

# PLAIN TRUTH®

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

## Gift After Gift After Gift



Brad Jersak

*We all live off his generous bounty, gift after gift after gift (John 1:16, MSG, The Message Bible)*

*Out of his full store we have all received grace upon grace (John 1:16, NEB, The New English Bible)*

**T**he first chapter of the Gospel of John presents an unequalled, beautiful and profound exploration of what, to the human mind, is “the genesis of God the Word,” made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Of course, God has no actual beginning, but the eternal One concedes to speak to the limitations of our human perspective and language.

John draws a parallel in his New Testament genesis to the first chapter of the Old Testament Genesis, emphasizing the Word

who was God and with God in the very beginning (or literally, “at the foundation of the cosmos”). In this grand revelation of the beginning, John speaks from the perspective of the Trinitarian God, one in harmony and unity, coequal and coeternal, three Persons in one essence.

Upon this Trinitarian foundation, John builds his glorious and majestic story of Jesus, the eternal Word, God the Son, God in the flesh, full of grace and truth:

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).*

### “Full of Grace and Truth”

This brief phrase—*full of grace and truth*—speaks of the grace of God

we receive from the fulness of the Son, which is *gift after gift after gift* (MSG) and *grace upon grace* (NEB). Lyrics in the soaring hymn “Great is Thy Faithfulness” echo Lamentations 3:22-23, “*The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning, great is thy faithfulness*” (RSV, Revised Standard Version).

Grace is always new, always fresh and refreshed, forever vital, never ending, an inexhaustible and eternal spring that flows from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

How do we fathom this magnificent *gift after gift after gift* called grace? First, it is a gift that opens our eyes, leads us, draws us and fills us with the oh-so-beyond-human positive response to God. This *grace upon grace* presents us with the opportunity to overcome the human tendency to reject God, his love, mercy and grace, and opens the door for us to respond in gratitude.

Grace frees us to offer an uncoerced response to God, our relational YES to love, for as John explains in his first epistle, “*We love because he loved us first*” (1 John 4:19).

In John’s prologue to his Gospel—a New Testament perspective on the genesis of all things—we are taken to new depths of insight about creation and its/our Creator. “*Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made*” (John 1:3).

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## In Search of a Lost Art

*Listen with curiosity...the greatest problem with communication is that we don't listen to understand. We listen to reply.*—Roy T. Bennett

**F**or those of us living in the United States, we find ourselves in the midst of one of the most contentious pre-election seasons in our national history. Whether the divide expands over taking a stand on hot button issues such as the economy, inflation, social programs and justice, foreign policy, or our national defense, or perhaps it's growing over the candidates themselves, and their political base and platforms, we seem to have lost **the art of listening**. It's nearly impossible to hear any sort of competing narrative. This challenge in communication is not limited to the world of political drama. Differences among church congregations, social media groups, communities of friends and once-close family units all can struggle to listen in times like these. And, the print, television and social media worlds love all the talking. But, **has listening become a lost art?**

Have you ever had the experience of sitting across from someone, sharing your deepest thoughts and feelings on a topic, only to wonder whether or not the other person is really listening to you? Perhaps the other person is nodding and gesturing in agreement, and offering plenty of minimal encouragers such as *yes* and *uh-huh*, yet you don't truly feel heard. The other person continues to interrupt your train of thought with what they want to say. To be sure, this pattern of communication is both maddening and unfortunately, all too common.

Roy T. Bennett's point as quoted above is a good one: **we don't listen to understand; we listen to reply**. We don't listen with a curiosity; we listen with an anxious desire to be heard. Watch any of the early Sunday morning political television shows, where Congressional leaders and think-tank consultants are interviewed as expert special guests. Rarely do these expert special guests listen carefully to the questions the network moderator is posing. Rather, the Congressional leaders and think-tank consultants wait to hear the sound-bite they are specifically looking for, and then proceed aggressively to answer the question, or speak to the topic they want to address. This technique in communication is one of the hallmarks of modern-day media training. It's called *talking points in politics*—rarely if ever do we hear of listening points. **The art of listening is missing altogether.**

**Can we listen to someone else who holds a view we disagree with**, and perhaps disagree with strongly? Can we hear the other through the emotional points of counter-argument built up in our minds? To take this one step further: can we repeat back the point the other person is making so we know, and they know, we understand what they are saying? This can be some of the most difficult work we do in communication, especially when emotions are running high.

