

# PLAIN TRUTH®

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

## Mental Health Care: A Christian Response



Brad Jersak

**M**y dear friend is a good man and faithful Jesus-follower. Truly. Kind and uplifting—effusive in his encouragement—completely loveable. A generous human being and effective communicator of the good news.

My friend is also in recovery from a very serious mental health crisis. It has been terrifying for him and his wife, for his children and his friends. His situation required urgent medical intervention. Hospitalization. Rigorous testing. Medication.

One and the same man—a beautiful spirit tormented by a physiological meltdown that assaulted his mind and emotions. How is that possible? Aren't people of good faith who love the Lord supposed to enjoy abiding peace

and emotional stability? So we once thought.

*Not so long ago, mental illness was stigmatized in our society and either meticulously repressed or overtly condemned in the Christian culture of “sucking it up and holding together.”*

We didn't know what to do with conditions that couldn't be preached out of us or held in check with Bible-laced platitudes. In fact, in the 1970s, two of my friend's brothers suffered from serious mental illnesses of their own, and a common reaction from the community had been contempt for their parents, as if they were to blame... all the worse since the dad was also a pastor.

But you know what? We've come a very long way.

Granted, we're currently drowning in a pandemic of anxiety

disorders, chronic depression, and trauma-related disability. But at least we're able to talk about mental illness openly without feeling the need to shame or blame those who are suffering or assume that anyone who pursues therapy has lost their faith.

Now, in my friend's case, the underlying issue was that he spent years enduring chronic stress, unknowingly wearing out his adrenal system. And what do a pair of fried adrenal glands mean for mental and emotional health?

I did some research and learned that our adrenal glands make cortisol, which is our body's main stress hormone—our own built-in alarm system. I found out that when we're under stress or in danger, cortisol levels increase to activate our fight or flight responses. It regulates our body systems, our mood, our motivation and our fear. And when a crisis passes by, our cortisol levels calm down so our heart, blood pressure and other systems go back to normal.

But what if you're under constant stress long-term and the alarm system gets stuck in the “on” position?

So it was that my friend's body began to react involuntarily and without warning, flooding his system with cortisol and then, because it destroyed his sleep cycle, his body was unable to clear it from his system. The result was weight-gain, hyper-responsiveness and



# Show Your Cards, Not Your Trophies

One of my close friends, Steve, is a successful business owner in the world of hospitality, event planning and catering. I was listening to a podcast recently in which Steve was interviewed on the topic of *Winning in Business*. During the interview, I was struck by something Steve said: “*In all areas of life, and not just in business,*” he said, “*I believe it’s better to show your cards, not your trophies.*” His phrase, ***show your cards, not your trophies***, caught me by surprise and has been ringing in my ears since the podcast interview ended. The simple-yet-catchy wisdom within his words has offered me some real food for thought.

So much of life around us seems to be all about winning. Whether it’s following a favorite sports team, a hotly-contested electoral race, a global trade imbalance, or even in the way we celebrate our national independence, winning seems to be everything. This perception can be true of how we see ourselves, as well. The bigger the successes, the victories, or the trophies we win in life, the better off we are, or so many voices would have us believe. But, is that the truth? ***Is winning, either in life around us or in how we see ourselves, the most important thing?***

One of my favorite authors and speakers is a research professor named Brené Brown. Brené has spent decades looking at human behavior, listening to the stories we tell ourselves and others, and trying to identify what makes us feel whole and connected to others. To the surprise of many of her readers and listeners, Brené Brown’s

findings show that it’s not our successes—our wins and trophies, if you will, or our great achievements that truly matter most. Rather, her research points to our vulnerability, and our willingness to be open with who we are. I call that vulnerability and openness ***showing your cards, not your trophies.***

## Show Your Cards, Not Your Trophies

What does this phrase mean to you? To me, this phrase means not being afraid to show our humanity—our flaws, our imperfections and our limitations. It means not being afraid to share the truth of ourselves with others. I’m not talking about sin here, as Christ Jesus has dealt with that fully, and is working continually to transform all darkness into light. Thankfully, he is doing so in all of us one day at a time. What I am talking about here is being open, humble, and transparent. In Brené Brown’s words, ***we need to allow ourselves to be seen, deeply seen, vulnerably seen.*** We need to ***show our cards, not our trophies.***

## The Meek Will Inherit the Earth

I’ve wondered about this statement as found in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:5, NIV). I’ve struggled somewhat to understand what Jesus may have meant when he used the word “*meek.*” At face value, there seems to be a paradox at work here. In general, most commentaries agree that the Greek word for *meek* conveys a sense of strength; strength while being humble, gentle, patient, and open or vulnerable in suffering. But, rarely does it seem that these

characteristics are of value in the world around us. Strength could certainly lead to an inheritance of the earth, but how could being humble, gentle, patient and vulnerable in suffering help to that end? Clearly, Jesus saw things differently.

