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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Like Wool on Sheep

By Greg Albrecht

In *The Pilgrim's Regress*, an allegorical fable by C.S. Lewis, the parents of a young boy named John dress him up to go see the local Steward—the title the author gives for the local religious authority. John's parents apparently feel it is high time for their son to “get some religion” (my words, not those of C.S. Lewis!).

The Pilgrim's Regress (1933) is Lewis' tongue-in-cheek response to John Bunyan's 1678 novel *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which Lewis argues for relationship with God based on a Christ-centered life experienced by Christ-followers rather than Bunyan's mandate of continual progress achieved by blood, sweat and tears. In this, the first book he wrote after his conversion to Christianity, Lewis begins a fantasy story about the ups and downs of finding spiritual

enlightenment with a discussion of “The Rules”—the title of the first chapter.

Young John is assigned a leading role in Lewis' tale, beginning with John's initial exposure to religious decrees. The subtitle to this first chapter admonishes “*Knowledge of broken law precedes all other religious experience.*” Early in John's life the family cook pulls John aside to advise him about “The Rules.”

The cook tells John about the Landlord “who owns all the country.” The Landlord has appointed the Steward “who makes rules for all the country.” The cook then sternly warns John if he does not obey the rules then the Steward “would be very angry.”

When John's parents feel that John needs formal teaching about “The Rules” they believe the local pastor/priest/vicar would be best suited for this task. Young John is extremely apprehensive about his

visit, but when he is ushered into the Steward's office, his fears seem to diminish as they talk, at first at least, about fishing and bicycles.

But then, without warning, the Steward takes a terrifying mask off the wall, and puts it on his otherwise warm and charming face. He then tells John about the Landlord, who is very kind (an obvious reference for the God the Steward represents) but if John

doesn't keep all the rules, the Steward sternly tells John the Landlord will send him to a black hole full of snakes and scorpions.

The Final Judgment

We have all had experiences similar to young John's. Religious professionals (“Stewards” who make the rules) have told us that if we do not keep all the rules then God (the “Landlord”) will not hesitate, in the final judgment, to send us to a black hole filled with snakes and scorpions.

What exactly is the “final” judgment? By what standards are we, and will we, be judged? Will an otherwise loving Landlord send us to a black hole full of snakes and scorpions if we don't measure up?

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a

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Descending to Serve

One of my favorite flying stories centers around Captain Thompson, a British Airways pilot, who, toward the end of his career, flew passengers around the Scottish isles. It was a time, many decades ago, when airline travel, particularly in small planes, was much less complicated and involved.

The planes Captain Thompson flew at the end of his career were so small they had no partition between the flight deck and the cabin. This arrangement enabled him to occasionally play a practical joke on his passengers. Captain Thompson would board the flight, dressed like any other passenger, and sit with them in the cabin, waiting for the pilot to show up.

When the time for take-off came and passed, inevitably the passengers would get upset, and Captain Thompson would join in. Finally, when everyone was really agitated, Captain Thompson would speak up and say he had read a book about flying, and this plane was so small it surely couldn't be that difficult to fly. He said that if the pilot didn't show up in three minutes he would go ahead and give it a try.

Sure enough, no pilot showed up, so Captain Thompson made his way to the pilot's seat. Whether it was because they were in shock or simply didn't know what to say, most of the time the passengers didn't protest his decision to fly the plane.

After Captain Thompson had successfully taken off, sometimes he would deliberately talk loud enough for the passengers to hear, talking to himself, trying to remind himself about what the book had said about landing.

Who are you following? Where are you going, and what is the purpose of your life? Are you confident that your spiritual airplane has a Pilot who knows what he's doing? Can you trust him to make sure you land safely at your final destination?

Washing the feet of his disciples (John 13:1-9) might be seen as one of the more definitive and epic moments of the ministry of Jesus. The actions Jesus took in washing the feet of his disciples, as recorded in these nine verses, review, rehearse and recap the mission and meaning of his life and ministry.

Jesus was at the table, eating with his disciples. He rose from the table, took off his robe and put on a towel. One might say that this action is somewhat like his incarnation in the very beginning. He came to us from out of eternity, becoming one of us, as God in the flesh.

