

PLAIN TRUTH[®]

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

Looking into **HEAVEN:**

Who,
What,
Where
and
When?



CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION[®]

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By coming down out of heaven, Jesus established and planted the flag of the kingdom, claiming the earth for the kingdom of heaven. Once he planted the flag, the kingdom started to grow. Thus the kingdom is an ongoing kingdom—it is already, it's present. But the kingdom is also not-yet—it has a future tense.

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Dateline Bethlehem: Then and Now

Thanks to Brad Jersak for a timely and thought-provoking article about Bethlehem in the Winter 2012 issue of *Plain Truth*. I also appreciated Greg Albrecht's article "Turmoil in the Arab World" in a recent PTM e-Update. All I can say is thanks be to our God and Savior for your ministry. Since we share the same religious journey, perhaps these observations impact us more, and I want you to know this is a refreshing—and I believe—Christ-like perspective. I learned a lot, agree with it (from my own independent study and travels) and hope it reaches far and wide. PTM is a voice of compassion and peace in a troubled world.

California



Kindness of a Stranger

I loved the article by Tim Urista in the Winter issue. He captured my heart-felt reactions to the many homeless people I met when I worked in Washington, DC. When I lived there, I volunteered to cook meals on weekends at a group home for the poor and disabled—what an experience! Thanks for sharing Tim's words.

Nevada



Stop Trying to Get Saved

Thanks for Greg Albrecht's article in

the Winter *PT* "Stop Trying to Get Saved." Your work is so inspiring. I was brought up in a legalistic church and I stopped going after about 25 years. But now I live with constant guilt and I feel like I'm being torn apart by it. I want to believe that God still loves me and will never give up on me.

Texas

Your article "Stop Trying to Get Saved" uplifted me with so much hope. I haven't felt this way in a long time. This article is the best I have ever read on the topic of grace, the gospel and the good news of salvation. It is precise, cohesive and complete—a condensation of *A Taste of Grace*.

New York



All of God, All of Me

I wanted you to know that the article "All of God, All of Me" by Martin Davis was particularly helpful to me personally. I've wrestled with that dilemma often, and I still do to a degree. How amazing that even with that emptiness in Monte Wolverton's heart, he actually echoes Mr. Davis' sentiment as he credits his beloved Kayte at the conclusion of his article "23 Miles from Home." Reading "testimonials" of others who are being helped via *CWR/PTM* is very encouraging, even exciting, to me, as I'm sure it is to others and especially you and your staff.

Tennessee



Christ-Centered Compass...

The focus of my Bible study today "Eucharistéo" –literally, "thankful for God's good grace." I give thanks to Greg and everyone at PTM. The first time I

ever heard about “Christ-centered” or “Christ-focused” was from Greg Albrecht. Up until then, I was “sin-centered” and “sin-focused.” I was a sin exterminator—or so I thought.

Kentucky



“If That’s All There Is...”

Thank you to Steve Brown for your latest words in the Winter *PT*. My mom was a preacher and when she said “save your fork” that meant the best dessert was at hand! The best is yet to be, so says Jesus! Our appetites should be ready to gobble up his grace.

Nevada



500 Years and Still Searching

The Fall issue of the *Plain Truth* magazine with articles on church history was very beneficial. I hope you will print more articles on church history in future issues. Thank you!

Alabama



Forgiveness Is a Tomato Sauce Bath

Thanks to Koni Atencio for her article “Forgiveness is a Tomato Sauce Bath” in the Fall *PT*! It really hit home. Thanks for all the interesting and helpful articles you publish—keep up the good work!

Illinois



PTM Prison Outreach

I wish to thank you for the support we have received from you. The magazines, books and booklets we received from you are truly a blessing to the men here. Thank you for your faithfulness even in these difficult times. It is because of ministries such as yours that we are able to minister to almost 2,000 men here at Jackson Correctional Institution. Please continue to remember us in your prayers. We pray the Lord will continue to bless you and your ministry.

Chaplain, Florida

Thank you all at Plain Truth Ministries and praise God for the gospel you share. Thank you for all the *CWR* CDs, *Plain Truth* magazines and other materials you send me. My brother is incarcerated and I want to send him and his cell-mates *Plain Truth* materials. He does need it! Thank you for all your help!

New York



Christianity Without the Religion

My wife and I continue to pray for *CWR/PTM* and that God may continue to grant you all His wisdom to carry on this work you are doing. We appreciate the insight and guidance that your messages, articles and books provide us.

Florida

Thank you for all you have done in my life. When I first started listening to *CWR* and reading *The Plain Truth*, I was trapped in a legalistic swamp. Like so many others then and now, I drank the Kool-Aid of Christ-less religion, and I was enslaved. I truly believe God used you and your ministry to rescue me from the mess I was in. That’s why I will continue to financially support you as you help others.

New York

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MEMBER  EVANGELICAL PRESS ASSOCIATION

BY GREG ALBRECHT

Looking into **HEAVEN:**

Who,
What,
Where
and
When?



It was just another typical day at Trader Joe's, a specialty grocery store particularly well known in Southern California (though the current owners are a German family named Albrecht, no one has ever offered me the family discount). The background music inspired me to share my appreciation for "oldies-but-goodies" with one of the "older" employees. Before long we were singing the praises of the Righteous Brothers. Within a few seconds one of their songs brought heaven into our discussion!

Back in 1962 Bill Medley and Bobby Hatfield (who died in 2003) were part of a group called The Paramours (John Wimber, one of the founders of the Christian Vineyard movement, was one of the keyboardists in the group).

As they ended one performance, someone in the audience shouted, "That was righteous, brothers!"



PHOTO COURTESY OF VINEYARD RECORDS

g after, Bill Hadley and Bobby Hatfield went on to form their own duo and called themselves the Righteous Brothers.

In 1974 the Righteous Brothers recorded a tribute to deceased rock singers Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Bobby Darin, Jim Croce, Jim Morrison and Otis Redding titled "Rock and Roll Heaven." In my conversation about the "good old days" with the Trader Joe's employee this song title provided the bridge between a discussion about music and theology. Here's the recurring chorus:

*If you believe in forever
Then life is just a one night stand
If there's a rock n' roll heaven
Well you know they've got a hell of a band.*

If you feel that rock and roll is "the devil's music" and therefore object to the suggestion that there's a place in heaven for rock

and roll, you really need to keep reading.

Speaking of "the devil's music," the 1989 movie, "Great Balls of Fire," has Jimmy Swaggart, who later became a televangelist (played by Alec Baldwin), advising his cousin, Jerry Lee Lewis (portrayed by Dennis Quaid), that rock and roll is "the devil's music." But I digress.

Rock and Roll...and Baseball Too?

Of course, whether or not rock and roll music is or will be featured in the kingdom of heaven is not the only question debated about the afterlife. You may have heard the story about Bob and Luke—two guys who loved baseball and were worried that God might not think their favorite sport was important enough to be played in heaven. These two die-hard fans couldn't imagine eternal bliss without baseball games. They agreed that the first one who died would let the other one know whether celestial baseball existed.

A few years later Luke died, and within a few days Bob received an email from *baseball-luke@heaven.org*: "Bob, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that there are thousands of baseball stadiums up here jam-packed with fans. The bad news is that next weekend you are the starting pitcher for the Cloud #9 Yankees. See you real soon, your friend forever, Luke."

We all want to know whether heaven really exists. We want to know more about heaven. What is heaven like, exactly? The expectation of a heavenly afterlife is a universal belief found in virtually all religions. Humanly we long for a "better place" after death. In *Mere Christian-*

ity C.S. Lewis speculated that since humans have desires that no earthly experience can satisfy it is probable that we were made for another world.

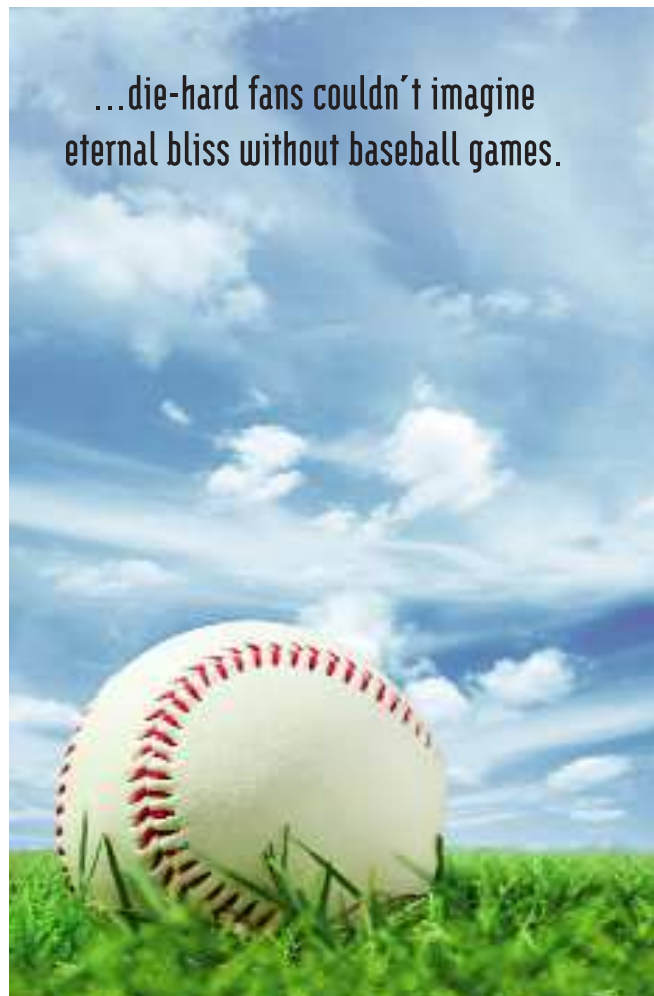
It's possible that being created in God's image (Genesis 1:27) means that we yearn for the paradise of the Garden originally given by God, but rejected by Adam and Eve. We naturally hunger for the kingdom of heaven and the Bible promises a heavenly paradise God alone can impart and confer. Beyond rock and roll and baseball, we should focus on some fundamental details of heaven—*where* and *when* is heaven?

Heaven—The Devil Just Might Be in the Details

Is heaven a *place* to which we go *when* we die? The promise of heaven has traditionally been explained as a two-step process:

- Given wide-spread Christian acceptance of the Platonic assertion of the immortality of the soul, death is normally thought of as the time when the immortal soul is released from the mor-

...die-hard fans couldn't imagine eternal bliss without baseball games.





What more can we know about heaven?
Will our pets join us?

Will we still have disabilities we have now?

What age will we be in heaven?

Will we look the same as we do now—if not,
how will we identify each other?

Will lots of people be in heaven or only those in our denomination?



Christ are resurrected, and their now resurrected, formerly mortal bodies become immortal. In some biblically unspecified way, the soul/spirit of Christ followers is reunited with their now glorified, immortal body.

What more can we know about heaven? Will our pets join us? Will we still have disabilities we have now? What age will we be *in* heaven? Will we



and steak dinners in heaven I assure them that I have it on good authority (my own) that Italian is the only cuisine served in heaven's buffet. One of the most burning

tal body—therefore heaven is felt to be a time when the soul “goes to heaven.” Theologians call this first stage the *intermediate state*. But if we base our beliefs on New Testament evidence and teaching, it's difficult to dogmatically believe in a heavenly *place or location* where disembodied immortal souls fly around waiting for angelic air traffic controllers to give them permission to land.

• However, the New Testament is clear about the widely accepted second step of heaven. At the Second Coming of Jesus, those in

look the same as we do now—if not, how will we identify each other? Will lots of people be in heaven or only those in our denomination?

According to one story making its rounds, one day Saint Peter met a new group of arrivals at the Pearly Gates and immediately put them on a bus to tour the celestial premises. Just as they prepared to pass a gated community Peter told everyone to be really quiet, because the people inside that compound thought they were the only ones in heaven!

When some of my friends want to know if they can enjoy lobster

questions I hear is—will we all be forced to take harp lessons?

Of course, many stereotypical notions of heaven are blatantly unbiblical. One of the first perspectives we must confront as we wrestle with eternity is our human sense of space and time—is the biblical heaven a *place* and a *time*?

Just as hell has come to be accepted, over many centuries, as the place or time (or both) *where/when*

I assure them that I have it on good authority (my own) that Italian is the only cuisine served in heaven's buffet. One of the most burning questions I hear is—will we all be forced to take harp lessons?



God sentences/confines those who fail to pass muster to eternal torture, popular views of heaven are equally preposterous. The prevailing idea of heaven as a place/time of blissfully enjoying an eternal

pass into a divine, glorified Disney World has no New Testament foundation. Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once said, “The Bible tells us very little about the temperature of hell, or the furniture of heaven.”

The last chapters of Revelation (Revelation 21 and 22) reveal God, at the end of human time, as transforming the heaven and earth we know into a new heaven and a new earth. The eternal Garden, paradise restored, is not described in Revelation as a trip *up* to heaven. According to the book of Revelation heaven comes *down* to earth. Just as we



can rightly reject hell as eternal torture because of its obvious incompatibility with the very nature of a loving God, so too must we examine improbable and far-fetched ideas about heaven as a *place* and *time* where angels give harp lessons to eternally bored residents.

The most appropriate and authentic way to evaluate traditional perceptions of heaven as euphoric ecstasy in the bye and bye is from a Christ-centered perspective. When Jesus spoke about eternal life he often spoke in terms of a kingdom.

Heaven as a Kingdom

Mention the word “kingdom” to the average North American adult and chances are one of the first

thoughts he or she calls to mind will be Walt Disney’s Magic Kingdom. Many pre-school and early elementary age children also interpret “kingdom” with a Disney-spin—the word causes them to think of countless Disney fantasy stories they have heard and/or seen, involving castles and forests and princes and witches and monsters. These Disney stories often depict an enchanted future enjoyed by a handsome prince and a beautiful young lady, who marry and “live happily ever after.”

But for many others, especially males between the ages of 12-30, the word “kingdom” brings to mind role-playing, interactive action-filled video games. These fantasy games can either be set in past or future kingdoms, but they normally include themes of battling forces of darkness and the adventures involved in overcoming evil and sinister powers. Warfare and combat are common denominators in such games, replete with either dungeons and dragons and weapons of a bygone era or of mythical, apocalyptic monsters and high-tech, futuristic weaponry.

Of course, those who lived in the first-century culture who heard Jesus use the word “kingdom” had no idea about Disney-like kingdom settings or of the kingdoms of video games, but they were painfully aware of kingdoms that oppressed, domineered and ruled by the sword. In the Old Testament era the kingdom of Israel (sometimes separated as the kingdom of Israel and the kingdom of Judah) was known and experienced, in the best of times and the worst of times, primarily as a physical kingdom. Kings and princes, warfare and combat, occupation and oppression, victory and defeat were all part of the story of the Old Testament people of God.

The New Testament uses the word “kingdom” as it characterizes the central message of Jesus. He came with the good news that “the kingdom of God has come near!” (Mark 1:15). The Greek word *basilea* from which our English

word “kingdom” is translated carries both the sense of an actual kingdom as well as the influence and sway of a king. Matthew’s Gospel uses the term “kingdom of heaven” while other New Testament writers use the term “kingdom of God.” In both contexts the “kingdom” is presented as:

- the sovereign rule of the Lord Jesus Christ, in whom his followers might live a kingdom life in their flesh, as well as
- a future, yet-to-be realized hope, when King Jesus returns in his Second Coming, ushering in

In John 12:24 Jesus explained that he was the seed of the kingdom, and that just as a single seed dies so that many other seeds may be produced, his death enabled much fruit to be borne.

the fullness of the kingdom, in all of its glory.

The use of the word “kingdom”—even when it was modified and explained as a kingdom like no other—had to have introduced somewhat of a barrier to those Jews who first heard and read about the gospel of the kingdom of God. The kingdom in which they lived was the Roman Empire. *Basilea* for them could only mean the ironic *Pax Romana* (the peace of Rome) of Augustus, established in 27 B.C.

Romans understood the peace of Rome as a time when warfare had ceased largely because Roman legions had brutally defeated any and all adversaries so that potential enemies had no will or wherewithal to do anything other than submit. Most Romans enjoyed the peace of Rome and understood the idea of *basilea*/kingdom/empire from a positive perspective. But for those, like the Jews to whom Jesus first came, whose country became occupied and oppressed under *Pax Romana*, the proclamation of a *basilea*/kingdom/empire only meant servitude and tyranny. For that reason, Jesus did not merely proclaim a kingdom but the kingdom *of God and from heaven*. The kingdom *of/from* God and *of/from* heaven is a kingdom like no other!

The Kingdom—Small, Insignificant and Already Here

But again, we ask, *when and where* is the kingdom of/from God/heaven? In Mark 1:15 Jesus said *“the kingdom of God has come near.”* Since the death and resurrection of Jesus the precise nature of the kingdom of God and the exact time of its arrival has been the object of endless speculation among Christians.

Have you ever looked for your missing car keys, only to find, after a long and fruitless search filled with stress and anxiety, that they

were in your pocket, or in the ignition of your car? You may have looked all around the house for your hat only to find it sitting right there on your head. It was there all the while, even while you frantically searched for it. Thomas Merton, one of the most influential Christian authors of the 20th century, once said that apart from God, human perception of the kingdom of God is somewhat like a person riding on an ox looking for an ox.

Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is in your midst” (Luke 17:20-21).

One obvious interpretation of this passage is that the kingdom of heaven had already come, and continues to be present in our world, through Jesus, the King of the kingdom, our risen Lord. In Christ, the rule and dominion of God was already being displayed.

He came bringing the gospel, the good news which proclaimed the kingdom of heaven. Just as the gospel of Jesus is one and the same as the person of Jesus, the kingdom of heaven is synonymous with the life of our Lord and Sav-

ior. He brought the kingdom with him. The kingdom did not die at his crucifixion, for he rose from the dead, and is very much alive and present in our world in the lives of those who believe in him and trust on him.

The kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, as it is called in Matthew, was frequently described and discussed by Jesus. In John 12:24 Jesus explained that he was the seed of the kingdom, and that just as a single seed dies so that many other seeds may be produced, his death enabled much fruit to be borne. The seed planted by the King of the kingdom has continued to grow for almost 20 centuries. Many of the parables of Jesus are about the kingdom—here’s one of the kingdom parables:

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches” (Matthew 13:31-32).

Jesus introduced this parable with a formula common to many of his kingdom parables: *“the kingdom of heaven is like.”* Interpretations of the parable of the mustard seed can become sidetracked with commentary that reveals the “shocking” reality that there are seeds smaller than a mustard seed. Other interpreters, who also miss the point, explain that while there are many forms of mustard plants, none grow into what we would call a tree.

But the parable of the mustard seed is a parable, not a botanical lecture. Parables, as a teaching method, do not invite specific, mi-

crossopic examination of each word picture—parables are stories that provide one or perhaps two major lessons and insights. The constituent parts of parables are normally incidental—they are stage settings that create the mood and the background so that the story can be told.

Jesus did not tell stories so that his followers could write horticultural and agricultural instruction manuals. So let's

first of all deal with the trivia that some make the primary focus of this parable: 1) Yes, there are seeds that are smaller than mustard seeds and 2) No, mustard seeds do not grow into trees.

Now, let's consider the teaching point of this parable. Jesus used the mustard

Jesus used the mustard seed as a symbol of the kingdom, in that the mustard seed was a known example of something that started small and became large... In the kingdom of religion bigger is better, but according to the values of the King and his kingdom, small is beautiful.

seed as a symbol of the kingdom, in that *the mustard seed was a known example of something that started small and became large.* That's the point Jesus makes in this parable—the kingdom of heaven starts small and becomes larger.

Jesus was telling his disciples, and you and me, to be content with being small. Jesus said that when it comes to the kingdom of heaven, size and numbers don't matter!

But according to the kingdom of religion, small is spiritually inconsequential, whereas large is meaningful and relevant.

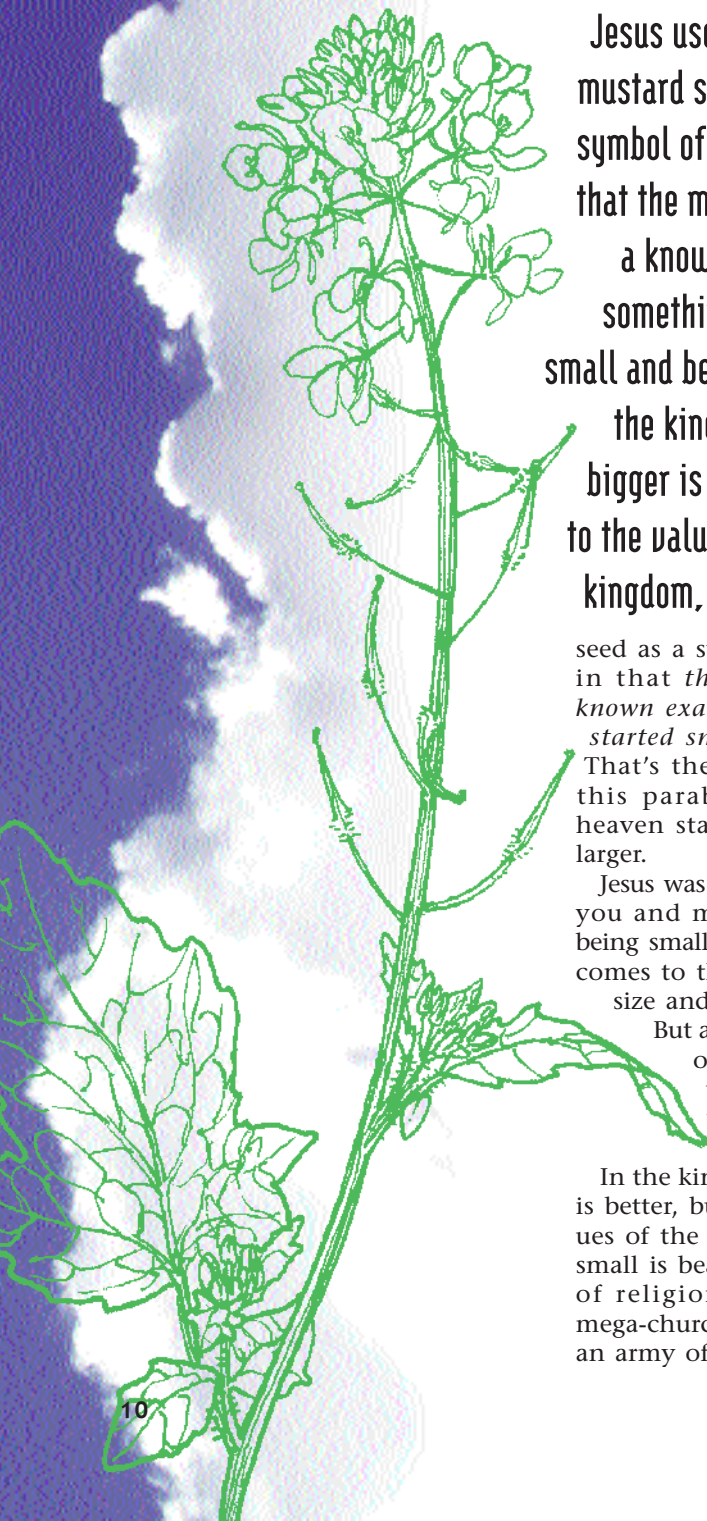
In the kingdom of religion bigger is better, but according to the values of the King and his kingdom, small is beautiful. In the kingdom of religion big cathedrals and mega-church parking lots requiring an army of attendants is desirable.



Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is present where only two or three are gathered together (Matthew 18:20). Big business religion scorns the small and admires the large. Size matters in the kingdom of religion.

Jesus was born in a backwater village. He spent much of his time with nobodies who were believed to be unimportant and inconsequential. His main message was the kingdom of God, yet much to the dismay of the Jews whose land was occupied and whose lives were oppressed by Rome, the kingdom Jesus started didn't appear to even make a dent in the military armor of Rome.

Jesus and his ministry was so small that it would have seemed to any observer who lived at the time that he and his little kingdom were defeated by Rome. So at the end of Jesus' earthly life it appeared that size and power and all of its trappings mattered most, because it was the Roman Empire that defeated King Jesus and his fledgling kingdom of heaven. But the mustard seed of the kingdom was still growing, undetected by most.



God Grows the Kingdom

In addition to asking *when/where* about the kingdom of heaven, it's helpful to remember *how*. It might seem obvious, but *how* exactly does the mustard seed of the kingdom grow? The kingdom of God, in the person of Jesus, was within the midst of those who first heard and experienced Jesus. And as Christ lives his life in us today, the kingdom of heaven is within us. The kingdom of heaven is everywhere—hiding in plain sight. But *how* does it happen—*how* does it grow?

Some assert that they and their efforts can “grow the kingdom.” No human grows the kingdom. Jesus planted the kingdom—it's doing just fine, thank you very much. The only spiritual kingdom that humans can “grow” is the kingdom of religion.

The kingdom of God grows because Jesus planted it and the kingdom grows as he determines, according to God's plan. In that regard, the kingdom of God is a mystery to humans, because it defies our predictions. It grows outside of churches that attempt to hoard it and control it and it grows inside of churches that attempt to uproot the kingdom, in favor of their own kingdom.

If the kingdom of God could have taken over the entire world by people carefully studying the Bible, or by people evangelizing the world, or by people marching to the drum beat of religion—then the kingdom of God would have completely overgrown the entire solar system by now.

The ultimate success of the salvation of the world has not been assigned to human beings—God will take care of that—in fact, he already has. As intoxicating as the notion may be, we Christ-followers must beware of the presumption that God exclusively depends on our efforts to save the world. The kingdom of heaven has been planted, by Jesus, God in the flesh. He himself is the seed that gave its own life that much fruit could

come out of it (John 12:24). The kingdom of heaven has leavened this world. Jesus' sacrificial death caused the kingdom to grow:

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (John 12:32).

For several centuries Christians had no idea of an institutional church with buildings and treasuries and hierarchies. When Constantine declared the Roman Empire to be one and the same as the kingdom of God, Rome became the Holy City. Grand cathedrals were constructed and dedicated “to the glory of God.” The Roman Empire redefined Christianity. Christians were no longer defined as pilgrims here on earth and citizens of heaven—they were now identified as citizens of an organized, politicized, polarized, militaristic, materialistic and blood-letting earthly kingdom. Doctrinal creeds that dictated conformity of belief became the standard of membership and citizenship rather than belief in Jesus Christ.

As we fast-forward to 21st century Christendom, we can see that many identify themselves as the kingdom of God, and rather than glorifying God as he grows his kingdom in the world at large, they draw a boundary around who they are and what they practice and believe. They and their group effec-

tard seed limited by someone's theological garden or field.

Jesus didn't say that the kingdom would be contained in a church building or confined by denominational dogmas and doctrines. Jesus never hinted that the kingdom of heaven was limited to those who believed in certain doctrines or those who practiced the “right” things and avoided the “wrong” things.

The kingdom of God is for everyone and grows everywhere for the simple reason that God doesn't march to the music religion composes and performs. It is impossible to build a fence around or put God into a denominational box. Jesus was resisted and rejected by religion because according to the religion of his day, and its leadership, he didn't look or sound religious.

Religion at the time of Jesus, and religion ever since (religion today) is looking for a different kind of kingdom than the one Jesus planted. The kingdom remains hidden to Christ-less religion because it is simply looking in all the wrong places.

Christ-less religion is looking for a kingdom it can help establish, by its missionaries, by its religious activities and hard work—but the kingdom does not need human efforts to grow.

The kingdom of God grows best

By contrast with God's gracious kingdom of heaven, the creeds and beliefs of institutionalized Christendom about heaven amount to spiritual Prozac, intended to keep its converts assured of eternal bliss as long as they keep popping religiously prescribed pills and potions.

tively attempt to monopolize the kingdom of God as they believe it to be primarily, if not solely, present within their institution and its creeds, doctrines and distinctives.

This belief is a travesty and blatant corruption of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The mustard seed is small, and it remains relatively small for a long time. The mustard seed's growth is not spectacular. Neither is the growth of the mus-

when humans don't get in its way. The kingdom of God is here—already—although as far as much of institutionalized religion is concerned, it might as well be hiding—and it is hiding in plain sight.

The kingdom of God, heaven on earth now and heaven in its future fullness, when it comes down to this earth, is never as neat and tidy as Christ-less religion would prefer. Many discover that just when they

By coming down out of heaven, Jesus established and planted the flag of the kingdom. Jesus claimed the earth for the kingdom of heaven and he purchased it with his blood. Once he planted the flag the kingdom started to grow. Thus the kingdom is an ongoing kingdom—it is already, it's present. But the kingdom is also not-yet—it has a future tense.

thought they had "heaven" all nailed down, the more they search and study the teachings of Jesus the more his perspectives about the kingdom of heaven mess up their fairy-tale mythic kingdom of heaven.

Some realize that the narrow, exclusive view they once had of heaven, as consisting of only those who were a part of their denomination, is preposterous when they embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ. They discover that God's amazing grace rocks their rosy, comfortable view of heaven. God's amazing grace becomes God's exasperating, unpredictable and even scandalous grace, from a human viewpoint.

By contrast with God's gracious kingdom of heaven, the creeds and beliefs of institutionalized Christendom about heaven can amount to spiritual Prozac, intended to keep its converts assured of eternal bliss as long as they keep popping religiously prescribed pills and potions. The carrot of heaven is used by some religious professionals as yet another control mechanism in return for loyalty and obedience.

The Not-Yet, All-Encompassing, Universal Kingdom

Even though the kingdom of heaven is already here, even though it is thriving in the hearts and souls of men and women everywhere, it obviously doesn't cover every part of our world yet—we still live in the midst of suffering,



**"Galaxies revolve and dinosaurs breed and rain falls and people fall in love and uncles smoke cheap cigars and people lose their jobs and we all die—all (that's what it says, "all") for our good, the finished product, God's work of art, the kingdom of heaven. Earth is not outside heaven, it is heaven's workshop, heaven's womb."
—Peter Kreeft,
*Heaven: The Heart's
Deepest Longing***

heartache, hatred, warfare and evil of all descriptions.

Human beings still live with ignorance and superstition—not to mention the fear, shame and guilt caused by Christ-less religion. Rough, rugged places and crooked paths still remain (Isaiah 40:3-4) but when the mustard seed is fully grown:

...the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).

The kingdom of God is the reign of God, characterized by God's grace, love, peace, mercy and justice. The kingdom of God is not physically located—it is a Divine dynamic that is always growing in the hearts and souls of men and women. It is not somewhere as opposed to not being another place. The kingdom of God is not like a medieval kingdom located in a castle—protected by high walls, a moat and a drawbridge. The kingdom of God is not *in* heaven—it is *from* heaven.

Jesus, God in the flesh, the King of the kingdom, came down to this world *from* heaven and in his flesh proclaimed the good news of the kingdom. Jesus came down *from* heaven, bringing the kingdom of heaven with him, living with us and among us as one of us. Then, after his resurrection, Jesus started to live his life in his followers. He is *with* us, *in* us and *for* us!

By coming down out of heaven, Jesus established and planted the flag of the kingdom. Jesus claimed the earth for the kingdom of heaven and he purchased it with his blood. Once he planted the flag the kingdom started to grow. Thus the kingdom is an ongoing kingdom—it is already, it's present. But the kingdom is also not-yet—it has a future tense.

The not-yet kingdom will also come down to this earth *from* heaven, in the person of Jesus, in his Second Coming. The not-yet kingdom is described in Revelation as new heavens and a new earth, in which all things are made new. The Bible insists that out of his love for us God, in Christ, became a human being, one of us. Jesus didn't diminish life here on earth. He didn't speak of the ultimate goal of his followers as "going to

heaven." The kingdom was already here, on earth.

At the end of time as we know it, when God makes all things new in the not-yet kingdom, he will not take us away from the earth, but he will instead bring heaven down to earth.

The kingdom of heaven is God's grand masterpiece of art, a work he has planned and continues to work on, throughout all time.

Each of us are part of that great work of art—we are the clay he, the Master Potter, is fashioning (Isaiah 64:8). We are saved by grace for works, so that we can become his *handiwork* (Ephesians 2:10).

God's work now, and God's work then—already and not-yet, is earth-centered. Commenting on how *in all things God works for the good of those who love him...* (Romans 8:28) Peter Kreeft, in *Heaven—The Heart's Deepest Longing* says, "Galaxies revolve and dinosaurs breed and rain falls and people fall in love and uncles smoke cheap cigars and people lose their jobs and we all die—all (that's what it says, "all") for our good, the finished product, God's work of art, the kingdom of heaven. Earth is not outside heaven, it is heaven's workshop, heaven's womb."

The kingdom of God, the kingdom which comes *down* from heaven, is the foundation of God's work of grace here on earth. We don't, through our efforts to evangelize, "build" or "grow" the kingdom.

Religious institutions don't create, build or bring about the kingdom here on earth. God alone can do that. Humans are invited to personally embrace his kingdom, to accept his invitation to live in his kingdom forever—but this one thing remains—he and he alone brings about the kingdom.

In Jesus, God brought the already-here kingdom *from* heaven to this earth. When God sent the law, he sent a human being. But Moses didn't establish the kingdom at Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments. When God sent

grace and truth, he delivered it himself. Jesus, God in the flesh, came personally, establishing the kingdom.

When God brings the not-yet kingdom to this earth he will also bring it in and through Jesus—the new Jerusalem, the new heavens and the new earth will come down *from* heaven. You and I can say with all assurance that we are *now* living in the kingdom of God. We are now experiencing, by God's grace, the already-here kingdom of God.

We can also believe, with all our hearts, that we will experience the fullness of the not-yet kingdom, when it descends from heaven—when the King of the kingdom makes all things new—when the heavens and this earth are made new.

A Place and A Time?

So, is heaven a place and a time? Yes and no. Yes, the already-here dimension of the kingdom of heaven is definitely a place and a time. It is here, now. No, the already-here dynamic of God's kingdom is not confined by physical boundaries. It is not somewhere at the expense of being in another location. The already-here kingdom of heaven is a Divine dynamic.

