

PLAIN TRUTH®

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

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The Crux of our Faith

By Greg Albrecht

The murder of Jesus, unlike Abel's—a homicide that cried out for vengeance—became a proclamation of grace. (Hebrews 12:24, The Message Bible)

The meaning of history is tied up with an event which takes place in the depth and hiddenness of a man who ended on the cross. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christ the Center, page 62)

...I didn't try to impress you with polished speeches and the latest philosophy. I deliberately kept it plain and simple: first Jesus and who he is and then Jesus and what he did—Jesus crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:1-2, The Message Bible)

The plain and simple focus of our faith is 1) *who Jesus was and is*, 2) *what he did and still does*, and 3) *who and what he will always be and do*. **The heart and core of the**

good news/gospel revolves around Jesus crucified.

Jesus crucified is the crux (“crux” is a Latin word emerging from the Cross of Christ that means the essence of any matter) around which our faith revolves and is focused.

The Cross is the singular act in history when God, in the person of Jesus, came down from the eternity of his holiness and perfection into our corrupted world to be with us, as one of us. The Cross of Christ is far more than a historical “fact” or a doctrinal dogma. The Cross exemplifies the marriage of heaven and earth, and while it happened historically, it is an eternal and transcendent reality.

The Cross stands forever as a symbol of God's vertical entry into our world from above, symbolized by the stake of the Cross. God in Christ came down and intersected

with human, horizontal life which is represented by the crosspiece on the Cross.

When God's divinity vertically intersected with our horizontal world of time and space we were enabled to be one with him, to die with him and to be risen in new life with him. The Cross of Christ is the eternal symbol of the axis between divine and human—heaven and earth—eternity and time and space.

Jesus came to fully reveal the love of Father God (John 17:6, 25-26). The Cross of Christ reveals the personification of

the love of God—the fundamental principle of his eternal existence.

God's love is the ground of his being and the crux—the essence—of his nature. The love of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is comprehensively revealed and demonstrated on the Cross of Christ.

Jesus crucified was the once and for all, earth-shaking moment in time when God in and through Christ transformed the universe. The Cross of Christ stands forever enshrined as omnipotent and eternal proof that God is not filled with wrath and anger. Jesus absorbed all human hatred and evil, without in-kind retaliation. He made no vows of vengeance—he didn't threaten to send his executioners to hell—rather he forgave them as they killed him.

The Cross of Christ is the most atrocious abomination ever—the

Continued on page 3



A Far, Far Better Rest

A *Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens has been one of my favorite books for well over 50 years. In addition to its well-known introduction, that begins “it was the best of times, it was the worst of times” one of its most celebrated and widely cited excerpts are the poignant words of Sydney Carton, who said, as he surrenders his life to save his friend, Charles Darnay: “*It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.*”

Carton says these words as he is being taken to the guillotine. Carton has managed to take the place of a friend who would have met the same fate, so he is, as Jesus said, exhibiting the GREATER LOVE of laying down his life for his friend. In this ultimate act of self-sacrificial love, Sydney Carton realizes **A Far, Far Better Rest**.

The character of Sydney Carton is a troubled soul—he is an alcoholic, and he is an arrogant narcissist who seems hopelessly in love with himself.

But as the story develops in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Carton is transformed from his somewhat miserable, self-centered life, and ultimately as he turns his focus toward serving others he does *a far, far better thing than he has ever done and enters into a far, far better rest than he has ever known.*

Transformation, regeneration and spiritual rebirth are constant themes of *A Tale of Two Cities*—through the eyes and perspective of the French Revolution.

The French Revolution is normally dated as occurring between 1789 and 1799, just over

200 years ago. The revolution overthrew the corrupt monarchy and ultimately replaced it with democracy—and then embraced, as the national motto of France: **liberty, equality and fraternity.**

It was a time of far reaching social and political upheaval, so while Paris is the focal point, London is also part of the story, thus *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Sydney Carton of London and Charles Darnay of Paris are two of the main characters in the story. They resemble one another in appearance, and that is one of the keys of the story.

