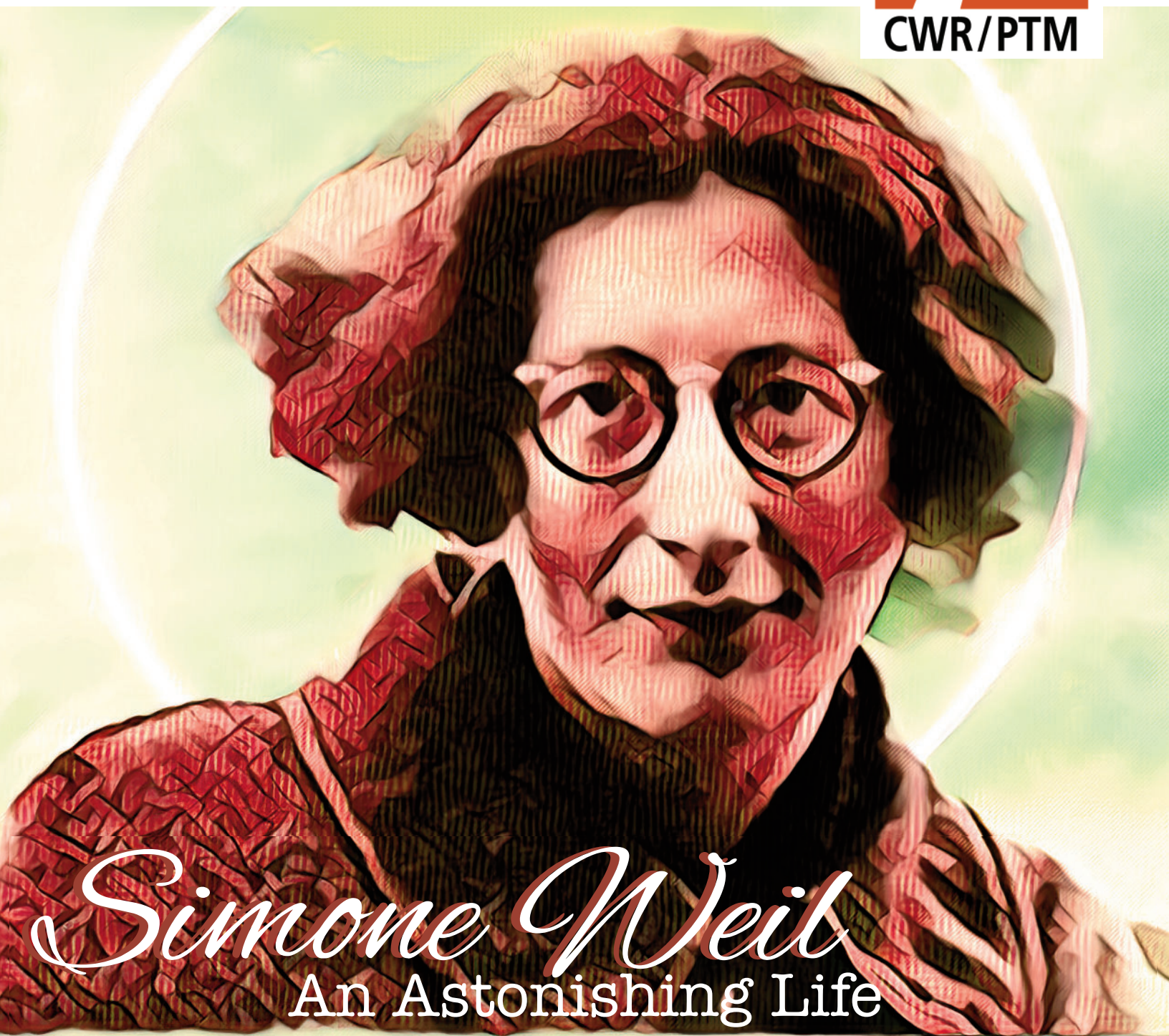


CWR^m magazine

October 2024
Volume 15, Number 5

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



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Simone Weil

An Astonishing Life by Brad Jersak

Simone Weil (1909-1943) was an astonishing woman who represents the “cross-shaped life” par excellence. Her life story makes her a patron saint of the unwelcomed, the afflicted and the “oddballs.” In the preface to her *Notebooks*, we see hints of her vocation and importance:

“French philosopher, activist and religious searcher... earned a reputation as one of the most original thinkers of her era. T.S. Eliot described her as ‘a woman of genius, akin to that of the saints.’ Albert Camus called her ‘the only great spirit of our time.’”

