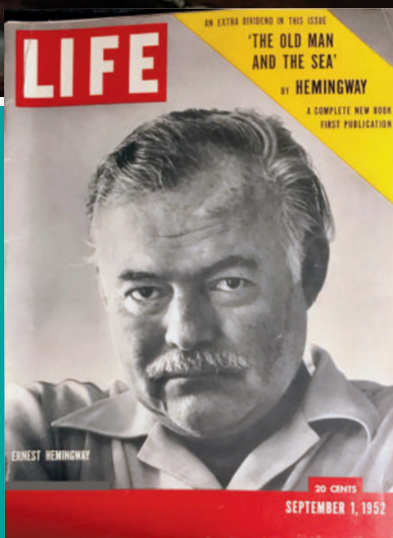
CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



DESTROYED BUT NOT DEFEATED



BY GREG ALBRECHT



He was an old man who fished alone. With these words, Ernest Hemingway begins *The Old Man and the Sea*—a literary masterpiece describing the story of a man who gave his best in spite of overwhelming odds.

(cont'd page 3)

What Our Readers Are Saying...

Many thanks!

When the April issue of *CWRm* arrived in the mail, my husband opened it and headed straight for Greg's articles—as he usually does.

Like the rest of the country, we were “safe at home.” So, while I was fixing us a snack, he began reading your *Pastoral Perspective* “Is the Bible Infallible?” out loud! You would have been impressed.

He was like an evangelist on a stump, with great enunciation. You've said similar things before, but this was your finest—at least as he “preached” it.

Thanks for your good work!

Michigan

Thank you so much for your seriously necessary messages of hope and encouragement. The way you invite us to remember every day that Jesus is living in and with us enables us to continue.

Washington

Thanks very much for your inspiring, thoughtful and encouraging messages; they truly put things in perspective.

New Zealand

I can't thank you enough for my deliverance from religious legalism and all the other religious fabrications.

Nova Scotia, Canada

I find the best part of every day is when I'm reading and listening to the resources you send me. Thank

you so very much. PTM is a huge blessing to me.

California

I've just finished reading *A More Christlike God* by Brad Jersak. It has been over a year now since I've last attended a brick-and-mortar church, but I find solace in knowing God hasn't abandoned me and that he loves me unconditionally. Thank you for your ministry. It is the closest thing I have now that feels like church.

Email

A More Christlike Way

Thank you for the priceless recent book by Brad Jersak, *A More Christlike Way*. I'm on my second reading and getting even more information from it. His book answers questions I didn't know how to ask. Many thanks!

Ontario, Canada

Thank you for the book, *A More Christlike Way*. There is much to ponder in Brad Jersak's revelations and questioning whether we are truly Christ-followers or merely Christians in name only.

New York

Dear Readers,



Your generous donations enable us to share this Christ-centered gospel and to inspire others to living faith in Jesus Christ.

A big thank you from all of us at CWR/PTM!

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COVER ART: Art from pages 1-4 are screen captures from the short animated film, “Old Man and the Sea” (1999). Animation by Alexander & Dimitri Petrov. <https://youtu.be/NNCxNntn2yc>



BY GREG ALBRECHT

DESTROYED BUT NOT DEFEATED

(cont'd from cover)

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* first appeared in *Life* magazine back in 1952—that issue sold more than five million copies in 48 hours. The impact of *The Old Man and the Sea* was immediate and electric.

Hemingway received hundreds of letters of praise every day. People kissed him when they saw and recognized him as the author. The person who translated *The Old Man and the Sea* into Italian could hardly do so for the tears running down his face, clouding his vision. People everywhere, then and now, identify with the old man who “fished alone.”

The spiritual connection of the old man's quest to the mission of Jesus are many and they are filled with significance for all who follow Jesus Christ. Consider the Christ-centered teaching of Hebrews 12:1-3:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set before him he endured

the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

THOUGHTS ON HEBREWS 12:1-3

Hebrews uses the metaphor of running rather than fishing, as did Hemingway. Indeed, we as Christ-followers are like runners in a race.

We are surrounded by a *great cloud of witnesses*. These witnesses are those who have already run the race we are now running. They may be alive or they may be dead—but they are veterans—they are, in and through Christ, champion runners.

The witnesses are not just watching this race as spectators. They are not like fans at a sporting



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contest whose main goal is to be entertained. These witnesses are connected to us, so we might better think of the race we are running as a relay. The witnesses have run their leg of the race, and they have now handed the baton to us. They are cheering us on as we run.

Hebrews encourages us to throw off *everything that hinders* and *the sin that so easily entangles*. In the first century culture in which Hebrews was written, readers knew that Greek athletes literally threw off everything—they ran naked. There are two kinds of burdens that might slow us down as we run this race:

a. “everything that hinders.”

Things that hinder us—that slow us down or impede our progress—may not be wrong or immoral, but they still hinder us. One runner might be encumbered with a burden that may not hinder another runner at all.

b. “sin that entangles.”

Hebrews does not speak of sins in the plural, as individual actions or behaviors, but it speaks of sin in general. Sin is an affliction that burdens us and shackles us, obstructing our mission in following Christ. It is not difficult to become hobbled and hogtied with sin.

