

PLAIN TRUTH®

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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

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If JFK Could Talk

Monte Wolverton

Sixty-three years ago, the American people elected John F. Kennedy (JFK) as their 35th president. To say that he was admired is an understatement. He is the third most popular U.S. president in history, right below Lincoln and Washington and just above Jefferson (according to the London-based research group YouGov).

Sadly, JFK was one of the shortest serving U.S. presidents. His administration was violently cut short 60 years ago, on November 22, 1963, by a 6.5 millimeter bullet fired from a war-surplus Carcano M91/38 bolt-action rifle with a 6-round magazine. Eight months earlier, the assassin had mail-ordered the firearm for a mere \$19.95, including \$7.07 for a scope.

In those days, it was also an understatement to say my devoutly Christian grandmother was

passionate about civics. Her living room was an official polling place. Before every election she crammed her furniture aside to make way for voting booths. She transformed her front porch and hallway into reception areas where local voters signed in and received their ballots.

When then-vice-president Richard Nixon came to town on September 13th, 1960, in the first week of his campaign against Kennedy for president (political campaigns were much shorter then, thankfully), my grandmother helped organize a reception for Nixon at the county courthouse. I still have a signed letter of appreciation from him. That day, as a budding photographer, I captured a photo of Pat and Dick Nixon riding up Main Street in their motorcade.

But that didn't mean I liked Nixon. I knew nothing of politics in the 7th grade, but I knew Nixon looked

frumpy with his shifty, scowling eyes, forced grin and jowelly five-o'clock shadow. By contrast, the charismatic Kennedy was young, athletic, progressive and dynamic. He had cool hair and a knockout wife. My friends were big fans, and so was I. Why wouldn't we be? He was popular, and later political observers would note that Kennedy had turned Presidential races (if not all political races) into what they are today—*popularity contests*.

Politics of Personality

Populism (related to popularity, but not the same) is a political approach that strives to appeal to *ordinary people* who feel that their concerns are disregarded by the *established elite*. This pretty much describes how my friends and I felt about the 1960 presidential race. Nixon represented the stodgy established elite, whereas it seemed Kennedy was actually in touch with our concerns (whatever we thought they were at the time). Policy, platforms and proficiency aside—my presidential preference was propelled by an almost religious *populism*—pure and plain.

Various forms of populism in the ancient past are well-documented, in fact, American populism arguably has its roots in religion, with the First Great Awakening—a succession of Christian revivalistic waves that swept England and the American colonies in the 1730s and '40s.

One of the spearheads of this movement was a young English minister named George Whitefield.

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The Love of Thanksgiving

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever. —1 Chronicles 16:34

O Lord that lends me life, lend me a heart replete with thankfulness.
—William Shakespeare

Why do we love the Thanksgiving season so much here in North America? Why do so many say that Thanksgiving Day is one of their favorite holidays of the year? Along with our friends in Canada, Thanksgiving Day, although celebrated on different dates, remains a highlight of the Fall season, and an important beginning to the spiritual richness of the holiday season to come. Along with a deep joy and a quiet peace we delight in during this season, there is a true **Love to Thanksgiving**.

The Thanksgiving season is a time when we may fall in love all over again. We may fall in love again with our shared lives together in Christ Jesus. We may fall in love again with his boundless grace, and with all the special people, favorite places and countless blessings and gifts we receive within his grace. It's not just a matter of perspective. It's a matter of honest emotion. As we focus on all that we are truly thankful for, spiritually and physically, our hearts feel, deeply feel, the **Love of Thanksgiving**.

My heart is overflowing with love for you, and as I reflect on my blessings this Thanksgiving season, I realize that you are Blessing Number One.— Henry Ward Beecher

Henry Ward Beecher was a nineteenth-century American clergyman, social reformer, author and speaker. In his many sermons and writings, Henry Ward Beecher was famous for emphasizing the reality of God's love in the lives of believers. When I read his words, there can be only one true addressee—**our Lord and Savior Christ Jesus**.