For me personally, discovering Weil’s astonishing vision of Christ in the depths of my own spiritual unraveling came as a lifeline for which I owe both Jesus and Weil a debt of gratitude. In this article, I’ll sketch a few highlights of her remarkable journey, hoping that she might inspire others as she has me.

EARLY WEIL: JEWISH AGNOSTIC, CHRISTLIKE COMPASSION

Simone Weil was born in France to a non-practicing Jewish family. She loved her parents (her father was a doctor, her mother a doted!) and grew up with her elder brother André, who would become a mathematical genius. Weil had no early religious experience aside from visits with a devout Jewish grandmother, but she was, from a very early age, deeply concerned with justice, compassion and solidarity with *the afflicted* (French: *malheureux*)—a term she used to describe *non-redemptive suffering* (such as the tragic death of a child).

Weil’s sense of empathy regularly led her to extremes. Even as a five-year-old, she insisted on sending her candy rations to frontline soldiers in the Great War and joining the protest marches of striking trade unionists. As a physically awkward child genius (possibly on the autistic spectrum),



“Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.”
—Simone Weil

she studied philosophy (receiving her doctorate when she was only 22) and dove into political activism.

For example, she briefly joined the anti-fascist resistance in the Spanish civil war (as a pacifist!) before accidentally stepping in a pot of boiling oil. That injury saved her life because her entire unit was killed weeks later. She also tutored unschooled factory laborers and joined them on the assembly

line of a Renault plant for a year—a dehumanizing experience that also nearly killed her.

During those years, Weil was tormented with excruciating migraines that persisted for the rest of her life. In all these strange experiences, her agenda was simple: to identify with the afflicted in their affliction.

WEIL'S AWAKENING FAITH

While Simone Weil arguably laid down her life in Christlike life, she was a compassionate agnostic until we hear of her first experiences with Christ as a 26-year-old. During a trip to a poor coastal community in Portugal, she heard a procession of wives singing mournful goodbyes (in a genre called “fado”) as their husbands sailed away for months on fishing trawlers. She knew in that moment that unlike the false gods of might and power, Jesus is the Savior who draws near to the afflicted and the poor, Lord of all, even peasants and slaves.

Two years later (1937), Weil visited the church in Assisi, Italy where St. Francis often prayed (the Santa Maria degli Angeli). She reports that in the holy solitude of that moment, *“for the first time in my life, something stronger than I compelled me to go down on my knees.”*

Such strong language—not the gentle invitation common to most believers. But I compare her encounter to that of the prophet Isaiah, who said, “Woe is me; I am undone” or Paul’s Damascus Road experience, blinded by the light and knocked to his knees in surrender.

Another year passed so that 1938 brought about her most significant *“faith shifts.”* First, Weil read the entire Old Testament for the first time but she was repulsed by the violent portrayals of God.

Then in April, trying to flee her migraines, she stayed at the Abbey of Solesmes, France through their Easter week services. The Gregorian devotional chants to Jesus moved her deeply. As her

LOVE III — George Herbert

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.

But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,

Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.

“A guest,” I answered, “worthy to be here”:
Love said, “You shall be he.”

“I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on thee.”

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
“Who made the eyes but I?”

“Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.”

“And know you not,” says Love, “who bore the blame?”
“My dear, then I will serve.”

“You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”
So I did sit and eat.

spiritual thirst deepened, she was inspired to read and pray the poem from the English poet, George Herbert, *“Love 3”* [cited above] as a daily practice.

And the Lord heard! Once again, she felt that overwhelming sense of Christ’s Presence, now indwelling her whole being. She knew she belonged to God and her life was no longer her own.

In the coming years, Weil also began to pray the Lord’s Prayer (*“Our Father, who art in heaven...”*) every day, in the language of New Testament Greek, giving great attention to every word. If her mind wandered, she would start over. Her goal was to develop the discipline of absolute *attention* (attentive receptivity) in all she did, whether prayer, study, friendship, or service for the oppressed.

She concluded, *“Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer.”*

WEIL'S UNIVERSAL FAITH: OUTSIDE THE THRESHOLD

While Simone Weil became aware of the story of Jesus and his love for the afflicted, her encounters with Christ and her friendships with priests did not convince her to join the church. In her time, the Roman Catholic church still stood in

the shadow of the Council of Trent (held from 1545–63), which taught that no one could enter God’s kingdom unless they were baptized into the Catholic Church (a reaction to Protestantism).

Weil pointed out that this was, ironically, very *uncatholic* of them, since “*catholic*” literally means *universal*. She preferred to stand outside the threshold of the church in solidarity with the world that God loves rather than join their exclusive religious club.