Yes, the not-yet dimension of the kingdom of heaven will exist in time, in the future tense (as humans experience time) and space. The coming kingdom of/from heaven will be earth-centered, integrating the eternity of heaven with our planet earth. The book of Revelation describes this conflation of heaven coming to earth as new heavens and a new earth. The not-yet kingdom of God will be "inhabited" by residents who have been given resurrection bodies. Citizens of the kingdom are not disembodied spirits. The not-yet coming kingdom will be an incorruptible temporality.

Does this mean that we, once given immortal resurrected bodies will perceive the flow of time—before, now and after? Will we

We don't know all the specifics, but as long as our speculations are Christ-centered, and as long as we refuse to accept or enforce dogmatic details about heaven, we are free in Christ to imagine and dream and hope.

sense and experience location—going here and going there?

We don't know all the specifics, but as long as our speculations are Christ-centered, and as long as we refuse to accept or enforce dogmatic details about heaven, we are free in Christ to imagine and dream and hope.

One day God will inaugurate the fullness of his kingdom on this earth—it will come down *from* heaven—he will make all things new. The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever. In the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15-24) Jesus uses the imagery of eating and drinking to depict the joy experienced when the kingdom comes down *from* heaven.

The book of Revelation tells us that we are invited to the great banquet, the wedding supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9). While the Bible doesn't give us precise details about the specific menu, nor of the sumptuous desserts (will it be okay to call heavenly pastries "sinful?"), we can safely assume that as good as the kingdom might be right now, *...no eye has seen...no ear has heard...no human mind has conceived the things God has prepared for those who love him...* (1 Corinthians 2:9). □



Heaven—More than a Memory

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

Somewhere beyond the blue there's a mansion for me. Those lyrics, sung at vacation Bible school, rang through my consciousness as a child. I was at times almost obsessed with heaven, looking up into the blue sky and imagining that, beyond the puffy cumulous clouds, there were heavenly mansions.

Heaven is not so real to me now as it was then. I am a spatial person; I hover over maps and amateur astronomical charts. I want to know where things are. Where, I ask, amid the millions of light years of space is the geography of heaven? There almost seems to be no real estate to be had for such a paradise—a tropical terrain of rivers and rain forests and meadows and mansions.

Many centuries ago before the scientific revolution, heaven was just outside the dome covering the earthly terrain. But as the galaxies have grown in numbers and size, the location of heaven has interestingly moved closer to home. The earth itself, many argue, will one day be restored to its primal perfection, and heaven will be right here on the third rock from the sun.

It is difficult for me to situate the whole of heaven here on earth. Will lightning strikes and hurricanes simply stop? Will perpetual sunshine compete with rain to nourish weed-free flower gardens? I cannot wrap my mind around such concepts. Theological constructs do not help, nor do ninety minutes of someone's post-operative experience—or hallucination, whatever the case may be.

For me, heaven is at least partly memory—even as is hell. Where exactly Adolf Hitler is at this very moment is beyond my understanding, apart from the fact that his decayed body and bones lie somewhere in Europe. There is no doubt, however, that Hitler is in hell—at least in the collective memory of most people who have ever

heard of him, there with Stalin and dozens of other despicable dictators and an assortment of terrorists, most notably Osama bin Laden.

In the same sense, my mother is surely in heaven. So also, Myra Jean, my husband's second dearly departed wife who was a friend of mine. How often our memories of her surface and find sanctuary in a heavenly realm far beyond our knowing. She is there and she is here and we will never forget. Our memories in the form of tender mercies surround her in this indefinable heavenly sanctuary.

But heaven for me is more than memory. I go back to my childhood and find heaven in song, particularly in the hymns we sang in the little country church that nourished my faith. *Shall We Gather at the River* was a favorite, as was the last verse of *Amazing Grace*:

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
bright shining as the sun.*

*We've no less days to sing God's praise than
when we've first begun.*

Spirituals also speak to the heart and bring the reality of heaven home. *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot* carries the believer to heaven on a joy-ride reminiscent of the prophet Elijah. *There is a Balm in Gilead* also draws from the Old Testament. The balm is to heal the "sin-sick soul"—healed so that "One of these mornings bright and fair, I'm gonna lay down my heavy load." Heaven for the slave was often equated with freedom—freedom on the other shore...of the Ohio River.

My favorite gospel song of heaven is Ralph Stanley's *Going Up Home to Live in Green Pastures*. Recently on the *Prairie Home Companion*, Garrison Keillor added some new phrases, one of which truly brings heaven home in terms of tender mercies:

*Even the Lord, in shorts and a T-shirt,
sits on the shore enjoying the breeze. □*

—Ruth A. Tucker

I want to know where things are. Where, I ask, amid the millions of light years of space is the geography of heaven?



You Only Get One Shot...

Have you heard about the worship leader who overslept and failed to show up for the Easter sunrise service at his church? The next year, the pastor called him Easter morning at 4 a.m. and said... "Jesus is risen! You had better too!"

I remember the first Easter Sunday I realized that Jesus was alive. It wasn't as powerful as the disciples' realization but, for a peon like me, it was close.

I was a young pastor in theological graduate school at Boston University and served a small church on Cape Cod to pay the bills. All winter, in that little church, we had struggled to get by. Cape Cod winters can be brutal and the people of New England are not known for putting church attendance at the top of their list of important things to do.

All winter we had worked to get people to church with very little success. That had a negative impact on our paying the bills and on me. I began to think that God had not called me to this.

I had made a lot more money doing a morning radio show in Boston and, while I was willing to work for less, it began to look like the church wouldn't even be able to pay me.

Then Easter!

I was in my little study (so small that if I sneezed, I caught my own cold) and heard some noise outside the door. I opened it and to my astonishment, the ushers were moving chairs from the church parlor and the Sunday school rooms into the sanctuary. "What are you doing?" I asked. They explained that it was Easter and Easter meant big crowds.

Now that really ticked me off! I decided to change my sermon to one on hell with the addendum, "that's where you're going and I'm glad."

That was when the church janitor (Ralph Richardson, who died a couple of years ago and adds a big attraction to heaven) came into my study without knocking, picked up on how angry I was, and said, "Pastor, you only get one shot at these people, so don't screw it up."

Then he left, softly closing the door behind him. I didn't leave. But I would have if Jesus had not shown up. Ralph was a good and wise man, but his words weren't enough. After he left, I started thinking about Easter and about a dead man getting out of a grave.

Maybe for the first time in my life, it hit me that Jesus was alive. And not only was he alive, he was right there in that little study and would be there in the service when I preached to the sinners who only came to church once a year.

That changed everything, and it still does!

There's something about Easter that makes a bad day good, a cynic wish for something better, and the sinful hopeful. Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 15, "And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain....and you are still in your sins....If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

That's why I like Easter. It's that time of year when I turn from religious nonsense, cliches and pretense. If you're a "religious professional," you know there is a lot of that sort of thing. Easter is the time when I sit back and review the basics...well...uh...the basic. A cold, dead corpse got out of a grave and said I could too.

If Jesus is a dead leader to be honored each year on the anniversary of his birth or death, leave me out. There

A cold, dead corpse got out of a grave and said I could too.

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he asked me...

are a lot of graves around filled with very important people and I don't need another one. Paul said that if Jesus was still in the grave, we were to be pitied.

Why is that? Because it would mean that there was nothing and "men must work and women must weep, and the sooner it's over, the sooner to sleep."

Did you hear about the man who threatened to jump off the 20-story building? He wouldn't talk to anyone but his pastor. The pastor was called and crawled out on the ledge with the man. They started talking. After about an hour and half of this, they joined hands...and both jumped.

Sorry. But frankly, if Jesus is dead, there really isn't any meaning to this whole thing. Do the best you can—or not—and then you die.

Paul also said that if Jesus was a "remembered statesman and teacher" instead of a risen Messiah, we were still in our sins. That may not seem like a big deal, but it's the key to everything else. God is holy and as the Christian song says, "everything is holy now." That's fine except when you come to the realization that you are not holy...not even close. Where do you go with that?

Jesus said to the prostitute in Luke 7 that her sins were forgiven. He says that to us too. If we're forgiven, we're free. If we're free, we're his, and that changes everything.

I don't have to be driven by guilt and shame. I was driven before, but now I'm drawn...drawn to Jesus who says, "I don't care where you've been or what you're doing, come to me. Your sins are forgiven." Good Friday, if Jesus was God, always leads to Easter Sunday for him...and for you and me.

"He is risen! He is risen indeed!"
"Jesus is risen and you had better too!"

Better: "Jesus is risen and you are risen too!"

He asked me to remind you! □

—Steve Brown

THE PLAIN TRUTH



Your Mileage May Vary

Miles-per-gallon claims are as important in selling cars as reports of miracle cures are in the vitamin and supplement business. In 2006 the Environmental Protection Agency updated test methods used to produce “estimated” gas mileage. At one time, attempting to achieve unbelievable results, it seemed to me that manufacturers who claimed inflated miles-per-gallon results must have put the specific model in question on a treadmill, with the tires moving and the engine either idling or not running at all. In time “*your mileage may vary*” (often appearing in small print) became the standard disclaimer to guard against any critics saying that some of these estimates were merely bald-faced lies.

Your mileage may vary can be a grace-filled, Christ-centered reminder as Christ followers discuss specific “results” and experiences with others. **For example**—a parent is comparing notes with another parent about their teenagers: “We were having trouble with our son, but when we finally started the XYZ program/rules/approach, our relationship really improved, but I realize *your mileage may vary*.” In such a conversation, a parent expresses humility, a primary attribute of life in Christ, and thus avoids a pride-filled, it’s-all-about-me conclusion. *Your mileage may vary* can be a gracious way to express the reality that **life in Christ is not a one-size-fits-all experience**.

Your mileage may vary is a way of remaining sensitive to the actual experiences others have that differ from our own. **For example**—a woman is telling her best friend about the joy she and her husband have about his dramatic improvement in health: “My husband was told he only had three months to live, so we prayed, fasted and started making our own carrot juice. Carrot juice was virtually the only thing he ate or drank for three months. We know carrot juice may not work for everyone, and we don’t know how much the carrot juice helped. But we do thank God for healing him!” Such a joyous

story (in some faith traditions it’s called a “praise report” but that phrase gives me the heebie-jeebies) includes a sensitive disclaimer, allowing that others may not experience similar results. Of course, conclusions reached about the exact relationship between God’s healing and the imbibing of umpteen gallons of pulverized carrots is highly subjective.

When we tell others stories of our own lives, it is helpful to remember that our reports are anecdotal. Stories are not incontrovertible evidence because they are not documented, tested proof. Stories are subjective and biased. By their very nature, stories are “testimonies” (in my opinion, another overused word bandied about in some circles within Christendom). The results experienced through testimonies/stories/first-hand accounts are not guaranteed to be repeated in every circumstance. A personal experience in one person’s life is not a certified warranty that similar actions in the life of another will produce similar results. *Your mileage may vary*.

Over eleven years ago, when we first discovered that my wife, Karen, had cancer, we frantically searched out all of our options. Before Karen determined to have surgery, we researched many alternative methods. In virtually every case, we found that alternative methods of healing invariably include a testimonial. **For example**—“Joe from Buffalo came to our clinic with the latest test result from his doctors. The doctors only gave him six weeks to live. Joe started on our program of apricot seeds/kelp/miracle berries from the jungles of Brazil/volcanic ash from a holy mountain in Japan (you get the idea) and three weeks later he went home. He was completely cured. His doctors couldn’t believe it!”

In my experience many people, when sharing some incredibly good news, neglect to include *your mileage may vary*—or some similar thought. A friend was telling me about an experience he had when he felt God blessed him with a new job after he had taken certain steps recommended to him by

a religious professional. Without discounting God's role in helping him land the job, I told him that I would be more comfortable hearing others share their good news giving God the credit without categorically insisting that God performed a miracle. As we share good news that has happened in our lives I believe Christ followers will minimize the alleged contribu-

I believe we must always make it about God—not about something we did or said. I also believe that we should never infer that if others carefully follow our actions, God will provide exactly the same results for them.

tion of all the stuff they did to the astounding result which they are enjoying. It seems to me that Christ-followers will normally offer some kind of disclaimer, such as: *"Your mileage may vary."*

When I shared this perspective with my friend he nodded politely, but his eyes told me that he was disappointed I did not believe that God gave him a blessing after he obeyed a religious professional. So I attempted to clarify: "I believe that God can do anything he wants whenever he wants to, and I always want to give him the credit, but I think we should be careful about dogmatically claiming that God did something when we are not absolutely certain that he did. I believe we must *always* make it about God—not about something we did or said. I also believe that we should never infer that if others carefully follow our actions, God will provide exactly the same results for them."

We can't take God into the laboratory and do clinical trials so that we can accurately predict "results." Many humans prefer to think they

can program God to act in a predictable manner, yielding calculable results. God isn't, as has often been said, a cosmic vending machine who dispenses exactly the outcome we want when we insert the right amount of good deeds.

If we believe God blessed us in a particular way, I don't believe he wants us to proudly place a bumper sticker on our car: *"Ask me how God blessed me. He'll do the same for you!"* Be sensitive, discreet and grace-filled when you share your good news. Allow for the wisdom expressed by John Lennon: *"Life is what happens when you're making other plans."*

I don't want to take away the joy from anyone as they share their own story of how they believe God intervened in their life. Because there is no guarantee that others, even if they retrace the exact steps taken by the person who is overjoyed with a particular blessing, will receive the same results, it is imperative to always qualify the joy we share by expressing a sensitivity to the differing experiences that others have. *Your mileage may vary.*

Another friend was telling me about the experience he and his wife were enduring. They prayed and prayed and prayed. Many friends, neighbors and family members joined them in prayer. They prayed for healing of a particular kind of cancer his wife was suffering. They pursued all of the medical procedures that were recommended by those they chose to consult. Just this morning I talked to my friend again, and after years of prayers and therapy and prescriptions and many visits and stays in the hospital, the cancer is still there. They have seen no progress whatsoever. Still, my friend's wife has faith in God, and without using it as a cliché, which it can easily become, she realizes that her life is in God's hands. She is at peace with that. She knows that *her mileage may vary.*

I realize that there are pied pipers of religion who will assure

you that God will always act and react in humanly predictable ways, and therefore, our relationship with him is always all about us and our virtuous efforts and deeds. But the fact is that our relationship with God is a little more complicated than that. It's all about him and his love for us. And we don't always know, in any given situation, how he will express his love to us. Just as we always know exactly what we want, God always knows exactly what we need.

If you follow the yellow brick road prescribed by some religious guru and stay on the prescribed path, and even if you successfully avoid the big bad wolf, you still may not always live "happily ever after."

There are many variables in this journey of life. The woods are pretty and beguiling and the truth is that there are many big bad wolves out there. Some of them promise us anything and everything, in the name of God, if we will just get on board with their specific program.

God does not relegate each and every one of us to a one-size-fits-all life experience.

Because he loves each of us in our individual circumstances and predicaments, **God does not relegate each and every one of us to a one-size-fits-all life experience.**

By God's grace I have finally, now in my "senior" status (attested to by my Medicare card) come to realize God acts uniquely in every person's life. I believe God is acting, apart from my knowledge, in the lives of many who most of us would not consider to have an "in" with God.

Mileage varies. How and when, how fast and how slowly God works in novel ways in the lives of everyone is his business and his business alone. *My mileage will vary.* So will yours. □

—Greg Albrecht

THE KING WHO SERVES



BY MARTIN DAVIS

When you think of God, what words come to mind? Many visualize God by using mighty and powerful words like “Almighty,” “Holy” or “Majestic.” Others may think of God as Lord, King or Sovereign Ruler of the Universe. Some may conceive of God in the “omni” language of the theologian, where God is depicted as “omnipotent” (all-powerful), “omniscient” (all-knowing) and “omnipresent” (everywhere present). To be sure, all these words accurately describe God.

At the beginning of the Passover meal, Jesus shocked his disciples by wrapping a towel around his waist and taking a basin of water (John 13:4,5). Then he started to wash their feet.

However, as we focus on the unique work of God in the person of Jesus, he reveals himself as a humble servant.

In his letter to the church at Philippi (Philippians 2:5-8), the apostle Paul admonishes his readers to be humble and unselfish. He instructs them to consider others better than themselves, looking not only to their own interests, but also to the interests of others. He reinforces his teaching by



Perhaps there is no better time than Easter to lay the heavy burdens of religion at the foot of the cross and to yield to the grace of our risen Lord, who will enable us to serve God and neighbor.

drawing upon the example of Jesus Christ, instructing his readers “to have the same mindset,” an attitude that Paul describes in terms of “servanthood.”

Paul asserts that, though Jesus Christ was equal with God, he took the form or nature of a “servant.” Paul dares to write that Jesus Christ, the divine One who was co-equal with God, *humbled* himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross.

As post-resurrection Christians

Paul asserts that, though Jesus Christ was equal with God, he took the form or nature of a “servant”... humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross.

reflected on Jesus’ startling claims, they came to the staggering realization that God had been present among them in the person of Jesus Christ. In the fourth century, in re-

sponse to heretical attacks on the nature of the Son of God, the church fathers precisely articulated the New Testament witness to the Father-Son relation by asserting that Jesus Christ is “of one nature or being” with the Father; that is, Jesus is “God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God.”