## Strength in Vulnerability

There is something so beautiful about the *internal intersection of Jesus’ indwelling divinity with our own inherent humanity*. Jesus has dealt with our sin, of that we can be sure. What’s left is to let his light shine on us, in us, and through us to others. That light can show our successes and achievements, our wins and trophies, if you will. That Light can also reveal our flaws, our imperfections and our limitations. We can use the Light of his divinity and the honest reality of our humanity to connect with others. His strength can cause our vulnerability to be a light for others, to be impactful in our community. We let others see us as we are and thereby know they are not alone.

As Christ-followers, there is nothing wrong with success and achievement. To win a few trophies every now and again is a wonderful part of life. But, it’s our cards—our humanity, vulnerability and that which connects us with others—that truly matter. Our flaws, our imperfections and our limitations are made perfect in him. And, he will use all that we are to help unite, strengthen and connect the parts of his spiritual body. Thanks be to our Lord and Savior for that! □

—Ed Dunn



feelings of panic centered in his chest—as if he were about to die of a heart attack.

My friend's descent was so severe that he said, *"Eventually, any sound, movement, or touch felt like daggers to my mind. It was agony."*

Can we consider how his trial had nothing to do with wavering in his faith or knowing God's love for him? Hearing that *"Christians shouldn't feel that way"* would not only have been a vacuous platitude, but probably be better identified with the "accuser of the brethren"!

### Holistic Support

But I have good news. That's not the type of response my friend experienced. He told me that the primary emphasis from all his caregivers (doctors, nurses, counselors and psychiatrist) was on self-compassion, kindness, and showing mercy to himself. His family, friends and house-church fellowship were all consistently supportive.

But most of all, in those hours and nights of deepest darkness, my friend testifies to God's goodness!

In that gloomy abyss, he saw that only the suffering God, the One who bears our sins, sorrows and infirmities, could help.

He said, *"Even before my body could receive it, my spirit knew (directly, existentially) the vicarious humanity of Jesus, fully present inside my weakness."*

The combination of appropriate medical help (including carefully regulated medications with no shame), empathetic support and spiritual care is, step-by-step, restoring his health.

That's right—I'm not averse to the wonders of science, rightly applied. So too, I'm not embarrassed to invoke the heavenly Father's care through prayer, especially when a friend in need asks for it. My friend shared how profoundly moved and helped he was by two specific prayers offered on his behalf.

First, our mutual friend Lise prayed and sent along this beautiful prayer:

*"Holy Trinity, I pray for my friend and the distress he is feeling right now in his body. Jesus, we know you felt our anxiety to the point of sweating blood. By your Incarnation, living life in your human body, you sanctified the feelings our friend feels right now and is experiencing in his body. Lord, I ask that you intercede for him to our Father and, together with the Holy Spirit, that an outpouring of your love and tender care would address what is happening in our friend's body and mind. Bring a special word of peace to calm the storm he feels right now. Help, Lord. Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy. Amen."*

The second meaningful prayer encounter was with a "spiritual director" who read the following words to my friend—words my friend composed for himself a while ago but which he now needed someone to cite on his behalf. He's allowed me to share it as a message that some of our readers may need to hear for themselves:

### You Are My Beloved (Adapted from Henri Nouwen)

As you listen closely to God's loving voice with great inner attentiveness, you will begin to hear your heavenly Father say:

*"You are my beloved child, on you my favor rests. I have called you by name from the very beginning.*