It's interesting that James concludes his thought in his letter by addressing the emotion of **anger** as it pertains to communication (James 1:19). **We do get angry, don't we?** Communication can be an emotional business. Hearing a position we disagree with strongly

can have us speaking not only quickly, but forcefully. **Listening can lead to us leaving the room.**

The image of Jesus standing quietly in front of an angry crowd, in the face of unjust and hateful charges against him, is a powerful reminder for us. Falsely accused by those with aggressive political agendas, **Jesus remained silent**. *He listened closely and completely* to the words being spoken at him, yet, he did not react in anger (Matthew 26:59-63, NIV). Although the severity of the moment for Jesus was far greater than anything we may ever face, he chose to listen and not respond. His indwelling and transforming life in us can give us the strength to do the same, especially when emotions run high.

**The art of listening** is both a practice and a gift. When we listen to another person, truly listen, we do so with a heart that is centered in Christ Jesus. We remain open, humble, trying to understand with an honest sense of curiosity. That doesn't mean we must agree with what the other person is saying. It doesn't mean we won't feel emotion. It just means we extend respect and brotherly or sisterly kindness in making sure the other feels heard. **In listening this way, we extend the strength and the grace of Jesus**. This type of communication is a gift of God's grace. As we allow that gift of grace, through Christ Jesus, to work within us, we learn, we grow and we relate more closely to those we listen to. His grace helps us to cultivate **the art of listening**, even in the most contentious of times. When we do keep up with what is happening around us, we can do so from our rest in him. □

—Ed Dunn

Continued from page 1

The grace of God the Son, the true light-creating Light, shines into all of creation and “gives light to everyone who is coming into the world” (John 1:9). Out of his full store Christ the *Light of the world* opens our eyes (Matthew 12:35; 2 Corinthians 4:6) and “brings us to our senses” as did the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:17). Our spiritual eyes are not opened by anything we accomplish or anything we can attribute to ourselves. The eyes of our heart are opened by grace, “not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:9).

The grace of God, in *gift after gift after gift*, generates the righteousness of the risen Christ in our lives: “But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in [or, through the faithfulness of] Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:21-22).

Repentance, faith and belief are themselves gifts of God, by his grace, *gift after gift after gift*. Grace is somewhat like the unending waves of the ocean, rolling in, crashing on the shore, an inexhaustible experience of wonder and awe.

### Relational Metaphors of God’s Love

This wondrous grace of God is the dynamic of divine love that reaches out to us as an authentic relationship. Scripture continually speaks of God’s invitation to us in terms of his house and his table. We read of a Servant-King and his subjects—unlike any king the world has ever seen. We read of the Good Shepherd and his sheep. We read of Bride-Groom intimacy, of Husband-Wife faithfulness, of our heavenly Father and of us as his reborn children, heirs of all he has.

We read of prodigal children, leaving their Father’s house to seek their own way, each slaving in their self-imposed fields of hedonism or religiosity. They are still God’s children and all he has remains theirs, but there’s a call home to

enjoy his household of grace and to know their Father’s kindness.

Notice how these metaphors are all relational. The inheritance motif involves a Father-child relationship. So too the covenant-relationship of the Husband-wife we see in Ezekiel, in Hosea, in Song of Songs and in the Bride-Groom relationship of the Gospels and Revelation. None of these metaphors are transactional, mechanical or contractual. Nor are they simply unilateral. In every case, they are utterly relational and reciprocal.

### “Our Part” in God’s Relationship With Us

Thus, the work of God’s love, mercy and grace is not automatic, forced, coerced or compelled. We “have our part”—however, “our part” is obviously not in doing, producing, performing, or earning something:

- *Our part* is not in making a downpayment.
- *Our part* is far more difficult than making payments or fulfilling rituals or accomplishing deeds.
- *Our part* is to freely and willingly accept, respond and receive the grace of God
- *Our part* is to come home on God’s terms (not our own) and to fall into his loving arms.