They both fall in love with the same woman, but it is Darnay who marries her. Darnay, however, is a marked man in France because he was a man of privilege and power.

Until the revolution, France had been completely controlled by the aristocracy, but now working men and women, who were impoverished and abused, started a grass roots movement to overthrow the corruption of the aristocracy.

The former corrupt leaders, including the educated class, the landowners and those who have held offices because of being favored by the aristocracy are all being hunted down, imprisoned and executed on the infamous guillotine.

Toward the end of *A Tale of Two Cities* Darnay is imprisoned, primarily for crimes against the new order in France committed by his father and his uncle—but still, he is awaiting execution.

But his friend Sydney Carton, who closely resembles Darnay in appearance, visits him in prison, and is able to bribe a guard so that

Darnay is able to walk out of prison and certain death to be reunited with his wife.

Because Sydney Carton looks so remarkably like Darnay, the prison guards and officials have no idea that they are executing Carton, instead of his friend Darnay.

Sydney Carton longed to transform his own life, he yearned to serve others and through his substitution for his friend Darnay he found meaning in life...he found rest.

“Do You Hear the People Sing?” is one of the great songs in *Les Miserables*, a novel by Victor Hugo adapted in our time as a stage play and movie that also concentrates on this tumultuous time of revolution in France.

Here are a few of the lyrics from the song, which capture the feeling of those who are oppressed, downtrodden and searching for relief from oppression—searching for **A Far, Far Better Rest**.

This stirring song does not move me toward a political solution. In this world in which we live, there is no perfect political solution. These soaring lyrics inspire me to think of the Jesus Way—our Lord and our Savior, who alone can give you and me **A Far, Far Better Rest**:

*“Do you hear the people sing,
singing a song of angry men? It is the
music of a people who will not be
slaves again! When the beating of
your heart echoes the beating of the
drums there is life about to start when
tomorrow comes...”* □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for “A Far, Far Better Rest” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of March 7, 2021.

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ignominious, outrageous human attempt to kill God! **The Cross of Christ was the worst humanity could do to God, while it stands forever as the symbol of the absolute best that God does for us.**

A Curse: An Embarrassing Humiliation?

Crucifixion seems to have been invented by “barbarians” on the edge of the known world, and taken over by both the Greeks and Romans. It is probably the most cruel method of execution ever practiced, for it deliberately delayed death until maximum torture had been inflicted. The victim could suffer for days before dying. (John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, pages 23-24)

The Cross as a symbol of our faith as Christ followers is counter-intuitive if not shocking when we consider the horror with which crucifixion was regarded in the ancient world. How could any faith venerate a man who had been condemned as a criminal, tortured, humiliated and killed in this most grotesque form of execution?

Yet, the Cross of Christ stands as a monument to the opposition of the upside-down kingdom of God to the cherished values and beliefs of this world. Paul explains:

God didn't send me out to collect a following for myself, but to preach the Message of what he has done, collecting a following for him. And he didn't send me to do it with a lot of fancy rhetoric of my own, lest the powerful action at the center—Christ on the Cross—be trivialized into mere words.

The Message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hellbent on destruction, but for those on the way to salvation it makes perfect sense. This is the way that God works, and most powerfully it turns out. It's written,

I'll turn conventional wisdom on its head

I'll expose so-called experts as crackpots. (1 Corinthians 1:17-19, The Message Bible)

