

PLAIN TRUTH®

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inside

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

God's Master Stroke for the New Year

Greg Albrecht

The Cross of Christ: Who, What, When, Where and Why?

Who? Jesus, God in the flesh, the Lamb of God, self-sacrificially, out of divine love, once and forever forgiving and giving mercy, love and grace to one and all. Everyone is included in his love! It was God on that Cross, for God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

What? The Cross of Christ is the enduring visual representation, the eternal memorial of God's love for

you and me. It is the sign and symbol that "God so loved the world..." God in Christ **loved the world SO much.**

When and Where? The Cross of Christ is the historical event in time and space, when and where human lust, arrogance, violence, anger, spiritual pride, resentment and all manner of hatred crucified Jesus, God in the flesh.

The Cross of Christ is the historical event in time and space when and where Jesus, God in the flesh, the Love of God incarnate, accepted, absorbed, forgave and overcame all

human lust, violence, arrogance, anger, spiritual pride, resentment and all manner of hatred.

Why? The Cross of Christ is **God's Master Stroke...** the masterpiece of his love... the center and fulcrum and yes, the CRUX of his love for all mankind.

It was not nails driven by human hands that ultimately held Jesus there, but rather the love of God that empowered and energized Jesus to be impaled on his Cross, and to receive and absorb human hatred and violence.

God's Master Stroke is good in return for evil—love for hatred—forgiveness instead of retaliation.

Our salvation has been accomplished. It is a reality. **We are forgiven—all of us, whether we want to be or not, and more to the point, everyone else is also forgiven whether we want them to be forgiven or not.** God has done all that needs to be done for our salvation... we have nothing to offer. We don't bring any righteousness of our own to him.

"You'll remember, friends, that when I first came to you to let you in on God's master stroke, I didn't try to impress you with polished words and the latest philosophy. I deliberately kept it plain and simple: first Jesus, and who he is, then Jesus and what he did—Jesus crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:1-2, The Message Bible).

God's Master Stroke is plain and simple.

Continued on page 3



It's All on Rails

The beginning of 2025 is a big deal as it relates to my commute to and from work each business day. Early 2025 is the date set for a brand-new train station to open close to my home. This means that no longer will I need half-an-hour to get from my front door to the station stop I use. Rather, all I'll need is ten minutes, with a convenient Starbucks Coffee positioned smartly along the way. I'll board the train with a hot cup of coffee in hand, and ride the rails to work a bit more quickly than I do now.

It's all on rails for me, which is to say, it's all quite easy. In an urban sprawl the size of Los Angeles County, to leave the driving to someone else is a real treat. Not that I have much of a choice with my eyesight as it is, still, I appreciate the work someone else is doing on my behalf. I simply board the train, sit down, sip on my coffee and look out my window as I move from Point A to Point B along the tracks someone else has laid down.

As I do, I see the same sights each day. The townhomes, retail storefronts, public schools and train stations are predictable and routine. Sometimes, I realize they are so familiar to me that I don't really see them anymore. Everything just blends into the background scenery as I pass quickly by.

We can approach our study of the Bible, especially in a religious setting, in much the same way. We walk into a church building for biblical teaching (we climb on board). We sit down. Often, we are presented with an immediate hot cup of coffee as we do. As we listen,

we move from Point A to Point B, from a question to an answer on any given topic, based on that particular denomination's doctrinal stance and biblical orientation. We are transported through the Bible as if **on rails**, their rails, in a way that they hope will lead to the listener's ultimate spiritual formation and full participation in the life of that religious entity.

Too often... we travel from the questions to the answers as the denomination intends—all the thinking has been done for us.

The established tracks then continue as the listener is invited, if not pressured, to plunge into *friendship circles* that teach the spiritual disciplines, discipleship classes, small groups, men's and women's groups, mid-week Bible studies, potlucks, and church sponsored community outreach opportunities.

All of this is done in the context of how that particular church interprets the Bible, and believes we should demonstrate our faith their way in *living it out*. **It's all on rails**, packaged so smartly and conveniently; ready to use and pass on to the next new listener.