OR not. This terrifying freedom is the risk that love takes. BUT never underestimate the wonders of divine Love. This Love that generated the universe can regenerate a heart of stone. This divine Love raised the dead, granted sight to the blind and set free the prisoners. And that same grace, that same gospel, that same



*It is a bit trite to reduce God’s offer to room and board forever... We are co-owners, in his house and at his table forever.*

*gift after gift after gift* continues in relentless pursuit of lost coins, lost sheep, lost sons.

The eternal offer of God is his passionate love affair with and pursuit of us, a divine invitation to marry the Son and live in the Father’s house forever. It’s relational. It’s personal. It’s intimate. It’s real. The Father’s house and the Father’s table—an always and forever invitation to live with and dine with God.

Some might suggest an analogy, proposing that God’s invitation is like telling us we have won a fortune in some lottery, but we need to claim it to cash in. But metaphors involving sweepstakes or a lottery stretch the biblical metaphors because they miss the relational key.

It’s always the *Father’s* house, the *King’s* table, the *Husband’s* wealth. The offer is eternal and forever, free room and board. He is the owner whose lavish hospitality we enjoy.

### More Than Eternal Room & Board

But a relationship is the key. We don’t just want his “stuff,” do we? Grace makes a way to know HIM. Love makes a way to love HIM. The table and the house and the wealth... they are worthless without HIM. Eternal life is NOT *getting* our inheritance. Jesus says it is *knowing* the Father, the Son

whom he sent (John 17:3) and Spirit they have given.

If we must think of “currency” in the kingdom, we think of grace—that’s God’s economy. Religious currency does not buy our way into a relationship. The currency in the kingdom of heaven is what God creates in us and of us—lost coins, buried pearls, tarnished gold—now found, revealed and purified by his love. We are his new creation.

It is also a bit trite to reduce God’s offer to room and board forever. In fact, the Bible speaks of our inheritance as his children. But contrary to human inheritances, our Father never dies or leaves. We’re more than grateful renters or lucky beneficiaries. We are co-owners, in his house and at his table forever, privileged to dine in his presence as his family.

Reflecting on this *gift after gift after gift* empowers and predisposes us to give fair consideration to God’s invitation. It can be a difficult choice when accepting God’s grace means letting go of self-will and surrendering our lives to his care. It is not at all easy or natural for those used to living their own way.

Our decision to accept means surrendering our self-centered desires, yielding to the Lord and following him (rather than “letting” him tag along with our agendas).

For that reason, many who deride grace as lazy, too easy, or meant for losers (of course it is!) find that grace is the hardest decision any human can make. Why? It means death to the demands of our egos and the way we prefer to live. It’s the end of any pretentious idea that God owes us and that we deserve God’s favor.

Thus, when it comes to “our part” grace is anything but easy. Christ calls it a “cross.” And on the other hand, he also dares to call it grace, good news and a light yoke. A contradiction?

Not really. Opening our tight fists to let go of our willful ways and grandiose schemes IS hard (as hard as we make it). But once opened and turned heavenward to receive what’s already flowing—oh the riches of grace that fill our waiting hands. *Gift after gift after gift.* □

*In addition to the many roles Brad fulfills for CWR/PTM, he is Principal of St. Stephen’s University in Canada.*



In need of mending  
from Christless  
religion?

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encouragement & healing.



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# Sister Rivals

Ruth Tucker

**T**he Bible is filled with good stories. Here we focus on the rival sisters, Rachel and Leah. So, a young man goes to his doctor. His symptoms are ominous: shortness of breath, irregular heartbeat, hyperventilation, inability to concentrate and more. After taking some initial readings, the doctor shrugs and tells him he's in love. It's the story of a country music hit, but most of us don't need song lyrics to remind us of the incapacitating nature of *falling in love*. Such was the case with Jacob, son of Rebekah and Isaac, thousands of years ago.

A bit of background. Rachel is beautiful—pure loveliness. She is the only woman in the scriptural text whose beauty and seductive powers elicited head-over-heals, heart-pounding passion, love-at-first-sight. Poor sister Leah, the ugly duckling. Actually, the only obvious defect is her apparent weak eye. A pair of stylish glasses might have done the trick.

But perhaps the text fails to tell us about Leah's stringy hair and crooked teeth. At any rate, most of us identify more with Leah than Rachel. But Rachel is the star of this show.