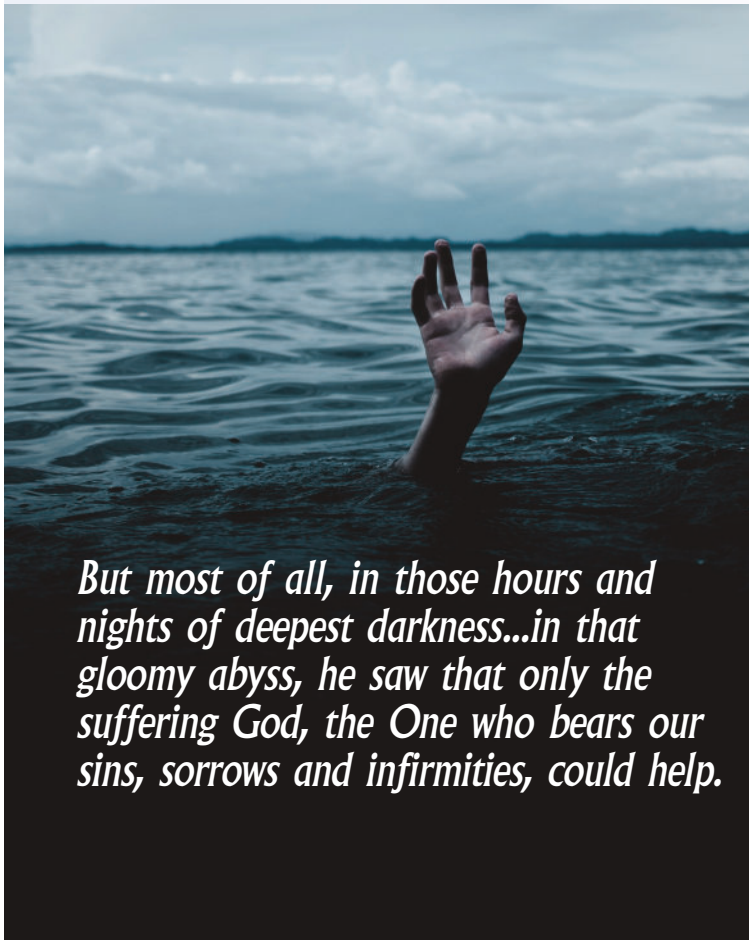
*You are mine and I am yours forever. I have molded you in the depths of the earth and knitted you together in your mother's womb. I have carved you in the palms of my hands and hidden you in the shadow of my embrace. I look at you with infinite tenderness and care for you, with a care more intimate than that of a mother for her child.*

*I have counted every hair on your head and journeyed with you at every step. Wherever you go, I go with you, and wherever you rest, I keep watch. I will give you food that will satisfy all your hunger and drink that will quench all your thirst. I will not hide my face from you.*

*You know me as your own as I know you as my own. You belong to me. I am your father, your mother, your closest friend, and the lover of your soul.*

*Nothing you have ever done or ever will do can make me love you more or cause me to love you less than I already do. Nothing can ever separate you from my love, for I have loved you with an everlasting love.*

*I long for you to make yourself intimately at home in my unfailing love and to experience my tender embrace as the place where you will receive all that you desire, all that you*



*But most of all, in those hours and nights of deepest darkness...in that gloomy abyss, he saw that only the suffering God, the One who bears our sins, sorrows and infirmities, could help.*

ever hoped for, all that you will ever need.

*It is the place beyond all earning, deserving, and rewarding. It is the place of surrender and complete trust. It is the place where you are held safe in the embrace of an all-loving Father who continually calls you by name and says,*

*‘You are my Beloved child, on you my favor rests.’”*

\*\*\*\*\*

While my friend’s story is unique to him, I hope you can infer three themes that apply to anyone suffering from mental or emotional illness:

1) We live as complex **embodied creatures** whose physiology sometimes needs medical care, and there is no shame in that.

2) We live as complex **social creatures** whose environments can be stressful, so pursuing uplifting activities and relationships is a beautiful necessity.

3) We live as complex **spiritual creatures** who are beloved children of a loving heavenly Father. While prayer may not feel like a miracle cure to what ails us, it can make us conscious that we have a divine Caregiver.

### Health Care Check-In

I’d like to leave readers with two helpful check-ins. The first list is eight caring *questions you can gently ask about someone else’s mental health* (or your own):

- 1) How are you feeling today (physically, mentally, emotionally)?
- 2) What’s taking up most of your headspace right now? Are there joys, sorrows, or worries you want to share?
- 3) When was your last full meal? Are you drinking enough water?
- 4) How have you been sleeping?
- 5) How are you getting your body moving?
- 6) What can you do today that would be life-giving for you?
- 7) What’s something you are looking forward to in the coming weeks?

8) Who are you connecting with these days that encourages you?