God in the Flesh Who Stoops to Serve

The “upper room,” at the beginning of the final Passover meal

shared by Jesus and his disciples (John 13:1) was the setting for one of the great New Testament teachings about humility. At this time and place Jesus embodied and

modeled a life of service. In the time of Jesus, it was customary for guests arriving at a meal or banquet to have their feet washed by a household servant. In those days, nothing like modern garbage collection or sewer systems existed. Household waste of all kinds was merely thrown out into the street. The roads were either dusty or muddy and littered with the droppings of sheep, oxen, horses and other animals.

Because they wore open leather sandals bound with thongs, guests arriving at a banquet needed to wash their feet before entering their host’s home. In wealthier households, this menial task was typically performed by the lowest-level servant.

At the beginning of the Passover meal, Jesus shocked his disciples by wrapping a towel around his waist and taking a basin of water (John 13:4,5). Then he started to wash

their feet. Given the conditions of the roads and by-ways in those days, foot-washing was an unpleasant task. No one other than a servant would think of washing someone else's feet. In the upper room, however, Jesus reversed worldly ideas about relegating service to a low-level servant by washing his disciples' feet and drying them with the towel around his waist.

We must realize that the one who stoops to wash the disciples' feet is no mere itinerant teacher of note who left us an inspiring example of self-abnegating love. Rather, in the washing of the disciples' feet recorded in the gospel of John, we see *God incarnate*—the one through and for whom the universe was created and in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:16,17; Hebrews 1:2,3)—stooping to wash the dirty, smelly feet of his astonished disciples.

Greatness Measured as Service

Soon after he finished washing their feet, Jesus explained to his disciples that he set them an "example" of service (John 13:15). Moments later, he says:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34,35).

In the upper room, Jesus instructed his disciples to love one another *as he had loved them*. As they followed their Master's example of service through self-giving love, the world came to know them as his disciples.

Jesus' command to serve one another ran contrary to the wrong-headed ideas his disciples held about greatness in the Kingdom of God. At one point in Jesus' ministry, two of his disciples, the brothers James and John, betrayed their complete misunderstanding of the nature of Jesus' messianic mission by daring to ask to sit in the places of honor next to him, one on the right and the other on the left, when Jesus assumed his

"glorious throne" (Mark 10:35-37, NLT).

Because the other disciples were indignant when they heard what James and John had asked, Jesus called his ragged band together and explained to them how greatness was measured in the Kingdom of God. Teaching them not to be like the Gentile rulers who "lord it over" their subjects, Jesus said:

...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and

Jesus describes greatness in terms of service to others. His measure of greatness is diametrically opposed to contemporary ideas of "success" measured in terms of possessions, power, and prestige.

whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

Jesus describes greatness in terms of service to others. His measure of greatness is diametrically opposed to contemporary ideas of "success" measured in terms of possessions, power and prestige.

Love, Not Religious Duty

As he continued to address his disciples in the upper room on the night before his death, Jesus affirmed, *"If you love me, keep my commands....Whoever has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me"* (John 14:15, 21).

Earlier in his ministry, when asked to name the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus succinctly declared:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:36-40).

Jesus subsumed the teachings of the entire Old Testament (the Law and the Prophets) under the rubric of "love," casting obedience to the Law in the form of love for God and neighbor. Therefore, for Jesus, obedience is *relational*; obedience is

love expressed in our lives as it is produced by the risen Lamb of God.

In religion, however, obedience is measured in terms of human performance generated by human power and ability, rather than in terms of the love of God, which produces the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). Religion demands obedience based on human performance, filled to the brim with rules and regulations, so that

discipleship becomes a burden grievous to be borne in order to please a demanding God—or a demanding pastor, congregation, or small group.

Contrary to the cumbersome burdens of religion, Jesus' commands are not an onerous burden of legalistic rules and regulations that bend us with guilt when inevitably we stumble under their heavy load. Nor is the love Jesus commands mere muscular imitation of his example, for Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to empower us to follow his example of love (see John 14:16,17).

Perhaps there is no better time than Easter to lay the heavy burdens of religion at the foot of the cross and to yield to the grace of our risen Lord, who will enable us to serve God and neighbor.

Jesus said, *"Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends"* (John 15:13). At Golgotha, just outside Jerusalem, God poured out his heart in love for his creation, taking away the sin of the world (see John 1:29). At Easter, as we ponder the Cross of Christ, we note that it is the perfect symbol of love. □

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baking, a king going to war, a king settling accounts with slaves, a man building a tower, a man building a house, a man enlarging his barn, a man tilling, a sower sowing seeds, wedding guests, the bride, the bridegroom, bridesmaids, laborers, a landowner, thieves, robbers, bandits, merchants, neighbors, friends, reapers, a corpse, drunkards, a creditor, debtors, an innkeeper, a judge, a manager, a master, an officer, a gardener, a host, a guest, infants, a child, children, a wife, a father, sons, a mother, a daughter, brothers, relatives, daughters-in-law, mothers-in-law, a widow, the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, citizens, hired hands, prostitutes, rogues, adulterers, tax collectors, debtors, a nobleman, tenants, an accuser, a magistrate, a gatekeeper, a hired hand and a vinegrower.

He speaks of...

Weather, water, rain, floods, the sea, a river, soil, the earth, the world, a desert, fire, flames, scorching heat, sulfur, wind, sky, clouds, moon, stars, the sun, light, light rays, lightning, darkness, a mountain, a chasm, stones, a log, a splinter, foxes, holes and salt.

He speaks of...

A sewing needle, a patch of unshrunk cloth, clothing, robes, linen, an apron, cloaks, purses, a belt, sandals, wineskins, nets, a jar, property, a bed, a table, a lampstand, cups and plates, a door, closed doors, keys, lamps, oil, a bushel, rooftops, housetops and a cellar.

He speaks of...

A garden, manure, a manure pile, tombs, a grave, unmarked graves, sackcloth and ashes, fields, a yoke, a sheepfold, a watchtower, a winepress, a millstone, a flute, rings, bandages, an inn, marketplaces,

royal palaces, a castle, a throne, a prison, armor, a sword, plunder, goods, a storehouse, possessions, alms, a case, the law, penny, pennies, treasure, money, wages, income, a cornerstone, gates, streets and a city.

He speaks of...

Eyes, blindness, ears, the mouth, a neck, a hand, a finger, a foot, a tongue and hair.

He speaks of...

A wedding banquet, a luncheon, a dinner, a famine, music and dancing.

And he speaks of...

Birth pangs, thirst and hunger.

I think it's kind of cool that so far as we know Jesus never used the words theology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology, soteriology, ontology, teleology and eschatology!

Instead, we have more than 350 of his references to everyday things. He taught with common sights, sounds, smells, tastes, textures and terms. Rather than boring us with bland theological speech, Jesus talks with people in a language spiked with Spirit.

Pictures work better than abstractions. Stories work better than dogmatics. Everyday things became in Jesus' teaching symbols of the greatest truths. Everyday experience became the language of heaven. □

Bert Gary is a United Methodist minister and instructor at the Jerusalem Institute for Biblical Exploration. He has 23 years experience as a preacher, graduate school Bible teacher and biblical lecturer in Israel, Greece and Turkey. Bert has degrees in psychology, theology and music from Emory University. He is the author of Jesus Unplugged (2005) from FaithWalk.



UPDATE

PLAIN TRUTH
MINISTRIES

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE ONGOING WORK OF PROCLAIMING THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST

www.ptm.org

SPECIAL 2012 YEAR-END REPORT:

“Because of PTM and CWR, I and countless others have been truly blessed to love God in ways unimaginable before. Please never, ever give up.... We sorely need you!”

PTM brings Christ-centered peace and comfort to those in desperate need. In 2012, PTM helped many escape the idea of an angry, vengeful god, ready to send us to an ever-burning hell—PTM helps people around this world come to know the truth of God as a loving, forgiving, heavenly Father. *Our world is full of anger, fear and violence*—and sadly, Christ-less religion contributes to the anxiety many are currently experiencing. But our heavenly Father is neither the author of performance-based religion nor the guilt and shame it produces. He truly desires a personal relationship with all his children. At PTM, our work and your support is validated when we receive letters like this:

Christianity Without the Religion Bringing hope and peace of mind to thousands each week

Every week, thousands of PTM’s friends know they can count on the teaching ministry of Greg Albrecht for inspiration, encouragement and hope. Greg is a missionary to religious refugees and spiritual prisoners. Whether online or through audio cassettes or CDs, CWR is ready when you are!



After pondering your profound significance in helping me move from legalism to faith in Jesus Christ alone, I felt overwhelmingly moved to let you know just how much I appreciate you. Thanks to you I now know that God didn’t create humans just so that he could hate and destroy us. God is not vindictive—he doesn’t tally our sins. He is not looking for the slightest provocation to punish us. God loves us more than we could ever imagine. Because of PTM and CWR, I and countless others have been truly blessed to love God in ways unimaginable before. Please never, ever give up on your passion for Christ. We sorely need you! New York

YOU ARE HELPING TO BRING THIS MESSAGE OF JOY, HOPE AND FREEDOM TO UNTOLD THOUSANDS!

When God uses PTM to help open someone’s eyes—to bring profound joy to someone who has lived life in fear and anxiety—he’s using your support and contributions to make a lasting difference.

The comments below tell what your support means to people whose lives have changed, as God has used PTM/CWR to open their eyes to his amazing grace.

Just a note to let you know that the messages Greg gives at Christianity Without the Religion are very uplifting and inspiring. I lost my husband a few months ago, and without God and Jesus Christ in my life, I would’ve felt empty. What a joy it is to know Christ is always with us, no matter what trials we may face. Thanks for all you do at PTM to spread the GOOD news! Illinois

Please allow me to thank all the PTM staff for the wonderful ministerial work that God is accomplishing through you. PTM has helped my wife and me muddle through to a better understanding of God’s grace—of course our journey in Christ, coming to know God, is still a work in progress. I have always disliked amusement rides, even as a child. Particularly the roller coaster rides which hang you upside down and go around in loops. Sometimes life feels like one of these rides for me. I started out a hapless loser human being. Yet God loved me and purchased me through himself in suffering and sacrifice, something I feel is significant because suffering and pain play a purpose in our lives as well. In Christ, God experienced this human life himself. God bless you all at PTM and keep up your work for the Lord. Our prayers are with this ministry. Florida

In this time of my life, I have been struggling with the whole church thing after being burned (figuratively speaking) by the last one my family and I attended. The articles in the PTM weekly updates really help keep me grounded and spiritually sustained. Thank you so much for the good work by promoting Jesus and his grace instead of the spiritual hoops that one must jump through to “please God.” I, too, have heard those argue that if you teach “cheap grace” people may get out of line. To me it must mean that the Gospel is really too good for even the most “faithful” to believe. Mississippi

I keep enjoying the material at your website and your grace ministry. I continue to pray for you and I request your prayers for our ministry in Cameroon. There is a great downgrading of the grace of God. Man's effort is being emphasized at the expense of the life of our risen Lord. I am working and teaching in a church, a school of theology as well as an orphanage. Thank you for the grace-based teaching you provide which is of great help. **Cameroon, West Africa**

You have given me "free food" for a long time. You have answered a ton of my questions, and never have you put the hurt on me, trying to guilt me into giving to PTM. In addition to absolutely connecting with your mission and ministry, the way you just keep on giving is the reason I am now donating to your ministry. **Canada**

I listened to you on the radio and then started to follow your ministry online, and then I became a financial supporter and have continued for almost ten years now. What you do is so important! **Virginia**

If you have a fan club in New Zealand, I want to join! I really appreciate www.ptm.org—thank you! **New Zealand**

Newsmakers of 2012

PTM collaborates with many other grace-based ministries, pastors and teachers—a network of Christ-centered people and organizations. Here are just a few of the people with whom PTM has been privileged to work in 2012. When you support PTM, you are helping us to proclaim the gospel of God's amazing grace!



Stephen Crosby

Dr. Stephen Crosby has pastored, ministered and consulted with churches and individual Christians across four continents. His decades of experience lead him to conclude that legalism and performance-based religion is a deadly virus that exists in the body of Christ. In the Summer 2012 *Plain Truth*, we published an excerpt of Stephen's book *Silent Killers of Faith*, titled "Our Relationship With God—Precepts or Person?" Stephen also visited our PTM offices and recorded several podcasts as well as videos, which are available at www.ptm.org. We thank God for the work he has accomplished in the life and ministry of Stephen Crosby, and we are thankful we can share that with our listeners and readers.



Susan Reedy

For many years Susan Reedy has been one of our most popular writers with her column *Growing Places*. But, as the title of her column announces, our lives are filled with "growing places" and given her many other responsibilities, Susan informed us that she would no longer be able to devote the necessary time to writing her column. As a way of saying "thank you," we presented her with a plaque which will help remind her of the love and gratitude of us all, including her many readers.



Monte & Kayte Wolverton

Monte Wolverton, who served as our Managing Editor for many years, began writing a new *PT* column, *Living Room*, as well as several articles for the *Plain Truth* this year. After a long battle with cancer Monte's wife, Kayte, passed away in July. She will be dearly missed.



Steve Brown

The Fall 2012 *PT* marked the 15th year of Steve Brown's contributions to *Plain Truth* magazine with his column, *He Asked Me to Remind You*. We look forward to many more reminders!



New Electronic PT

After several years of planning, we rolled out a new way to reach people around this world with the *Plain Truth*, in a manner that will enable us to keep pace with costs of providing it. We are now offering electronic versions of the *PT* to new subscribers.

Plain Truth Ministries brings hope and encouragement to thousands burdened by legalistic religion—and YOUR FAITHFUL SUPPORT MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE!

PTM is *your* ministry! We rely solely on the support of our individual Friends and Partners to keep bringing hope to untold thousands of hurting people. We have no big corporate or institutional sponsors—it's up to you and others like you! So if you've been helped—help others with a gift to PTM! Your prayers and regular financial support help bring the comfort and healing of the gospel.

If you regularly donate to the work of PTM—thank you! If not, why not contribute today? We offer three easy ways:

- 1) Visit our secure website at www.ptm.org/uni/Donation
- 2) Call us at 800-309-4466
- 3) Mail your contribution to Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129

Can God Be Too Good?



BY MONTE
WOLVERTON

Can We Hope That All Will Be Saved?

...And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.—Ephesians 3:17-19

Sam Thompson sat on a concrete bench, staring at his father's tombstone. "Where are you, Dad?" asked Sam aloud. "I don't know how to think of you. When you passed on, what did you pass on to?"

Sam's dad, Ed Thompson, had lived in the same house for nearly 60 years. Together, he and his wife had raised three kids—all of them now middle-aged. When Ed died, he had nine grandkids, four great grandkids and one on the way. His

wife, Ellie, had passed away fourteen years ago. Ed missed her horribly, but between his family, his old business cronies and taking care of the house, he kept busy. He seemed healthy for a guy in his 80s. Then two weeks ago, he just fell asleep, sitting in his swing on the porch. He had a pretty good life—for an atheist.

His wife took the kids to church with her every Sunday. But Ed had never been remotely interested. He never talked about it—he had his private reasons for not believing in God. Ed's kids speculated that there had been a bad experience with a church or a minister. No one knew for sure.

As Ed's kids left home they went their separate theological ways. Ed's oldest, Barbara, had become an ardent church goer. She had worked on her dad for years, hoping to get him to "say the Sinner's

Prayer" and to accept Jesus. But Ed wouldn't budge. Barbara was devastated when he died. She was certain she would never see her father again, and she shuddered to think

Universalism, his sister had derisively called it—"nothing more than feel-good wishful thinking!" But Sam wasn't sure. If God was infinitely loving and merciful, would he throw Sam's dad into hell to fry forever just because he never understood Jesus?

about him suffering in the blazing fires of hell. At times Barbara was overwhelmed with guilt. If only she had tried harder—spent more time "witnessing" to her dad—set a better example. If only—but now

it was too late. As far as Barbara was concerned, all hope for her father was lost.

Ed's youngest, Mark, the "hippie" of the family, had no concerns whatsoever about his dad. In a vaguely New Age way, he believed that his dad, like everyone who died, went to a better place, regardless. ~~even our people say,~~ would all find some kind of peace in the afterlife. Sort of like that network TV show where the lady helps spirits of recently departed people pass into the light. As far as Mark was concerned, his dad had most certainly passed into the light.

Sam, the middle child and "moderate" Christian, didn't know what to think about his dad, but he found his younger brother's ideas about the afterlife strangely attractive. *Universalism*, his sister had derisively called it—"nothing more than feel-good wishful thinking!"

But Sam wasn't sure. If God was infinitely loving and merciful, would he throw Sam's dad into hell to fry forever just because he never understood Jesus?

On the other hand, Sam couldn't believe that everyone who ever lived got a free ticket to heaven with no questions asked. Where did God draw the line?

If we had to pigeonhole the theology of Sam's younger brother Mark, we might call it *popular or pluralistic universalism*. Mark has a lot of company. According to recent Barna surveys¹, 40% of respondents agree with the statement, "All people will experience the same outcome after death, regardless of their religious beliefs."

That's a good definition of pluralistic universalism. But there's a big difference between pluralistic universalism and *Christian universalism*, as we'll see.

Can Christians Be Universalist?