As Christ-followers, we all share the same **Blessing Number One**. We may indeed enumerate and enjoy blessings “number two through two million” quite differently, but to be sure, **Blessing Number One** we hold in common.

And, what is **Blessing Number One**? Our lives have been redeemed, transformed, and re-purposed as a result of coming to know the saving work of Christ Jesus. In his boundless grace and enduring love, we now live as new men and new women. We live with hearts replete, or filled, with thankfulness; our hearts are overflowing with Love.

We love him because he first loved us. Christ Jesus showed us the way to true love. We have learned of true love from him. If our hearts are over-flowing with love for him, that love is a mirror of his love for us. We are his beloved, and as such, the quiet peace and deep joy we feel comes from knowing his love for us, and for all the world. We rejoice and rest in him.

Count your many blessings, name them one-by-one, and it will surprise you, what the Lord has done states the classic Christian hymn composed by Johnson Oatman. *Count your many blessings, name*

them one-by-one—beginning with our **first and most important blessing**. This counting is central to Thanksgiving Day. *And it will surprise you, what the Lord has done*—within that surprise, within that honest emotion, our hearts are filled with a thankfulness and overflowing love. His boundless grace and enduring love overwhelm us.

We love Thanksgiving because it's a time to focus on what the Lord has done in our lives. That focus is on the spiritual richness of his boundless grace and enduring love. We love Thanksgiving because we *count our many blessings, naming them one-by-one*. That focus is on the physical blessings and gifts we've been given by his grace. Those physical gifts—including the wonderful food, the warmth of family and the excitement of the Fall festivities—make Thanksgiving Day a favorite. The deep joy, quiet peace, and true Love of Thanksgiving holds both physical and spiritual components. As a result, our hearts are filled with thankfulness.

We rejoice and rest in the reality that Christ Jesus is our Lord, and he is filled with goodness. **Jesus is the Love of Thanksgiving**. His love endures forever and his grace is boundless. **He is our Blessing Number One**.

As we focus on Thanksgiving Day, we celebrate the good news of his birth, life, death and resurrection. We celebrate his transforming work being done within us. And, we celebrate his love, in us and through us, to all the world. In this, we give thanks to the Lord. □

—Ed Dunn

Continued from page 1

After his education, ordination and the development of his revivalistic style in England, he travelled to the American colonies in 1740. In those times of uncertainty (and what times aren't uncertain?), Whitefield offered a solution. Unlike many established Anglican and Presbyterian pastors, his preaching was extemporaneous, dramatic and highly emotional.

George Whitefield entertained and captivated audiences, using his early theatrical experience to deliver stunning portrayals of biblical stories. True to the definition of *populism*, he appealed to ordinary people who increasingly felt that their concerns were ignored by the established religious elite. And if his audiences weren't swayed enough by his riveting shows, he hurled terrifying warnings of hellfire at complacent onlookers who had not properly received the "second birth."

As the movement advanced, Whitefield and other itinerant revivalist preachers aroused and incited congregants to revolt against institutional clergy and install their own "reborn" ministers. Not all leaders of the Awakening were happy with this unhinged turn of events, including Congregationalist theologian Jonathan Edwards, whose preaching demeanor was staid compared to that of Whitefield. Still the Awakening churned on, for better or worse.

Like countless revolutions, the outcome of the Awakening was a mixed bag. Yes, the Christian religious establishment was challenged as it needed to be on many issues. Yes, the Awakening ended segregation in many congregations, and furthered the idea of the abolition of slavery.

On the other hand, clergy education, quality theological training and careful, reasoned preaching were often laid aside in favor of bombastic rhetoric and what could only be described as

emotion-driven mobs. In fact, the more passionate adherents of the movement were derisively labeled "enthusiasts" at the time. Some historians contend that the groundwork for the American Revolution was laid in large part by the Awakening.

Now, nearly three centuries later, like George Whitefield's zealots, we are willingly inducted into the personality cults of anyone who puts on a good show.

But far more dangerously, we are transfixed and recruited by political and religious celebrities.

Why Celebrity Worship?

