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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



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Sometimes, Waiting Is Hard

Advent is a word I was unfamiliar with as a child growing up in my Baptist tradition. But in my years with the Mennonites, I became familiar with the ritual of lighting candles on the Advent wreath in anticipation of Christ's nativity.

Advent, I learned, meant arrival, but intrinsic to that word was the waiting, the anticipation, and the longing of God's people for his appearance and especially his deliverance. As a little boy, I relished that expectant hope as the calendar slowly edged forward to Christmas.

SOMETIMES, WAITING IS HARD

I think most children find waiting for the climax of Christmas morning difficult... but they may also enjoy the waiting itself as they experience the whole season as a wonderland of

lights, sweets and intoxicating anticipation.

Still, in our culture and in our lives, waiting can be terribly hard. On top of the frenetic pace and exhausting demands of our 21st century society, the Christmas season adds a new dimension of scurrying. I become more sensitive to long traffic lights, slow download speeds and snail-paced checkout lines. I get more demanding of others—where's my fast-food order? Why hasn't he replied to my text yet? When is she picking me up? Checking my watch every two minutes.

Beyond these trivialities, waiting for important news can be excruciating. Applications are brutal... applying for jobs, applying for housing, applying for school, applying for work permits or scholarship funds or debt forgiveness. Waiting!

And then there's waiting for

medical results. What did the lab say? A second opinion? How long? Three weeks? Good grief! Waiting can be awfully hard.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF WAITING

We may experience serious negative effects of waiting in our body, soul and spirit:

- We may have a spike in anxiety that affects our sleep and our appetite.
- Waiting may also trigger feelings of frustration, which is really a kind of anger, especially at whatever or whoever we see as prolonging or blocking our path.
- Chronic waiting may walk us into grief and groaning.
- Eventually, waiting may settle into depression and despair.
- We may even lapse into a hard cynicism or self-defeating victim narrative.

Cries of despair echo around the globe as so many wait in

apparent futility for relief from chronic poverty and illness, constant hostility and continual war.

HOW DO WE WAIT?

How shall we respond to the moans of those whose waiting has ground them down?

First, I think we must *be with them*. The promise of a virgin-born child named Emmanuel was to say that God is not distant or deaf to our groaning prayers. He is “God with us”... and not in some magical misty fog of abstracted presence. No, he is with us, embodied as those who willingly co-suffer with the broken. It means weeping with those who weep rather than rushing to fix them with empty platitudes. When we hear their story, we bear it with them, as God-in-Christ did and does.

Second, we do our best *not* to silence their lament. The complaints of those who wait in grief can be messy and it’s tempting to correct them when we hear B.S. about God or the world or themselves spewing out of their mouths. But those toxic beliefs need a wait out, need to be given voice as part of the detox.

It’s important to practice nonjudgmental listening in the presence of our unrattled God. And we need to offer up our own honest laments without fear.

Third, we *join in the waiting* with a call for deliverance, committing to not growing bored or jaded and simply moving on when the wait seems too long. “How long?!” is the legitimate, weeping cry of many in our world today. Let’s cry out in prayers of solidarity with and for them.

SOMETIMES, WAITING IS GOOD

So far, I’ve emphasized how difficult waiting can be. But waiting is also incredibly important to human development. I recently brainstormed the positive effects of waiting with a congregation in Regina, Canada. They offered the following list of positive impacts of waiting.

- Waiting develops patience, endurance and resilience.
- Waiting creates longing and increases expectancy.
- Waiting builds gratitude for what we’ll receive.
- Waiting prepares our hearts and readies our hands to receive.

- Waiting increases our capacity to receive... enlarging our hearts.
- Waiting cleanses us as we let go of lesser desires or attachments.
- Waiting deepens faith in the goodness of God despite delays.

Many times when I or others are waiting on God, we complain that it’s going too slow and ask why God can’t pick up the pace a bit. The sense I’ve had again and again is that God is going as fast as we can. He longs for us to receive the grace that’s already ours but can only deliver that to the degree we can receive it. In other words, he’s honoring the pace of our growth.

WHEN WAITING BECOMES ARRIVAL

The good news is that our waiting gives way to arrival. Advent reminds us that while we wait for our Savior to return, he has also already come. This was Simeon’s experience when Mary and Joseph brought Christ to the Temple as an infant (Luke 2:25-32):

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.

Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

Yes, many of us wait to restore the broken places of our lives, and we wait for his appearing to restore all things, but we also proclaim his arrival. Christian worship is of Emmanuel—“*God with us*,” not “*God was with us*”—present tense! God’s children cry out, “*Come, Lord Jesus*,” but we also welcome Christ’s presence here and now. And whenever two or three gather in his name, our Advent waiting becomes Advent arrival. □

Brad Jersak serves as CWRM’s pastoral scholar, and serves as Principal of St. Stephen’s University, NB.

Great Gifts in Small Packages

Laura Urista

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7).

Two Christmases ago, after exchanging all the other presents, our daughter gave my husband Juan and me a small beautifully wrapped package. She had saved it and asked us to open it last. At first, we were a little confused, because the contents looked like a positive Covid test, but I suddenly realized it was a positive pregnancy test. The tears started flowing as I understood that we were going to have a new addition to the family!

What joy the news of a precious new life brings to any family. At this time of year, we are also reminded of a great gift who came in a small package. The infant Jesus was born in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. That small package held the Messiah—the greatest gift of all time—the Savior to save mankind from all sin and to make a way for us to enter the family relationship of our triune God.

From the beginning, all of humanity was created to join in the deep loving relationship of the family of God—a relationship of love (*agape*) between Father, Son and Spirit that had already existed before the creation of the world.

In the signature quote above, we are admonished to “love one another, for love comes from

God.” The word translated into our English word “love” in this verse is the Greek word “*agapao*” or “*agape*.” I’ve read that *agape* refers to the unconditional love of God, and that is true, but that’s only part of the meaning. *Agape* also refers to the love that arises from a keen sense of the value and worth of the object of our love. We are commanded to “*agape*” one another, in other words, to have a keen sense of the worth and value in others.

The last part of the verse says, “everyone who loves is born of God and **knows God.**” But what does it really mean to “*know God*”?

The Greek word for “know” used here is “*ginosko*” and it is often translated elsewhere in the New Testament as “to perceive, to discern, to understand, to be assured or to view with favor.”

God understands, perceives, discerns, is assured about us and views us with favor. God **knows** all about us and he loves us anyway. God loves us more than anyone in this physical life ever will or ever could.

Those who “*know*” God are in a **deeply intimate**, loving relationship with God. God doesn’t just *have* love as one of many attributes of his character... God IS Love. Love is the essence of God’s nature. **God is love** throughout eternity. Out of God’s loving generosity he invites us to be a part of his family in the



“Gaga” Laura with then one-day-old granddaughter, Natalia.

circle of divine love and to share his love with others.

This is the greatest gift of all—to know God and to be in a loving relationship with God and with others. Here is my gift to you this Christmas. It can’t be wrapped up, even in a small box but the words are a treasure to me. It’s from a song called “*Nature Boy*” made famous by Nat King Cole, which ends with these profound and timeless words:

“*The greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return.*” I pray you’ll be wrapped up in the deep, intimate, loving relationship God invites us all to enjoy as a part of his family, this Christmas and always. □

Laura Urista is Vice President of PTM & managing editor of *Plain Truth* magazine.

Believe Him & Receive Him

Greg Albrecht

“Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (John 1:12-13).

A grandmother was reading the story of Christmas to her granddaughter. The grandmother liked the *King James Version*, with all its old English words and phrases... and when she came to the part *“Mary was great with child,”* her little preschool-age granddaughter didn’t get it. The grandmother stopped and talked about how pregnant mothers grow in size because they are carrying a baby, and that Mary was ready to give birth. The little girl said, *“Oh goody, I hope it’s a girl.”*

She was disappointed when her grandmother explained that the little baby was a boy. Some people are disappointed that Jesus wasn’t an American... or English or Chinese or Indian.

Beyond his gender and his race, Jesus wasn’t, in so many ways, what many people hoped and expected him to be.

Jesus was God in the flesh. Jesus was God coming to become one of us. Jesus was, even though he became flesh and blood and therefore like us in his physicality and mortality, totally unlike us in his divinity.

Jesus was the God-man (the Greek, *theanthropos*, God incarnate). Jesus is very man and very God—in his humanity he

was corruptible and mortal (yet without sin). Given his mortality, Jesus could and did die, not of disease or aging, but at the hands of hatred and evil.