### Self-Care Check-In

How would you answer those questions? The second checklist is similar, but it suggests some avenues for active *self-care*:

- 1) *Affirmation*—speak an encouraging word to yourself and to someone else.
- 2) *Quiet time*—Enjoy a little undistracted me-time and/or God-time.
- 3) *Service*—Experience the joy of helping someone.
- 4) *Activity*—What exercise works best for you? How about a walk?
- 5) *Curiosity*—Invest in wonder, discovery, and learning.
- 6) *Creativity*—Activate a creative outlet.
- 7) *Nourishment*—What good things fill your soul (or your belly)? Savor it!
- 8) *Openness*—Let go of something and open your hands to God’s fresh gifts.

A prayer-thought from Psalm 103:1-5, speaking to our “inmost being”:

*Praise the Lord, O my soul,  
all my inmost being, praise his holy name.  
Praise the Lord, O my soul,  
and forget not all his benefits—  
who forgives all your sins  
and heals all your diseases,  
who redeems your life from the pit  
and crowns you with love and compassion,  
who satisfies your desires with good things  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s. □*

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*I’m not embarrassed to invoke the heavenly Father’s care through prayer, especially when a friend in need asks for it.*





# Two Ships that Pass in the Night



Greg Albrecht

**T**wo people who cross paths, perhaps even becoming close for a moment or two in time, but eventually separate and part ways are idiomatically spoken of as “two ships that pass in the night.”

The idiom is traced to American poet, educator and author Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882). In his poem “The Theologian’s Tale,” part of the larger work, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*, published in 1863, Longfellow writes:

*“Ships that pass in the night, and speak to each other in passing, only a signal shown, and a distant voice in the darkness; So on the ocean of life, we pass and speak to one another, only a look and a voice, then darkness again and a silence.”*

Even those only vaguely familiar with the Bible have heard of Jonah. The story is known as the man who was swallowed by a big fish and lived to tell the tale.

Most assign at least two simplistic lessons to what they see as the morality tale of Jonah: 1) God gets upset when we don’t follow his orders and 2) when we’re in a deep pit, if we repent God will hear our prayers and cause the “big fish” that swallowed us

(and whose gastric juices are now digesting us) to vomit us up.

## A Deep Story

Let’s go deeper into the story—even deeper even than the “big fish” went in the ocean with Jonah. Jonah is yet another biblical example of how humans can completely misunderstand God. We can use the name of God, we can pray to him, we may think we know him, but it may well be we’re just briefly passing by him without ever really getting to know him. *We can be, with God, like two ships that pass in the night.*

The book of Jonah begins with God telling Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrian empire. Nineveh was a notoriously evil city. God charged Jonah with the job of telling the people of Nineveh to change their ways.

Jonah didn’t like the assignment. His ship and God’s were like two ships passing in the night. Why didn’t Jonah want to go to Nineveh? It may well be Jonah didn’t want to give the people of Nineveh a chance to change. Jonah’s attitude was “why bother?” It becomes clear as we read the book of Jonah that Jonah felt Nineveh deserved to be

destroyed. Jonah seemed to feel that God should just destroy Nineveh and let others learn a lesson.

*In terms of mercy and compassion, Jonah and God were like two ships that pass in the night.* Jonah was fine as long as mercy and compassion were experienced by people he “liked” and were “like” him. But the people of Nineveh and the nation of Assyria were enemies of God’s people. They were perverted and wicked and evil. As Jonah perceived it, they didn’t deserve any mercy.

So Jonah decided to run away from God. Jonah caught a ship heading to Tarshish—paradoxically, another evil place, in terms of people who didn’t obey the laws of God as Jonah understood them. After the ship sailed it, encountered a huge storm, and the sailors on the ship decided Jonah’s god was upset and needed to be appeased. Jonah volunteered to be thrown overboard so that everyone else could be saved.

It worked (or at least if one were predisposed to perceive God as a god who can be placated and appeased)—Jonah’s punishment saved the others. The storm stopped, the ship and its crew were saved. What happened to Jonah? Ironically,

while he was on his way to another evil place, he was swallowed by a great fish that, it turns out, was on its way to Nineveh.

## A “Funny” Thing Happened... as Jonah Ran From God

There’s a lot of humor in the book of Jonah. The idea of trying to run away from God is preposterous, of course. And then when Jonah does try to run away from him, God, using the unconventional vehicle of a great fish, makes sure that Jonah winds up right where God wants him to go.