The reasons may be complex, but some research suggests that *the less connected people feel, the more they turn to celebrities*. We look to appealing public figures to give us the same sense of belonging that we may have lost with family, close friends and real community. A strong political or religious leader may become a father or mother figure. A younger, dynamic politician may seem like a big brother or sister to us. These personalities may offer us pat solutions to our problems and refuge from our disappointments, failures and losses—making us feel part of something great and important—restoring our sense of identity.

On top of that, we crave heroes. Joseph Campbell, in his book *Hero of a Thousand Faces* makes the case that heroic sagas are essentially the same story told over and over again across all cultures. The more chaotic our perception of the world, the more we obsess on the idea that some great champion will rise up to save us from our own evil and usher in a sparkling utopian world of peace and order.



Add to this our cultural addiction to hype, driven by advertising and media. In the intense competition for ratings and customers, every piece of information, product, news item, headline and public figure must be sensationalized. Whether it be a business enterprise, sports figure, entertainer, politician or religious figure, it must be grossly overhyped to get noticed amid the deafening 21st-century media cacophony. Anyone who wants to get noticed by the public must groom themselves to seem larger than life.

Because of all this, we are easy prey for unscrupulous political and religious leaders who know precisely how to leverage these human emotional needs for their own gain. They dumb down issues that are complex and nuanced, simplistically blaming society's problems on a single evil enemy or class of people. They paint themselves as heroic because they know that will grab the public on a subconscious and visceral level.

One such politician wrote, "Persuasion must be aimed at the emotions and only to a very limited degree at the so-called intellect" because "sober reasoning determines [people's] thoughts and actions far less than emotions and feeling...*my purpose is to arouse, to whip up, to incite.*"

That politician was Adolf Hitler, in his book *Mein Kampf*. I'm certainly not suggesting that all

populist leaders are genocidal despots. But I am contending that *following populist leaders who use emotional manipulation as a strategy to amass power is historically a perilous road*—one that responsible citizens (especially Christians) should avoid.

Christ-Style Servant Leadership

Accounts of Jesus' preaching reveal no emotional manipulation or what we would call revivalism. His messages were powerful and brilliantly crafted and his responses to adversaries were stunning. Even his silence spoke volumes. We might expect this level of skill because, after all, he was and is God. But there's no record of him arousing, whipping up or inciting crowds, trying to amass a following or acquiring power—religious or political.

Jesus reveals his mission statement in Luke 4:16-21. He quotes Isaiah 61:1-2, declaring that his Father has sent him to *"proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* In other words, he came to proclaim the gospel—and to be the Gospel by his life, death and resurrection. *There's nothing here about inciting people to do anything except believe the good news!*

What's more, the Apostle Paul urges everyone (including any kind of leader) to follow Jesus' example. *"In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross"* (Philippians 2:5-8).

None of this is to say that we should write off preachers or politicians just because they are gifted

speakers. But it is to say that we should never, ever check our brains at the door of any institution, whether it be church or government.

Back to Kennedy

John F. Kennedy, populist though his campaign may have been, did not usher in the kingdom of the antichrist as some religious fanatics predicted. He turned out to be an outstanding president, and he accomplished a great deal during his short administration. He was intent on pursuing world peace. Yet, he locked horns with some of the powerful established elite in the federal government and military. Although we may never know the details, in the end, Kennedy may have paid for this with his life.

Sixty years later, we're faced with the same issues—with different players dressed up a little differently. But somehow things seem a lot worse. We desperately need functional civil government. We need coherent, informed discourse and civil debate to maintain a stable society and a stable world. We urgently need competent human leadership.


What kind of human leadership and governance? Scripture doesn't specify much. Jesus left no detailed blueprint even for church governance. After millennia of experimentation, failure and sparkling visions of the future that didn't happen, it currently seems that some form of democracy is the best we've got. On paper anyway, we have government by the consent of the governed and checks and balances of power.

But who do we elect to lead us? Here's where the system often fails. You would think that voters would evaluate candidates based on their values, education, policies and proven capacity to fulfill their responsibilities. But no. We vote for whomever we like. Candidates and their handlers know it's a popularity contest, and they strive to build a fan base. They transform themselves into saviors and heroes.