## The Wedding Day

Her father has arranged the marriage. Alas, the day finally comes. The servants have been up all night preparing for the grand wedding feast. Everyone is invited. There's music and dancing, feasting on tasty hors d'oeuvres, steaming bowls of mutton stew, and prime rib

on the spit, medium rare. The guests linger over their aged wine and tasty sweets as the sun sets in the west.

Then everything falls apart. Sad stories featuring a flight of the groom (or bride) abound in literature and in real life. There is no chance of this, however. Jacob surely is not going to do hard labor, as he had for seven years, without the promise of his beautiful bride. What happens next, however, is mind-boggling. It is the most stunning bride-switching story in all history. Think of it. What a shock to Jacob on discovering that he's consummated a marriage with the wrong sister. But this story is not about Jacob.

Imagine having your heart set on a good-looking young guy who absolutely adores you only to discover that your father has gone behind your back and surreptitiously arranged for your sister to be veiled and sent to the marriage bed. What a bummer.

But then one week later, with no fanfare, Rachel becomes Jacob's second wife. She's waited seven years and seven days. We would not blame her for utter disillusionment with this whole patriarchal system in which she is embedded. And, for all she has endured, we can't help but wish her well. But anyone who is familiar with the story of Rachel and Jacob knows that this is hardly a *happily-ever-after scenario*.

Marriage brings Rachel not only a new husband but also a servant, Bilhah. Now she's a lady of the house. Gone are the carefree days of

herding sheep. Her most important role will be that of mother. Apart from her inherent maternal instincts, she is duty bound to bear children. So also, sister Leah.

## Wives and Mothers

The sport of polygamy in the Bible has at least one common thread: it is fraught with anger, resentment and fierce competition. In this instance, Jacob is no help. The hyperventilation of falling in love has worn off. Married life can sometimes get more than a little bit prickly. How well he knows, son of Isaac and Rebekah.

Rachel is the one Jacob loves, but what does it matter if her sister has babies and she does not? In fact, the text reveals that the matter of conceiving and being loved by Jacob are directly related: "*When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless.*"

Leah, it seems, is scoring a goal every time she competes in this cutthroat baby-making game. Finally, Rachel is down 4-0, and she's furious. *Babies or bust* is her motto. "Give me children, or I'll die," she rages at Jacob. He comes right back at her. He places the matter squarely with God (and her, indirectly). Does she pray for forgiveness and plead with God to open her womb? No. This is not Rachel's way. Like her mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law, she takes matters into her own hands. She sends in a substitute, her servant Bilhah.

One might wonder at this point how poor Bilhah feels about being a pawn in this polygamous sport. Is she aware of the behind-the-scenes maneuvers? Is she young, only fourteen or fifteen years old? She obviously has no say in the matter, but she might have been pleased by the thought of having a baby of her own—maybe thinking it would be like having a doll to diaper and cuddle, not fully aware that she is essentially a disposable surrogate.

A son is born, and Rachel names him Dan; then a second son, whom Rachel names Naphtali. By now Bilhah surely knows that she is more than a mere baby-making machine for Rachel. She is Rachel's servant and as such has primary care for these boys. Likewise, she knows that these very sons of hers are Jacob's own sons, thus enjoying far greater status than any child fathered, for example, by a manservant.

### Two Sisters—Two Servants—Two Cousins

As for Rachel, bottom line, she's still barren, and the sisterly rivalry continues. The score now 4-2, Leah gets back into the game by sending in her own sub, her servant Zilpah, who scores twice more with Gad and Asher. Again, Rachel is down by four. Now the game is 6-2 There are no screaming crowds, but the winning team is smug. True, the game is not over. Rachel is yet to score, Joseph first and then Benjamin, a goal that takes her life.

Before that happens, however, there is more drama and dishonesty. Two sisters and two servants caught up in a man's world of patriarchy and polygamy.