When the subject of Christian universalism is raised among some traditional Christians, hackles rise like those on the back of a Jack



What about Ed Thompson—and his family in anguish and doubt over the fate of their atheist father? What about the billions of people in parts of India and China for whom Jesus is nothing more than a strange, foreign demigod?...Are all these people "saved" or are they "lost"? While many religious institutions claim to know the answer, the truth is that no one can say for sure.

Russell Terrier who has just spotted a cat.

As far as many "Bible-believing" Christians are concerned, the terms "Christian" and "universalism" are not compatible. Universalism, they say, is a dangerous heresy that has arisen from paganism like a toxic green slime, oozing through New Agers and Unitarians into mainstream Christian churches in recent decades, threatening to engulf and corrode cherished, time-tested doctrines (especially those having to do with an ever-burning hell).

But not everyone writes off Christian universalism as heresy. According to the same Barna surveys, some 25% of committed Christians believe that "all people are eventually saved or accepted by God."

That's quite a number—large enough to warrant our attention and careful investigation.

Just what is this thing called universalism? It's often misunderstood and misapplied because it can mean (or be confused with) several things:

Theological inclusivity—the idea that all faiths and philosophies share universal truths.

The universal church—certain churches believe themselves to be the one true church, encompassing all cultures and ethnicities. Historically, the Catholic (meaning universal) church believed this—and many denominations and cults still do.

The universality of the church—Yes, this sounds a lot like the previous item, but it's completely different. This is the truth that the genuine Christian church is catholic (universal)—embracing and including all believers in Christ from all backgrounds.

The first three items have to do with being a Christ-follower in the here and now. Our final definition, and the subject of this article, has to do with the universality of God's relationship and reconciliation with human beings in the afterlife:

Christian universalism—the assertion that somehow, in some way, all will ultimately enjoy eternity with God.

Dire Implications

Why is Christian universalism such a hot issue? Because it carries with it several unsettling and far-reaching implications and questions:

- If everyone is automatically “saved,” why did Jesus have to die?

- If salvation is universal, what about an ever-burning hell? Is the eternal punishment spoken of in the Bible (Matthew 25:46) not one and the same as eternal punishing?

- If there is no justice or punishment for mass murderers, tyrants and terrorists, what’s the point of trying to live a good life?

- If everyone is destined for heaven, why bother to evangelize and share the gospel? Will people who have not been evangelized in this life receive some sort of post-mortem evangelization?

- If all religious paths lead to eternal life, and Hindus and atheists get the same reward as Christians—why not just believe and do whatever suits your fancy?

- Most importantly, this issue may ultimately be based on what we believe about the nature of God—his mercy and judgment—in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These questions can be disturbing, especially for those who are confident that they have all their theological ducks arranged in a neat row. Such Christians would be even more perplexed if they knew that some of the same early church fathers who helped develop fundamental doctrines such as the Trinity also dared to hope that Jesus

actually meant it when he said he would “draw all people” to himself (John 12:32). But more about that later.

If you’re not confused yet, you’re probably about to be. Within our definition above, Christian universalism represents a whole spectrum of beliefs (see “The Expanding Universe of Christian Universalism”). If you look at this table carefully, you’ll see that there are variations on the same recipe with differing mixtures of the following ingredients:

Punitive punishment—punishment for the sake of justice.

Remedial punishment—punishment intended to teach and reform.

Salvation of Satan and demons—yes, some believe it is possible.

Justice—will big-time evildoers get what’s coming to them? If so, how?

Free will—the ability for humans to have choice in their eternal destiny.

Predestination—the idea that God has already made choices for us. Also called determinism.

The last two items are fundamental issues in universalism. Many Christians reject universalism out of hand because they believe it does not allow for free will. You see, strict universalists insist that God has predestined all to be saved (ironically, they share this disallowance of human choice with Christians who insist that God has predestined some to be “saved” and others to be “lost”).

Less doctrinally adamant, but still considered by many to be under the umbrella of universalism, are those who hold hope and confidence that all will ultimately respond to and be reconciled to God, allowing for human choice and free will.

We add a major wrinkle to the discussion when we ask—how capable is a human being at making a genuine free-will decision about his or her own eternal destiny—a fully conscious and aware choice for or against God—in this life (see Greg Albrecht’s accompanying article, “How Free Is Human Free Will?”)?

What Does the Bible Say?

Let’s consider three passages from the New Testament, beginning with Romans 6:23:

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now let’s look at Matthew 25:41-46:

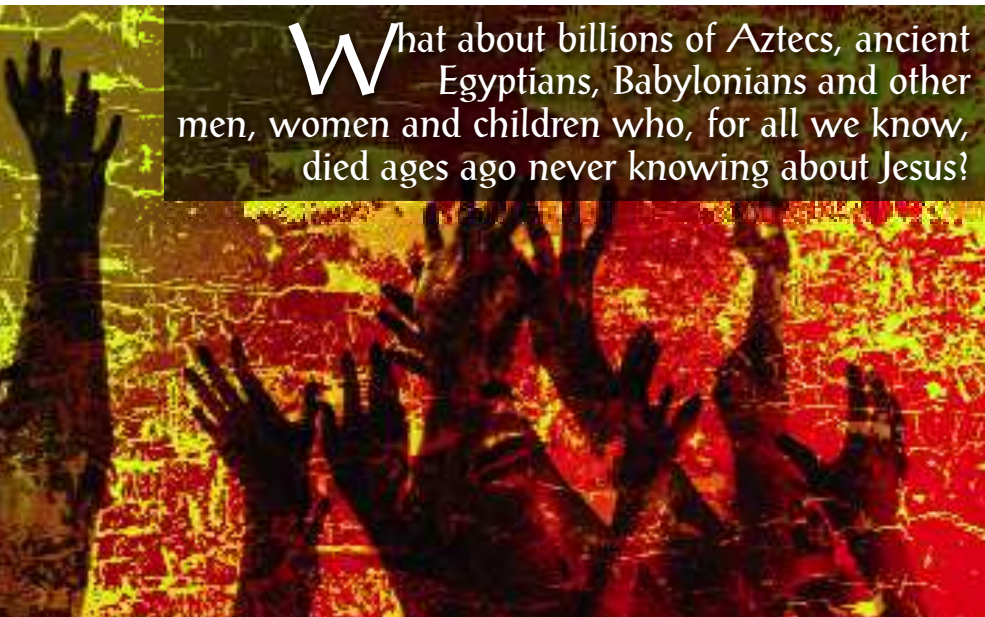
“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.’ They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ Then they



We know from

Scripture that God is infinitely merciful and extends his grace to all his creation. Given this emphasis, dogmatic insistence on eternal torture and suffering is inconsistent with the gospel.

What about billions of Aztecs, ancient Egyptians, Babylonians and other men, women and children who, for all we know, died ages ago never knowing about Jesus?



There are many paradoxical and seemingly contradictory passages on this topic... It may well be that God intended these passages to keep us from being too dogmatic and polarized (of course this has not stopped institutional Christianity from doing so).

will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

Finally, let's consider Philippians 2:9-11:

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

If we were reading these passages with no prior knowledge of traditional Christian teaching about the afterlife, we might conclude that they contradict each other. The first passage tells us that those who sin will die. We might think that

"eternal" in the second passage says that the unrighteous will not merely die but be punished eternally. The third passage suggests that everyone will ultimately worship Jesus.

Even as you are reading this paragraph, however, you are attempting to reconcile these contradictory passages by filtering them through the doctrine you have been taught.

Many take the second passage at what they assume to be "face value" (because it fits comfortably with the traditional idea of heaven for the righteous and eternal hell fire for the wicked—even though it doesn't actually say that). If that's

your perspective, you will then develop (or consult Bible helps for) explanations as to why the other two passages don't really mean what they seem to say. And then you will sit back, satisfied and relieved, believing you have wrangled obstreperous scriptures into harmony.

If we were more honest and courageous, we might ask ourselves—*isn't Scripture inspired by God?* If so, why do we need to "harmonize" seeming contradictions? Was the Holy Spirit incapable of making the Bible internally consistent?

There's a better explanation. What if God has done this

Infernalist, Annihilationist and Universalist

Infernalists (the majority Christian view) believe that God consigns the unrepentant wicked to some form of eternal punishment in hell.

Annihilationists believe that God simply allows the unrepentant wicked to die (perhaps after a "second death" in the "lake of fire").

Universalists believe that God will somehow, in some way, ultimately redeem and reconcile all humans to himself.

Each school of thought uses particular passages to support its claim—an easy task, since the Bible and New Testament in particular offer many paradoxical passages about the afterlife. Commentators often attempt to reconcile these passages by favoring one passage at the expense of others. The list below shows passages favored by each group. As we might expect, preferred infernalist passages emphasize dire punishment after death; favorite annihilationist passages emphasize eternal death as the only fate of the wicked; favorite universalist passages imply a future universal redemption.

But when we attempt to proof-text our pet doctrines, we may be missing an important point—perhaps God's intent is to show us different aspects of the same issue. Taking these passages (and many others) as a whole, we come away understanding that God is the ultimate judge, that God holds the power of life and death and that God, by his grace, offers reconciliation and salvation to all who will accept.

Infernalist

Matthew 5:22
Matthew 18:7-9
Matthew 25:31-46
Revelation 14:9-11
1 Peter 3:19-20
Luke 16:22-24
Jude 1:7

Annihilationist

2 Thessalonians 1:9
Romans 6:23
John 3:16
Hebrews 10:27
Revelation 19:19-21
Revelation 21:4-8
Matt 3:10-12; 13:30, 42, 49-50
1 Corinthians 3:17
Philippians 1:28; 3:19
2 Peter 2:1-3; 3-7

Universalist

1 Corinthians 15:28
Acts 3:21
Philippians 2:10
Revelation 5:13
Colossians 1:16-20
John 12:32

The Expanding Universe of Christian Universalism

Christian universalism is the idea that somehow, in some way, all will ultimately be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. Modern Christian universalism seems to have its roots in 17th century England, quickly spreading to America. It found fertile soil among pietist and Anabaptist believers, in addition to Quakers, Methodists and Lutherans. Early adherents were often of German ancestry.

Within Christendom today, the word universalism is most often associated with the Unitarian Universalist Church, formed in the 20th century by consolidation of two older organizations. Although the Unitarian Universalist Church has roots in Christianity, it now embraces non-Christian beliefs, and therefore does not represent Christian universalism. It's necessary, therefore, to make a clear distinction between the classically known unitarianism of the Unitarian Universalist Church and Christian Universalism.

Christian universalism includes a broad spectrum of belief. The following continuum moves from the most radical beliefs found within Christian universalism (#1) to more conservative and cautious (#6).

1. Every one of God's creatures will be saved—even Satan and the demons. God has predestined it so, and human (or angelic) choice is not a factor. Jesus' sacrifice has saved everyone. This variety of universalism has also been called restorationism, as it is believed that God will restore the creation to perfect harmony. This is not to be confused with other teachings known as restorationism, including the Christian primitivist restorationist movements, which are concerned with restoring the Christian church to its early apostolic roots, or the 19th century movement to restore the Jews to the Holy Land.

2. Same as #1, except Satan and the demons will not be saved. Their fate is sealed.

3. All human beings will ultimately be saved, with the addition of an element of choice: Those who have not accepted Christ in this life will receive, understand and choose to accept the gospel posthumously.

4. Same as #3, except that those who have not accepted Christ in this life will receive temporary punishment for their sins in the afterlife (similar in some ways to Catholic purgatory)—until they repent and accept Christ. This punishment is neither punitive nor soul-purifying (as is Purgatory), but remedial—intended to bring the soul to repentance, reconciliation and acceptance of God's grace. Some early restorationists (see #1) believed in this temporary form of hell. Others denied the existence of hell entirely.

5. Same as #4, except that those who have not accepted Christ in this life will not receive punitive punishment for sins, but they will have to review (and on some level, experience) the pain they have caused others—with the goal of repentance and reconciliation at the foot of the cross.

6. God will save "all but a few." Some may argue that this is not really universalism, which by definition means all, but we still include it under the Christian universalist umbrella. This is the type of "hopeful universalism" that some of the early church fathers maintained. While they did not say dogmatically that all would be saved, neither did they deny the possibility. This position allows for free will: God does not force salvation on anyone, yet it is possible that all will ultimately receive his grace.

deliberately? What if he is showing us different facets of eternal truths that can't be summarized in a single passage?

As Brad Jersak observes in his book, *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut*, "Our obsessive attempts to harmonize the Scriptures into artificially coherent, stackable propositions—as if they required us to contend for their reliability or authority—actually do violence to their richness."²

There are many paradoxical and seemingly contradictory passages

on this topic (see "Infernalist, Annihilationist and Universalist"). It may well be that God intended these passages to keep us from being too dogmatic and polarized (of course this has not stopped institutional Christianity from doing so).

Jim Fowler argues that *The Extent and Efficacy of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ* should be seen as a balance between what he calls the objective-universal "all" of humanity at large and the subjective-particular wherein "not all" will choose to individually and

personally respond to Jesus Christ.³

Historic Hopeful Universalists—They Dared to Hope

Many centuries ago, before Christian doctrine had become a political football, a few eminent Christian thinkers pondered the passages we have just discussed—and exchanged their ideas openly.

The early church fathers—especially those active before the council of Nicea in 313—lived during a time of doctrinal flux and forma-

How Free Is Free Will?

By Greg Albrecht

How much choice does any individual human actually have? We speak of "free will"—but how much of a choice to accept God's grace does anyone have, given the brainwashing and propaganda to which they are subjected? *How much of a choice to accept God's grace does a young boy in a radicalized Muslim school have? How much of a choice to accept God's grace does someone have who is ensnared by some ultra fundamentalist church, where performance-based religion rules?*

Being in Christ is a divine invitation to an eternal relationship, open to everyone. But being in Christ is not an automatic, divinely bestowed or imposed gift. Being in Christ is not a spiritual address or a relationship he forces on us. God is not coercive—he does not bully us into accepting his love. We may decline the relationship he offers. We have a choice.

But *how much of a choice* do we really have? Are we all on a level playing field, or when it comes to responding favorably to God's invitation do the odds favor some of us more than others?

1) I believe God provides an open invitation to all mankind—and that in some way, somehow, God will, in his perfect wisdom and love, eventually draw people to himself. Because of the cross of Christ, all are

don (in present-day Slovenia). In addition to his prolific writings, he translated the entire Bible into Latin. In this quote Jerome seems to foresee a time when God would reconcile everyone to himself:

In the end and consummation of the universe all are to be restored into their original harmonious state, and we all shall be made one body and be united once more into a perfect man, and the prayer of our Savior shall be fulfilled that all may be one.



Jerome

eventually invited to accept God's love. However, all are not, at any moment in time, equally drawn by God's grace to relationship in Christ. Therefore, all humans have free will, but at any given point in time, some are more free than others because God has drawn them, by his grace.

2) God's grace draws us to Christ (see John 6:44 and 6:65). *Drawn* indicates some divine illumination, some impartation of light and understanding that was not there before. By virtue of our humanity, we have a spiritual genetic predisposition, we are "hard-wired" or at least incredibly attracted to religion rather than grace, like iron filings to a magnet. In order for us to unplug from wrong-headed notions, including the attraction that bad-news religion presents to us, and plug into God's grace, God has to help prod us and "draw us." In this regard, perhaps God's grace is somewhat like a magnetic field.

When God "draws" us he graciously overcomes the spiritual inertia that holds us captive. So in drawing us I believe God, who is love, acts as the divine Lover. He pursues us and beckons to us (this in contrast with the religious idea that he is threatening to burn the hell out of us for all eternity, torturing us if we don't comply with his wishes).

So, for example, when we as Christians classically

use the word "repent" (as in turning from one behavior or action to another) how much of that action is directly and solely attributable to us and us alone? Can any human just decide to seek God one day, or does God have a part, even in the most elementary and initial part of our decision to seek him? I believe that God must draw us to himself—for by nature we are against God and his plan and his grace (Romans 8:7). God's grace offends us.

God, when he draws us, starts to pursue us somewhat like a man pursues a woman, the object of his interest. Having made his intentions for us clear, God patiently waits for us to accept and receive his embrace.

All Are Invited, But All Are Not Responding

I believe that the gospel assures us, by virtue of the cross of Christ, that 1) all are or will be given the opportunity, an invitation if you wish, to relationship in and with Christ, and 2) in some way, somehow, all will be drawn by God. All, by virtue of the cross, are invited. In ways completely and absolutely known to God alone, he communicates an invitation, in his time and way, in a manner he determines as fair and equitable to humanity at large.

So while all are invited and all are welcome, there is absolutely no

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was a philosopher, theologian and bishop in the city of Hippo in what is now northern Algeria. A firm believer in the grace of Christ, his ideas reinvigorated the

Roman church, enabling it to survive the dissolution of the Western Roman Empire. He is considered one of the most influential thinkers of Christianity. Yet he feared that earlier

church fathers' universalist leanings could lead believers to dangerous permissiveness. Partially because of this, Augustine firmly established and embellished the idea of a hell of endless torture (partly based on his misunderstanding of the context of the biblical Greek word later translated as "eternal" in most English Bibles). Augustine emphasized that only some would be saved—and those only by God's will. He even taught that



Augustine of Hippo



... While all are invited and all are welcome, there is absolutely no doubt, if we open our eyes and ears, that many in our world are living outside of Christ. They are "in the dark."

believe that God will just eventually wear down every single last person who has ever lived. Based on what I read of the gospel, I can't buy this idea. I wish it were so. I can hope for it, and I do. If God chooses to do such a thing, I will rejoice. But I can't tell others to believe such a thing, because I don't believe anyone can absolutely know such a thing for certain.