He descended to serve—his object and his goal and his mission was to serve us. Foot washing was not only an incredible act of humility and service, but it was also the act of Jesus, who was about to die, preparing his disciples to follow him and give their lives to him.

We remember the powerful words of Paul, in Galatians 2:20, describing the spiritual death, burial and resurrection of all Christ-followers:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

As disciples of Jesus, we have been crucified with Christ so that the physical life we now lead we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us to the end. We are Christ-followers. The narrow road we travel is called

The Jesus Way. Throughout the Four Gospels we often read that Jesus said to his disciples, "Follow me."

"Follow me" is the invitation of Jesus—an invitation that connects us intimately with him. It is an invitation that connects us with the great I AM who is truly going somewhere. The act of following Jesus means that we share the same road—we suffer and we serve. In fact, the word often translated "follow" in the four Gospels is rooted in the Greek word for "road."

Our lives, as Christ-followers, are wrapped up in him—our lives are defined by him. He is the center and focus of our lives. Because he is in us and we are in him, we serve others in his name.

Jesus doesn't call us to become brain surgeons or commercial airline pilots. He doesn't expect us to heal others. He doesn't require us to be rocket scientists or world class theologians.

Jesus doesn't presume we will walk on water or multiply a few loaves and fish to feed thousands of people. Jesus doesn't insist that we die on a cross.

Jesus descended into the pig pen we have made of planet earth to be one of us, to love us and serve us so that one day we might ascend with him. Jesus invites us to follow him. Jesus offers us a new life if we allow him to wash our feet.

Jesus invites us to serve others, symbolically washing their feet, in his name. □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for "Descending to Serve" at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of November 15, 2020.

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shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left" (Matthew 25:31-33).

Jesus' teaching about "*The Sheep and the Goats*" (Matthew 25:31-46) is probably the biblical passage most frequently used to describe the final judgment. Jesus uses sheep and goats as symbols of all who appear before him, when he returns "in his glory" sitting on "his glorious throne" (Matthew 25:31).

Based on this teaching, we have heard frightening descriptions of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ when a long line of billions of people will stretch around the world. Everyone ("all nations" Matthew 25:32) will be trembling, as they await their judgment.

There will be no jostling in this line—no one will be trying to get ahead of someone else—no one will be in a hurry to have their sins and flaws weighed on the scale of justice.

The parable describes Jesus separating the line into two groups—one consisting of sheep, and the other consisting of goats. Jesus says that the sheep will have fed him and provided him with something to drink—they will have given hospitality to him as a stranger and clothed and visited him when he was sick and in prison.