As I ride the rails in such denominational settings, I often wonder, is there room for critical thinking in how we approach the Bible? Is there room for the asking of the tough questions, questions that may indeed muddy the waters of the simplistic answers I listen to? Is there harm in letting my Bible study time become so familiar that I don't see new insights or possibilities within Scripture? Sadly, too often **it's all on rails**, and we

travel from the questions to the answers as the denomination intends—all the thinking has been done for us.

As I ride the rails, I listen closely for the tools of sound biblical interpretation. Does the teacher understand the Testament (Old or New, and hence, the Covenant) from which she or he is teaching? Is the Scripture being expounded set in its context, genre, language and culture of the day in which it was written? Does the pastor understand the issue being addressed, and the audience to whom the original author was writing? Most importantly, does the teaching come from a Christ-centered perspective? Is the lens being used to open-up the passage the lens of Christ Jesus himself?

I like riding the rails. I like the ease and simplicity of getting wherever I need to go without much trouble or thought. Truth is, I like the predictable and the routine. Call it part of my human nature. However, when it comes to time in the Bible, these truths of my human nature work against me. And many such denominational settings do not help. Although I can appreciate the ease and simplicity of many of the station stops taught along the way, I need to ask the tough questions of Scripture. It cannot be on rails. I need to look for new insights and possibilities in each verse. Whether I am reading the Old or the New Testament, I must do so through the lens of Christ. **Christ Jesus is the whole point of the Bible.** He alone must be the rails, the station stops, the train and the scenery outside my window. □

—Ed Dunn

Continued from page 1

God's Master Stroke is Jesus... who he is and what he did... Jesus crucified.

God's Master Stroke is centered in and on Jesus. Jesus is the Master Stroke—who he is and what he did, with the capstone being his Cross.

God's Master Stroke is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Cross of Christ is the starting point—it is ground zero of our faith. It is God's Master Stroke. The Cross of Christ is the heart and core of the gospel.

The Cross of Christ crushes the tyranny of attempting to please God on the basis of obedience to laws, while at the very same time the Cross insists that the love and grace of God, poured out and exemplified on the Cross of Christ, is the bedrock of our faith and the foundation of our hope.

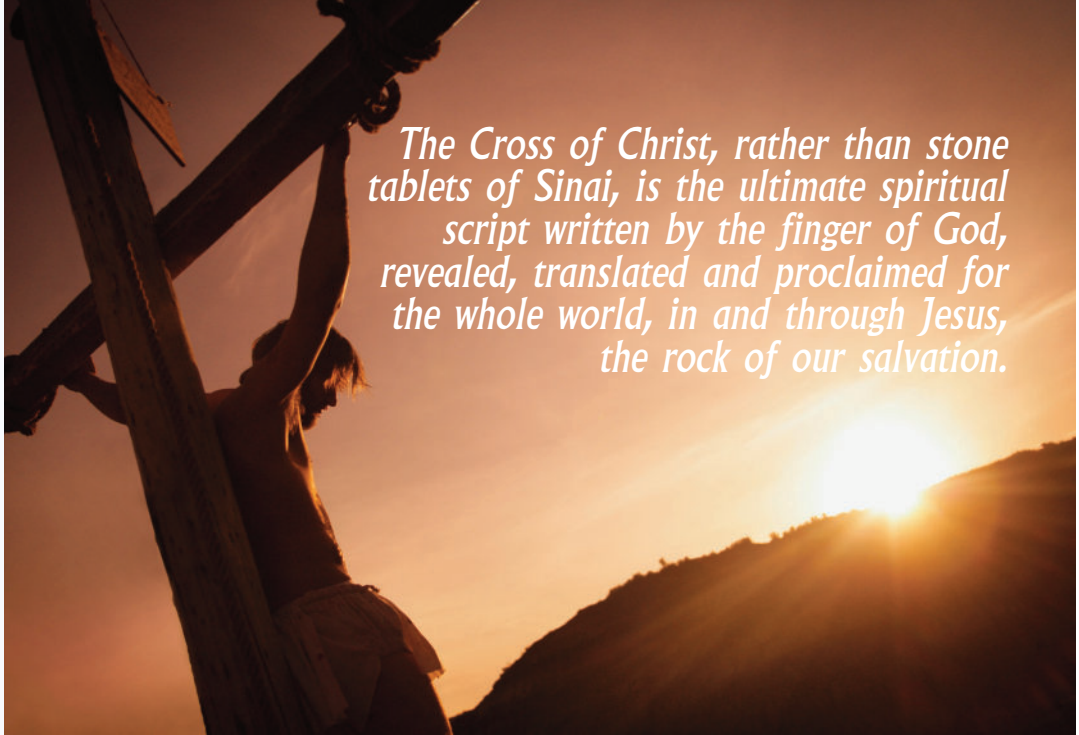
The Cross of Christ, rather than the stone tablets of Sinai, is the ultimate spiritual script written by the finger of God, revealed, translated and proclaimed for the whole world, in and through Jesus, the rock of our salvation.