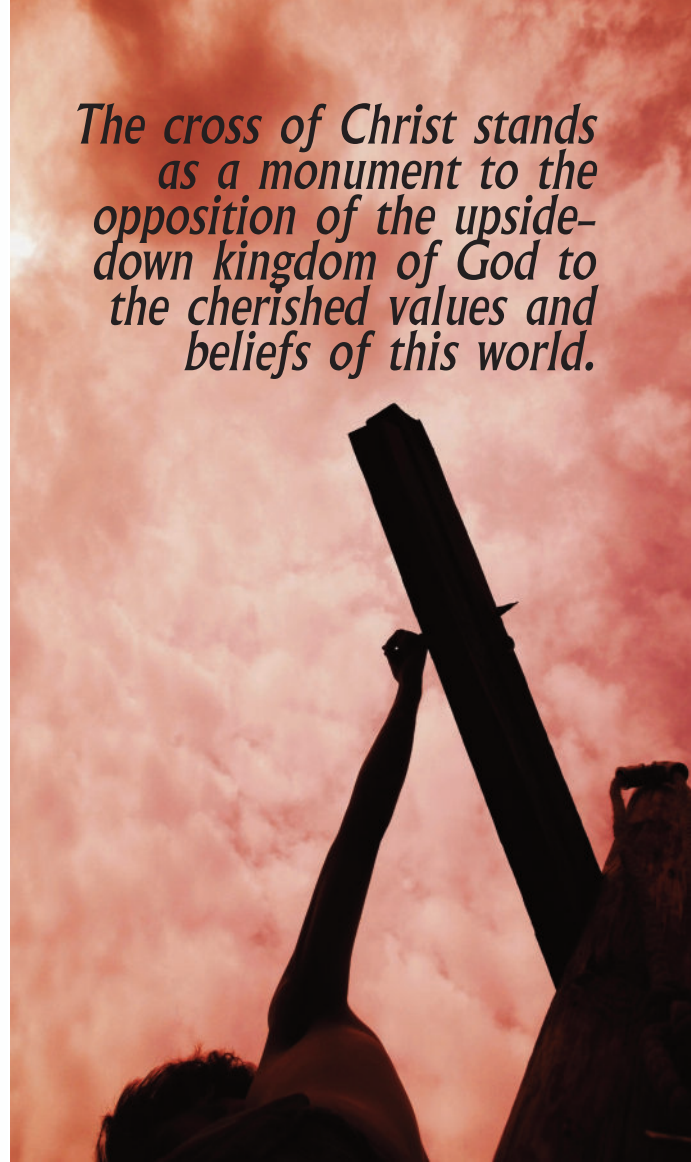
When Jesus told his disciples that he would be killed, *Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him* (Mark 8:31-32). Peter was horrified that Jesus would predict such a gruesome and premature end to his ministry. After Peter rebuked him for being “so negative” Jesus responded:

Whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (Mark 8:34).

Taking Up Our Cross

- The Cross of Christ non-violently overcomes fear, the intimidation wielded by the authorities of religion and state. The Cross strips bare the bullying and harassment of religion and state.
- Picking up our cross and following Jesus means emptying our backpacks filled with fear and worry, for Jesus sets us free from those things that enslave us.
- Following Jesus is an invitation to scuttle and abandon a works-based approach to life wherein one supposedly is the master of one's own destiny. The Cross of Christ hammers all requisite nails in the coffin of religious legalism and openly triumphs over it, dancing on the grave of performance-based religion as a preposterous and bankrupt belief. The invitation to pick up one's cross is to dump the illusion that we can earn God's love and favor.
- Following Jesus means living the way of the Cross—the Jesus Way. It is the way of service in the name of Jesus. It is the way of self-sacrifice. It is the way in which we as Jesus followers identify with Jesus and he with us. By Jesus' invitation and by the grace of God we are enabled to appropriate his death and live his risen life.
- Following Jesus means to follow him in suffering (1 Peter 2:19-25).

The cross of Christ stands as a monument to the opposition of the upside-down kingdom of God to the cherished values and beliefs of this world.



Christ-followers pick up their cross, follow him and suffer, in Christ participating in pain, and self-sacrificially living out God's own love. We discover in suffering for and with Jesus the God who wipes away all tears from our eyes (Revelation 21:4).

A Law Person or God's Person?

The Cross is the victory of grace over law.

Have some of you noticed that we are not yet perfect? (No great surprise, right?) And are you ready to make the accusation that since people like me, who go through Christ in order to get things right with God, aren't perfectly virtuous, Christ must therefore be an accessory to sin? The accusation is frivolous. If I was “trying to be good” I would be rebuilding the same old barn I tore down. I would be acting as a charlatan.