We are also encouraged to run with *perseverance*. Hebrews does not see the race of a disciple as a sprint but rather as a long-distance run requiring endurance.

The race we run is *marked out for us*. We don't

choose all of the twists and turns of the obstacle-course-like race we run—it is *marked out for us*.

The focus of our race is Jesus. He is the finish line. Thus, we run while *fixing our eyes on Jesus*. The Christian race is Christ alone. As we run this race we should not allow our attention to be diverted or divided—our race is Christ alone.

Jesus is *the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*. Jesus laid out the course of this race and he also ran it, to perfection. He is our model—he is our coach—he is our goal—he is our source of strength and encouragement.

After Jesus ran this race, he *sat down*. The language here suggests he won a permanent and everlasting victory so that his race need never be run again.

His race was once and it was for all.

Finally, we are instructed to *consider him who endured such opposition*, who *for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame*. Jesus flawlessly ran the race we run, and although his race involved the pain and shame of the cross, he endured it because of the ultimate joy he would

have bringing rescue, redemption, restoration and new life to the world.

SANTIAGO—THE OLD MAN WHO FISHED ALONE

The story of Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* is set in pre-Communist Cuba, where Santiago lived alone, in an old shack.

Santiago's wife has passed away. His neck is wrinkled and his face is lined, weathered by the sun. His hands are scarred, a fisherman's hands, marked by the injuries of many a fishing battle. Santiago is a



humble man, who never complains, though the shack he lives in has no running water.

Santiago has gone 84 days without catching a fish. But he *perseveres*. On the 85th day, Santiago once again sets off in his boat. He finally hooks into a gigantic marlin. Santiago battles with this fish for three days. Santiago finally subdues the great fish. He is exhausted. He ties this great fish to the side of his boat and heads for home. His great prize, the huge fish, is actually bigger than his boat.

As he tries to get his great catch home sharks begin to attack, and although Santiago fights them off many times, their tireless attacks eventually leave only the carcass of that great fish attached to his boat.

In many respects, Santiago is just like you and me, people whom God has invited to run the race. Some of those who ran the race before us were young and others were very old, but they were all vulnerable. All who run this race now are weak and fragile in some way—we are not immune from wounds—in need of Help and Healing.

The *great cloud of witnesses* who cheer on those who run the race today have run the same race themselves. Those who run, surrounded by a *great cloud of witnesses*, run in spite of the world and culture in which they live—a world that urges them to define and understand success in life in terms of how strong, how rich and how influential they are.

FIVE WAYS SANTIAGO SYMBOLIZES JESUS

We hear clear echoes of the victory Jesus Christ won over death at his resurrection when Santiago

finally subdues the great fish “on the third day.”

When Santiago sets out to catch this great fish, he has not allowed himself to be weighted down with all kinds of special equipment. He has a simple boat and fishing line. He has *thrown off everything that hinders and sin that so easily entangles*.

While the old man Santiago is fighting to bring the fish in, the fishing line actually slices through his hands, so that the wounds in his hands suggest

the wounds of the hands of Jesus on his cross.

Santiago is Christlike as he *runs with perseverance the race marked out* for him because of the joy of the finish line.

Hemingway describes the painful noise as Santiago cries out in agony—“a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hand and into the wood.”

He leaves no doubt that the pain in Santiago’s shredded hands was symbolic of what Jesus felt when he was nailed to the cross.

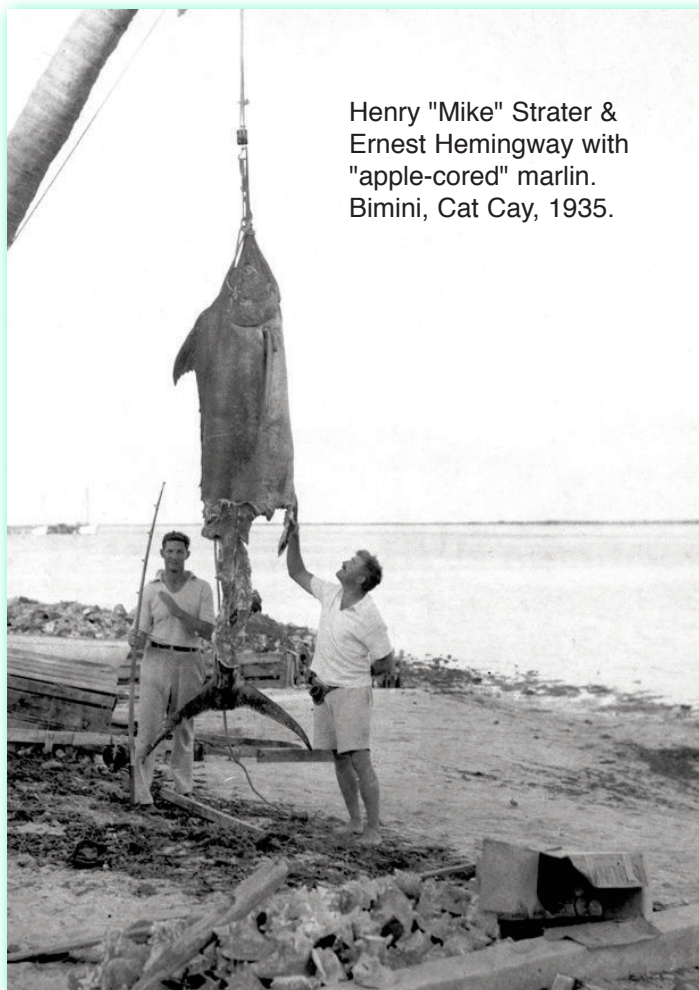
After Santiago finally returns to shore with what was left of his great catch, Hemingway says he “picked up the mast and put it on his shoulder and started up

the road ... He [sat] down five times before he reached his shack.” As we read these words, we imagine Jesus shouldering his cross on the way up the hill to his execution.