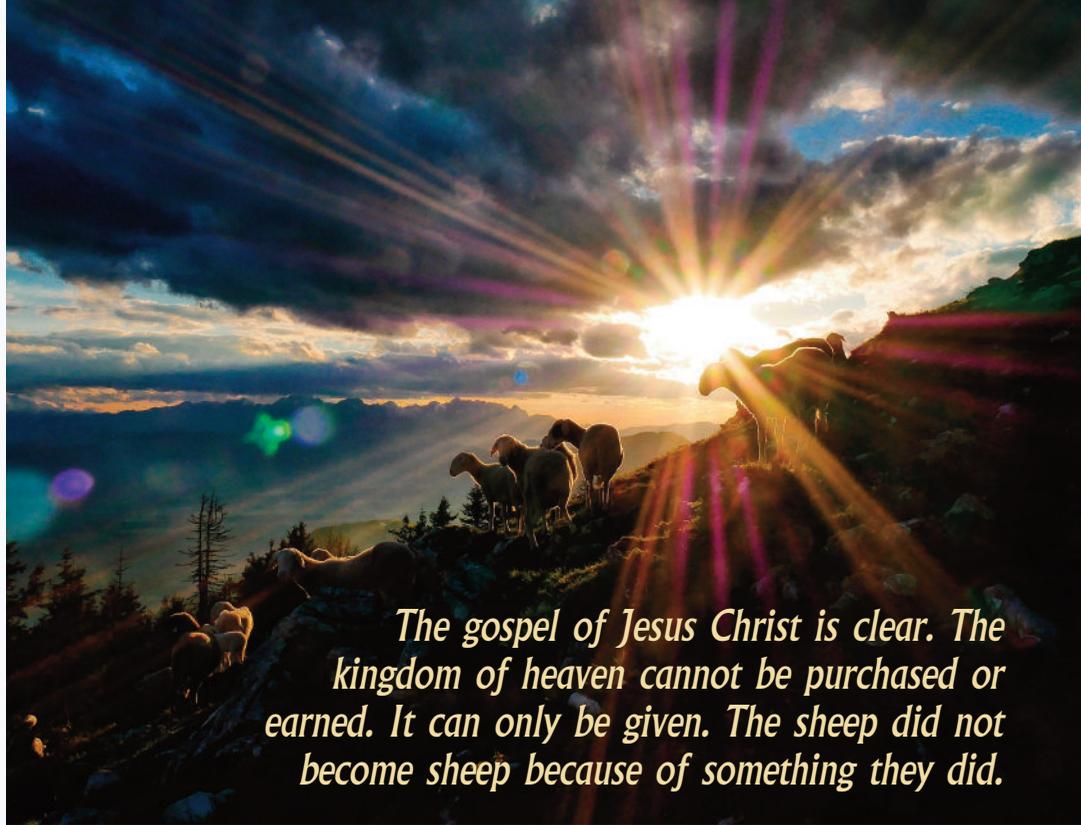
Pulpit Pronouncements About the Sheep and the Goats

Here are some actual comments explaining *The Sheep and the Goats* that have been and continue to be made from pulpits:

"How well the judgment goes for you will be based on how well you behave on this earth, right now."

"At the judgment, God will put us under the microscope of his justice and holiness, and he will drag all of our sins into the open."

"We will be judged based on how much character we have built. The sheep will have built a lot of character. The goats were



The gospel of Jesus Christ is clear. The kingdom of heaven cannot be purchased or earned. It can only be given. The sheep did not become sheep because of something they did.

disobedient, lazy and just goofed off."

"You and I better prepare ourselves right now for the judgment, because we are going to have to meet God one day."

"When we appear before God's throne, all of our sins will be revealed. Every deed will be exposed and accounted for in front of all the saints of God. God keeps perfect records, he sees it all, hears it all and knows it all. The things we think we did in secret will be exposed in all their ugliness."

Will God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, put on a horrible, frightening mask, tell us that he was just kidding about being filled with love, mercy, forgiveness and grace and proceed to sentence those who screwed up their lives to eternal torture?

It's true that this parable explains that the sheep are different from the goats. But here's the question: what makes the sheep different from the goats? Actually, there's an even more telling question—WHO makes the sheep different from the goats?

How Do Sheep Become Sheep?

According to Jesus, the difference between sheep and goats is

predicated on how they have served others, in his name, or failed to do. The righteous sheep will "answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me'" (Matthew 25:37-39).

The sheep have no idea why the King concluded that they served and ministered to him. Jesus' sheep did not live a life of record-keeping, carefully recalling all their good deeds. Jesus was the most important thing in the lives of his sheep, and they served others as a result of following him. The sheep do not believe they are worth much, but they believe Jesus is worth everything.

The goats, on the other hand, have no idea when they did not serve and minister to the King. They cannot remember a single time when they did not behave in what they consider as a right, good and morally appropriate way. The goats are shocked because they always went to church, always read

and studied their Bibles, always prayed, always performed the right ceremonies at the right time...

The goats say to Jesus: **'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me'**" (Matthew 25:44-45).

1) This passage says that one of the differences between sheep and goats is acts of kindness, compassion and generosity—demonstrated and given to people who cannot, necessarily, pay us back.

2) The passage implies that the people who are classified as sheep on the basis of these acts of kindness, compassion and generosity do not receive credit for doing so—they do not produce or manufacture these actions via their character or innate goodness. The humble sheep live out acts of kindness, compassion and generosity without expecting a reward for doing so.