What Can Happen When We Fail to Focus on Jesus

When our focus leaves the Cross of Christ, many other interests and agendas can subtly replace the gospel. Without mentioning them all, here are a few:

- When our focus leaves **God's Master Stroke**, political fervor and nationalistic zeal can overcome the gospel—so that people who say they are Christ-followers start to place greater value in their membership in a political party and their national interests, even militaristic interests, far more so than their affiliation to Jesus and their membership in his universal body.

Rather than worshipping Jesus and placing all our affection on him, it is so easy to become sidetracked with political platforms concerning our nation, our state or province, our local issues, and we can be overcome with greed and lust.



The Cross of Christ, rather than stone tablets of Sinai, is the ultimate spiritual script written by the finger of God, revealed, translated and proclaimed for the whole world, in and through Jesus, the rock of our salvation.

Nationalism quickly morphs into justifications for violence and warfare, for control and dominance, for subjection of others. Good citizenship within the nation and province and territory and state and city in which we live is a priority for citizens of the kingdom of God, but most of all and more than anything, we are citizens of the kingdom of God.

- When our focus leaves **God's Master Stroke**, the Cross of Christ, individual and corporate economic interests overcome the needs of the poor and the impoverished, so that those who say they follow Christ have little compassion for the homeless, the imprisoned, the sick and diseased and the cast offs of society.

- When our focus leaves **God's Master Stroke**, we can begin to define success in terms of possessions and money, in terms of earthly wealth and security, and even justify such pursuits as proofs that God is blessing us. We leave the **Jesus Path** of self-sacrifice and take another road, that of self-aggrandizement and self-interest

- When our focus leaves **God's Master Stroke**, we can quickly forget about the humility and self-sacrifice of our Savior and instead chase after power, domination and greed.

Winning and having power was the concern of Judas, the disciple

who betrayed Jesus... winning, succeeding, and acquiring more was not what Jesus was all about.

The dangers of power and greed distort the lives of citizens of the kingdom—the dangers of power and greed can take us off the **Jesus Path**, they can remove our focus from the Lamb of God, our Savior, and his Cross.

- When our focus leaves **God's Master Stroke**, the Cross of Christ, we exchange the mind of Christ for other priorities. Our heart closes up and it shrivels, it shrinks into a self-absorbed world where there is little room for the humility and self-sacrifice of Jesus.

When we remove our gaze and our attention from the Cross of Christ, we can become convinced that social programs for those in need are entitlements they don't deserve.

When we remove our gaze and our attention from the Cross of Christ, we can close our hearts to the cries of the homeless, the poor, the aliens.

When we remove our gaze and our attention from the Cross of Christ, we can forget the little children and we can forget the elderly... both of these bookends of human life. The bookends of the very young and the very old are front and center in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Look Up!

God's Master Stroke, the Cross of Christ, is our focus because the Cross has been and is lifted up before us as the center of our attention. He was lifted up physically, by virtue of being on a Cross above the ground, and he was lifted up spiritually, by virtue of all that the Cross of Christ means to the entire world.

Jesus predicted his death and the precise way in which he would die.

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32).

The Cross of Christ is enshrined and memorialized as God's love letter to you, me and the whole world, lifting up Jesus and drawing all humanity to himself.

When we follow Jesus, we follow in full submission and in complete devotion to the Cross of Christ, **God's Master Stroke**.