The entire book of Jonah is one big satire—a humorous spoof of the many ways people misunderstand God, including God’s own prophet Jonah. The great fish spits Jonah out on the beach where God wanted Jonah to go in the first place. Jonah is happy, initially. He has been saved from certain, slow death. Once Jonah has cleaned himself up from all the gastric juices and other slimy things that must have been sticking to his skin after he was unceremoniously disgorged on the beach, God asked him to do what he asked him to do the first time.

Perhaps Jonah just sighed, and like a teenager might say to their parent, “whatever.” Jonah did what God wanted him to do. He told the city of Nineveh to repent of its sinful ways. Another “funny” thing (unexpected at least) happened.

Nineveh actually changed. Jonah couldn’t believe it! They actually listened to his warnings, to his doom-and-gloom preaching and they responded, and God decided to have compassion on the citizens of Nineveh and not destroy them.

You’d have thought Jonah would have been delighted. At the very least one would think he would have been happy that someone listened to his preaching—after all, it’s high praise for a preacher when people actually respond.

*But Jonah was upset and angry. He didn’t mind God’s grace and forgiveness for himself or his friends and his nation, but not so much for others.*

Jonah was like a lot of people when they hear

preaching and teaching about God’s grace—about God’s no-matter-what, absolutely unconditional love. Some say, “This grace stuff is just a lot of mush. God is upset, angry and he wants payback. He is going to kick some serious you-know-what. ‘Love-love-love, grace-grace-grace’ is weak, lame, wishy-washy stuff. God will give people what they deserve.”

Like so many religious people today, Jonah wanted an angry God of wrath, not what he felt was a weak and spineless God of grace and compassion.

*Jonah and God were like two ships passing in the night. Jonah was more concerned with religion than he was with grace.*

Jonah was angry because he was more like an Old West gunslinger who saw his success by the number of notches he had carved on the grip of his prophetic six-shooter. But Jonah didn’t get to gun down the bad guys in the town of Nineveh. He had to ride out of town without killing anyone. Utter humiliation for a gun-slinging prophet!

Jonah figured he might be a laughingstock back home—the prophet who couldn’t deliver on his threats of hellfire and brimstone. Jonah wasn’t even close to being on God’s wavelength. He was a religious gunslinger. He was a prophet who wanted people to get what they deserved. He lived to see people “get theirs”—and when they did, maybe other people would hear and fear.

## Jonah: A Book of Compassion

The people of Nineveh whom Jonah thought were so deserving of absolute destruction received the very opposite—an outpouring of God’s grace. Jonah wanted his religion vindicated—he wanted people who didn’t do all the “right” things to suffer. Jonah wanted people to hear-and-fear what happened to Nineveh after Jonah came into town, bringing a message of blood-and-guts.

Jonah wanted the story of Nineveh to be a testimony to the power of... Jonah. But the story of Nineveh is a tale of God’s amazing grace. God is all about grace. God is all about compassion. God wants relationship, not religion. Religion and grace—they’re heading in the opposite directions. They just barely cross paths, ever so briefly, *like two ships that pass in the night.*

Jonah was a bit like the older son in the parable of the prodigal son. The older son was not happy to see his younger brother receive grace. The older son and his father (the father filled with extravagant compassion and grace) were also *like two ships passing in the night.*

The older son in the parable of the Prodigal Son said, in effect, to his father, “How can you show grace like that? You need to do the hard thing—punish my younger brother. Don’t let him get away with that kind of behavior!”

But that’s why grace is amazing. It’s undeserved. Jesus said to pray for our enemies, not to pray that they get theirs. Jesus wants the best for all his children—even for the people who crucified him, for whom he prayed, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.” □

*That’s why grace  
is so amazing.  
It’s undeserved.  
Jesus wants the  
best for all his  
children...*







## Elevator Dogmatics

**M**y close friend Auggie enjoys travel. Over the past couple of years she has accompanied me on camping trips and road trips, including one all the way across the United States. We've spent many a night in inexpensive motels. Auggie loves good food and drink and is exceptionally social. She delights in going out with new friends. She is physically fit and loves vigorous walks. Oh...did I mention that Auggie is a dog?

Despite her travel experience, there's one thing that astonishes her—elevators. How is it possible to walk into a little room, shut the door and reopen it only to be somewhere completely different? Auggie runs anxiously around in a circle, sniffs the elevator door and is incredulous whenever it opens on a different floor. To Auggie, elevators are the equivalent of folding space and time.