“But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated.”

—Ernest Hemingway

When Santiago finally reaches his shack, he falls face down on the newspapers that cover his mattress and adopts a posture resembling Jesus on his cross. Santiago lays on his bed with his arms



Henry "Mike" Strater & Ernest Hemingway with "apple-cored" marlin. Bimini, Cat Cay, 1935.

stretched out straight from his torso, his hands still bleeding and his palms face up.

DESTROYED BUT NOT DEFEATED

One of the critically important statements Hemingway attributes to his fictional old fisherman comes toward the end of Santiago's titanic three-day struggle with the great fish. As the ordeal comes to a close, Santiago says, "man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated."

Destroyed but not Defeated rings true of Jesus, *the pioneer and perfecter of our faith*.

After Jesus ran this race, he sat down... His race was once and it was for all.

Destroyed but not Defeated describes the *Jesus Way*—the way of life of all those who run the Christian race.

For Christ-followers, *Destroyed but not Defeated* means *fixing our eyes on Jesus*, running with *perseverance* and it means running *the race marked out for us*.

Victory over all obstacles and opposition is not what defines us as we run our race—rather, as our risen Lord lives in us and empowers us, *the race marked out for us* defines us—even when we know that our own physical death is inevitable. *The race marked out for us* defines us as a faithful Christ-follower.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the old fisherman, Santiago, resembles Jesus Christ and all who follow him in that he transforms loss into triumph,

and while facing the inevitable reality of death, transcends and overcomes it. In a similar way, each of us who run the race face suffering and pain, trials and challenges—and in the end, in and through our risen Lord, we are empowered to transform loss into triumph.

As Christ-followers, we run *the race marked out for us* and are united with all our fellow runners in Jesus, *a great cloud of witnesses*, both dead in Christ and alive.

Not everyone who "fishes alone" lives in Cuba and not all who fish

do so on the ocean. So too, as we run *the race marked out for us*, we need not all pray the same memorized prayers someone else wrote, we need not sing the same hymns or participate in the same traditions, rituals or ceremonies.

Fixing our eyes on Jesus means we run our own individual race, united in our common goal in Christ.

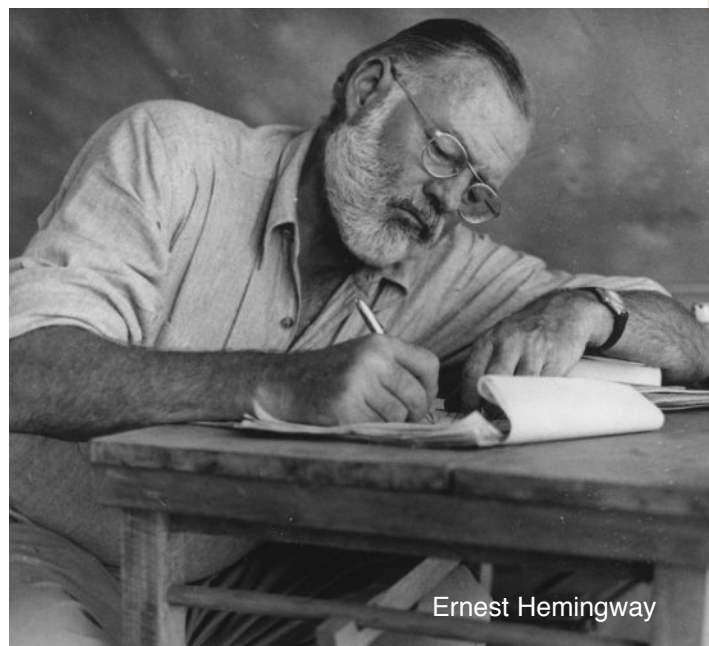
We are not united because we wear the same uniform or have precisely the same doctrinal answers. As we run our race, our unity in Christ is not a set of humanly produced theological propositions.

That said, I believe some theological propositions are more Christ-centered than

others, but I resist with all my heart that our unity in Christ is determined by theological tests, doctrines and dogma.

Jesus has marked out our race, but not to ensure we will suffer. As we run our race, we will suffer because that's simply the nature of running a long-distance race.

As long-distance Christian runners, the suffering we experience is the inevitable consequence of living in a temporal body that is wasting away. In Christ, we learn, grow and mature from our sufferings.



Our suffering doesn't come because our faith is weak but paradoxically, our faith is often strengthened by our journey through suffering.

In the words of Santiago, from Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*: "*man is not made for defeat. Man can be destroyed but not defeated.*" □

Greg Albrecht is president of *Plain Truth Ministries*.

"I'M OFFENDED!"

Rudy: "I'm offended!"

