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CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Learning Pandemic Lessons:

Then Pressing On

By Greg Albrecht

*...I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: **Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus** (Philippians 3:8-14, my emphasis).*

We are thankful that the nightmare of 2020, the year we first started to experience the COVID-19 pandemic, is in the rearview mirror. Some of us lost loved ones, some of us were personally quarantined, as were friends and members of our families. And we all know people who either lost jobs or are struggling financially right now because of the catastrophe of 2020.

As this New Year of 2021 begins, what have we learned... or rather, **what can we learn from the Year of the Pandemic?**

- We can learn that spiritual significance can be found in suffering. Suffering can either close our hearts and turn us inward toward more self-centeredness or it can break our hearts open and thus turn our attention toward the needs of others.

- We can learn that faith and trust in Jesus is the spiritual vaccine against fear and worry. Faith is the trust that releases our fear and

acknowledges that when all is said and done, our lives are in his hands. Faith is God's gift to us and the response Jesus asks of us—the promise that no matter where the road of following him might lead us, he will always... always... be with us. Following Jesus involves letting go of our fears, addictions, worries and stress and allowing him to live in and through our lives.

- We remember during the pandemic of 2020 we were all told to stay safe and stay at home. But we resisted that, did we not? We humans are naturally programmed to earn our own paycheck. We resist charity. We would rather take care of ourselves. One of the lessons the pandemic can teach us is that Jesus is the hero of our story. We cannot save ourselves. We naturally do not want to just sit at home, we desire to do something—something to *make God happy*.

God had just saved the nation of Israel from the brutal slavery of Egypt but now they were blocked by the Red Sea. Trapped by mountains on two sides of them and the Red Sea on the other. The only available direction was to return in the direction they had come, but the Egyptian army was rapidly closing in on them for the purpose of enslaving them once again. The Israelites faced certain annihilation by the Egyptian army but Moses told them *"The Lord will fight for you; you only need to be still"* (Exodus 14:14). Moses' message:

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Here Comes the Dreamer

On April 4, 1968, as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was leaving the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee to go out for dinner, a shot rang out. MLK, the victim of an assassin's bullet, was rushed to a hospital where he died later that night.

While I have never visited the spot, I have read that the Lorraine Motel in Memphis still displays a wreath and a plaque with MLK's name, the date of his birth (1929) and the date of his death (1968). The plaque also includes an excerpted summary of a passage from the 37th chapter of Genesis, cited at Dr. King's funeral.

The excerpted quotation inscribed on the plaque is taken from the 1611 Authorized King James Version. These are hate-filled words of Joseph's older brothers, as they saw their younger brother at a distance, travelling to visit them as they grazed the sheep of their father Jacob.

"They said to one another, 'Behold, here cometh the dreamer... Let us slay him... And we shall see what will become of his dreams.'"

Not quite five years before he was killed, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. announced that he had a dream. Here's an excerpt from "I Have a Dream" given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. on August 28, 1963:

"I have a dream that my four little children will live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.... I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made

straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

Just as Joseph's brothers didn't agree with or like the dreams that Joseph had and related to them (Genesis 37:5-11), in 1963 not everyone agreed with Dr. King's dream. In fact, there were many churches in North America that strongly denounced Dr. King, condemning him for personal flaws and faults and even made fun of him, in the name of God.

On Martin Luther King Jr. Day, we pause to remember his dream. We remember his dreams of justice, of harmony and we remember the need to denounce hatred, greed and indifference to the pains and hurts of others. Dr. King once said: *"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."*

But Christ-followers have even a bigger dream. As beautiful as the dream of Martin Luther King Jr. is, we have a more majestic dream. Our dream is the vision Jesus had and has of his kingdom. In the kingdom of God, as MLK Jr. said, in his citation of the soaring rhetoric of Isaiah 40: 4-5, *"every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain made low, the rough places will be made plain and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."*

Jesus had a dream—indeed, the sarcastic and hate-filled comments about Joseph by his brothers, *"here cometh the dreamer... let us slay him,"* apply far more to Jesus than anyone who has ever lived. *"Here cometh the dreamer... let us slay him"* is precisely how the religious establishment of

Jesus' day reacted to him. And they did crucify him.