I can identify with her bewilderment. Every time I endure the death of a loved one, I feel like Auggie in an elevator. A person lives with you for years or decades, until suddenly they don't. They're gone. One day you're talking with them, sharing a meal, holding their hand. But now you're not because they're just not there. You may believe in an afterlife, but really—how does that work? Can they hear or see you? Are they busy doing something else? What, exactly?

At this point, our faith in Christ should bring us joy and comfort. But sadly, ungodly religious dogma barges in with crushing anxiety, sleepless nights and downright pain—designed to terrorize and subjugate its followers. Billions worry that their loved ones didn't make the grade and are being forever tortured in hell. If not, billions anguish over their loved ones being tormented in purgatory to cleanse them of residual sin (which somehow Jesus missed).

Actually, the Bible says nothing of eternal hell (as commonly taught), or of purgatory. What does it say? Among other things, it speaks of the deceased going to be with God and of a resurrection, but it says little about what happens between these two events. Some Christian traditions call this time *the intermediate* or *interim* state, during which deceased

souls are judged and/or “await” the resurrection of their bodies. Other traditions suggest the idea of “*soul-sleep*” where the dead are not conscious until the resurrection. Popular Christian culture largely ignores the resurrection and has the “good” deceased souls instantly equipped with angelic wings, harps and halos as soon as they arrive in heaven.

The underlying assumption here is *time*. Early theologians assumed that God exists in time. Yet thankfully, as author Douglas Campbell points out, we have the advantage of living after 1915. That's the year Albert Einstein published his general theory of relativity, asserting that gravity, space, energy, motion and time are all related—and all of these are *physical* properties of the universe. Since then, evidence has confirmed this to be correct. Now we know that time is quite physical, part of creation and it varies throughout the universe.

God, by contrast, is not subject to time. He is the beginning and the end, existing eternally—outside of our physical timeline (except when he steps into it as he does in the Person of Jesus). If our departed loved ones are with God, at perfect, joyful rest in this timeless eternity, are they “awaiting” anything? The Apostle Paul speaks of the resurrection as part of a sequence of events, but that seems to be from the perspective of an earthly timeline. Ultimately, the resurrection has happened, is happening and will happen in eternity, *as Jesus himself is the resurrection and eternal life* (John 11:25)!

Maybe you can understand how all this works, but I sure can't, any more than my dog can figure out elevators. Like Auggie in the elevator, I can only be astonished—but I need not be anxious. Paul offers further reassurance when he writes that “*God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus*” (Ephesians 2:6).

Wow! It almost sounds like we're already there in eternity, doesn't it? And I think that's the point. Our departed loved ones (and really everyone else, ourselves included) are totally forgiven and eternally safe in the timeless reality of Jesus—the only certainty or dogma we will ever need. □

—Monte Wolverton



## Quotes & Connections



"I cannot, by direct moral effort, give myself new motives. After the first few steps in the Christian life we realize that everything which really needs to be done in our souls can be done only by God."—C.S. Lewis

"Vulnerability is the birthplace of innovation, creativity and change... Imperfections are not inadequacies; they are reminders that we're all in this together."—Brené Brown

"Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes."—Mahatma Gandhi

"Our human compassion binds us the one to the other— not in pity or patronizingly, but as human beings who have learned how to turn our common suffering into hope for the future."—Nelson Mandela

"This sad old world is filled with the spiritually sick and imprisoned, finding themselves in such a predicament because a toxic spiritual teaching or church is making them sick, because authoritarian, legalistic ideas are controlling them and preventing them from experiencing freedom in Christ."—Greg Albrecht, *Spiritual Soup for the Hungry Soul, Volume 1*

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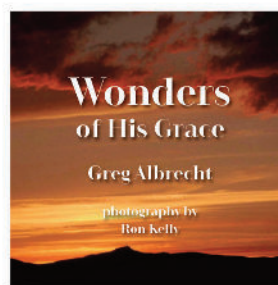
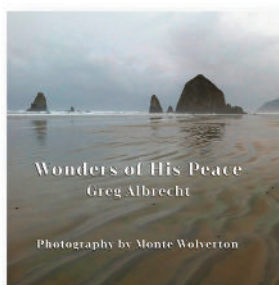
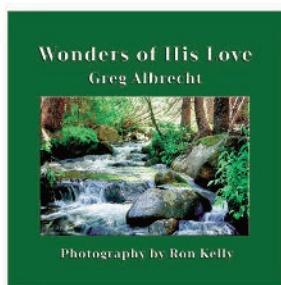
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