Patrick: "Rudy, shut your gob!"

Rudy: "I'm telling the counselor!
... Hey, Mr. K, I'm offended."

Mr. K: "Rudy ... shut your gob!"

Rudy, as I remember him, was a fellow student at the Bible College I attended in the early 80s. Rudy was offended by everything. And as the dorm intern, Rudy had a deep need for us to know that. He didn't like "rule-breakers." He was always offended and outraged by something. Our music was always too loud, our card games always ran too late, our attitude

the law, worshiped order, enforced conformity ... and had the college handbook memorized front to back. He wasn't averse to using the rules as a bludgeon to feed his egoism.

By contrast, Patrick's generous grace created its own kind of order, grounded in our respect for his discernment about what mattered and what didn't. He saw the hearts and heard the stories behind the behavior. And he would advocate for us when Rudy became heavy-handed. "Rudy, shut your gob!"

That offended Rudy. But really, Patrick's *grace was the real offense*. Or so I recall.

the globe—innocent victims of war, poverty, slavery and abuse. I think of little children, enslaved by generations of debt to work long scorching days in Pakistani brickyards for the duration of their abbreviated lives. That kind of exploitation is surely offensive to God (if the biblical prophets have anything to say about it). At best, we can plead criminal negligence—at worst, we deliberately turn a blind eye. Our privileged lack of offense is itself offensive.

But what's more remarkable is what *DOES* offend us. No matter where one is embedded in the lie we call the "left-right spectrum,"

GRACE IS THE REAL OFFENSE

BRAD JERSAK

to his authority always stunk. Most of all, he was offended by Patrick and his posse (which included me).

Rudy was especially offended by Patrick's creative noncompliance—by all the ways Patrick ignored, bent or broke the rules. And Rudy's inventory of offenses only escalated when Patrick was chosen as a fellow intern.

Patrick led our dorm with genuine concern for his fellow students and by the spirit of the law. When we erred, Patrick didn't punish us. He had gentle conversations that probed why we did what we did, gently guiding us toward a culture of mutual care and comradery.

This offended Rudy. Why? Because Rudy loved the letter of

IN A WORLD OF OFFENSES

It is not without reason that the Apostle called our era "this present evil age" (Galatians 1:4). Despite Christ's victory over darkness, dread and death, the dominant human response to Abba's gift of self-giving love, radical forgiveness and unfailing mercy continues to be a defiant resolve for personal and collective self-harm.

Our incorrigible rejection of divine grace creates so much destructive fruit that is genuinely offensive—our penchant for violence toward ourselves, toward others, toward our planet. What's offensive to me is our capacity for turning a blind eye to suffering, especially the afflictions of children around

those who submit to their ideological impulses and fundamentalist "othering" (the us-them mentality of exclusion), *grace is the real offense*.

And of course, this is nothing new. It's just that Christ exposed such offense for what it truly is: ***an engorged pseudo-righteousness that is more outraged by grace than by the cries of broken children huddled in the world's refugee camps.***

This hypocrisy is as true of the opponents of Christian faith as it is for the religious Pharisees in our camp. Yes, the New Atheist crowd are experts at prodding our unChristlike ways, our failure to be kind, our addiction to judging and condemning, the truckload of beams in our eyes.

All too easy. But that stuff is often just for fun—self-congratulating target practice. If you want to *truly* infuriate them, forgive those they deem unforgivable, stand with those they judge as irredeemable.

You'll see. Even to the self-proclaimed “woke” crowd, *grace was the real offense*.

WOULD THAT BE A BAD THING?

What is it that so enrages us about grace? Why is it that behind both hard-headed conservatism and reactionary progressivism we find a common hostility to grace? During the course of a 12-mile hike across New Zealand's Tongariro Crossing, site of Nguruhoe (Mount Doom in the *Lord of the Rings* movies), Brian Zahnd posed a thought experiment. Here is my adapted paraphrase:

Imagine the Day of Judgment. And imagine that you can see all those you consider wicked, beyond hope and hell-bound before Christ's judgment seat. Despite 10,000 opportunities to repent in this life and join the Jesus Way, these reprobates have perished without so much as a thought of God.

Now imagine Christ, the all-knowing Judge, revealing the folly of their wasted lives, enabling them to feel the lifetime of harm they have caused in a painfully precise and



Angel of the Arc De Triomphe

Our incorrigible rejection of divine grace creates so much destructive fruit that is genuinely offensive...

relentlessly thorough victim-impact statement. What if they were to realize these terrible truths in the presence of our Holy God and all those whom they've ever hurt? What if from this eye-opening revelation rose a torrential roar of weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth?

What if the 'great and terrible day of God's dread judgment' turns out to be a cosmic truth and reconciliation commission?'

And what if, rising from his throne in “the valley of decision,” Christ, the all-merciful Judge, cited his earthly brother's words as his grand and finale verdict: “*Mercy triumphs over judgment*” (James 2:13)? What if he descends from that throne and begins to wipe every tear

from our eyes? What if he reconciles *all* victims and offenders, healing *every* offense, restoring *all things* (Acts 3:21, Revelation 21:5)—reconciling *all people* to each other as he did on the Cross? (Colossians 1:20).