They were not thrilled that Jesus' dream would mean the end of their religious world—they were not happy that Jesus was clearly going to change everything they lived for, believed and cherished. They were not thrilled with the inclusive gospel of the kingdom of God, including the reality that all mankind is loved and accepted by God

No one upsets religious apple carts and gets away with doing so. And they thought, erroneously of course, that by crucifying the dreamer they would eradicate the dream.

The dream is alive and well. It has found fulfillment in many ways over the last 2,000 years—it continues to, and one day *"...the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea"* (Habakkuk 2:14).

My friends—whatever battle you may be fighting—no matter how depressed you may be—know that Jesus is alive. He is our risen Lord. He invites you to share and participate in his dream, his kingdom, if you will only embrace it.

Don't give up. The road is long. Darkness at times obscures your path. There are times when it may seem the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel has been extinguished. Remember: *Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.* □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for the complete message of "Here Comes the Dreamer" at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of January 17, 2021.

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“Stay at home. God has this. Have faith in him!”

- We follow Jesus in the midst of our world that places worth and value in working, building, making and producing. The history of humanity is one of a rat-race survival-of-the-fittest, building Towers of Babel and in so doing trying to impress, earn and achieve—even and perhaps especially when it comes to our relationship with God.

- We can look back on 2020 and learn to let go of our past and our present—to let go of the things that weigh us down—to forget about what seems to be important so that we might follow Jesus, Who is of Ultimate Importance.

Perhaps more than any New Year in recent memory—perhaps more than any New Year in our lives—we identify with Paul as he says ***forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.***

Five Themes for Christ-Followers in 2021

Consider the five highlighted statements in Philippians 3:8-14:

1)...for whose sake [knowing Christ Jesus] ***I have lost all things...***

Paul refers to his own legalistic history which produced oppression and pain, in his own life and in the lives of others. Paul is speaking of how foolish it is to put our faith and confidence in our flesh, as if we have the ability and power to please and appease God by the righteousness we produce. Thus, for Paul, to gain Christ is to lose all things—all things that we humanly value and prize. As we “*gain Christ*” (vs. 8) we lose all that we prized and valued before we embraced the grace of God.

2020 is ample proof that we cannot do all that is necessary to protect and secure ourselves. 2020 proved that we might not even be able to have enough toilet paper for

the next day, let alone prove to God how we deserve his love and blessings.

2)...Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ...

Christ alone is the focus and goal of our faith. He alone gives us, by the grace of God, his own righteousness. Apart from the grace of God we will continuously spin our spiritual wheels, in vain, like a hamster on a wheel, trying to be righteous enough to please God.

In *Every Drop of Blood*, Edward Achorn studies the second inaugural address of Abraham Lincoln. The horrific Civil War had ended when Lincoln, only 41 days before his assassination, took his second oath of office. The nation was still divided, filled with hatred and animosity, even though two armies were not killing each other. Lincoln explained his plans to heal the nation, and Achorn concludes that Lincoln had determined “it was time for Americans to stop thinking about self-righteousness. The only way forward was to recognize we had all been wrong and to treat each other with mercy.”

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23).

Our “righteousness” is what we are capable of producing. The end result of our “righteousness” is death. The end result of attempting to earn our just desserts from God via obedience to the law is death.

Thus the grand and wondrous paradox of the gospel: When we



2020 was filled with the fear of death, wasn't it? We became aware of an invisible, toxic and deadly virus that paralyzed and overwhelmed our world.

accept and embrace Jesus Christ, we surrender all of our attempts to be good enough and produce enough righteousness to earn eternal life. We die with Jesus—he dies in and with and for us—so that having died with him, we rise with him. He lives in those who seek not their own righteousness, but the righteousness of God which is through faith in Christ.