This stung her Catholic acquaintances because they knew without a doubt that her faith and her spiritual experiences were authentic—perhaps even “saintly.” For example, her Notebooks describe a three-day encounter with Christ in a garret in Marseilles, France. Weil describes her face-to-face communion with the Lord, reminiscent of Moses’ “tent of meeting” in Exodus 33. Whether her descriptions were meant literally or not, her priest friends believed her, acknowledged she was a genuine Jesus-follower and therefore, obviously one of “them.” But they could never push past her objections to joining their flock.

Her defiance would become important after her death, when the papal nuncio in Paris met her father, read her Notebooks, and became convinced she was completely right. He began preaching her convictions publicly and instead of being defrocked, would ultimately become the Pope John XXIII, who launched Vatican II (a

council held from 1962-65) through which the RC Church began to repent of their imaginary monopoly on the kingdom of God.

In a sense, by refusing to be baptized into the exclusive system of Trent, Weil succeeded in “baptizing” the council in her universal gospel—a revelation we’re only beginning to grasp.

WEIL’S “DE-CREATION,” RESISTANCE & DEATH

Meanwhile, back to Weil’s life in the 1940’s. As Hitler’s stormtroopers occupied France,



our hero scooped up her aging parents and joined the resistance in Vichy, France. She used her writing skills there for the resistance, but she recognized time was running out to help her Jewish parents escape. Together, they boarded a ship to New York City, where she left them with

her brother André and proceeded to England to join Charles de Gaulle in exile.

There, Weil focused on writing up radical plans for overcoming Hitler’s tyranny (e.g., deploying front line nurses to change the moral atmosphere) and reimagining France after the war (e.g., she wrote a *Charter of Freedoms and Responsibilities*). Sadly, De Gaulle did not take her seriously and marginalized her involvement.

At this point, she contracted tuberculosis and was admitted to a sanatorium. Her inability (some call it a refusal) to ingest adequate nourishment led to heart failure and death at just 34 years of age.

Post-mortem, we now recognize that her decades of self-imposed fasting caught up with her—and should have been diagnosed as an eating disorder. But her father (though a doctor) would never admit to that.

Whatever the reasons lurk behind her great struggles with food, she always chose to offer up her shrunken appetite in solidarity with the hungry. But her battle with food was also related to her desire to “*de-create*” her will—that

is, to empty herself and become selfless (the way Christ was in Gethsemane). But there is a shadow side to her *de-creation*: Weil found simply receiving God’s grace terribly difficult—as difficult as she found swallowing meat—and she knew it.

As you reread Herbert’s *Love III*,

you can see this whole arc of her story: the mystery of Weil's eating disorder, her stubbornness around grace, but also her desire to surrender to Jesus. Imagine her praying this poem with full attention and utter sincerity each day over the course of years. Her acute awareness of her need and her willingness to bring it to Christ are astonishing indeed.

WEIL'S THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

When I ponder Simone Weil's life, it's not her savant-level genius or radical activism that grips me. Rather, it is her real-life experience of the Cross. She reckoned the goodness of God and the affliction of humanity as a real contradiction and an infinite distance. Evil cannot be rationalized or justified without calling good evil or evil good.

BUT, she says, the Cross of Christ spans that distance because right there, we see goodness and affliction intersect in the heart of Perfect Love as he hangs dying, forgiving, and loving.

And, she adds, at the Cross, our own afflictions act like pincers that grab us and arrest us before the Mystery of the crucified God.

As we wait there (our gaze attentive to grace), healing love flows from Christ's wounds into us and through ours into this broken world.

Thus, I would argue, Simone Weil's astonishing vision of the Cross, the source of divine healing, is precisely what our afflicted world needs today. □

Brad Jersak serves as CWRM's pastoral scholar, whose Ph.D. studies included translating Simone Weil's book, Awaiting God.

Everyone Is Forgiven

by Greg Albrecht

T*o forgive somebody is to say... "You have done something unspeakable and by all rights I should call it quits between us. Both my pride and my principles demand no less. However, although I make no guarantee that I will be able to forget what you've done, and though we may both carry the scars for life, I refuse to let it stand between us. I still want you for my friend."*

To accept forgiveness means to admit you've done something unspeakable that needs to be forgiven. And thus both parties must swallow the same thing: their pride.