3) We should also note what this parable is *not* saying. This passage is *not* suggesting that we become a sheep on the basis of giving to someone who begs or panhandles, or because we serve at a rescue mission or soup kitchen, or because we volunteer for a prison ministry. The parable is not suggesting that we buy our way into the kingdom of heaven, becoming a sheep, on the basis of what we do.

After all, ***the gospel of Jesus Christ is clear. The kingdom of heaven cannot be purchased or earned. It can only be given. The sheep did not become sheep because of something they did.***

The sheep did not live their lives taking a God mask down from the wall and putting it on, hoping to scare people to death with threats about how God will sentence them to a black hole full of snakes and scorpions unless they obey religious rules (all the while calling this activity "evangelizing").

The sheep are surprised, because

Jesus was doing things like that in their lives all the time—and as they followed Jesus, they naturally shared what he was producing in their lives. ***Jesus' followers serve other people just as naturally as wool grows on a sheep.***

But if the big, bad wolf of the nursery tale pastes wool all over himself, he is still the big, bad wolf. ***Simply having what seems to be wool is not proof that one is a sheep of Jesus' pasture.***

Jesus' followers serve other people, just as naturally as wool grows on a sheep.

We are not saved *by* our works, we are saved *for* works. Works do not ensure that we have an intimate relationship with God, nor do they ensure that we maintain it. It's all about grace. God makes wool grow on sheep just as he alone can make a tree grow.

What Makes a Sheep a Sheep

The sheep of this parable—authentic Christians—are different from the goats because they have been blessed by the Father (Matthew 25:34)—they have accepted and received the riches of God's grace.

One pastor I know visualizes standing before the judgment seat of Jesus, and the conversations that ensue go something like this:

Jesus says, "John, look up March 24, 2004 on your electronic planner or journal. Tell me what you were doing on that day."

John looks it up, and he says, "Oh yes, that's the day I gave that great sermon. The people at church said it was one of the best sermons they had ever heard."

Jesus replies, "No, the sermon you gave on March 24, 2004 is not what I am interested in. By the way, I never listened to your sermons anyway. What I was thinking about was how you walked over to the old lady you

saw at the Starbucks where you stopped before church for coffee. She was sad, you noticed her and went over to her and asked if anything was wrong. Remember that John?"

John: "Well, no Lord, I don't."

Jesus: "Well, you served her in my name. When you stopped to talk to her, you stopped to talk to me."

"Okay John—take another look at your notes. Look up January 18, 2006. Remember that?"

John scrolls back, and finds January 18, 2006. "Yes, Lord, I found it. I spent the entire day working on my book, and in fact that's the day I heard from my publisher that they were going to publish my book. Is that what you mean?"

Jesus: "No, I don't know anything about that. I never read your book. What I have in mind is that time when you stopped by McDonald's with your kids after the soccer game. You were in a hurry so you decided to order in the drive-thru line."

"I remember when you paid the cashier for your meal and for your kids, you told the cashier you wanted to pay the bill of the man behind you as well."

"You never knew how much that changed that man's life forever. He had never had anyone do anything like that for him before. When you allowed me to live in you and help feed him, you fed me. When you paid for his burger and fries, you bought me a burger and fries."

We don't know all the details of the judgment seat of Jesus. He gives us a parable here—not precise details, but broad brushstrokes about sheep and goats. But we know this:

Forget about all the spiritual and religious stuff you can remember doing that was so important—chances are it means little to Jesus.

The stuff Jesus has done in and through you and me—our daily routine that we do naturally by God's grace—is like wool growing on sheep. That's the stuff which makes us one of the sheep of Jesus' pasture. □



Thanksgiving for Everyone

by Brad Jersak

What is the celebration of Thanksgiving about? It depends who you ask.

In the USA, Thanksgiving Day is celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November. Traditionally, it commemorates the feast shared by a group of pilgrims and Native Americans circa 1621. After disastrous crop failures and facing starvation, the surviving Pilgrims were grateful to God for a fruitful harvest, largely because the Indigenous people taught them how to grow crops and catch fish.

The nostalgic imagery of Pilgrim fashions, fall colors, turkey dinners and great pumpkins would develop over time, until it became America's primary annual family gathering, even more than the Christian "holy days" of Christmas or Easter.