Given that the primary purpose of the gospel of Jesus Christ is extending an invitation to receive God's love and given that God has infinite resources to convince and "woo" us, we can reasonably hope that most will, at some time and in some way, say "yes" to God.

However, the intimate and eternal relationship that God reveals and to which he invites us is not a forced relationship. There are no forced eternal marriages with God. We have a say. That means some will resist God's gracious advances and reject him—no matter how relentlessly he pursues them. But I could be wrong. Check back with me when Jesus sits me down on the other side of eternity and sighs, and says, "Okay Greg—you had a few things right, but we need to go back to some basics." □

doubt, if we open our eyes and ears, that many in our world are living outside of Christ. They are "in the dark." Are some people in the dark, and outside of life in Christ, because, while God has invited everyone, he has not yet drawn them? Are they in the darkness, outside of the Light of Christ, because God has not yet started, for some reason unknown to us, to seriously court and woo them—to use the human expression of romantic love? Yes, I think we have to conclude that.

However, are some people walking in darkness because they have refused to be drawn by God's overt and active interest in them, as he makes his invitation plain by drawing them? Have some actually rejected what God offers? Yes, based on the evidence of our world and what we have seen and heard and read, I think we have to conclude that some have or

some seem to be rejecting him.

Next question. Of all the people who are outside of Christ, what percentage are living in darkness because, while Christ has died for all mankind and all are, or will be invited to be in Christ, God has not yet drawn them—and how many have been drawn by God in some way and yet have still rejected him? No one knows that number or percentage, of course.

Some believe that God will so relentlessly draw all to himself that in the end, everyone—100% of humanity—will accept God's invitation. They seem to believe that God will not give up until everyone says "yes"—in this scenario some seem to think that the entire world, even the most obstinate, willful, and wrong-headed will eventually just get so tired of God's constant "advances" that they give up, just to "get rid" of his constant attention. In this view, it seems to me that some

unbaptized infants, because they had inherited original sin, would be subjected to eternal (albeit mild) punishment. He also allowed that lesser sinners would undergo temporary punishment in purgatory, until they were sufficiently cleansed of sin to enter heaven.

Such ideas appealed to leaders of the institutional church, especially in light of the waning power of the Roman Empire. It was time for the Roman church to fulfill its destiny as the Augustinian "City of God." And let's face it—threats of eternal torture make a far better tool for controlling the masses than nebulous visions of a loving God and

universal reconciliation. Augustine's presumptions about eternal conscious torment generally won the day in the Western Church, although the Eastern Church did not ultimately follow his teaching.

By the time of **Justinian**, Byzantine emperor from 527 to 565, the concept of universal reconciliation had come to be regarded as non-orthodox. Justinian's iron-fisted rule encompassed the church, where he sought to insure uni-

formity of doctrine and suppression of anything that looked like heresy. Among his edicts was a posthumous condemnation of Origen and his views on universal reconciliation, following the Synod of Constantinople in 543. Ironically, although Gregory of Nyssa had taught something similar, his orthodoxy was never questioned.

In any case, the universalism that the early church fathers had discussed and considered was now *anathema*—forbidden by the insti-

(continued on page 35)



Justinian

William Barclay (1907-1978)

Professor, Theologian, Author, Greek Scholar

Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism at the University of Glasgow, William Barclay dedicated his life to "making the best biblical scholarship available to the average reader."

The result was the Daily Study Bible, a set of commentaries on the New Testament, exploring verse by verse through Barclay's own translation of the New Testament, listing and examining every possible interpretation known to



providing all the background information he considered possibly relevant. The 17 volumes of the set were all instant best-sellers and continue to be so to this day. Following is an excerpt from his Spiritual Autobiography.

I am a convinced universalist. I believe that in the end all men will be gathered into the love of God. In the early days Origen was the great name connected with universalism. I would believe with Origen that universalism is no easy thing. Origen believed that after death there were many who would need prolonged instruction, the sternest discipline, even the severest punishment before they were fit for the presence of God. Origen did not eliminate hell; he believed that some people would have to go to heaven via hell. He believed that even at the end of the day there would be some on whom the scars remained. He did not believe in eternal punishment, but he did see the possibility of eternal penalty. And so the choice is whether we accept God's offer and invitation willingly, or take the long and terrible way round

through ages of purification.

Gregory of Nyssa offered three reasons why he believed in universalism. First, he believed in it because of the character of God. "Being good, God entertains pity for fallen man; being wise, he is not ignorant of the means for his recovery." Second, he believed in it because of *the nature of evil*. Evil must in the end be moved out of existence, "so that the absolutely non-existent should cease to be at all." Evil is essentially negative and doomed to non-existence. Third, he believed in it because of *the purpose of punishment*. The purpose of punishment is always remedial. Its aim is "to get the good separated from the evil and to attract it into the communion of blessedness." Punishment will hurt, but it is like the fire which separates the alloy from the gold; it is like the surgery which removes the diseased thing; it is like the cautery which burns out that which cannot be removed any other way.

But I want to set down not the arguments of others but the thoughts which have persuaded me personally of universal salvation.

First, there is the fact that there are things in the New Testament which more than justify this belief. Jesus said: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw *all* men to myself" (John 12:32). Paul writes to the Romans: "God has consigned *all* men to disobedience that he may have mercy on *all*" (Romans 11:32). He

If one man remains outside the love of God at the end of time, it means that that one man has defeated the love of God—and that is impossible.

writes to the Corinthians: "As in Adam *all* die, so also in Christ shall *all* be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22); and he looks to the final total triumph when God will be everything to everyone (1 Corinthians 15:28). In the First Letter to Timothy we read of God "who desires *all* men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth," and of Christ Jesus "who gave himself as a ransom for *all*" (1 Timo-

God is not only King and Judge, God is Father—he is indeed Father more than anything else. No father could be happy while there were members of his family forever in agony... The only triumph a father can know is to have all his family back home.

thy 2:4-6). The New Testament itself is not in the least afraid of the word *all*.

Second, one of the key passages is Matthew 25:46 where it is said that the rejected go away to eternal punishment, and the righteous to eternal life. The Greek word for punishment is *kolasis*, which was not originally an ethical word at all. It originally meant the pruning of trees to make them grow better. I think it is true to say that in all Greek secular literature *kolasis* is never used of anything but remedial punishment. The word for eternal is *aiionios*. It means more than



everlasting, for Plato—who may have invented the word—plainly says that a thing may be everlasting and still not be *aionios*. The simplest way to put it is that *aionios* cannot be used properly of anyone but God; it is the word uniquely, as Plato saw it, of God. Eternal punishment is then literally that kind of remedial punishment which it befits God to give and which only God can give.

Third, I believe that it is impossible to set limits to the grace of God. I believe that not only in this world, but in any other world there may be, the grace of God is still effective, still operative, still at work. I do not believe that the operation of the grace of God is limited to this world. I believe that the grace of God is as wide as the universe.

Fourth, I believe implicitly in the ultimate and complete triumph of God, the time when all things will be subject to him, and when God will be everything to everyone (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). For me this has certain consequences. If one man remains outside the love of God at the end of time, it means that that one man has defeated the love of God—and that is impossible. Further, there is only one way in which we can think of the triumph of God. If God was no more than a King or Judge, then it would be possible to speak of his triumph, if his enemies were agonizing in hell or were totally and completely obliterated and wiped out. But God is not only King and Judge, God is *Father*—he is indeed Father more than anything else. No father could be happy while there were members of his family forever in agony. No father would count it a triumph to obliterate the disobedient members of his family.

The only triumph a father can know is to have all his family back home. The only victory love can enjoy is the day when its offer of love is answered by the return of love. The only possible final triumph is a universe loved by and in love with God.

Quoted from *William Barclay: A Spiritual Autobiography*, pp. 65-67, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1977.



When we remove our dogmatic reading glasses, Scripture allows for the possibility of ultimate redemption for all. We also know that in an earlier age (before dogmatic church/state institutions quelled such speculation), devout and learned Christian leaders freely and openly discussed the hope of universal reconciliation.

tutional church. With few exceptions, the institutional Christian church to this day has effectively bowed to Justinian's authority on the issue. Ultimate redemptionists have been on the fringe ever since.

What Does It All Mean?

1,500 years later—what does this mean for us? What about Ed Thompson—and his family in anguish and doubt over the fate of their atheist father?

What about the billions of people in parts of India and China for whom Jesus is nothing more than a strange, foreign demigod? What about billions of Aztecs, ancient Egyptians, Babylonians and other men, women and children who, for all we know, died ages ago never knowing about Jesus?

Are all these people “saved” or are they “lost”? While many religious institutions claim to know the answer, the truth is that no one can say for sure. What we do know is this:

- When we remove our dogmatic reading glasses, Scripture allows for the *possibility* of ultimate redemption for all.
- We also know that in an earlier age (before dogmatic church/state institutions quelled such speculation), devout and learned Christian leaders freely and openly discussed

the hope of universal reconciliation. Considered one of the most important theologians of the 20th century, Swiss Catholic Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) expressed hope that all will be saved while warning we must not assert such a belief dogmatically.

- We know from Scripture that God is infinitely merciful and extends his grace to all his creation. Given this emphasis, dogmatic insistence on eternal torture and suffering is inconsistent with the gospel.

- It seems both biblically reasonable and Christ-like to believe that God allows every human being a choice—that human beings have free will.

- Further, depending on how one defines freedom it may be that some choices could be freely made only in the afterlife—free from the encumbrances that enslave many in our world.

- But since by its very nature, the outcome of free will can't be predicted with certainty, neither can we know dogmatically whether all will ultimately respond to God's grace.

- Beyond this, we can't fully know, understand, predict or fathom the judgment and mercy of God. Since God's will is truly free, we can't presume (as many have done) to

Love or Justice?

The discussion of eternal torment and the fate of the “unsaved” is often framed, by the law and order crowd, as a matter of God’s love or his justice. Those who are intent on relegating those who, to their knowledge and satisfaction, have never heard or accepted their version of Christianity to eternal torture, often characterize those, like myself, who primarily look for answers based on God’s love and grace, as soft-headed, soft-hearted and weak.

So which is it—love or justice? Is God primarily a God of love or a God of justice? Here’s what I see as the fundamental flaw in real, he-man, tough-as-nails Christianity:

- Jesus Christ is the very embodiment of God’s love—he is God’s love personified. When I study his life and teachings I am overwhelmed by his compassion and mercy, and find few examples when he models a heavenly hanging judge who makes tough, by-the-book decisions in favor of religious perceptions and definitions of justice.

- The Bible reveals that God is love. The Bible defines the very heart and core of God as love. Love is what God is, rather than one of his attributes. God has many attributes, with justice being among them. But all of God’s attributes flow out of his love—his attributes do not flow out of his justice. God is merciful, sovereign, holy, just, perfect, good, righteous, omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient—and all of these attributes are summarized in his divine love.

- Most of the arguments attempting to place God’s justice and wrath as his defining characteristics go something like this: *Yes, the death of Jesus Christ was the ultimate expression of divine love. But, it was the ultimate expression because God cannot, by his very perfection, pass over sin. To vindicate his justice God did the unthinkable—in the person of Jesus he died for us. So at the center of the cross is the glorification of God’s perfect justice.*

Such ideas then lead to the insistence on an ever burning hell fire for the vast majority of humans who have ever lived, and, by comparison, an exclusive and small kingdom of heaven occupied primarily by paid-in-full, dues-paying slaves of Christ-less religion.

I absolutely reject a characterization of God as a primitive god of wrath on the grounds of the person of Jesus Christ and the fullness of his gospel. God the Father did not insist that God the Son die so that God the Father could be vindicated. In seeking a humanly satisfactory motive for the cross of Christ, this outrageous idea diminishes the love of God and perverts his very nature.

We must beware of defining God by human standards. Human ideas of retributive justice, or vengeance, often masquerade as a divine manifesto. God never said we would, in this lifetime, completely fathom his love—by his grace we are saved from theological attempts that try to do just that!

- Those who argue for eternal punishment of those who fall short of humanly imposed religious standards are not only violating the fundamental definition of God as love, they are, in pitting the wrath of the Father against of the compassion of the Son, violating the revelation of the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. According to some theological presuppositions, in order to place justice on the divine throne, justice must be presumed to trump God’s love in the end. That is, God may desire to forgive those who in some way are deemed to have fallen short, but he can’t—his justice compels him to send such poor souls to eternal torture. This belief and teaching bifurcates the very nature of God, separating his very essence.

In order to advance their own sense of retribution and satisfaction, theological lynch mobs have to place God’s love and justice in tension. They must set God against himself! But the Bible insists that the matter is not love or justice—it is not either/or, but both/and. And the Bible insists that love triumphs over all! The gospel is good news because God’s love is unalloyed, infinite and relentless.—Greg Albrecht



place him in a corner in terms of his decisions and plans.

- So, as we attempt to understand God and his wisdom and grace, we will err—but surely God would prefer us to err on the side of more individuals being with him for all eternity than a small remnant of our particular denominational brand of theological thinking.

- If we are truly in Christ and he in us we cannot help but hope. We can have peace and confidence that we do not need to anguish over departed friends and loved ones. Rather than dogmatic condemnation, or anxious uncertainty, our response to the question of what will happen to all humanity for all eternity can be hope. □

1. <http://www.barna.org/faith-spirituality/484-what-americans-believe-about-universalism-and-pluralism>

2. *Her Gates Will Never Be Shut*, Brad Jerzak, Wipf and Stock publishers, Eugene, Oregon.

3. *The Extent and Efficacy of the Life and Work of Jesus Christ*, James A. Fowler, <http://www.christinyou.net/pages/pdfs/ExtentEfficacyEbook.pdf>

For Further Reading:

Universal Solution? The Current Debate, Robin A. Parry and Christopher H. Partridge

Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell and the Fate of Every Person Who Lived, Rob Bell

The Inescapable Love of God, Thomas Talbot

The Evangelical Universalist, Gregory McDonald

Christian Universalism: God's Good News for All People, Eric Stetson

Hope Beyond Hell: The Righteous Purpose of God's Judgment, D. Scott Reichard and Gerry Beauchemin

Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved? Hans Urs von Balthasar

Syndicated cartoon artist and associate editor of Plain Truth magazine, Monte Wolverton lives in Washington state.

Not long after his high school graduation, my firstborn, Stephen, served with a relief and development agency in Chiang Mai, Thailand for several eye-popping months. While there, one overly helpful tourist introduced him to a particular corridor into the city where Stephen was informed “You can do anything you want here.” The would-be guide then glanced furtively about before leaning in close and with hushed intensity, emphasized, “I mean *anything*.” What “*anything*” meant was left to my son’s imagination, but the implications of absolute, morally unfettered freedom hit him with a wave of nausea.

Later, another young NGO volunteer showed surprise and disapproval when Stephen declined his invitation to take advantage of the great local prices on a sexual massage. Stephen emailed me, observing “this is not the freedom Jesus was talking about when He said, ‘The truth shall set you free.’ Aren’t these cravings for selfish hedonism the very chains Jesus came to set us free from...not for?”

His experience reminded me of what American novelist, David Foster Wallace called the “slavery impulse.” He criticized the North American idea:

“...that kids are exposed to very early: that *you* are the most important and what *you* want is the most important. And that your job in life is to gratify your own desires.... This does not work as well when it comes to educating children or helping us help each other know how to live...and to be ‘happy’—if that word means anything. Clearly it means something different from ‘whatever I want to do’—‘I want to take this cup right now and throw it! I have every right to! I should!’ We see it with children: that’s not happiness. That feeling of having to obey every impulse and gratify every desire seems to me to be a strange kind of slavery.”

Nor is this exclusive to sex tourists or impulse consumers. Many Christians employ the word “freedom”

exactly as the world has sculpted it. Have we not demanded freedom (even religious freedom) as our right to self-determination? Have we not often lived out our spiritual liberty as self-centeredness? Under the label “freedom,” we’ve armed ourselves to protect self-will, self-preservation, and self-importance as our highest cultural values. We should double-check whether or not that freedom is really worth dying for, killing for...an altar on which we’re willing to sacrifice our children.

The “freedom” of selfish indulgence is not the freedom for which Christ set us free, even when licensed by religious slogans and national hymns. Jesus did not die for our self-pleasure or even our self-fulfillment. The Gospel is not a golden ticket for moral or spiritual anarchy or protection from every personal hindrance and hurdle we find inconvenient to our autonomy.

Rather, freedom in Christ is freedom from the slavery of the old self, chained as it was to the demands of the ego; chewed up as it gets by the machinery of the world system; contorted as it gets by religious manipulation.

Set free from those old cravings and addictions, we experience the grace-based, Christ-centered freedom available to God’s children. Our freedom in Christ releases us to become living expressions of God’s radical love. Not by self-effort or self-will, but because God the Son, the very personification of divine love, lives in and through us.

