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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Learning Pandemic Lessons:

Then Pressing On

By Greg Albrecht

*...I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: **Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus** (Philippians 3:8-14, my emphasis).*

We are thankful that the nightmare of 2020, the year we first started to experience the COVID-19 pandemic, is in the rearview mirror. Some of us lost loved ones, some of us were personally quarantined, as were friends and members of our families. And we all know people who either lost jobs or are struggling financially right now because of the catastrophe of 2020.

As this New Year of 2021 begins, what have we learned... or rather, **what can we learn from the Year of the Pandemic?**

- We can learn that spiritual significance can be found in suffering. Suffering can either close our hearts and turn us inward toward more self-centeredness or it can break our hearts open and thus turn our attention toward the needs of others.

- We can learn that faith and trust in Jesus is the spiritual vaccine against fear and worry. Faith is the trust that releases our fear and

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acknowledges that when all is said and done, our lives are in his hands. Faith is God's gift to us and the response Jesus asks of us—the promise that no matter where the road of following him might lead us, he will always... always... be with us. Following Jesus involves letting go of our fears, addictions, worries and stress and allowing him to live in and through our lives.

- We remember during the pandemic of 2020 we were all told to stay safe and stay at home. But we resisted that, did we not? We humans are naturally programmed to earn our own paycheck. We resist charity. We would rather take care of ourselves. One of the lessons the pandemic can teach us is that Jesus is the hero of our story. We cannot save ourselves. We naturally do not want to just sit at home, we desire to do something—something to *make God happy*.

God had just saved the nation of Israel from the brutal slavery of Egypt but now they were blocked by the Red Sea. Trapped by mountains on two sides of them and the Red Sea on the other. The only available direction was to return in the direction they had come, but the Egyptian army was rapidly closing in on them for the purpose of enslaving them once again. The Israelites faced certain annihilation by the Egyptian army but Moses told them *"The Lord will fight for you; you only need to be still"* (Exodus 14:14). Moses' message:

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“Stay at home. God has this. Have faith in him!”

- We follow Jesus in the midst of our world that places worth and value in working, building, making and producing. The history of humanity is one of a rat-race survival-of-the-fittest, building Towers of Babel and in so doing trying to impress, earn and achieve—even and perhaps especially when it comes to our relationship with God.

- We can look back on 2020 and learn to let go of our past and our present—to let go of the things that weigh us down—to forget about what seems to be important so that we might follow Jesus, Who is of Ultimate Importance.

Perhaps more than any New Year in recent memory—perhaps more than any New Year in our lives—we identify with Paul as he says ***forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.***

Five Themes for Christ-Followers in 2021

Consider the five highlighted statements in Philippians 3:8-14:

1)...for whose sake [knowing Christ Jesus] ***I have lost all things...***

Paul refers to his own legalistic history which produced oppression and pain, in his own life and in the lives of others. Paul is speaking of how foolish it is to put our faith and confidence in our flesh, as if we have the ability and power to please and appease God by the righteousness we produce. Thus, for Paul, to gain Christ is to lose all things—all things that we humanly value and prize. As we “*gain Christ*” (vs. 8) we lose all that we prized and valued before we embraced the grace of God.

2020 is ample proof that we cannot do all that is necessary to protect and secure ourselves. 2020 proved that we might not even be able to have enough toilet paper for

the next day, let alone prove to God how we deserve his love and blessings.

2)...Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ...

Christ alone is the focus and goal of our faith. He alone gives us, by the grace of God, his own righteousness. Apart from the grace of God we will continuously spin our spiritual wheels, in vain, like a hamster on a wheel, trying to be righteous enough to please God.

In *Every Drop of Blood*, Edward Achorn studies the second inaugural address of Abraham Lincoln. The horrific Civil War had ended when Lincoln, only 41 days before his assassination, took his second oath of office. The nation was still divided, filled with hatred and animosity, even though two armies were not killing each other. Lincoln explained his plans to heal the nation, and Achorn concludes that Lincoln had determined “it was time for Americans to stop thinking about self-righteousness. The only way forward was to recognize we had all been wrong and to treat each other with mercy.”

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

Our “righteousness” is what we are capable of producing. The end result of our “righteousness” is death. The end result of attempting to earn our just desserts from God via obedience to the law is death.

Thus the grand and wondrous paradox of the gospel: When we



2020 was filled with the fear of death, wasn't it? We became aware of an invisible, toxic and deadly virus that paralyzed and overwhelmed our world.

accept and embrace Jesus Christ, we surrender all of our attempts to be good enough and produce enough righteousness to earn eternal life. We die with Jesus—he dies in and with and for us—so that having died with him, we rise with him. He lives in those who seek not their own righteousness, but the righteousness of God which is through faith in Christ.