Valuing hospitality and inclusion, as I do, I can see how the Thanksgiving we celebrate today has become both broader and narrower, more inclusive and more exclusive.

A Narrower Thanksgiving

After that first Thanksgiving banquet, marked by kindness, hospitality and interracial brotherhood, the sad history to

follow is lamentable. A series of European-borne epidemics (e.g. small-pox) ripped through the Native peoples, killing many, causing their hunting-gathering economy to collapse and leading to mass starvation. These tragedies wiped out up to ninety percent of the Indigenous population. Then, as treaties were made and broken, hostility and wars ensued, followed by forced relocation to small reserves across 1000s of miles. It's worth understanding this is often what "Thanksgiving" means to those people groups today.

It's also narrower in that Thanksgiving was reduced to an in-house family event rather than an occasion to help and welcome the stranger and alien to our table. That's a real loss but also an opportunity. As kingdom people, how might we open our tables and who might we invite to share with this year?

A Broader Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving has also become broader and more inclusive, including all citizens, rather than only people of faith. As a secular holiday, it is a time for *all* to be grateful. My agnostic and atheist

friends celebrate Thanksgiving just as I would, sans the religious lingo.

Thanksgiving is broader and older than its American history. It's *broader* geographically, as Canadians celebrate Thanksgiving much like Americans. We hold it on October 12—any later and the pumpkins and leaves would be long gone. By late November, we're covered in snow and decorating for Christmas.

It's also a much *older* holiday if we remember the Jewish "Feast of First Fruits," described in Leviticus 23. Verse 10 says, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest.'" It was a true harvest

festival for all Jewish people (and most of their pagan neighbors as well).

The New Testament broadens this further, identifying the First Fruits with Christ's resurrection and the festival itself with Pentecost, when Christ poured out the Holy Spirit on *all* flesh. The relevant passages include Hebrews 10:8-10, 1 Corinthians 16:15, James 1:18 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-23.

See how Paul identifies his Thanksgiving with the Resurrection and again, how this extends to ALL:

*But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the **firstfruits** of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam **all die**, so in Christ **all will be made alive**. But each in turn: Christ, the **firstfruits**; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.*

This Thanksgiving, let's *all* remember *all* we're grateful for, empathize with those in need and look forward to the great spiritual harvest these First Fruits portend. □

Brad Jersak recently co-authored his first novel with Wm. Paul Young, titled "The Pastor: A Crisis."

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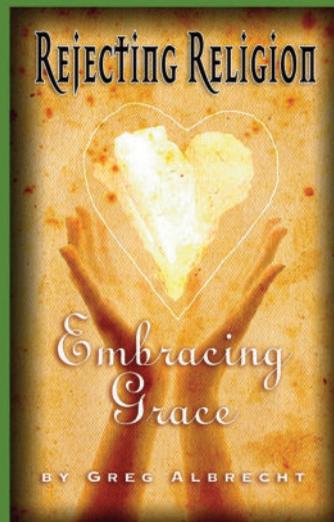
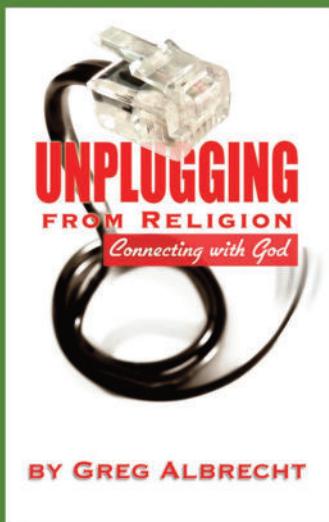
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Scaredy Pants

It was just a simple trip to the drug store to get a jar of Mentholatum for my wife, back in the early days of the pandemic.

Restrictions were just beginning, but folks in the checkout line voluntarily spaced themselves six feet apart—except for the guy behind me.

I turned around to see a large, 30-something, full-bearded fellow, looking maybe like a longshoreman. “Dude,” I reminded him pleasantly enough, “could you move back just a little?” He stared at me. “Social distancing, y’know?” I said, motioning with my hands.

He continued to stare for a while and finally spoke. “You don’t tell me what to do!”