One great thinker has said, “No desire of the soul has any reality within the soul until it has passed through the body by means of actions, movements and attitudes.” For Christian freedom to be real, it must pass through the flesh as compassion. What might this freedom look like in practice?

Think about family at the moment. Jesus has set us *free for, not free from*, the responsibilities of love as a faithful spouse or parent. Yes, I know, “responsibility” can be a religious club used for control. But what if God’s grace compels us to participate in his sacrificial

A photograph of a young child running across a green grassy hill under a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. A red and black kite is flying in the sky, with its long tail trailing behind it. The child is in the lower right foreground, running towards the left. The overall scene is bright and cheerful, symbolizing freedom and joy.

Freedom For or Freedom From?

by Brad Jersak

Our freedom in Christ releases us to become living expressions of God’s radical love.

love for others? What if God so frees us from egoism that his love in us generates pride-swallowing forgiveness in family conflict; patience in the mundane routines of child-rearing, and endurance to resist when worldly “freedoms” tempt us?

My point is that life will inevitably confront us with an apparent conflict between love for others and our own freedom. When this happens, our culture says “my personal liberty trumps the call to costly love.” But Jesus challenges

whether that is freedom at all...such a temptation is really a call back into bondage to the old self. But the Christ of the Gospels has shown us that the love of God—even when it is sacrificial and self-giving—is the higher and truer freedom into which we’re invited. □

Brad Jersak and his wife Eden live in the Fraser Valley of British Columbia. Brad is a faculty member at Westminster Theological

Centre (UK) and facilitates seminars in local churches around the globe.

The Gospel in Chairs

Join Associate Editor Brad Jersak for his “The Gospel in Chairs”—our latest feature video. Dr. Jersak explains how a Christ-centered perspective of the cross reflects God’s positive predisposition to you and me! That’s good news!

www.ptm.org/chairs



Every March Plain Truth Ministries (PTM) supports and publicizes a *Day of Prayer for Religious Captives*. Because Jesus came to set us free from institutions and individuals who prey on God-given gifts of freedom and justice, each year we devote one day in March to help increase awareness of the scourge of religious bondage and abuse.

On March 10, we encourage a focused day of prayer—not only for those who are enslaved by religion, but also for those who are physically held captive as slaves. Millions in this world are trafficked as merchandise by those who control and “own” them.

Thus, our *Day of Prayer for Religious Captives* on March 10, 2013 is also dedicated to prayer for those who are exploited and abused physically. Whether slavery and bondage is physical or spiritual (and sadly, in many cases it is both) our individual response must be to believe that we can make a difference. We who have been liberated spiritually, and given the precious gift of God’s grace know that we are not the end user of his grace. We are here, now, to pass on his grace in any way we can. We must believe that there is hope for a better tomorrow—and a better today.

Where would we be if Martin Luther had not opposed the entrenched religion of his day? Where would we be if William Wilberforce or Martin Luther King Jr. refused to take a stand?

Why should you pray? Will your prayers make any dif-

ference whatsoever? Prayer changes us—God does not need to be changed. God doesn’t need to be convinced that there are huge, seemingly insurmountable despicable evils in our world. Prayer helps us realize the enormity of the plight of the victims of spiritual and physical abuse.

Our world is a world held captive, both spiritually and physically, through an endless and seemingly increasing number of methods and techniques. Our world is enslaved and impoverished!

Pray for the kingdom of heaven to come—both today and tomorrow. Pray that the Light of the world will continue to overcome the darkness, exposing it and conquering it. Pray that good will triumph over evil. Pray for those who continue to be victimized—pray for their rescue and their liberation.

Wherever you may be on March 10, take some time to pray. Pray privately. Pray with your family. Pray with a group of friends.

If you are a part of our worldwide CWR congregation, join us for our services that week.

If you attend a brick-and-mortar church, ask that a part of services on March 10 be dedicated to those who are held captive. If you meet with a small group to study and pray, in addition to or in lieu of attendance in a church building, make sure that your brothers and sisters in this world who are held captive are part of the prayers you collectively offer.

Join us for this Day of Prayer—March 10, 2013. □

Speaking of Prayer...

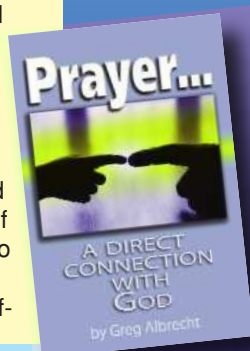
What is prayer anyway? Is it just another religious ritual we endure? Is it merely an exercise we have to do to keep God happy? What if you didn’t pray before a meal—would you be in deep *do-do* with God? And why do we only “say grace” before a meal—why not pray before we go to the movies, to a concert or to a baseball game? Is prayer all about persuading God to do something that he is reluctant to do?

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The “S” Word

If you look closely, my knee tells a story. All scars tell stories. My knee is riddled with the smallest of scars, all created when I was six years old, from a gravel driveway of the parsonage in which I lived. My house, a parsonage, was a few yards

away from a church, where Jesus lived, making Jesus and me neighbors.

I knew Jesus lived next door because his picture was in the basement. He was holding a little lamb. He looked caring, careful, gentle, protective. That picture told me that Jesus loved little sheep.

But I was running down the driveway fast as my little legs could fly, and I stumbled, and because I was wearing shorts, my right knee took the brunt of the fall.

It's a word we avoid at all costs, because there just doesn't seem to be an answer.

by Ron Benson

for little lambs, why didn't he care for me? After all, he lives right next door.

Big questions for a little boy. I admit my memory may have filled in some of the story based on the rest of my 57 years. I will also admit I still have some questions.

Questions We All Have

They are questions we all share—the questions prompted by the “S”

The gravel ripped through the flesh and buried itself. My mom had to pick out the stones while I screamed (I still disdain pain, and still occasionally scream). Mom applied mercurochrome (you may want to “Google” that) to the mess, stinging like the dickens, turning it brighter red, making it look worse than it really was, making me scream worse than I ever had.

The wound was bandaged and it hurt for a long time. And I thought of that little lamb. And a question formed in my little mind: *Why did Jesus let me fall on the driveway and get this owie?* (Adults still believe calling it an “owie” is supposed to make major, life-crushing trauma turn trivial). *If Jesus cared*

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my spirit asked: "Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"

Why?

What David wants to know, and what we study to understand, is whether there is some purpose for pain. We're all grown up, and we acknowledge that pain might even be okay to experience if there was some positive outcome, some product of the spirit, some light at the end of the tunnel that would make it worth it all, help make sense of it and provide a reason. We've asked David's questions and God seems unnecessarily mute.

Is God afraid of our questions? Is he dodging us? I think I can say with confidence: No, he is not. He welcomes our queries. He encourages our curiosity. About our questions, God says, *Bring them on.*

God's communiqué to mankind, the Bible, is chock full of the same questions about

that is quite probably the very first book written, even before Genesis, is a book that devotes itself almost entirely to this very question. The book of Job asks, *Why do we suffer?*

Starting at the very beginning of his lament, Job asks questions. Lots of questions. Questions about why he was born (3:12-13), why life seems purposeless (3:20-23), why there seems to be no hope (6:11-13). He even asks God the tough stuff: *Does it please you to oppress me...?* (10:3) Are you really just and

word: suffering. Why do we suffer? Why do we have pain? Why do I have to bear these scars? If Jesus is supposed to care, supposed to love me so much, if he is close-by and can do something about it all, why doesn't he help me? How could a loving God allow this to happen?

Your father abandoned you as a child. Your son is addicted to crack. You lost your job and had to file for bankruptcy. Your husband died of pancreatic cancer. Your sister has severe type-one diabetes and may lose her leg. Your wife ran out on you with another man.

And you have pain—pain all over, pain that won't stop, pain that sets into the recesses of your very bones. It is physical, mental, emotional, relational, spiritual—because it's impossible to separate one from the other and try to sort it all out. All you know is that it hurts, and there are scars, and you know Jesus, and you've prayed, implored, begged, bartered, and bargained, but he isn't doing a damned thing about any of it.

David, the emotional poet who wrote many of the Psalms, wanted to know the answers just like us. In Psalm 77:1-9, he asks questions that reflect just how we feel:

I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord, at night I stretched out untiring hands, and I would not be comforted. I remembered you, God, and I groaned; I meditated, and my spirit grew faint. You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak. I thought about the former days, the years of long ago; I remembered my songs in the night. My heart meditated and

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GOD'S COMMUNIQUÉ TO MANKIND, THE BIBLE, IS CHOCK FULL OF THE SAME QUESTIONS ABOUT SUFFERING. THEY PEPPER THE PAGES OF SCRIPTURE. ABRAHAM ASKS, MOSES ASKS, DAVID ASKS, THE PROPHETS ASK, THE DISCIPLES ASK. EVEN JESUS, FACING OFF WITH THE PROSPECT OF DEATH, ASKS.

suffering. They pepper the pages of scripture. Abraham asks, Moses asks, David asks, the Prophets ask, the disciples ask. Even Jesus, facing off with the prospect of death, asks. In fact, the book of the Bible

holy? (10:4-7), Why did you give me life just so you could bring me this kind of pain? (10:8-22), Why are you so angry at me? (13:20-27).

Some of us have dared to ask similar questions about our suffer-

ing. Some of us have the questions deep down but have never been bold enough to ask. Some of us, like Job, have asked and not been answered.

Job's friends gather around to offer help, but their assistance comes with solutions that don't make Job feel any better. They ask about what he's done wrong that God would be hurting him so much. They ask about what lessons he might learn from this suffering. They ask if he needs to "get right with God." If you have friends like Job, you can probably relate to his calling them "worthless physicians" and to his telling them to just shut up (13:4-5).

The problem with the whole Job story is that the answer we're given does not satisfy. It does not resolve the purpose issue. God offers Job no answer to the question, *What is the purpose of my pain?* That bugs me, but that's tough. God's response to Job in the end, put simply, is "I'm God. You're not. Do you have a problem with that?"

Trust

God's response is a challenge to trust. Do you trust him? Do you believe he loves you? Can you rest in that knowledge in spite of not understanding the pain? Trust is the issue. But that doesn't necessarily make me happy.

When I suffer I want a shepherd! I'm a little lost lamb. I want to be held and hugged, cared for and loved on, healed and restored and made right, with a full and complete reason why it all had to happen. I don't want my owies to go unnoticed and unexplained. Truth is—I don't want to suffer at all, but if I have to, I want to know that there is someone who knows completely how I feel and how to comfort me. I want to know that it was important; that there is a payoff for the pain.

WHEN I FIRST READ THE ASSIGNMENT MY IMMEDIATE THOUGHT WAS, I'M NOT QUALIFIED TO WRITE THIS ARTICLE—AND I DON'T WANT TO BE! I'VE NOT EXPERIENCED SUFFERING AND PAIN IN THE SAME DEGREE AS OTHER PEOPLE I KNOW.



“TO SOME, THE IMAGE OF A PALE BODY GLIMMERING ON A DARK NIGHT WHISPERS OF DEFEAT. WHAT GOOD IS A GOD WHO DOES NOT CONTROL HIS SON’S SUFFERING? BUT ANOTHER SOUND CAN BE HEARD: THE SHOUT OF A GOD CRYING OUT TO HUMAN BEINGS, ‘I LOVE YOU.’

—Philip Yancey

Does this sound like grace? No. Grace and suffering seem oxymoronic. Yet suffering and legalism apparently walk hand in hand. That's the answer Job's friends give most often. *It will all be understood once you confess your horrible sin, get right with God, and learn from the experience.* It's an economy of suffering that makes pain worthy by binding it to sin. That prompts another question, maybe the biggest of all: If I'm forgiven because of Jesus' sacrifice, why should I have to suffer?

Divine Answers

Does God give us answers? Yes, he does. They may not satisfy completely, but they're what we need to know about pain, as provided in Scripture.

1. Suffering makes us aware of our need for help. Pain is a requirement, even a blessed gift, to help us find help. Physically, it works like this: I pinch my fingers in the scissors. Nerve endings and chemicals built into my body by

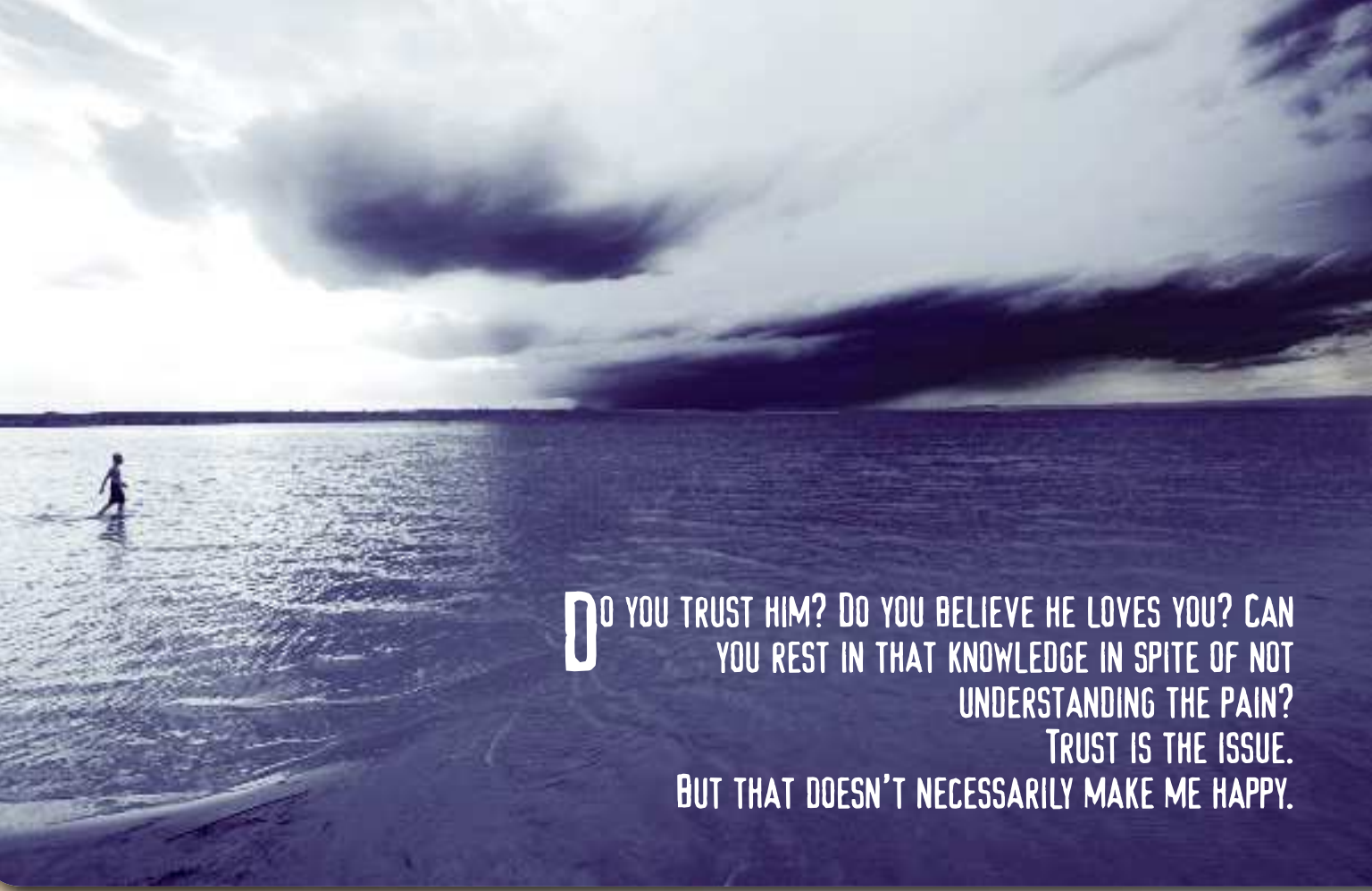
God's design transfer information to my brain's pain center in a flash and trigger the sensation. That pain informs me that I need to give attention to my finger.

When pain isn't processing correctly, we have a problem. CIPA (congenital insensitivity to pain with anhidrosis), for instance, is a rare genetic condition that causes the pathway of pain to be short-circuited. As a result, children with the malady ignore the natural signals the body sends—like *“Hey! Don't do that! Get some help! You're in trouble here!”* The result is often fatal.

The same is true of emotional and spiritual pain. When we feel it, we can do something with it. When we don't feel it, something is wrong. God has designed us so that pain will communicate. Physical pain isn't fun, but it's a gift without which we will die. Spiritual/emotional pain is grace. Without it we would not know our dire need for God.

Can you trust him with the grace of pain?

2. Suffering builds character and leads to holiness. Prepare to



DO YOU TRUST HIM? DO YOU BELIEVE HE LOVES YOU? CAN YOU REST IN THAT KNOWLEDGE IN SPITE OF NOT UNDERSTANDING THE PAIN? TRUST IS THE ISSUE. BUT THAT DOESN'T NECESSARILY MAKE ME HAPPY.

be reminded of a trite but true statement: no pain, no gain. ARGHH!

Can I confess something to you? I was not excited about writing this piece. I love *Plain Truth* magazine and enjoy writing stuff for our readers. But writing about suffering scares me. When I first read the assignment my immediate thought was, *I'm not qualified to write this article—and I don't want to be!* I've not experienced suffering and pain in the same degree as other people I know. But then, there are some people who have not experienced it like me.