Jesus was the God-man, very man and very God—in his divinity, absolutely perfect and inherently pure. He was and is the divine Word of God.



LIKE... AND UNLIKE US

While Jesus was one of us during this Christmas season we reflect and give thanks that he was not at all like us in so many ways.

He was totally unlike his human creation in his values and his priorities—totally unlike humans in terms of how he spent his time and energy, and what and who we respect and admire.

We give thanks and celebrate the fact that Jesus came to be like us so that we could become like him.

Jesus is our friend—and what a friend we have in him. Jesus is our

Lord and Savior. Jesus is our King. Jesus is our Redeemer, our Healer... he is our ALL in ALL.

Christ is like us, one of us, in the fact that he came out of eternity into time and space, born of a woman with a physical body. Time, of course, is the opposite end of eternity—eternity is defined as *beyond time* by we who are defined by our time and space limitations.

Jesus came to be one of us in order (1) to reveal the fulness of the love of God, so that we understand God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and (2) to offer all who believe and receive him the grace of God that we could become like him—and thereby live his risen life in all who believe and receive him.

“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).

“WHO WAS, IS & IS TO COME”

In his book, *The Applause of Heaven*, Max Lucado says:

“Only a puny god could be bought with tithes. Only an egotistical god would be impressed with our pain. Only a temperamental god could be satisfied with our sacrifices. Only a heartless god would sell salvation to the highest bidders. And only a great God does for his children what they cannot do for themselves.”



Who was and who is this Jesus whose birthday we celebrate?

Jesus is not only God in the flesh, but God is Jesus in the flesh.

Jesus, the Light of the world, is the prism through which the light of God is reflected into every aspect of our lives.

Jesus came to more fully reveal Father God—and we see in and through him, as he invites us out of our darkness into his glorious light, that he is absolutely and irrevocably and eternally concerned with our suffering, our failures, our losses, our frustrations, our humiliations, our injuries both emotional and physical—*Jesus is God with us, God one of us, God for us.*

We see God in Jesus, we come to know God in and through Jesus... so that we realize his forgiveness, his mercy, his grace and his love.

When we focus on and absorb the fullness of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus we discover that he is a spiritual earthquake, a necessary one subverting and overturning human values and desires.

When we focus on and absorb the fullness of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus we see all he was and is, so that we cannot conceive of God independently without considering Jesus.

When we focus on and absorb the fullness of the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus in gratitude and thanksgiving, *we believe and receive him.*

For many years the music of Don Moen has graced our home during the month of December. For Karen and myself, Don Moen touches chords of joy, thanksgiving and worship in a way that most Christmas music does not.

The thoughts and phrases, lyrics if you like, of “Believe Him and Receive Him”—my humble efforts of lyrical verse—are partly inspired by Don Moen’s song, “You Can Trust Him” and from Pastor S.M. Lockridge’s classic sermon, “That’s My King! Do You Know Him?”

But most of all, literary sources from the New Testament, primarily the Gospel of John, guided my thinking, and are in many cases direct quotes. □

Greg Albrecht is President of Plain Truth Ministries.

Believe Him & Receive Him

Believe Him and Receive Him!

He is unique and exceptional
He is the One and Only
He is filled with grace and truth
He is our relentless, eternal lover

Believe Him and Receive Him!

He is the way and the truth and the life
He is the creator of all that is,
 visible and invisible, seen and unseen
He was in the beginning,
through him all things were made
He was and is the Light shining in our darkness
He became one of us,
 living with and among us

Believe Him and Receive Him!

He came to reveal the fullness of the Father
He came to reveal the love, grace and mercy of
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Moses gave the law,
 grace and truth came through Jesus
From the fullness of his grace,
 we are given one blessing after another

Believe Him and Receive Him!

He is the king of the kingdom, yet
He is a different kind of king
He is meek and lowly in spirit
He is humble and approachable
He is filled with limitless love
There is no end of his mercy and grace
He defines and illustrates
 the unbelievable love of God
He is Jesus, the Son of God
He is our Lord and our Savior
He is Alpha and Omega
He was, and is and is to come
In him is life, and his life is immortal
You can't be given new life without him

Believe Him and Receive Him!

He received hatred and animosity
 from religious professionals
He accepted betrayal and rejection
 by and from his own

He forgave all
He destroyed all evil
 by drinking it all into himself
He died and was buried
Christless religion thought it had gotten rid of him
But death could not hold him
Jesus exploded from his tomb
Our risen Lord lives that death may die
He died eternal life to bring
He rose in victory and triumph
 over death and the grave

Believe Him and Receive Him!