And now for our thought experiment: *Would that be a bad thing? Would seeing that THEY are IN too make us angry?* Would we rejoice with the angels that our Shepherd is SO GOOD that he left not even one sheep lost?

Or, like the older brother of Jesus' parable, would we regard all our bitter striving as more perfect than their slavery to sin? It isn't. Without hell to pay (he already did), would we wonder if following Jesus had been a waste of goodness? It isn't, is it?

Would knowing eternal hell does NOT await sinners free us to follow Christ out of love rather than out of fear?

Or would we feel so ripped off we might yet choose to turn from such grace? Would such grace be the real offense?

HEARTS OF IRON

I am inspired by the 20th century monk, Silouan the Athonite, whose life prayer was, “I pray, O merciful Lord, for ALL the peoples of the world, that they may come to know you by the Holy Spirit.”

One day, another monk visited Silouan, trying to impress him with his holiness by showing glee in the damnation of the wicked. For him, *grace was the real offense*. Silouan responded:

Love could not bear that. We must pray for all.

If the Lord saved you along with

the entire multitude of your brethren, and one of the enemies of Christ and the Church remained in the outer darkness, would you not, along with all the others, set yourself to imploring the Lord to save this one unrepentant brother? If you would not beseech him day and night, then your heart is of iron—but there is no need for iron in paradise.

And St. Paul, who was so truly united to Christ that he was able to affirm: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me,”—did he not say that he was ready to be “separated from Christ for his brothers”? Must not each of us plead with the Lord in the same way: May all my brothers be saved along with me! Or otherwise, may I also be

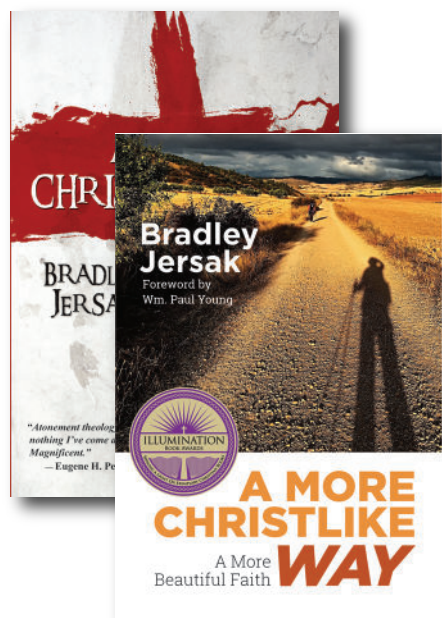
damned along with them! Does not our Lord also wait for us to pray such a prayer? And would not this prayer also be the solution to the problem of hell and damnation’?

I sometimes wonder if the other monk’s name was Rudy. No matter. How about us? If there’s any part of our hearts that finds *grace is the real offense*, we’d do well to pray for a grace-wash: “Lord, have mercy on this heart of iron! Melt it in the fiery forge of divine love. Restore in me a heart of flesh, of empathy and compassion. Renew in me your superabundant grace. Amen.” □

Brad Jersak is the author of CWRPress’s award-winning titles, A More Christlike God and A More Christlike Way.

CWR_press

A More Christlike Way: A More Beautiful Faith



Earlier this year, Brad Jersak’s latest book, **A More Christlike Way** (CWRpress, 2019), was awarded the Illumination Book Awards’ 2020 Enduring Light Gold Medal.

A More Christlike Way, the highly anticipated follow-up to *A More Christlike God*, is already receiving high praise and it promises to impact the lives of readers in a similar way. Students and seekers of Jesus will be thrilled with the transforming insights in both of these Gold Medal Award winning books.

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The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it... Though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.

—John 1:5, 10

Have you ever had a situation where you'd given of yourself sacrificially, taken care of someone or shown a remarkable amount of restraint, love and humility in the face of animosity, selfishness and arrogance... and then been treated poorly in response? It's as if all the love you've shown has gone completely unrecognized.

There's a saying, "no good deed goes unpunished." I can't think of any greater example of this than humanity putting to death the One who came to show us the way of love—Jesus Christ. Many people who do good works have been put to death because they've been suspected of being enemies, wolves in sheep's clothing. Their good works go unrecognized in the midst of the violent world in which they live.

John is obviously talking about the Creator as the Light of the world, but John himself was a witness to that Light, just as we are called to be. John 1:6-7 says, "There came a man sent from God, his name was John. He himself was not the light; he came as a witness to testify concerning that light."

UNRECOGNIZED LIGHT

It may be that as we reflect Christ's light in a dark, violent and hurting world, our actions may not be recognized either. And here is a contradiction: although we are taught to be salt and light (Matthew 5:14), at the same

Keep Shining

Blair Baker

time, that light may go completely unrecognized.

So, what do you do if, after you've put yourself out for someone, sacrificing your time and energy, you get abuse or ingratitude in return? What if everything you've ever done for someone goes unnoticed? *What if someone feels entitled to everything you've given and doesn't recognize the pain or effort or cost to you?*

Remember this: God loves you as much as he loves the one you've just given the shirt off your back.

There is a danger of loving and giving pathologically. I have a friend who recently told me she has a habit of giving to others in need without thinking of the consequences to herself, and she has been left in dire straights, unable to pay her bills. She was taken advantage of and was never paid back.