3)...becoming like him in his death...

2020 was filled with the fear of death, wasn't it? We became aware of an invisible, toxic and deadly virus that paralyzed and overwhelmed our world. In the spiritual dimension we can never make progress following Jesus unless and until we face death and

realize that our lives are in his hands.

While we cannot earn or deserve God's gifts, he does not force his grace on us. We must embrace God's grace—we must accept the invitation to follow Jesus on and in the Jesus Way.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God (Romans 6:8-10).

4)...I press on to take hold of that which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

Pressing on is part of our journey in and with Christ. We have a role—we press on. Jesus Christ does not do it all for us. We continue to put one foot in front of the other as we follow Christ—we are Christ followers.

For we live by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Our 2020 adventure of following Christ was a journey of faith, and our pilgrimage in 2021 will continue our journey of faith.

We have faith for our mission as Christ-followers because Jesus Christ **took hold** of you and me. Our faith is better understood as a verb, rather than a noun. Our faith as Christ-followers is a process, not a trophy or a possession.

Our faith **pressing on to take hold** is an expedition without a physical map we can see. We cannot "take hold" of Jesus until he first "takes hold" of us. Jesus is our map. Our faith is following him.

We must look beyond the darkness of our world and our immediate circumstances and walk by faith, not by sight. As Christ-followers we always look for his Light, and while there may be more darkness than Light, he will enable us to see His Light...and be uplifted, inspired and strengthened for our ongoing journey.

5)...Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is

ahead. I press on...

When Paul tells us in Philippians 3:13 to "**forget the past**" he is not advising us to act or pretend as if the nightmare of 2020 never happened. Paul is not telling us to live in denial.

Paul is **forgetting what is behind** without denying it—Paul is looking forward in the light of the past. **Paul is forgetting what is behind and pressing on.**

...we strain toward what is ahead and press on.

Faith in Christ is being absolutely unaware of precisely where we are going, but pressing on anyway. We struggle and we strive. We put one foot in front of the other. Jesus does not do it all for us.

Paul advises that **we forget what is behind**—forget the pain and heartache. If someone else caused our suffering, forget it and press on. Forget about anger and even rage toward those who victimized us—including in some cases our anger toward God and frustration with him.

You may well have been a victim, but be careful of over-playing *the role* of victim, because *victims often never get beyond their anger and their regrets*—they just sit there, like a pot of stew simmering on the stove.

There is darkness and pain in the past and in the present—when we leave the past and the present behind and **strain toward what is ahead and press on** we focus on the light rather than the darkness—the good rather than the evil.

Resolutions for 2021

There is hope involved in hanging up a new calendar on the wall, or placing it on our desk. There is also an exhilaration involved in being liberated from all those events that happened in the year gone by.

The month of January is named for the Roman god Janus—the god of transitions and doorways, of gates and beginnings. Janus is often

depicted as having two heads—one that looks to the past and one that looks ahead to the future.

With a new calendar, we look forward to all of the months of a new year, most of them yet void of appointments, mostly clean and unadorned pages of a calendar not yet filled with places to go and people to see.

A new calendar involves retiring an old calendar. When we retire the year that has just ended, we don't pretend it never happened. In fact, sometimes it's helpful to review the year, even if it brings up bad memories. We only truly forget the past when we refuse to deny it, but instead we **strain toward what is ahead and press on.**

Our collective work here at Plain Truth Ministries and Christianity Without the Religion—the ongoing work we, by the grace of God, accomplish together—involves reaching out, bringing good news of the love, mercy and grace of God. What a beautiful and meaningful mission it is!