*—"Wishful Thinking"
by Frederick Buechner*



If you are anything like me, you have traveled the road of forgiveness many times, coming and going, in both directions. Ironically, the more I stand in awe of the imponderable beauty of forgiveness, the less I realize I actually know! You may say, "Well, if you don't know that much about forgiveness, what kind of a pastor are you anyway?" Funny you should ask such a question. It allows me to tell the story of the man who thought he was calling the liquor store. He made a mistake and punched in the phone number of his pastor instead.

The pastor picked up



the phone and didn't even have time to identify himself when the voice on the other end of the phone said, *"Send six cases of bourbon over to my house please... here's the address."*

The pastor had a small congregation and immediately recognized the voice on the other end of the phone as a member of his congregation. As gently as he could he said, *"You've made a mistake... I'm your pastor."*

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line, and then, perhaps out of embarrassment that his pastor knew how much alcohol he was planning on ordering, the man demanded, *"Well, what the heck are you doing at the liquor store?"*

So you might ask, *"Why on earth are you talking about forgiveness when you admit you are not an expert?"*

I know forgiveness because I've been forgiven.

I know forgiveness. I have seen the miracles and wonders it produces in people's lives.

I know the amazing and stupendous beauty of forgiveness—a spiritual reality so profound that it surpasses the glory of majestic mountains, the roaring waves of the ocean and the breathtaking magnificence of the sun setting over the desert.

Forgiveness is at the heart and soul of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Forgiveness is forever one of the great mysteries of who God is and what he is like. Forgiveness, as proclaimed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, means that all humans need forgiveness and it means that all humans are offered forgiveness. *Forgiveness is a divine gift, a gift we cannot pass on to others until we have fully*

accepted, believed, embraced and experienced it.

WE ALL NEED TO BE FORGIVEN

Everybody needs to be forgiven, and everybody needs to forgive someone else.

God's forgiveness is not limited to just those who beg for it or those who qualify for it by proving to God that they are "worthy" of being forgiven. God's forgiveness is unconditional and when we understand, embrace and accept his forgiveness, ***God's grace recalibrates our ingrained religious indoctrination that insists God limits his forgiveness.***

God does not dole out his forgiveness according to human standards of worth—God's unconditional and forever forgiveness means that he has

determined that every human being deserves, by his grace and because of and through the Cross of Christ, total and equal forgiveness. There are no limits to God's forgiveness—no human can draw a boundary around God's forgiveness and hem him in and restrict him.

God's grace is lavishly given without human distinctions of worthiness. It is not reserved for those determined by themselves or others to be virtuous and righteous. God's gracious forgiveness is provided to one and all because of God's own goodness.

No virtuous human behavior can ever qualify one to be forgiven by God and no evil human behavior can ever disqualify one from being forgiven by God. God unconditionally forgives—he always forgives—in fact, the entire world has already been forgiven by virtue of what happened on the cross of Christ.

When Jesus said *“Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing”* (Luke 23:34) he was not only talking about those Roman soldiers who carried out his crucifixion—he was talking about you, me, and everyone who has ever lived.

WE ARE ALL FORGIVEN

God does not force us to accept his forgiveness. ***We are all forgiven, but we are free to reject God's forgiveness.***

Why would anyone refuse to be forgiven? Many refuse to be forgiven for the same reason as they reject God's grace in favor of Christless religion. They don't want to accept his free handouts. People reject God's forgiveness because they would rather live in some religious la-la land where they believe they can earn and deserve forgiveness the “old fashioned way”—the way of “old time religion”—of working and qualifying and proving to God they are worthy of forgiveness.

The fact that we are all forgiven does not mean anything and everything goes with God—the fact that he unconditionally forgives us, that he will always forgive us and that we are forgiven by the Cross of Christ does not mean God is a permissive heavenly Father who delights in all kinds of immoral behavior. The fact that we are all forgiven does not mean that everything we do pleases God.

We are forgiven yet we still stumble and fall.

God does not refuse to embrace anyone who wishes to accept his forgiveness. When God's forgiveness is the topic, refusal and rejection are not concepts that apply to him—they only apply to humans who refuse and reject God's freely given, gracious gift of forgiveness.

No one has had their “last chance” to be forgiven—no one can sink so low or travel so far away from God that they may not be forgiven—but they must embrace God's forgiveness, and yield to him, trusting in him, and of course that means changing... repenting... of a former way of life.

Jesus never made anyone beg to be forgiven—but Jesus did urge people to change and repent and believe the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus issued an invitation, and his invitation does not consist of scaring the hell out of people until they accept his overtures. Jesus extends a proposal, and his offer is not predicated on making anyone claw, scrape or agonize their way through religious obstacles, proving to him that they were worthy of his forgiveness.