What actually took place is this: I tried keeping rules and working my head off to please God, but it didn't work. So I quit being a "law man" so that I could be God's man. Christ's life showed me how, and enabled me to do it. I identified myself completely with him. Indeed, I have been crucified with Christ. My ego is no longer central. It is no longer important that I appear righteous before you or have your good opinion, and I am no longer driven to impress God. Christ lives in me. The life you see me living is not "mine," but it is lived by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. I am not going to go back on that.

Is it not clear to you that to go back to the old rule-keeping, peer-pleasing religion would be an abandonment of everything personal and free in my relationship with God? I refuse to do that, to repudiate God's grace. If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily. (Galatians 2:17-21, The Message Bible).

The Cross of Christ is the victory of God's grace over law—any law(s) that purport, by one's allegiance to them, to impart or increase already existing favor from God.

When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive—right along with Christ. Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ's Cross. He stripped all the spiritual tyrants in the universe of their sham authority at the Cross and marched them naked through the streets.

So don't put up with anyone pressuring you in details of diet, worship services or holy days. All those things are mere shadows cast before what was to come; the substance is Christ. (Colossians 2:13-17, The Message Bible)

The Cross Lifts Up The Good News!

Within a few days of his death on The Cross, Jesus spoke about his glorification:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds (John 12:23-24).

He further explained:

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

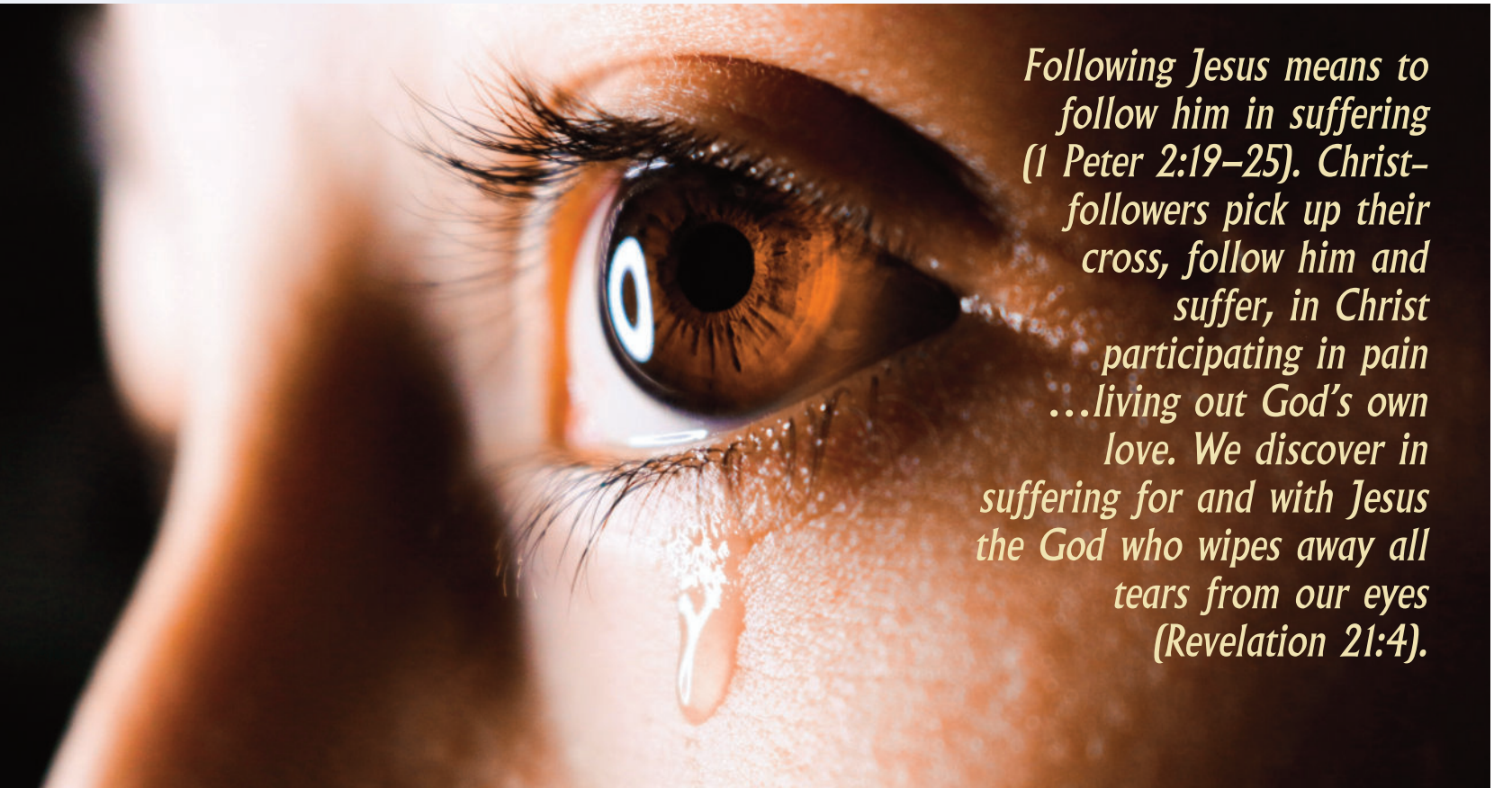
What Jesus did in time and space, in his incarnation as the God-man, perfectly reflects the eternal reality of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The love of God has always been his eternal reality.