COVID-19 has taken a toll on our collective ministry. For many reasons, many of our Partners have had to sharpen their budgetary pencils. For understandable reasons, some have reduced and in some cases were forced to temporarily stop their donations to this ongoing work. As a ministry we in turn have tightened our belts, all the while attempting to continue serving as we have.

By God's grace, in the name of Jesus this collective ministry will **strain forward toward what is ahead and press on** in 2021. If you have not already, we invite you to join us as we **strain toward what is ahead and press on** in this New Year.

We invite you to continue to work with us, collectively, in this worldwide ministry. Jesus Christ is our Risen Lord, and he is the Great Physician. Rumor has it that our Great Physician hasn't lost anyone yet! *He is risen. He is alive. He is Lord of all!* □



my way, I'll enjoy some of the best *people watching* anyone could do, anywhere. I'll enjoy all the fans of two major college football programs, there to support their teams later that afternoon in the *Grand-Daddy of Them All*, the Rose Bowl game.

The families from all over Southern California and

and take it—another misguided message of someone else's Jesus. An angry, retributive Jesus those making the most noise believe they're serving.

I must confess the message of their Jesus I can't run away from quickly enough. This is not the Jesus I have come to know. This is not the Jesus I'd want anyone to come to know. I say "come to know" as I too have come out of a difficult religious background. And, I'm still unlearning as much as I've learned. This Jesus loves, accepts and includes. **I must confess**, I love that

This is not the Jesus I've come to know. This is not the Jesus I'd want anyone to come to know.

I must confess I enjoy a special tradition on the morning of each new New Year's Day. I like to bundle up, coffee up with a large *to-go* thermos and sneak quietly out of the house. As I do, the sun is rarely up.

What could be my destination so early on the first day of each New Year? That's simple. I like to make my way with the crowds of excitable spectators hurriedly streaming toward a world-famous piece of real estate. I like to join in with one million or so other fans on their way to the narrow sidewalks of Colorado Boulevard. Together in eager anticipation of taking in the wonder and pageantry of the annual Tournament of Roses Parade, we wait.

Although my one million friends and I will have to sit out the 2021 Rose Parade due to Corona virus concerns, we all look forward to the 2022 parade with great, and no doubt, pent up, anticipation.

When next I reach Colorado Boulevard, I'll turn westward and walk the parade route in reverse, all the way back to Old Town Pasadena. The trek will be just short of three-and-a-half miles. As I make

beyond will be there to see the flora and fauna of the colorful floats and the tight rhythms and ranks of the well-rehearsed marching bands. It will be a spectacle like no other, once again.

But sadly, without fail, all the happy faces, all the flora and fauna, rhythms and ranks and wonder and pageantry of a perfect parade morning will most likely be pierced by the sound of angry megaphones. They will be out there again in full force—those who feel called to witness and warn a captive audience of their sins and the coming judgment of God. They will again present Jesus as the judge, jury and high-executioner of all who don't confess their sins and do as they've done, repent and conform to their religious ideals.

All those poor people. Stuck. Trapped even. The freezing, under-caffeinated, huddled masses, there just to enjoy a parade, won't be able to budge an inch in any direction. They'll have no choice but to just sit there

message. That Jesus makes for a wonderful New Year's Day, and every day thereafter. □

Ed Dunn is a writer, editor, blogger, member of the Plain Truth Ministries Board of Directors and host of This Month at PTM. See the back cover of this issue for more details on this new video resource from CWR/PTM.