As Christ-followers, the Cross of Christ defines our community with one another, all those followers of Christ we can see and know, and so many invisible to us because we do not know them—but nonetheless we are in communion with them because we are united, in union with Jesus.

As Christ-followers, our community with one another is the community of the Cross, **God's Master Stroke**, for all that we are and all that we will ever be is because of the slain Lamb of God, now glorified and resurrected, our risen Lord who lives within us, now and forevermore.

*"You'll remember, friends, that when I first came to you to let you in on **God's master stroke**, I didn't try to impress you with polished words and the latest philosophy. I deliberately kept it plain and simple: first Jesus, and who he is, then Jesus and what he did—Jesus crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:1-2, The Message Bible). □*



"The Tree of Life"
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In need of mending from Christless religion?



Jesus brings hope, comfort, encouragement & healing.



PTM/CWR — All Jesus, all the time

Sunsets and Seasons of Life

Stuart Segall

I recently took this photo of a sunset while on a trip and I spent time reflecting on the days of our lives and our sunsets. Ecclesiastes 3:1-2 states, *“There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens.”*

Sunsets symbolize the end of the day, a moment of transition from light to darkness. Similarly, the later stages of life can be filled with LIGHT in the form of wisdom, memories and unique beauty. Just as sunsets are fleeting, life’s final chapters are fast, fleeting and so transient.

People pause to watch sunsets, reflecting on the day’s events or contemplating life. They provoke thoughts of a sense of wonder and introspection.

As we age, we naturally reflect on our experiences, relationships, and choices. The twilight years offer an opportunity for deeper contemplation.

Sunsets mark the end of one day and the beginning of another.

My experience in grief counseling is that most people in the final stages of life, come to a gradual acceptance of mortality. It’s a time to find closure, make peace with regrets and appreciate the journey.

1 Thessalonians 5:18 (NKJV) says: *“In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”*

Yes, even in the sunset times, it is a time to give thanks. There is a

master plan for eternity for which we give thanks.

The colors in a sunset—warm oranges, pinks and purples—represent different emotions. Orange signifies hope, pink represents love and purple suggests mystery.

Similarly, life’s final season is colored by emotions—joy, love, nostalgia and sometimes sadness. Each hue contributes to the overall tapestry of existence. Finally the sun disappears below the horizon, leaving a sense of mystery about what lies beyond.

My mind again travels back to 1 Thessalonians 5 where in verse 5 we are told *“You are all sons (children) of light and sons (children) of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness.”*

We are encouraged in verse 9-10: *“For God did not appoint us to wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, that whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with Him.”*

The end of life is reaching the horizon. Then we continue to read more here in verse 11: *“Therefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.”*

Our Lord wants us to know what is going on and to find comfort and consolation that even as the sun is setting, one day we too will rise again.

So, sunsets serve as poignant reminders of life’s impermanence, beauty, and the need to appreciate each fleeting moment. Just as

sunsets vary—some are fiery and spectacular, some are intense, others are soft and gentle—so do our individual life stories.

Whether it is our story or someone else’s we are observing, don’t miss the sunset but give it time and appreciation, recognizing the blessed assurance God gives us in each one of our sunsets. □

Stuart Segall lives about an hour north of Seattle, Washington. He has spent most of his adult life counseling, encouraging and uplifting others.

Come

for hope, comfort,
healing & encouragement

Stay

for connection, care
& community



PTM/CWR All Jesus, All the time

“Rise Up and Walk!”



Steve Brown

I recently talked to a pastor who has been preaching grace with all its power. A man in his church (a retired preacher) accused him of “exalting sin” in the pulpit. He emailed his sermon to me and asked me to read it. I did and I told him that the retired preacher was crazy. In fact, in the sermon, sin was preached in all its horror. The law was given without compromise. And the solution was exactly what the Bible says it is *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works so that no one may boast”* (Ephesians 2:8-9).

As I read my friend’s sermon, it was clear that he was big on biblical holiness and sanctification. His message was not that everybody ought to try harder, but that they should love more and the only way to do that is to be loved deeply, unconditionally and fully by Jesus. A lot of those who are uptight about too much grace are saved, but they don’t hang around long enough to get loved.