However, in and on the Cross, in a singular historical act, all humanity could forever see Jesus lifted up.

Somewhat like a modern communication tower, the Cross of Christ lifts up the love of God and broadcasts it to the world. God's love is lifted up, on high, on the Cross so that it shines in its unrefined purity. In and through the Cross all mankind may be enlightened by the Cross, the divine evidence and testimony of who and what God is.

The Cross of Christ lifts up the One God above all other gods. Gods of human choosing and of human fabrication are safe and predictable—God on the Cross is bigger than we can define, totally unpredictable (why would he show us his love in such an extreme way?) and surrounded by divine mystery that is beyond our finite minds, the minds he gave us, as our Creator, by which we might comprehend.

In the blessed name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit—A-men! □



Following Jesus means to follow him in suffering (1 Peter 2:19–25). Christ-followers pick up their cross, follow him and suffer, in Christ participating in pain ...living out God's own love. We discover in suffering for and with Jesus the God who wipes away all tears from our eyes (Revelation 21:4).

When I AM Lifted Up

Brad Jersak

In the Gospel According to St. John, we encounter a notion of “glory” unlike anything religion had previously known.

On the night of his arrest, Jesus offers up these opening words to his high priestly prayer:

“Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (John 17:1-4).

Having glorified his Father through a lifetime of perfect surrender, Christ announces that the time is now for the Father to glorify his Son. Now is the moment of his glorious exaltation and enthronement—the revelation of his glorious and victorious crowning as King of kings and Savior of the world.

But the now to which Jesus refers is not his resurrection or ascension. He will indeed be “lifted up” but ironically, the throne to which he ascends is the Cross and the “royal diadem” with which he will be crowned is a wreath of thistles.

The revelation of God as “cruciform” (cross-shaped) unveils the truth that to be divine has nothing to do with the earthly glory of infamous emperors who define power through domination. Rather, the glorification of God-in-Christ looks like the all-powerful Love of extreme humility, radical forgiveness and selflessness. Yes, “Love wins” but the means of Love’s triumph were a shocking crucifixion and ghastly death.

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) portray Good Friday as an apparent defeat and humiliating death. They only see the glorious victory of Christ in his resurrection and ascension. But for the Jesus of John’s Gospel, exaltation and crucifixion are simultaneous. Everything begins with, revolves around and flows from the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“If I am lifted up...”

John conflates the death of Christ and the victory of Christ through the deliberate use of a clever pun. The Greek word is *hypsotho*, which means “to lift up.” The play on words combines physically hoisting something upward and metaphorically elevating someone’s status. For Jesus, being “lifted up” onto the Cross (crucifixion) is *at the same time* “ascending to the right

hand of the Father” (to be glorified).