O death where is your victory?
O grave, where is your sting?
He has triumphed over the gates of hell
He leads captives to freedom
He rescues the impoverished and the enslaved
He comforts the afflicted
He afflicts the comforted

Believe Him and Receive Him!

He is Jesus
King of kings and Lord of Lords
He is Jesus
The Prince of Peace
He is Jesus
The True Vine and the Living Water
He is Jesus
The Bread of Life and the Light of the World
He is Jesus
The Living Water
He is Jesus
The Resurrection and the Life

Believe Him and Receive Him!

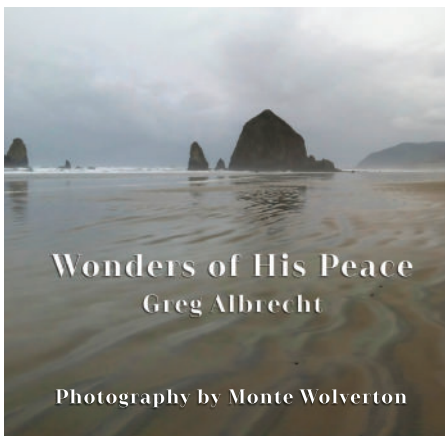
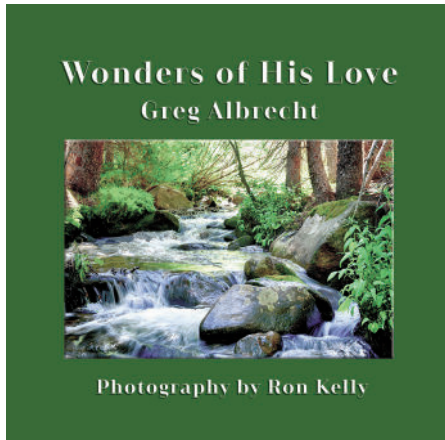


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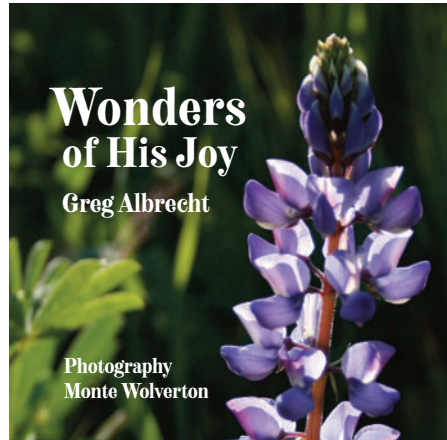


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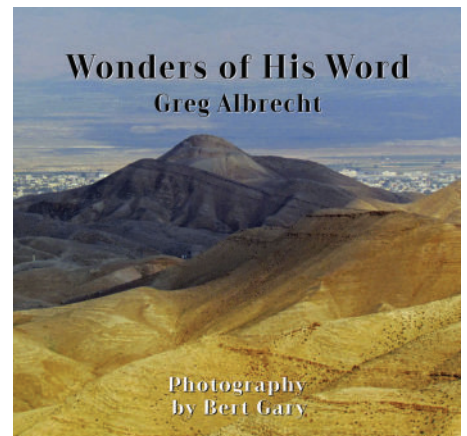
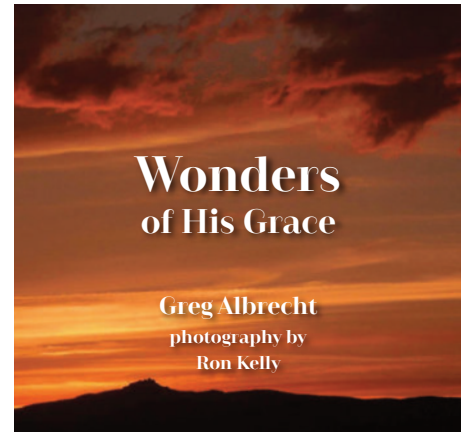
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Stay for connection, community & care!*



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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Greg Albrecht
EDITOR / ART DIRECTOR: Brad Jersak
MANAGING EDITOR: Laura Urista
PUBLISHING DIRECTOR: Dennis Warkentin
ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Ed Dunn
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