3)...becoming like him in his death...

2020 was filled with the fear of death, wasn't it? We became aware of an invisible, toxic and deadly virus that paralyzed and overwhelmed our world. In the spiritual dimension we can never make progress following Jesus unless and until we face death and

realize that our lives are in his hands.

While we cannot earn or deserve God's gifts, he does not force his grace on us. We must embrace God's grace—we must accept the invitation to follow Jesus on and in the Jesus Way.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God (Romans 6:8-10).

4)...I press on to take hold of that which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Pressing on is part of our journey in and with Christ. We have a role—we press on. Jesus Christ does not do it all for us. We continue to put one foot in front of the other as we follow Christ—we are Christ followers.

For we live by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Our 2020 adventure of following Christ was a journey of faith, and our pilgrimage in 2021 will continue our journey of faith.

We have faith for our mission as Christ-followers because Jesus Christ **took hold** of you and me. Our faith is better understood as a verb, rather than a noun. Our faith as Christ-followers is a process, not a trophy or a possession.

Our faith **pressing on to take hold** is an expedition without a physical map we can see. We cannot "take hold" of Jesus until he first "takes hold" of us. Jesus is our map. Our faith is following him.

We must look beyond the darkness of our world and our immediate circumstances and walk by faith, not by sight. As Christ-followers we always look for his Light, and while there may be more darkness than Light, he will enable us to see His Light...and be uplifted, inspired and strengthened for our ongoing journey.

5)...Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is

ahead. I press on...

When Paul tells us in Philippians 3:13 to "**forget the past**" he is not advising us to act or pretend as if the nightmare of 2020 never happened. Paul is not telling us to live in denial.

Paul is **forgetting what is behind** without denying it—Paul is looking forward in the light of the past. **Paul is forgetting what is behind and pressing on.**

...we strain toward what is ahead and press on.

Faith in Christ is being absolutely unaware of precisely where we are going, but pressing on anyway. We struggle and we strive. We put one foot in front of the other. Jesus does not do it all for us.

Paul advises that **we forget what is behind**—forget the pain and heartache. If someone else caused our suffering, forget it and press on. Forget about anger and even rage toward those who victimized us—including in some cases our anger toward God and frustration with him.

You may well have been a victim, but be careful of over-playing *the role* of victim, because *victims often never get beyond their anger and their regrets*—they just sit there, like a pot of stew simmering on the stove.

There is darkness and pain in the past and in the present—when we leave the past and the present behind and **strain toward what is ahead and press on** we focus on the light rather than the darkness—the good rather than the evil.

Resolutions for 2021

There is hope involved in hanging up a new calendar on the wall, or placing it on our desk. There is also an exhilaration involved in being liberated from all those events that happened in the year gone by.

The month of January is named for the Roman god Janus—the god of transitions and doorways, of gates and beginnings. Janus is often

depicted as having two heads—one that looks to the past and one that looks ahead to the future.

With a new calendar, we look forward to all of the months of a new year, most of them yet void of appointments, mostly clean and unadorned pages of a calendar not yet filled with places to go and people to see.

A new calendar involves retiring an old calendar. When we retire the year that has just ended, we don't pretend it never happened. In fact, sometimes it's helpful to review the year, even if it brings up bad memories. We only truly forget the past when we refuse to deny it, but instead we **strain toward what is ahead and press on.**

Our collective work here at Plain Truth Ministries and Christianity Without the Religion—the ongoing work we, by the grace of God, accomplish together—involves reaching out, bringing good news of the love, mercy and grace of God. What a beautiful and meaningful mission it is!

COVID-19 has taken a toll on our collective ministry. For many reasons, many of our Partners have had to sharpen their budgetary pencils. For understandable reasons, some have reduced and in some cases were forced to temporarily stop their donations to this ongoing work. As a ministry we in turn have tightened our belts, all the while attempting to continue serving as we have.

By God's grace, in the name of Jesus this collective ministry will **strain forward toward what is ahead and press on** in 2021. If you have not already, we invite you to join us as we **strain toward what is ahead and press on** in this New Year.

We invite you to continue to work with us, collectively, in this worldwide ministry. Jesus Christ is our Risen Lord, and he is the Great Physician. Rumor has it that our Great Physician hasn't lost anyone yet! *He is risen. He is alive. He is Lord of all!* □