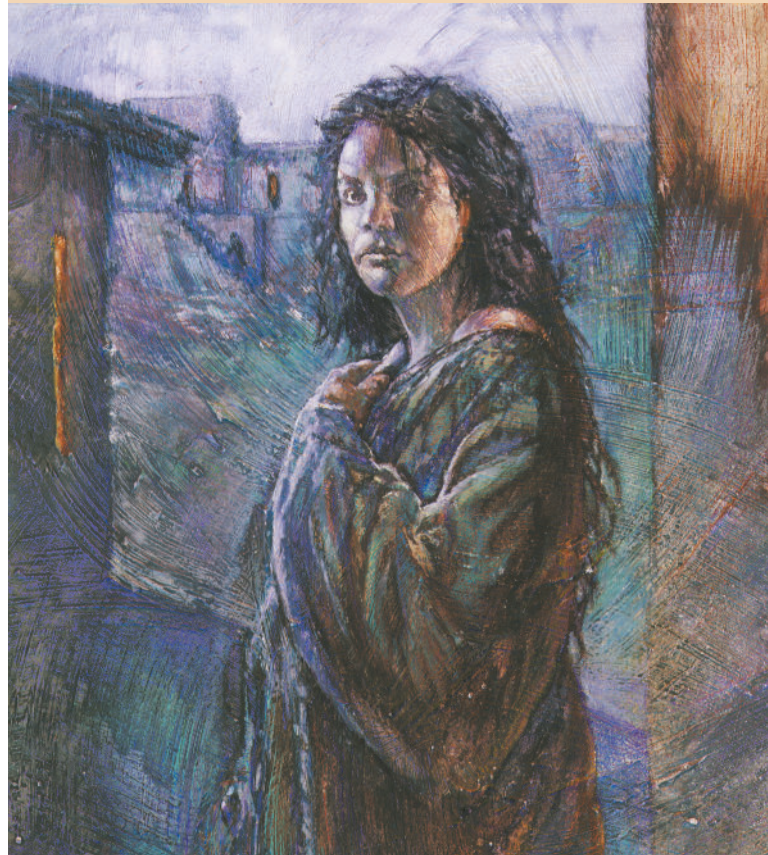
How very different are the two cousins we read about in Luke's gospel—one married and too old to have a baby, the other unmarried and too young. Elizabeth and Zachariah are "righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless." Also childless. But suddenly, while Zachariah is serving in the temple of the Lord, the angel Gabriel pays a visit. Seriously. Standing right there on the right side of the altar.

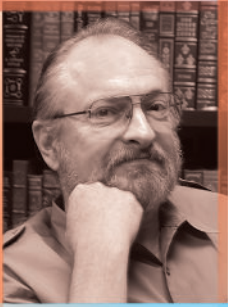
No surprise, Zachariah is "startled and gripped with fear." Gabriel calms him down by telling him he has "good news." He will soon become a dad, even though Elizabeth is "well along in years."

We all know where this story is going. How very different from the story of the rival sisters. Elizabeth and her cousin Mary get together and praise God for the good news—the good news of the gospel. When her time is fulfilled Elizabeth gives birth to John, Mary to Jesus. John the Baptist, that crazy soap-box preacher, who paves the way for the earthly ministry of Jesus. Since known as "the Baptist," he baptizes his second cousin, Jesus.

At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." □

*Adapted from Dynamic Women of the Bible by Ruth Tucker (available through Amazon and other online sellers). Ruth Tucker is a regular columnist for Plain Truth magazine.*





## Outside the Walls

I attend an old church in a charming neighborhood of Portland, Oregon. When I say old, I mean old by west-coast American standards. The current building is 118 years old, but the parish was founded back in 1851 when Portland was little more than a rowdy frontier town. Today, no less than 11 major streets or neighborhoods in Portland still bear the names of influential pioneer members of this church who worked to bring faith in Jesus to this unholy outpost.

These same leaders would be initially delighted if they could see their legacy today—a great stone edifice nestled among tree-lined streets, other houses of worship, elegant apartment buildings, well-kept Victorian homes, parks, boutique shops, restaurants and upscale pubs. But they'd be horrified at the crime, homelessness and substance abuse that plagues the area—not unlike parts of any big city.

I suppose I could just stay home in my living room (35 miles away, in the country) or opt for a “safe” suburban megachurch closer to home. But this particular church's art, music, style of worship and people connect with me. More importantly, services are stunningly beautiful, inspiring and thoroughly Christ-centered.