When Jesus met the prostitute in Luke 7, he loved and forgave her and said, *“He who is forgiven little loves little.”* There’s a syllogism here. Premise: Sin is universal and destructive. Premise: People who are forgiven little love little. Conclusion: Angry and critical Christians are living in denial about their own sin.

My friend clearly taught that when we think we’re righteous, we have lowered the very high and devastating demand a holy God gave to us in his perfect law. At the same time, we have raised ourselves up with an insufferable and dishonest self-righteousness. John the Baptist said that Jesus must increase and he/we should decrease. When that’s reversed, it’s not the Christian faith— instead it’s a lie from a very hot place.

Another friend of mine, Zac Hicks, an incredible worship leader and composer, wrote a wonderful version of the Doxology. Here are the lyrics:

*Your perfect Law exposes me
I feel my sin and desperate need
My best good works are powerless
To satisfy your righteousness.
But there is One who lived for me
His life, my only victory
His death forever sealed in time
That I am His and He is mine.
Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise him, all creatures here below
Praise him, above ye heavenly hosts
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.*

That’s it! That’s the gospel, and the reason for our worship and praise. We really do love because he first loved us, and in that love, God begins to make us more and more like Jesus until ultimately, we will be just like him (1 John 3:2).

All of that is true. We do get better—sometimes not much, but better. We can’t help it. The reason is that we’ve learned a principle I’ve preached a thousand times: ***The only people who get better are those who know that, if they never get better, Jesus will love them anyway.***

Now let me tell you something I’ve discovered: A healed cripple doesn’t have to be encouraged to walk. ***Say what?*** Think about it. In Acts 3, Peter and John were empowered by God to heal a crippled beggar. Peter said that they didn’t have any money but they had something better. “Look at us,” Peter said. “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!” Then the beggar responded, “Thanks but if it’s all the same I’ll just sit here.”

Are you crazy? Of course that’s not what the beggar said. Luke wrote, “And leaping up, he stood and began to walk, and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God!”

If you’re blind and healed, you don’t have to be encouraged to see. If you’re deaf and healed you don’t have to be encouraged to hear. If you’re crippled and healed, you don’t have to be encouraged to walk. You may not walk very well. You may even stumble. You probably won’t be able to dance right away. But you don’t have to be encouraged to walk.

That’s what happened to us. We’re all, as it were, healed cripples. That’s what justification and imputation are all about. It’s by faith alone, grace alone and through Christ alone. We don’t need to hear sermons on the horror of being crippled or about how guilty we should feel for being crippled. We don’t need other cripples telling us that if we really loved Jesus we wouldn’t be crippled (hypocrisy). That’s all nonsense.

Jesus says, *“Rise up and walk! As you do, I’ll help until one day you will dance before the throne.”* □

Steve Brown is the president of Key Life Network.



Mercy Drops

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

I was a senior in high school, focused and driven. A Mozart French horn solo was all that seemed to matter. I will never forget the phone call with the news that I had won first prize in the northern Wisconsin regional brass competition. It was a feeling of sheer ecstasy—a landmark in my life.

We all have experiences like that. Maybe it's that long-awaited phone call that the adoption has finally come through. There are no words to describe our joy.

Or maybe we're biting our nails in the third row back of the darkened auditorium when daughter Katie spells "masseur" and wins the spelling bee. Or, perhaps we've traveled more than a hundred miles to cheer the hometown team on and son Mike makes the final basket to win the state championship.

These are landmarks in our lives and we ought to treasure those singular moments. We glue the letters and certificates and newspaper stories in our scrapbooks.

These are the big stories that are easily featured. But do we sometimes ignore the little *tender mercies* that surround us every day?

Counselors warn us that we shouldn't depend on these high points of life to carry us through. One obvious reason is because they come so infrequently, and besides no one can live on such high planes of excitement. We're simply not constructed that way psychologically.

Indeed, many people feel depressed after such singular experiences. There's a huge buildup of anticipation and then a letdown—whether we win or lose.