Here are the key texts:

- John 3:14-15: *Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.*

This verse is embedded in the story of Jesus’ moonlight conversation with Nicodemus, “the teacher of Israel” and a member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus is an earnest seeker who will ultimately become a disciple of Jesus. But he struggles to understand where Christ is coming from (both literally and figuratively). Jesus’ teachings and his signs (John’s term for miracles) indicate that God has sent him. But Nicodemus struggles to understand what phrases like “*You must be born from above*” could possibly mean. He stumbles over his own literalism, knowing he can’t re-enter his mother’s womb.

Jesus shifts the metaphor and recalls the story of the plague of serpents from the book of Numbers. God saves the people from death by instructing Moses to erect a bronze serpent on a pole. Those who look to the bronze serpent in faith will be healed. Jesus says, basically, “that incident was a preview of my mission. When I am ‘lifted up,’ those who look to me will be healed

of the serpent's venom—the curse of death that bit the human race in Adam.”

• John 8:28: So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.”

In this brief passage, Jesus reveals who will “lift up” the Son of Man. “When you have” refers to his audience, the Judean establishment (specifically, Pharisees here). They may hear him claiming that they will “exalt” him and imagine to themselves, “No way. Never.” But in fact, by crucifying Jesus, they will do exactly that.

• John 12:32-33: “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” This he said, signifying what death he should die.

Finally, John is unambiguous: when Jesus says “lifted up,” he is referring literally to his crucifixion. BUT, as we shall see in the end, he is also alluding to his glorification as King. □

This Month at PTM!

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Now Available:
Letters to My Friends
by Greg Albrecht

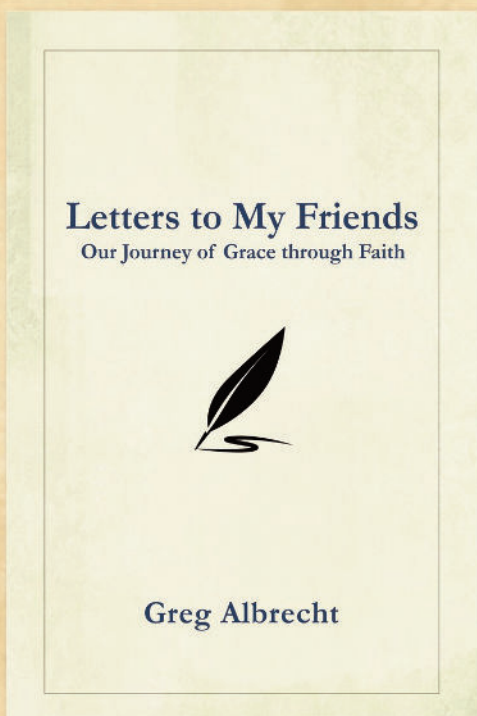


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Greg Albrecht has reviewed hundreds of inspirational and uplifting letters he has written for more than two decades. Since the last years of the 20th century, he has been sending a monthly “snail mail” letter to thousands of mail boxes (and more recently posting them electronically as well). He has selected a number of these messages and organized them, calling the collection *Letters to My Friends*.

Order your 1st edition collector's item
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Places I've Been

Since the day I snuck into my dad's office, pulled his well-worn black box camera off the shelf and shot a photo of my mom's backyard laundry drying rack, I've been fascinated by photography.

Sixty-seven years and countless darkroom hours later, I still have that image (digitized)—and the camera that shot it. I also have several thousand more photos. Most of these images (not to mention the photos and movies inherited from my parents) are places I've been.

Whether you used a Kodak Brownie, Instamatic, Polaroid, Canon, Nikon, Hasselblad or smartphone—whether you voyaged to the far east or drove to a nearby park—you doubtless have more than a few photos of your journeys.

As I revisit my father's old movies, I see my young self delighting to be on road trips across the country—and there were many of them. An elementary school teacher (who prepared my lessons to take on the road) told my parents I might learn more from travel than I would in her classroom.