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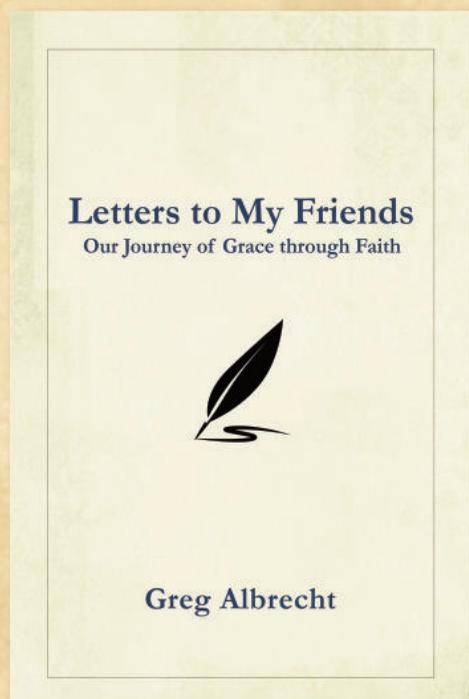
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Letters to My Friends
by Greg Albrecht



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My Sister Claretha

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

We pulled a U-Haul rental truck in front of the beautiful 2-story, Dutch-colonial house on tree-lined Giddings Avenue in Grand Rapids. August 10, 1978 marked a new beginning for me—my first teaching job after too-many years of college and grad school. Now a lovely home for \$40,000, costing less than we received in the sale of our much-inferior house we left behind.

It marked a major change in my life, not the least of which was living in a mostly African-American neighborhood. We waved at neighbors who appeared both curious and wary. Within weeks, however, our effort to be friendly was marred by an accusation of racism. Me, a racist? I had no reason to treat black people any different than I would treat whites.

But a little incident became a serious point of tension. Two young boys had climbed over our back-yard fence. I demanded to know what they were up to. They were over the fence in a heartbeat, and I hot on their trail. I was fast in those days, but no match for these two who were running for their lives. Unlike so many instances we hear about, this was not caught on a cell phone. But it was witnessed by Claretha, Jack and their three children. They were furious, and they let me know. I told them point blank that I would have chased white boys climbing over my fence as well. They didn't buy it.

I went back into my house stewing over the accusation. But as the minutes turned into hours, my conscience started talking. I wrote a letter to Claretha apologizing for my behavior, telling her I wanted to be friends. That moment was the real new beginning. For the next 28 years we bonded inside and outside each other's houses. When son Carlton acquired two VIP tickets for candidate Bill Clinton's visit, she joined me. We were right

up against the fence as he walked to the podium. He spotted Claretha and reached out to give her a hug.

Times of laughter and fun were balanced by serious reflection. One afternoon when I was raking, Jack was working in his own yard. As we chatted, I asked about his growing up in Mississippi. That's when he told me about the night of terror. He and his girlfriend were double dating, parked at a lonely spot along a river. Suddenly headlights beamed into their rear windows. A sheriff and deputy ordered them out of their vehicle, guns drawn. The boys forced to stand, arms outstretched, hands against the car while the girls were raped. "They called me *boy*," Jack recalled after all those years, "and I didn't do a thing to save those girls." The pain is still raw.

She was my sister and she wasn't about to be left out. Her very presence crowned our little wedding with tender mercies.

Fast forward two decades. I was teaching a seminary course that included a segment on racism. I opened the class by saying to my all-white students: *There is racism here in this room.* That jolted their early morning malaise. I paused, looking slowly at each student, and said, *I know there is racism in this room and in this seminary.* Another pause, and I said, *I know there is racism because I am here.* I told them about racing after those two boys in my back yard, and that I still had to be ever conscious of the insidious nature of racism in my own life.

Two young black boys in my back yard spurred the beginning of a friendship. That same back yard was the setting for my marriage to John in 2004—a very small family affair. Claretha, however, informed me she was coming. She was my sister and she wasn't about to be left out. I was honored. Her very presence crowned our little wedding with tender mercies. □

—Ruth Tucker



Quotes & Connections



"Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ; I therefore hate the corrupt, slave-holding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason but the most deceitful one for calling the religion of this land Christianity."
—Frederick Douglass, *Life of an American Slave*, 1845

"This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. It is, perhaps, the end of the beginning."
—Winston Churchill, 1942

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."
—Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Yesterday is history—tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why it's called the present."
—Eleanor Roosevelt

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