God's forgiveness is one of the core elements of the gospel—the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about

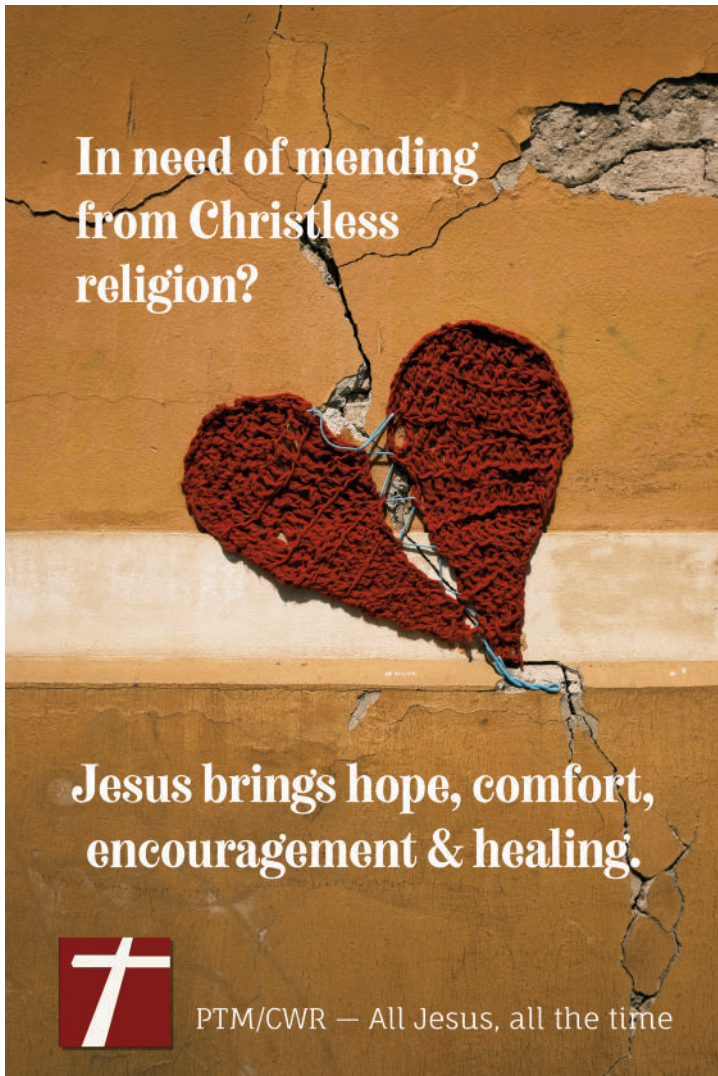
No one has had their “last chance” to be forgiven—no one can sink so low or travel so far away from God that they may not be forgiven...

God's one-way, unconditional, no-strings-attached, forever love to people like you and me who cannot ever measure up to who they should be. No one can ever be so bad, evil and sinful that God will withdraw his freely given forgiveness from that person—but again, God does not force his forgiveness on those who reject and refuse it.


The grace, mercy and kindness of God offers us forgiveness from anything and everything. It is the grace, mercy and kindness of God that forever forgives us all—all of us—may we accept and embrace his gracious invitation of healing and wholeness. □

Greg Albrecht is the President of Plain Truth Ministries and Editor-in-Chief of CWRm and Plain Truth magazine.

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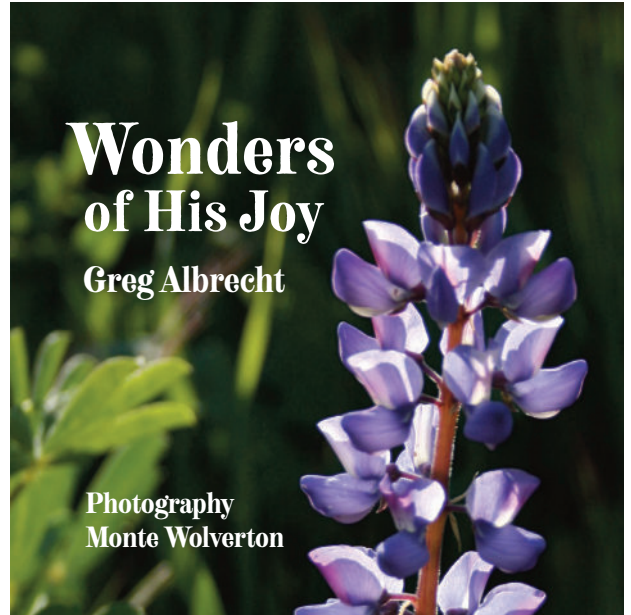


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