If an aspiring leader—political or religious—makes vast, sweeping, egoistic promises of freedom and justice for everyone in order to secure an office or consolidate power, we need to realize it's nothing more than pompous, empty rhetoric on which they can never fully deliver. It is foolishness to expect from mere human beings something that only Jesus Christ is capable of delivering—and which *he will deliver*.

John F. Kennedy was reputed to be a hero, and in the world's most powerful human office he may have done the best he could. But like all of us, he was human and fatally flawed. If we could hear him talk today, I believe he would tell us that the only genuine hero was and continues to be Jesus Christ. □

Monte Wolverton, who writes from Vancouver, Washington, has been actively involved with Plain Truth magazine and Plain Truth Ministries for many decades.



There's nothing here about inciting people to do anything except to believe the good news!



Should We Fear God?

Brad Jersak

“In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence.”—King Solomon

What is “the Fear of the Lord”? From a gospel standpoint, in light of Jesus’ resurrection victory, his words echo in our ears: “Be not afraid” (John 6:20 KJV). The good news of Jesus demonstrates Christ’s unwavering opposition to all forms of fear. Indeed, our experience of fear is almost always rooted in lies we’ve come to believe or mistrust in the love of our heavenly Father. The New Testament frames “the fearful” as those bound up in chains, in desperate need of freedom.

This begs the question: What about “the fear of the Lord,” a phrase that appears about thirty times in the King James Version of the Bible? Aren’t we commanded to “fear the Lord”?

In his collection of proverbs, King Solomon treated the fear of the Lord as an essential virtue, required by God of his wise and faithful servants: *“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding”* (Proverbs 9:10).

But why would the same God, incarnated in Jesus, say “It is I; be not afraid” (John 6:20, KJV) also command us to fear him?

After all, John the Beloved wrote

that there is “no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear: because fear has to do with punishment” (1 John 4:18). So then, where does this leave room for the *fear of the Lord*? It sounds like a double-bind. We’d best sort out what God means.

More Than a Feeling

Simple interpretive guidelines will help clarify the biblical definition of the *fear of the Lord*. First, we need to stop treating the fear of the Lord as merely an emotion. The norm in Scripture is that it is less about feeling scared and instead, treated as a *way of life*. As long as we falsely equate and reduce this “fear” to a feeling, we forever wrestle over when and whether we should be afraid of God. Either that or we choose other less offensive feelings (like reverential awe) or attitudes (like respect) to explain this puzzling phrase. That’s a first step in the right direction, but still centered in an emotional experience.

But just as “discouraged” in Scripture can be a verb, meaning, “to give up” rather than an emotional label (to feel despondent), so it is with the fear of the Lord. Instead of representing an emotion like terror, the fear of the Lord is really an action word, the meaning of which becomes clear by applying the second interpretive principle.

Hebrew Parallelism

This second principle is the basic poetic device called “Hebrew parallelism.” Briefly, Hebrew parallelism uses two parallel phrases. The second phrase will define, clarify, exemplify, expand, or contrast the meaning of an initial phrase. The second phrase makes the meaning of the initial phrase clear. Thus, by using parallels synonymous with “the fear of the Lord,” the Hebrew prophets and poets define it for us, as demonstrated below (using the NKJV to retain “fear” lingo but updating the grammar):

1) Most often the fear of the Lord simply means OBEYING God diligently.

Now this is the commandment, and these are the statutes and judgments which the Lord your God has commanded to teach you, that you may observe them in the land which you are crossing over to possess, that you may fear the Lord your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, you and your son and your grandson, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged. (Deuteronomy 6:1-2, my emphasis)

Come, you children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Who is the man who desires life, and

loves many days, that he may see good?

**Keep your tongue from evil,
And your lips from speaking deceit.
Depart from evil and do good;
Seek peace and pursue it.**

(Psalm 34:11-14, my emphasis)

2) The fear of the Lord includes SERVING God faithfully.