“Not really” I answered. “I’m just suggesting...”

“Scaredy pants! Scaredy pants!” he boomed.

Other customers were casting sidelong glances and beginning to fidget. “Well,” I laughed, “I suppose I am a bit scared—septuagenarian—wife at home with a high-risk condition and...”

“What?! I don’t care! You’re a scaredy pants!”

The conversation seemed unproductive, so I ignored the fellow, checked out and left.

Back home, sitting in our living room, I pondered—if I were a bona fide scaredy pants, would I have engaged such a guy? I shared the story with my neighbor, who actually is a longshoreman (a union leader no less). He commented that no self-respecting longshoreman would use the term scaredy pants, and he had a more longshoremanly couple of words to describe the guy I had encountered.

I had apparently run into one of those people who balk at sensible public health guidelines. A couple of weeks later, they turned it into a political/constitutional issue, demonstrating in front of our local court house, loudly refusing to wear masks or to comply with other restrictions, while claiming that the pandemic was some vast conspiracy.

They purported to be courageous, but to me this looked more like fear—fear of the unknown, fear of change, of economic collapse—fear of loss, pain and death. Since then, as of this

writing, our country and the world has been traumatized not only by the pandemic but by racial injustice, political upheaval and probably many more things I don’t know about yet.

Given all this, fear is a natural reaction. It’s built into animals, including human beings, for a reason. Healthy fear keeps us out of trouble and alerts us to approaching danger. Individuals lacking in this sense may tend to have short lifespans. It’s the kind of fear expressed in the proverb: “A prudent person foresees danger and takes precautions. The simpleton goes blindly on and suffers the consequences” (Proverbs 27:12, NLT). Another proverb informs us that “Fear of the Lord is the foundation of wisdom. Knowledge of the Holy One results in good judgment” (Proverbs 9:10 (NLT)).

There we have two examples of healthy, prudent fear. But like so many things, fear has a dark side. It can easily spiral out of control and become toxic. When we find ourselves claiming to be fearless, exuding bravado, obsessing over power, domination and weaponry—there’s a good chance we are driven by toxic fear. It can transform otherwise smart folks into proverbial “simpletons” who blindly blunder on and suffer the consequences. Toxic fear and anxiety are the enemies of creative problem solving and sound decision-making.

Perhaps John the Evangelist had this desperate, toxic kind of fear in mind when he wrote, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

The bottom line is that God is not a source of fear, because he doesn’t want to punish us. On the contrary, he’s the one who drives out fear! And even in these dark days with so many in the grip of toxic fear, He offers to lead us forward out of that fear with confidence, courage, faith and thankfulness—because of his perfect love. □

—Monte Wolverton



Quotes & Connections



"The most interesting biblical hermeneutic is the one that sees Paul's statements on women as permanent injunctions for all time, but sees Jesus' command to love enemies as being so strangely full of nuance that it never seems to apply." —Benjamin L. Corey

"Thou who has given so much to me, give me one thing more—a grateful heart."
—George Herbert

"I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare." —C.S. Lewis

"Gratitude is from the same root word as 'grace,' which signifies the free and boundless mercy of God. Thanksgiving is from the same root word as 'think,' so that to think is to thank." —Willis P. King

"Shakespeare called thanks 'the exchequer of the poor.' Let us thank God he has made it possible to give something back to him." —William C. Skeath

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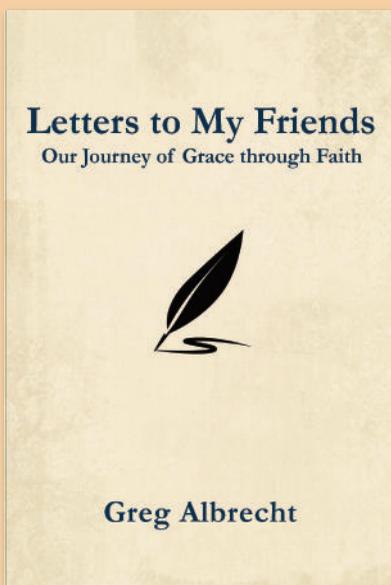
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