Later in life I took my own family to far-away places, and I continue to do so a few times a year—usually mixing profession with pleasure. I've joined international groups of artists and journalists, made hundreds of friends, and gained a more holistic perspective of our world. I've often been reminded that my locale and my nation is not the center of the universe. That is, until last year, when physical travel came to a screeching halt. Now my travel consists of walking to my living room and meeting on email or Zoom.

I'm not alone in my frustration. Travel is so important to many Americans that they get antsy when they can't. At the height of the pandemic, a survey by American Express reported that nearly half of respondents felt anxious because they couldn't travel.

Even as our pandemic eases, travel in the future is likely to be far different. Those of us at higher risk will think twice about herding into an aluminum tube crammed with hundreds of

people hurtling through the stratosphere for hours on end. Besides, companies have discovered that most business meetings can be done cheaply online—and technologies are rapidly improving.

But this change could be a good thing. Despite the huge benefits of travel, the escapist downside is that we can neglect our home, our communities, our family and ourselves. Our pandemic has been a pointed reminder that we desperately need to address burning issues at home—some of which have been shamefully neglected for decades.

Likewise, this Lenten and Easter season compels us to take time from running to and fro—to come back home to Christ—to relax with him for a while and contemplate where we've been, where we are headed and where he would have us travel.

It's kind of the spiritual equivalent of flipping through old photos and pondering the places you've been—the joys along with the hardships, disruptions, illnesses, dangers and calamities you've faced. Maybe a few of those journeys were places you didn't want to go.

Yet Jesus offers us the grace and freedom to choose our path as we follow his way. It's a bit of a paradox—his way is at once the narrow road (Matthew 7:13) and the way of freedom (2 Corinthians 3:17). Narrow, because so few really find the full freedom of traveling the way of Jesus. Free, because we travel with full confidence that we will reach our destination. It's unlike the physical journeys we carefully plan for ourselves with tight schedules, itineraries and reservations. By contrast, in our spiritual journey along the Jesus way, one never knows exactly what might be around the bend or over the hill.

Our friend Jesus does, and I think he's probably keeping some kind of photographic record of the whole thing—well, the good parts anyway. We can review them with him when it's all over. Wait—what am I saying? We can review them with him *any* time. □

—Monte Wolverton



Quotes & Connections



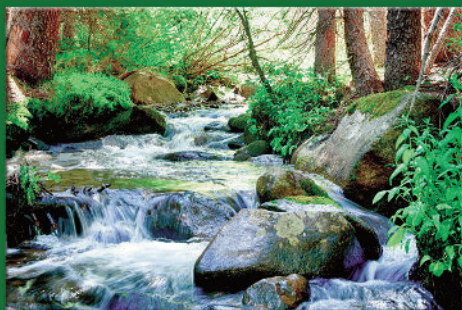
“When Jesus took the bread and said, ‘This is my body which is broken for you’ (1 Corinthians 11:24), it’s hard to believe that even in his wildest dreams he foresaw the tragic and ludicrous brokenness of the Church as his body. There’s no reason why everyone should be Christian in the same way and every reason to leave room for differences, but if all the competing factions of Christendom were to give as much of themselves to the high calling and holy hope that unites them as they do now to the relative inconsequentialities that divide them, the Church would look more like the Kingdom of God for a change and less like an ungodly mess.”—Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*

“If Jesus Christ were to come today, people would not even crucify him. They would ask him to dinner, and hear what he had to say, and make fun of it.”—Thomas Carlyle

“The thing about God’s sacrifice on Calvary that makes it a perfect expression of agape is that it demonstrates God giving that which has unsurpassable worth—his Son—on behalf of a people with no apparent worth. This is the nature of agape love. It is unconditionally ascribing worth to another at a cost to oneself.”—Gregory A. Boyd, *Repenting of Religion*

“The temptation of the age is to look good without being good...there is a beautiful transparency to honest disciples who never wear a false face and do not pretend to be anything but who they are.”—Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

Wonders of His Love Greg Albrecht



Photography by Ron Kelly

Coming Soon! Wonders of His Love by Greg Albrecht

featuring the
photography of
Ron Kelly

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