*“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to **fear the Lord** your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to **serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul**, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?*

(Deuteronomy 10:12-13, my emphasis)

If you fear the Lord and serve Him and obey His voice, and do not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then both you and the king who reigns over you will continue following the Lord your God.

(1 Samuel 12:14, my emphasis)

3) The fear of the Lord also includes WORSHIPING God exclusively.

*For the Lord is great and greatly to be praised;
He is **to be feared** above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
But the Lord made the heavens.
Honor and majesty are before Him;
Strength and beauty are in His sanctuary.
Give to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
Give to the Lord glory and strength.
**Give to the Lord the glory due His name;
Bring an offering, and come into His courts.
Oh, worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness!
Fear before Him, all the earth.***

(Psalm 96:4-9, my emphasis)

Even to those who come in the trepidation of their shame, he says again right now, “It is I; be not afraid” (John 6:20, KJV).



4) The fear of the Lord means TRUSTING God completely.

*Oh, how great is Your goodness,
Which You have laid up for **those who fear You**,
Which You have prepared for **those who trust in You**
In the presence of the sons of men!*

(Psalm 31:19, my emphasis)

*You who **fear the Lord, trust in the Lord**; He is their help and their shield. (Psalm 115:11, my emphasis)*

*He has put a new song in my mouth—Praise to our God;
Many will see **it and fear**,
And will trust in the Lord.*

(Psalm 40:3, my emphasis)

***In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence**, and His children will have a place of refuge. **The fear of the Lord** is a fountain of life, to turn one away from the snares of death. (Proverbs 14:26-27, my emphasis)*

5) The fear of the Lord means we serve NO OTHER GODS.

*Now therefore, **fear the Lord, serve Him** in sincerity and in truth, and **put away the gods** which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. **Serve the Lord!** And if it seems evil to you to **serve the Lord**, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, **whether the gods** which your fathers served that were on the other side of the river, **or the gods** of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, **we will serve the Lord.** (Joshua 24:14-15, my emphasis)*

When God Seems Scary

To be fair, some Bible authors do use the phrase “*fear of the Lord*” to denote a terrifying experience of the Almighty (Isaiah 2:19, 19:16, Jeremiah 5:22), or an awesome encounter with his glory that resulted in reverence (Psalm 33:8). Consider Isaiah’s reaction when he encountered God face-to-face:

***Woe is me, for I am undone!** Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; **For my eyes have seen the King**, the Lord of hosts. (Isaiah 6:5, my emphasis)*

I do not deny such experiences. Yet gratefully, when such traumatic encounters with the Lord occur in the Bible, notice that from Genesis (26:24) to Revelation (1:17), God consistently answers with a word of comfort, “*Fear not!*”

God is not looking to evoke dread in his people. Rather, **Fear of the Lord** is described in the Bible as a lifestyle of obedience, service, worship, and trust in the only God who says, “*There’s no need to be afraid. My love is perfect and will free you from fear.*”

Today and every day, Christ himself invites us to *come quickly, knock loudly, and enter boldly*. And even to those who come in the trepidation of their shame, he says again right now, “*It is I; be not afraid*” (John 6:20 KJV). □

Brad Jersak is Principal and Director of Theology and Culture at St. Stephens University in New Brunswick, Canada.



A Sickness Unto Death

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

Today is April 5, 2023 as I write this. Full moon. Grand River is rising. Predicted to go four feet over flood stage. Our house is on the river, though 10 years ago (during the 100-year flood), it was *in* the river.

The river, by the way, does have a personality. The raging anger of a bitter winter ice jam when you think the surge will bulldoze your house a full block downstream. Or the wave and smiling face as this summer grand river floats merrily downstream. But, in flood season the river doesn't care one whit whether it's driving past our house or driving right through it.

So, we get our kayaks out of storage and haul them a quarter mile up to dry land—flood season transportation. The other aggravation of the day is that for some bizarre reason I suddenly lost the email capability that I've enjoyed for nearly two decades.

A setback in transportation and communication, a mere aggravation but only in the broader scheme of things as I have come to realize.