Some church leaders reinforce this mindset with subliminal tones that come through sermons about faithfulness and sacrifice, while abuse hides in the shadows and everyone is busy turning cheeks.

SKEPTICAL ABOUT HELP

Circumstances like this can turn us inward and make us reluctant to help anyone. The rising tide of street beggars is a case in point. It's common for people who are not actually homeless or in need to make a good living off the compassion of others by posing as beggars. In turn, people are less inclined to give and skepticism rises even higher.

Like my friend, I've had a tendency to give without thinking. It's left me feeling exhausted and, on occasion, hurt when I've realized I've been taken advantage of. I wasn't being "wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove." I was just being naive.

(cont'd page 14)

My Soul is Like a Chiminea

My evolving Christianity and the reasons I still call myself one.

Jonathan Foster

"Chiminea," Gary Denham | Flickr



My soul is a chiminea by the sea. Complexity flames up like the sound of cracking mesquite wood. The fire expands and glows, releasing energy that converts my approach to faith, hope, and love. And in doing so, reconverts my approach to Christianity.

None of this has been anticipated—as if real life ever is—but now that I'm here, I have choices to make. Will the fire consume everything I once held dear, or will it provide new ways of thinking about my faith? Yes.

I'm learning, again, that *to get to the new, the old must pass away*. So, although much of my faith has changed, here are five

compelling reasons I am a Christian and continue to call myself one.

1. BECAUSE I WAS BORN INTO A LOVING CHRISTIAN FAMILY

Had I been born into a loving Hindu, Jewish or Muslim family, I would likely identify as Hindu, Jewish or Muslim. Humility compels me to say Christianity was my context. I had no choice. That's not to say I'm ungrateful. I've learned a lot. We are who we are due in large part to those who brought us into the world. People give us what we need, which is good. Well, as far as it goes . . . *because people also give us what we don't need.*

Much of American Christianity (or is it Christian America?) is hopelessly caught up in a web of sacrificial rules and fear, the result of which is the sacred formation of religious hierarchies and scapegoating. We're all contaminated. Which leads me to the next reason:

2. BECAUSE JESUS NAMES & REVEALS THE SIN OF THE WORLD: SCAPEGOATING

It is, to borrow language from Gil Bailie, our seemingly never-ending effort to purge ourselves of our sins by offloading our animosities onto others.

We've created a pretty exclusive club, us Christians, what with all the power we've created by talking about how all-powerful our God is and all. The exclusivity has gone to our collective heads, myself included. I'm as culpable as anyone. We're so enamored with power that we endlessly create and recreate systems that spew out victims. I'd like to think we do this unintentionally, but I'm not so sure. Jesus showed us a better way. He voluntarily stepped into our victimary machine and identified with the victim.

He became a victim to subvert the victimary machine.

He became a sacrifice to shed light on the absurdity of all our sacrificing.

He became a scapegoat to end all our scapegoating.

Considering the life of Jesus, and in particular, his *at-one-ment* with the victim challenged my assumptions of power. The implications spread like embers across the night sky. It changed what I saw, but even more, it changed me, for however one defines conversion or repentance, it must be an inward move before anything else. And maybe never any more than inward.

Too much outward movement can lead to overzealously naming things bad, impure, defective, and lead us to exclude the other person, blinding us to the truth: the desire to live by the power of excluding “the other” is something we learned well, *from the other!*

The French sociologist Rene Girard taught us that “the other” colonized our desire before we even knew of its existence. In other words. . .

Jesus became one with the other to free me from my desire to kill the other!

Now I am free.

Free to live. Free to love.

Everyone. Myself.

Especially myself.

You see, I basically thought the point was to get all of us on the “outside” into the “inside.” And like I mentioned, I have been on the inside all my life. Remember, I’m a Christian first because I was born into the tradition. I’m not saying my interactions with Jesus weren’t authentic. But I also don’t know where the authentic interactions began and where the desire to please my family ended. I

was a pretty well-behaved kid, and like lots of children, I just wanted to please my father. He said, “Be a Christian,” so I was. I made sure to be a part of the in-crowd.

Okay, fine, except, after I grew up, the more I watched Jesus, the more obvious it became that Jesus was hanging out with the people on the outside.

The more I watched, the brighter the chiminea burned. The fragrance of mesquite wood triggered thoughts: If Jesus is *out there* (with the one) who’s in here (with the 99)?

Who is in? Who is out?

I continued to read the story of Jesus. And it continued to read me. I recognized my hypocrisy: I claimed Jesus as my Savior

because of the cross but it was my blaming obsession that crucified him in the first place.

So, the reason I’m a Christian now is because following the way of Jesus releases me from the burden of scapegoating and the hell of putting myself in a position to tell others they’re out.

Speaking of which, the next reason I am a Christian is . . .

3. BECAUSE I BELIEVE CHRIST CAN REDEEM OUR MISDIRECTED THINKING ABOUT HELL

Freely draw your own conclusions, but I believe that what we tend to think of as hell is something that came to us by way of layers of shame-infested thinking over the generations.

Like so many strata of sedimentary rock one might uncover when excavating a section of earth, each layer contains elements initiated and propagated by theologians who meant well. But they were too overwhelmed with their own guilt and shortcomings to come up with anything other than a fiery, torturous, retributive, punitive place of judgment. Take Augustine, Jonathan Edwards and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* for example. It appears that all their guilt resonated with all our guilt.