Yet congregants and clergy are acutely aware of the abject misery just outside their walls, and they're doing something about it. The church runs a large food pantry every day except Sunday, and offers a weekly sit-down meal where the unhoused are invited to dine with other parishioners. Just in the last year, demand at the food pantry increased by 200%.

Every few weeks I serve as a host at services. Among other duties, we cheerfully welcome everyone who enters—members, visitors and unhoused alike. The massive front doors always remain open during services—even in freezing weather. As we stand in the doorways, we can't help but hear the dichotomy—the chaos without and the peace and order within. We must, however, be vigilant, as some visitors may arrive drug impaired, suffering from

severe mental illness or even carrying weapons. To be on the safe side, the church offers us professional crisis intervention training. We always have opioid overdose antidote on hand for emergencies. It's just part of the “abnormal” world we live in, amplified in the city. By contrast, my church of origin met just five blocks away in the same neighborhood in the early 1960s. At that time it was an anxiously exclusive—if not paranoid—denomination. Doors were kept tightly shut during services and stalwart deacons ensured no unwelcome people slipped in. And even in those days there were poor, unhoused people roaming the streets.

Exclusivism—no religious institution is immune. At times in its long history, my current church drifted into exclusivism and had to correct its error—often with dissension. And exclusivism has a way of reinventing itself—often masquerading as respectability, virtue or holiness. This is nothing new. As early as the 3rd and 4th centuries, rigorous Christian sects such as the Novatianists and Donatists insisted that attendance should be restricted to the “faultless.” But who does not grapple with some form of emotional or mental impairment?

Author Aldous Huxley once wrote *“The real hopeless victims of mental illness are to be found among those who appear to be most normal...Many of them are normal because they are so well adjusted to our mode of existence....Their perfect adjustment to that abnormal society is a measure of their mental sickness. These millions of abnormally normal people, living without fuss in a society to which, if they were fully human beings, they ought not to be adjusted.”* —Brave New World Revisited

In other words, those of us who breeze through life exclusively insulated from the suffering and craziness around us may be the ones who are truly mentally and emotionally impaired. But unlike Huxley, I don't believe it's hopeless. The Holy Spirit is prompting everyone toward empathy and compassion, because, although we may not all know it yet, every last one of us is loved by God. □

—Monte Wolverton



## Quotes & Connections



“The crib and the cross didn’t happen because God remained aloof. The crib and the cross happened the way they did because God determined, out of his love for you and me, to enter into his reality and become just like us and experience life as we live it. He brought us good news which we call the gospel. He didn’t write a book, lick a stamp and put the gospel in a package and have the mailman or FedEx driver deliver it. He didn’t send angels or prophets— he brought the gospel himself, in person.”—Greg Albrecht, *Letters to My Friends: Our Journey of Grace Through Faith*

There are a few things in this world you can’t get but can only be given, and one of these things is love in general, and another is the love of God in particular.  
—Frederick Buechner

“When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.”—Ernest Hemingway

“Religious sin is the only sin Jesus publicly confronted... Religious sin is the most destructive kind of sickness, for it masquerades as and feeds off the illusion of health.”  
—Gregory A. Boyd

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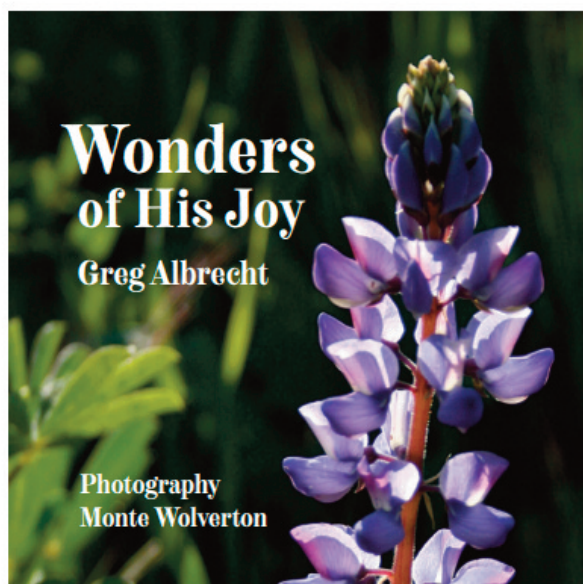
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