Yet, we often ask God for the big gift while failing to see all the little gifts all around us. I'm reminded of the lines of an old hymn that I sang as a child: "There Shall be Showers of Blessing." It speaks of wanting to hear the "sound of abundance of rain."

The final words of the chorus are: "Mercy drops 'round us are falling, but for the showers we plead." I think we easily set ourselves up for failure when we are pleading for showers, while ignoring the mercy drops that are falling all around us.

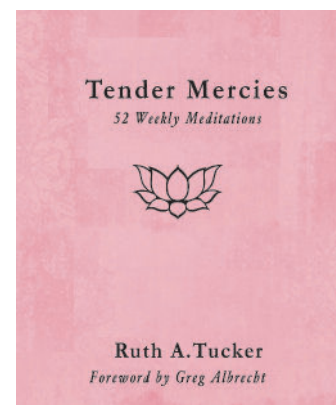
Tender mercies do not carry an "I Won the Lottery" headline. Sometimes they seem so small and inconsequential that we hardly notice, but they sustain us on a daily basis—if we are aware of them.

John Ames is an old-man preacher in the best-selling book *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson. He's on medication and his days are numbered but not his memories. Some of the stories he records for his young son are landmarks, but mostly they are tender mercies:

"A few days ago you and your mother came home with flowers... You had honey-suckle, and you showed me how to suck the nectar out of the blossoms. You would bite the little tip off the flower and then hand it to me, and I pretended I didn't know how to go about it, and I would put the whole flower in my mouth and pretend to chew it and swallow it... and you'd laugh and laugh and say, 'No! no! no!!'... and then you got serious and you said, 'I want you to do this.' And then you put your hand on my cheek and touched the flower to my lips, so gently and carefully, and said, 'Now sip.' You said, 'You have to take your medicine.' So I did, and it tasted exactly like honeysuckle, just the way it did when I was your age and it seemed to grow on every fence post and porch railing in creation."

What a profound story of tender mercies, yet so simple—God's mercy-drop gift to an old man and a little boy. □
—Ruth Tucker

Excerpted from Ruth's new book, *Tender Mercies: 52 Weekly Meditations*, published by CWR Press. Available soon at www.ptm.org/books.





Quotes & Connections



"The church has two choices. It can be in the business of providing clear-cut exclusive formulae for people to accept. It is the way many of the more conservative churches approach evangelism and Christian culture. On the other hand, it can offer to accompany men and women as they are on their individual quest for a meaning in life, in their search for truth and in their openness to a faith which contains both of these."
—Peter Ball, *Journey Into Truth*

Loving your neighbor is more important than religious duties, obligations and rituals (see Mark 12:33).

"You can't mass-produce disciples. The religion I was socialized in was about domination. We need to move from a religion that dominates to faith that restores."
—Jer Swigart, *Global Immersion*

"Give up your good Christian life and follow Jesus."
—Garrison Keillor

"Christless religion is always adding something to the gospel. Religion is always attempting to improve God's recipe of grace. Don't let anyone tell you that you can overdose on grace. It's impossible to focus on God's grace too much. We need more grace, not less."
—Greg Albrecht

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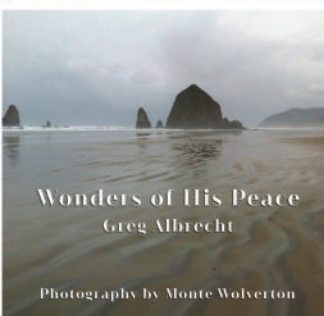
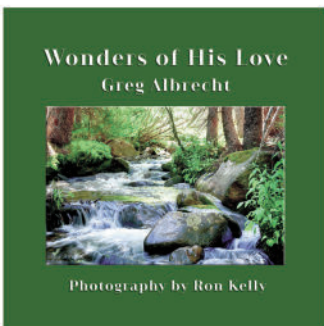
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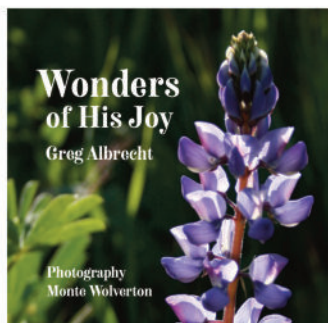
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