We were given an inch of ideas about a hellish afterlife and took it the proverbial mile. For some reason, we’re all wired to think pain, fear and punishment more holy than health, love and grace.

Now that I’ve had opportunity to look into



this, *I'm of the persuasion that it's biblical to push back against all such talk of hell.*

One biblical writer said, "*He's not willing anyone should perish.*" Another said, "*He doesn't count our transgressions against us.*" Yet another, "*He came not to condemn the world but to save the world.*"

Don't forget Jesus, who said, "*Love your enemies.*" **Why expect us to love our enemies if God plans to burn his?**

So, yes, I'm suspicious of all the hell talk by religious people. I believe love is bigger than hell and will never stop working to connect and reconnect with us.

This is true for this life and all eternity. Neither the Scriptures nor my understanding of love leads me to believe that all decisions about eternity must be made in this life.

Eternity has already begun. It's happening now.

Love invites all of us, right now and for all eternity, to enter into its way. And for the life of me, I don't know why it's Christians who are so hell-bent on promoting the idea that one day, love will just quit inviting.

Aren't we the ones who are supposed to be forgiving?

Isn't grace a Christian idea?

Doesn't our sacred text say, "Love is patient"?

Please consider what you might do if, upon entering into the heavenly dimension, you discover one of your children is missing. If it's me, there's no chance—despite decades and centuries of theology telling me otherwise—that I would be content knowing one of my kids was out in the far country of darkness. I would cinch up the boots, pack my backpack and go after them with all my heart.

What motivates me to do that? Love! Love always goes into that far country. I think that's what love will do for everyone who's ever lived. It might take a long time. Ages even. But Love never gives up.

Which is good, because I'm going to need that perseverance in dealing with the next reason I'm still a Christian...

4. BECAUSE IT OFFERS A RESPONSE TO SUFFERING

Important distinction: a *response*, not an *answer*.

An atheist may say that suffering proves that there's no loving God. So they turn away. Which is fine. It is their prerogative. I don't blame them. But ignoring God doesn't change the reality of suffering. Suffering exists whether you believe or not.

However, I'm more sympathetic to the atheist than I am of the Christian who wants to explain away suffering. As if there is an explanation. Look, if you could explain evil, none of us would be able to label it as such. So, most Christians should probably just stop explaining things. Me too. I just gotta finish this article first!

Job is the most famous test case for suffering in the Bible. After forty-some chapters of Job's misery, what does God do? Well, he certainly doesn't explain.

He simply shows up.

God is present.

God was with Job.

It's the same thing all the New Testament writers insisted: God is with us. This may be the unique response to suffering that Christianity offers. We want answers, but what we really need is someone willing to be with us.

It's solidarity more than

solutions. It's entering into life more than explaining life.

For example, think of some of your favorite stories. There's always a moment when the protagonist recognizes they are in over their head. But in spite of the odds, they choose to move forward. With the complexity of their chiminea roaring into the night sky, they take the proverbial leap of faith. Not because they have answers but because they have friends. And you love it. It's why you call them your favorite stories.

Frodo and his *Fellowship of the Ring*, Katniss (*Hunger Games*) and her former victors, *Dora the Explorer*, with her monkey and talking backpack.

Solidarity is huge. Like fire being transformed into energy, it's possible for suffering to be transformed into hope. I don't know exactly how, I just know it can be done. This leads to the final reason:

5. BECAUSE IT GIVES ME HOPE

I don't deny death. Death is real. Grieving, lamenting, suppressing or cursing are all understandable responses. I've tried them all. I even tried some this morning. But ultimately, I need something more.

I need hope that this is going to get better.

The way of Jesus gives me hope. He alleviates my fear of death. It turns out that this was his mission all along. He wasn't merely born to die. It's just that the earthly powers couldn't take his commitment to life so they joined forces to have him murdered.

Jesus shows us how to be human in the middle of all the persecution he suffered. Even

more, he empowers us to be human because he conquered death from the inside out. It serves to remove our fear of death.

Eugene Peterson's *Message* translation says, *By embracing death, taking it into himself, he destroyed the Devil's hold on death and freed all who cower through life, scared to death of death* (Hebrews 2:14).

If the resurrection wasn't real, then death would be "The End."

But, if it is true, then I know there's nothing to fear. Actually, I don't know anything but I have hope. And that's the point.

We don't have to cower to despair. We can hold our heads high, live our lives, do the best we can, risk, love, laugh, and forgive. You do realize risking, loving and laughing are all synonymous?

Death does not have the last word.

It is not the deepest sting. The grave is not a dead-end. It's a corridor into whatever is next.

Peter Kreeft told me a long time ago that as the baby is inside the womb, and the womb is inside of the world, so we are inside the world and the world is inside of heaven. Death isn't the final act. It's the initial contraction of being birthed into the new creation. Behold, ***everything is being made new.***

This gives me hope. And I need hope! It's a major reason I still risk being labeled a Christian.

Will the fires of complexity be stoked tomorrow? Will the chiminea be asked to rage brighter? Maybe. And maybe I'll give it all up. Or maybe the energy of the heat will convert me all over again. □

Jonathan Foster is a podcaster and author based in Overland, Kansas.