Which brings up another question: *How much pain makes a person an expert?* Is there a graph somewhere that can show the relative spiritual benefits of suffering and what kind of pain results in the most holiness? If there was, I could plan my suffering better; map it out so as to have the best effect but not hurt so much; budget the suffering wisely for the greatest return.

I've often heard that to be a good pastor I'll have to endure suffering. That never seemed very fair, nor did it seem like an appropriate goal. It sounds like this: To be a successful pastor I need to have pain. It follows that if I stand in the middle of the freeway, or manage to contract a serious contagious disease, or take scissors to my pinky finger, I will be a successful pastor.

The truth is, I have not had to seek it out. I still have my pinky finger; I didn't have to lop it off. Instead, suffering found me. Not the same way it did you, not to the same degree, and not at the same joints or wounds, but it came. I'm not a success; in fact, on several pastoral measurement scales, I'm a failure. But I've learned lessons.

Suffering does that.

Only God has that scale. Only he can be trusted with it. Can you trust God to budget your suffering?

3. Suffering drives us to Jesus. We've already considered the role of pain as a motive to get help. Here we're talking about something more, something primal. Our suffering calls out not only for assistance, but for empathy. Suffering is an incredibly lonely business. It doesn't matter who's in it with us, what they are feeling, what others are going through; in the end we are alone in our pain. We stand isolated and self-possessed. Pain is solitary.

But that very isolation creates its own gnawing need—the need for a friend, a companion, a lover. We don't need merely an EMT techni-

JESUS IS THE SHEPHERD WHO GAVE HIS LIFE FOR HIS SHEEP. CAN YOU TRUST HIS UNDERSTANDING? CAN YOU TRUST HIS EXPERIENCE? CAN YOU TRUST HIS LOVE? WHY DO WE FIND A FRIEND IN JESUS WHO CAN EMPATHIZE? BECAUSE OF THE CROSS.

cian who is removed from our situation and busy hooking up the IVs and taking our pulse and driving the ambulance. We need someone to hold our hand and calm our fears; someone who knows our sorrow and loss and devastation; knows it from experience. Pain urgently demands a fellow.

That's why we sing,

Jesus knows all about my trouble. He will stay 'till the day is done. There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus. No not one. No not one.

Finding Answers in the Cross

Jesus is the shepherd who gave his life for his sheep. Can you trust his understanding? Can you trust his experience? Can you trust his love?

Why do we find a friend in Jesus who can empathize? Because of the cross.

Rob Bell wrote:

"Our tendency in the midst of suffering is to turn on God. To get angry and bitter and shake our fist at the sky and say, 'God, you don't know what it's like! You don't understand! You have no idea what I'm going through. You don't have a clue how much this hurts.' The cross is God's way of taking away all of our accusations, excuses, and arguments. The cross is God taking on flesh and blood and saying, 'Me too.'"¹

Philip Yancey agrees:

"To some, the image of a pale body glimmering on a dark night whispers of defeat. What good is a God who does not control his Son's suffering? But another sound can be heard: the shout of a God crying out to human beings, 'I LOVE YOU.' Love was compressed for all history in that lonely figure on the cross, who said that he could call down angels at any moment on a rescue mission, but chose not to—because of us. At Calvary, God accepted his own unbreakable terms of justice.... Any discussion of how pain and suffering fit into God's scheme ultimately leads back to the cross."²



THE CROSS PROVES GOD'S MOTIVES. THE CROSS PROVIDES A BOLD AND DIRECT ANSWER TO THE QUESTION, CAN I TRUST HIM? JESUS' PAINFUL DEATH GIVES ALL PAIN AND SUFFERING AND HARDSHIP AND SORROW A CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING.

God's motives. The cross provides a bold and direct answer to the question, *Can I trust him?* Jesus' painful death gives all pain and suffering and hardship and sorrow a context for understanding.

And it is ultimately the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross that is the beginning of the end of all pain, the setting to rights of the whole broken world, the restoration and healing and rebirth of all that God intended from the beginning.

As Job discovered, the issue of pain and suffering has its explanation and its purpose hidden deep in the redemptive power of God almighty. He is worthy of our trust.

So when I skin my knee and wonder why, even though it does not completely satisfy, even though I cannot see the whole resolution, and even when pain stirs my emotional soup, I can say with child-like confidence, *He loves me. I know it. I trust him.*

All scars tell stories. Jesus showed his scars to Thomas, proving he was alive, but more—proving he loved. Jesus still bears the scars of love so that my scars can be completely removed. □

1. Rob Bell, *Sex God*, ©2007, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI. p. 106.

2. Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?*, ©2002, Zondervan Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI. p. 232.

Ron Benson is a writer and pastor. He'll show you his scars in person at Grace Christian Fellowship in Bay City, Michigan. Ron would be willing to share your pain via Facebook, if you'd like a friend.





COMPLAINT DEPT.



Expecting Jesus' healing here and now is often harder than writing it off as unrealistic or something to be awaited on the other side of death. Everywhere I travel it seems I meet people and communities crippled by disappointment.

A man in Iceland prayed for days that his sister would come back to life after a drug overdose. A pastor of a church in the UK died of cancer in spite of massive prayer efforts. A close friend's Pakistani Christian friend who advocated for minorities was gunned down in Islamabad in March. I myself have been discouraged by the slew of revenge killings in a Honduran community dear to my heart—and now by a close friend's decline in a long prayer-bathed battle against cancer. What disappointments do you have, small or big?

"How many of you have been disappointed by God?" I asked a group of inmates. Many were honest enough to admit frustrations at God not apparently answering prayers. Others were afraid to admit their disappointments—especially at a time when they really need God's help. Many assume that being honest with God might get you on God's bad side.

I have been learning to bring my complaints to Jesus, and encouraging many to risk transparency

I have been learning to bring my complaints to Jesus, and encouraging many to risk transparency with God through the clear articulation of disappointments.

with God through the clear articulation of disappointments.

Martha and Mary have been helpful teachers, and I've discovered the fresh relevance of John 11—a chapter dedicated mostly to people's complaints to Jesus—who doesn't punish them (or us) for being real but goes with them and us to the depths of grief—through the darkness and towards the other side.

The story begins in John 11:1-3, where Mary and Martha are mentioned, and Mary is forefronted as the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair—a bold act of transparent worship in the house of a judg-

by Bob Ekblad

I am feeling freer to speak my laments and complaints directly to Jesus—and it seems my faith, my intercession and my longing for transformation are increasing.

ing Pharisee (see Luke 7:36-50). Mary is a true devotee who represents those in relationship with Jesus who come to him expecting answers to prayers.

Mary and Martha send word to Jesus about their brother, Lazarus: “Lord, he who you love is sick” (vs. 3). Jesus deliberately stays where he is for two days, and Lazarus dies. By the time Jesus approaches Bethany Lazarus has already been dead four days.

Martha’s Complaint in Faith

Martha goes out to meet Jesus, while Mary stays back, grieving in the house. “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give whatever you ask him” (vs. 21).

Martha’s complaint is strong and so is her faith. Yet in the ensuing conversation it is clear that she has no expectation that Jesus can or will resurrect her brother before the last day (vs. 24). Jesus responds, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me shall never die,” and invites her to believe—in him. In the aftermath of premature death Martha’s affirmation of faith in Jesus, that he is Christ, Son of God energizes her as she stands before him. She goes back and takes pastoral liberties, tricking her despondent sister into approaching Jesus with two well-intentioned lies.

“The Teacher is here,” she said, “and is asking for you” (vs. 28). Intercessors affirm as real that which is not yet actual based on what they believe to be true. Jesus was not yet in the village, as the next verse clearly states. Nor had Jesus called for Mary. Martha’s faith jumpstarts Mary’s. She gets up quickly and goes to him.

Mary’s Complaint Without Faith

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and repeats Martha’s exact com-

plaint but without Martha’s confession of faith: “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

Jesus is deeply impacted. He doesn’t correct her, explain himself or in any way justify his absence. A series of verbs shows Jesus’ increasing closeness to Mary, Martha and their dead brother. He sees her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he is “greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.”

Jesus shows God’s willingness to go with us fully into our pain. Rather than distancing himself through theological reflection Jesus asks: “Where have you laid him?” (vs. 34). The people invite him deeper into the concrete details of their upset: “Come and see,” and Jesus weeps.

Complaints From the Crowd

Jesus’ empathy leads some in the crowd to complain as I sometimes do: “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?” (vs. 37). The crowd doesn’t complain directly to Jesus as Martha and Mary do, but talk about him in the third person.

Regardless of different people’s ways of addressing Jesus, the text says nothing to critique people or to justify Jesus. Rather, Jesus shows a willingness to go even deeper into people’s root disappointments and loss, inviting them (and us) to intercession to the point of discomfort and even offense. How far will Jesus go? Much further than we will, it seems.

Jesus is described as being “deeply disturbed” but not intimidated as he comes to the tomb, a cave with a stone lying against it. Jesus commands: “Take away the stone.”

Martha represents the realist. She’s the voice of those who accept the finality of death and impossibility of repair. “Lord, already

there is a stench because he has been dead four days.” Martha resists Jesus’ descent into the grave.

Jesus addresses her unbelief with a challenge: “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”

They take away the stone and Jesus is there, face-to-face with the rotting corpse of his friend. He cries with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!”

The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, “unbind him, and let him go.”

Faith in Our Risen Lord

Many of the Jews witnessing the event believed in Jesus, and I have been feeling compelled to put my faith more fully in the person of Jesus than ever before. Though opponents sought to kill Lazarus and did manage to kill Jesus, and John the Baptist while Jesus was still alive—his resurrection means he himself continues to be the resurrection and the life for us—before and after death.

I am feeling freer to speak my laments and complaints directly to Jesus—and it seems my faith, my intercession and my longing for transformation are increasing. There is so much about prayer and God’s action in the world that I still do not understand. So much remains a mystery.

May Jesus increase your faith to bring your uncensored disappointments, complaints and grief directly to him in prayer. May you experience first-hand God’s presence, goodness and power as you come into Jesus’ presence and as he goes with you into your difficulties to bring resurrection and life. ☐

Bob Ekblad, author of Reading the Bible With the Damned and A New Christian Manifesto, is a biblical theologian and Christian activist. He was the founding director of Tierra Nueva (New Earth) a ministry that serves immigrants, inmates, gang-members and the poor in the U.S. and Central America.



Scary Stuff

Grandpa—you and I need to have a discussion. We like different things. I know you like war and blood and stuff, but it makes me scared, so I wish you wouldn't talk about it when I'm around. I don't mean to hurt your feelings."

My nine-year-old granddaughter, Annika, is a sensitive kid. She doesn't like scary, loud, violent things. No movies with big explosions, creepy villains, gruesome space aliens or monsters. No shooting, murder, blood and death. I suppose some would say that's abnormal for a kid these days. I didn't think I had been talking about "war and blood and stuff"—but maybe I'm just not sensitive enough.

My father was a professional comic artist in the 1940s and 50s, so I grew up with comic books, science fiction and scary stories. I've never met a fictional monster I didn't like. Additionally, I've probably read more than my share of fiction and history where battles, gunfights and combat are portrayed in detail. I've also been a student of the Bible for most of my life—a book that pulls no punches in its graphic descriptions of human violence, especially in the Old Testament.

Yet I wouldn't describe myself as a person who enjoys "war and blood and stuff." I hate war and have an aversion to blood outside of its proper place in the body. Unlike many of my Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan veteran friends (whose selfless service I am thankful for) I have never been in real combat. Based on their first-hand descriptions, I would probably be terrified out of my wits.

Like Annika, we all have fears or things that disturb us. As we age, we grow out of some and acquire others. We trade our fear of mythical monsters for fears of all-too-real foreclosures, tax audits, financial insolvency, debilitating diseases, chronic pain, loss of loved ones and loneliness. Some of these we may fear more than death itself.

My dog, Kirby, has a fear of firecrackers, gunshots and explosions. I have to sedate him on the Fourth of July and New Year's

Eve when my normally quiet country home sounds like it's in the middle of the Battle of Normandy. I have tried to comfort Kirby, sitting with him on the couch in the living room, covering him with blankets and reassuring him, but it does little good. He insists on panic even though he actually has no idea what is causing all those loud noises.

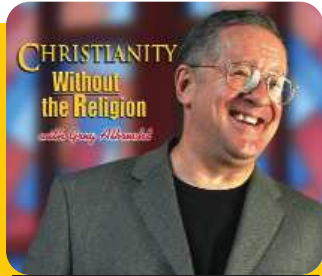
If you've ever tried to comfort someone overcome by fear, you may know something of how God feels when we refuse to accept his comfort and instead choose terror. It's easy to tell someone, "What are you scared of? There's no reason to be afraid. Buck up!" when you have not faced similar fears. But the closer you've been to where the other person is, your attempts at comfort hold a whole lot more credibility. That's part of the reason God, in the person of Jesus, chose to come walk in our shoes for a while. He laid down his total power and became a vulnerable human being—subject (in many ways) to the time, chance and accidents of his own physical creation. In Jesus Christ, God experienced rejection, injury and even death, and he rose, victorious over death, giving us hope.

Unlike some thoughtless, insensitive Grandpas, God thoroughly perceives our fears and things that disturb us. But he doesn't leave it at that. God helps us face our fears, not by magically removing them or their sources, but by walking along with us and giving us faith as we naturally experience the things we fear.

It's just as well that Annika isn't ready yet (if ever) for scary or violent stories, movies or video games. Maybe that's a gift. The scary nature of the world, with all of its real monsters, will reveal itself to her soon enough, and I am confident that God will walk with her on that journey. Real peace, confidence and courage come in knowing that God is okay with you and you don't need to be afraid of him. Jesus came to tell us that. □

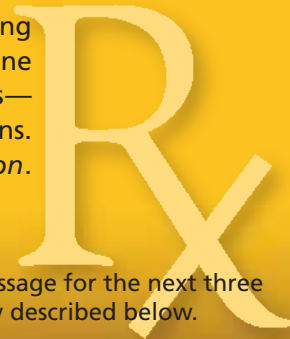
—Monte Wolverton

I grew up with comic books, science fiction and scary stories. I never met a fictional monster I didn't like.



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- In some cases, spontaneous outbursts of joy, punctuated by exclamations like, "Free at last, free at last!"
- If it takes you more than four days to recover from a religious meeting or gathering, be assured it wasn't CWR!
- CWR is not for everyone. Ask a religious professional—or better yet—ask someone who has suffered at the hands of one—if CWR is right for you!

Each weekly message for the next three months is briefly described below.

Be sure to join us at www.ptm.org for services every Sunday morning—or anytime throughout the week for *Christianity Without the Religion*.

How God Chooses His Team When Jesus chose his disciples, his decision wasn't based on who had the best personality or who showed the most academic promise. How does God choose us for his team, exactly? Week of March 3.

Set Free For Freedom As we celebrate our Day of Prayer for Religious Captives, our focus is on why God's grace sets us free. What is freedom in Christ all about? Week of March 10.

A Matter of Life or Death Our freely-given relationship with God is literally a matter of life or death. As we prepare to remember his death and celebrate his resurrection, we turn our minds and hearts to Jesus, who is the author and finisher of our faith. Week of March 17.

The King Who Comes in Humility On this Palm Sunday, and during this Passion Week, guest speaker Brad Jersak reminds us of the humility of our Lord and Savior. Week of March 24.

Easter Never Ends When all the eggs are gathered and when all the ham has been consumed, Jesus remains. His resurrection is more than a day, for it never ends! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Week of March 31.

God Alone Can Draw Us to Jesus Some speak of humans who were instrumental in "leading them" to Christ, and others speak of "finding God." But these assertions are fatally flawed—diminishing the gospel of Jesus Christ! Week of April 7.

Healing—Beyond Mere Recovery Healing in and by Christ is not simply a matter of receiving back something you once had—it's receiving something you never had before. Week of April 14.

"It's Turtles All the Way Down!" What do turtles have to do with the foundation of our solar system? Join us as we discuss the foundation of all that is, seen or unseen. Week of April 21.

Who Shall Separate Us? Just as young children experience separation anxiety, so too do God's children. During those times when all that we can see or feel may lead us to think that God no longer cares about us, according to our keynote passage in Romans 8:31-39, we can always be assured of the love of Christ. Week of April 28.

Forgiving Others Because God Has Forgiveness Join Greg for this first of a two-part series on forgiveness, as he explains that God's forgiveness goes far beyond the absence of a penalty—God's forgiveness is his presence. Week of May 5.

Forgiveness Is a Journey Mother's Day is a perfect time to focus on forgiveness! Forgiveness is a day by day journey with and in Christ. It's a life-long process, an attitude, a way of life we lead that is produced in and through us by our risen Lord. Week of May 12.

Our Father Some call the sample prayer Jesus gave us "The Lord's Prayer" and others call it "Our Father." Join us as we study the implications and significance of the meaning behind this short prayer in Matthew 6:9-13. Week of May 19.

"No More Condemnation" Shame is connected with how we feel about *who we are*, and guilt is about things *we have done*. Shame = I am bad; guilt = I did something bad. What did Paul mean about "no more condemnation"? Week of May 26.