Since last summer, I have been seriously ill and handicapped. I can now walk quite well—not the fast walking I'm used to, but tolerable for a 77-year-old woman. My right hand is partially paralyzed, though I am capable of typing at a very slow speed of about fifteen words per minute.

After suffering a fractured pelvis last July while helping my husband John with a construction project at our little shop, I contracted a case of sciatica so bad that it required three injections before I could say goodbye to my wheelchair.

Then it was Covid 19 and a three-week quarantine. One thing after another, finally confined to a hospital, a psychiatric facility, another hospital, and an infirmary. Diagnoses ranged from a UTI to bipolar. Bottom line, I was a mess.

My slow recovery began only after I was discharged and released into John's care in

December. I couldn't walk, take care of bathroom duties or eat. I was sent home with a feeding tube, plenty of diapers, and a hospital bed.

Charge me with bias if you choose, but there has never been a caregiver that could even be compared with John. I was telling a friend who commented that she knew her husband would never have done that.

What I learned today about my condition, however, was nothing short of shocking. I learned

My slow recovery began only after I was discharged and released into John's care... home where I was given back the gift of life. Truly the gift of life.

I was but a hair's breadth from death.

I casually asked son Carlton if he ever thought I might die while I was hospitalized. The question baffled him.

Didn't you know how bad things were?

It turns out that, as my guardian, he was twice called in by doctors for consultation. Their reasoning: I was 77, terminally ill, not eating, saying to staff that I wanted to die, and occupying a hospital bed someone else would need.

They had decided to remove life supports and have me transferred to hospice. I can't even imagine Carlton's outrage. Absolutely, categorically, emphatically, *no*. He would never under any circumstances permit them to just let me die. *How dare you!*

Days later I would be transferred to an infirmary. Then two critical things happened. Staff at the infirmary had me walk, holding onto parallel bars. I slipped, paralyzing my right hand.

On the positive side, they trained John how to care for me at home—home where I was given back the gift of life. *Truly, the gift of life.* Crowning me with tender mercies to the uttermost. □

—Ruth Tucker



Quotes & Connections



"Nothing in life is to be feared, it is only to be understood. Now is the time to understand more, so that we may fear less."—Marie Curie

"Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision."—Winston Churchill

"God has two dwellings; one in heaven, and the other in a meek and thankful heart."—Izaak Walton

"Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it."—William Arthur Ward

"The word 'religion' itself, even while it has positive meanings attributed to it, is, at its core, a toxic faith. The etymology of the word goes back to the Latin *religare*—to bind—and *religio*—obligation (to the gods). The use of the word 'religion' today generally points toward the practices and beliefs individuals accept as a true definition of what God (or the gods) expects of them."—Greg Albrecht

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Greg Albrecht
EDITOR/ART DIRECTOR: Laura Urista
EDITOR: Brad Jersak
PUBLISHING AND CIRCULATION DIRECTOR: Dennis Warkentin
ASSOCIATE EDITORS: Ed Dunn, Monte Wolverton

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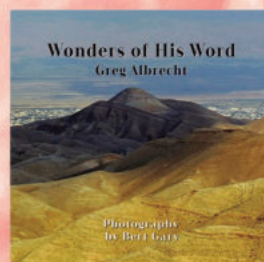
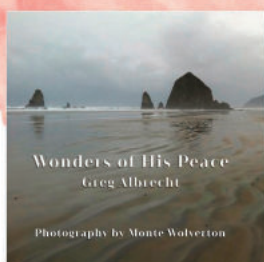
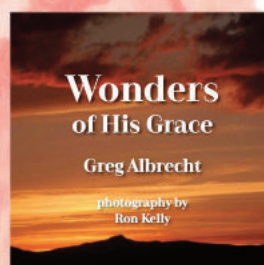
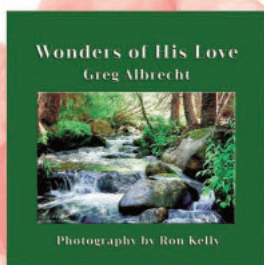
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