Keep Shining by Blair Baker

(cont'd from page 10)

My son, in his twenties, recently told me about a situation where a rough-looking man came up to him while he was having his lunch break. The man asked for some money, but my son offered to buy him lunch instead. My son is on minimum wage, so every penny counts.

He walked with the man to a fast food shop and suggested he buy him one of the burgers but the man got agitated and aggressive, saying he wanted the best steak meal. He began complaining about horrible and completely inappropriate things. My son quickly bought him a burger and left. He was quite shaken and felt that he'd been scammed. I doubt the good my son did was recognized by the man who probably felt entitled to more than the burger he got.

LOVE IS LIGHT

What then? Shall we stop doing good, stop reflecting the light because we may get it wrong or face ingratitude? I don't like the look of the world I imagine in that scenario.

I remember reading Billy Graham's book on the Holy Spirit years ago. He suggested that the good we now see in the world is because God's Spirit is at

work on the earth in people. And hell is wherever goodness is absent.

It scared me to think of such a place, and I'm daily reminded that though the world can often be a dark place, there is a tremendous amount of light shining. I want to be part of that. I'm always, always looking for the light!

Shining God's light is not just about giving. It's about *being*. 1 Corinthians 13 is a recipe for love. Love is light. Every time you forgive, you are *being* light. So forgive! Every time you are patient, you are *being* light. So be patient!

Philippians 4:6 tells us, "...in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God bring everything in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to God." If you're not sure if you should give to someone, pray about it. There are other options for people, which don't always require our input. If you've had a bad experience and are tempted to pack it all in, take a deep breath, shake your head and remember Christ's words from the cross: *Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.* If they can't recognize the light, maybe it's because they literally can't.

So, keep shining, but be wise. For a world without light is a scary place indeed. □

Blair Baker is an artist, illustrator and poet based in England.



BRAD JERSAK

With hope for all, why share our faith?

QUESTION: Evangelism seems to have been endemic in early Christianity, the Apostle Paul being perhaps the most outstanding example.

If you have hope that all might come to Christ (ultimate redemption) why share our faith?

RESPONSE: We share the good news for the same reasons that compelled Paul. Namely, **1. Because Christ is the most wonderful person in the universe and knowing**

him IS eternal life. Not just when you die, but in the abundance of this life, the fullness of our inheritance in the gospel and in the depth of relationship Christ opens to God as *Abba*.

While Paul calls Christ “the Savior of all,” *it’s knowing* Christ that brings truth into our experience in the here and now. Sharing the good news means announcing how, in Christ, we can experience deeper intimacy with God, the assurance that our sins are forgiven, the freedom of being washed of shame, fearlessness before death, etc. So, why wouldn't we tell people this good news?! Yes, knowing Christ is eternal life!

2. Because so many people experience the human condition as alienating, as perishing, as hell on earth. I meet so many people who struggle to find meaning, peace and belonging—tormented souls who end up medicating their weary, broken hearts with false comforts and toxic distractions. In other words, it’s clear to me that regardless of how wonderfully Christ will restore all things in the end, people desperately need him today!

Life is hard and people feel “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Besides these two key reasons to share the good news, I also come at it from another angle. IF God shall indeed redeem all of humanity, our Scriptures and our experience tell us he does so by specific means. IF Christ is Savior of us all, how so?

- ◆ By revealing God’s infinite love and grace.
- ◆ Through Christ’s decisive victory over Satan, sin and death in his Passion and Resurrection.

- ◆ Via the witness of those who faithfully announce the good news (there’s your evangelism).
- ◆ In answer to our prayers that all people, everywhere, would be saved (1 Timothy 2:1-4).
- ◆ By the grace of the Holy Spirit.
- ◆ Through a faith response to Jesus Christ.
- ◆ And as a result of the refiner’s fire judgment (Malachi 3 / Mark 9 / 1 Corinthians 3).

These are among the means by which anyone is ultimately saved.

Sadly, I meet many Christ-followers who see no reason to share good news beyond hell avoidance. Why not?

◆ We’ve been soured to the Great Commission because modern evangelism has become so ugly. Instead of shining brightly with truly good news, our focus shifted to argumentative apologetics or threatening ultimatums. No thanks.

◆ We’ve become awake to God’s all-inclusive love but lost the uniqueness of the Incarnation as the Way access to God as *Abba* comes about. We forgot the true means to the end.

◆ We’ve not actually connected with Jesus in a way that makes Christ real to us. We can’t proclaim what we haven’t experienced. Are we tempted to trade away the transforming power of authentic relationship with the living God? Are we out of touch with humanity’s existential crisis and adopted a faith not much worth trumpeting? These are real questions for self-examination. In short, how do we deal with the reality of a Christendom that signs off on a prayer or creed without having yet met Christ?

It is striking to me that when the evangelists of the book of Acts preach the gospel (MANY times to Jews and Gentiles, including to the Jewish Sanhedrin and Greek philosophers) they *never once address hell* as a motivation in their evangelism.

It’s all about what Christ has done for us and the hope he gives us now. Following him today is the good news that changes everything. That’s a gospel I can (and do) preach. □

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