

*Religion Is
Now Poison
for Us*

"I'M SICK AND TIRED OF IT ALL. All this church talk is just religious junk. God knows that I've tried to live the Christian life. I've taught both of my children how to live a Christian life. I've taught them from the time they were babies! Now this happens. I'm sick of it. I have friends who have never even taken their children to church once and they haven't had to face this kind of mess. I've been sincere, but this is all a big joke. It just doesn't work. I know you believe in all of this, Steve, but I don't anymore. The Christian life just doesn't work."

I sat silently while Wayne expressed the rage he felt, which had begun to surface two days earlier when he found out that his youngest daughter was pregnant. He had cried when his daughter told him the news. He had expressed to her his heartfelt grief over the fact that in a moment she had thrown away her youth as well as the infinite possibilities for the future. Then he had wrapped his arms around her and whispered in a breaking voice, "We'll get through this somehow, baby. You're 17 and I'm not going to make you go through this alone." That night he had held his wife, Joan, as she cried herself to sleep. He had said all the right words to his family, but for the past two nights, in the stillness of the early morning hours, he

had lain awake with his brain being mercilessly pounded by a single thought: *Where did I fail her? I taught her better than that! She knows how to live a Christian life.* Where did I fail?

What do you tell a man like Wayne? There was a time when I would have given him some pat answers that I heard in seminary or catchy phrases I learned from other pastors who had no idea what he was facing. I don't do that anymore. After 30 years of seeing the empty look that comes into people's eyes when they have religious clichés hurled into their bleeding faces, and after having had life slam me between the eyes with a few hard knocks of my own, I have made the conscious choice to never do that again.

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We are living in a day when rote, religious answers just won't do it for people anymore. They will respond to spiritual reality, but our generation has little tolerance for thoughtless Bible-babble that has no connection to their own lives. People like Wayne have been Romans-eight-twenty-eighted to death.¹ Don't misunderstand me—I firmly believe that people need the eternal truths that are found in the written Word of God. But they won't settle for a glib Bible verse like a child accepts a rabbit foot when told it will bring him good luck.

To be specific, people like Wayne need a Christlike response, not a religious one. What did I tell him? I simply pointed him to

the One who understands his confusion and his pain. I made no effort to give him definitive answers about the *why* of his situation. As has often been the case when I talk to people devastated by life's circumstances, I didn't know the reason why. Instead I pointed him to the *Who* of every difficult circumstance we will ever face in life. I've learned over the years that when I don't know what to say about the whys of life, the best thing to do is to point to the Who of all things. Religion tries to systematize everything into neat little compartments that readily offer hollow answers for the unanswerable. Jesus never does that. He simply points to Himself and gently whispers, "Believe."

Allow me to go ahead and set the tone for the remainder of the book: I'm not big on religion; in fact, it leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Maybe it's because I swallowed so much of it for so many years. I was a pastor of local churches for over 20 years. I've served up and eaten every dutiful dish of dead doctrine you can imagine. My problem wasn't a lack of sincerity. To the contrary, I was very sincere. But then so was Paul when he was persecuting the church, all the while thinking he was doing God a big favor. Don't think that I'm saying I have renounced my faith in Jesus Christ. My disdain for religion hasn't diminished my love for Jesus Christ and His church. Rather, the opposite has occurred. Since God's grace has leveled the religious wall which partially obscured my view of Christ, I've come to love Him more deeply and serve Him more fervently than ever before.

Those precious friends in the churches I have served might differ with my assessment of most of my pastoral ministry. It's true that many people did come to know Christ during all those years before I began to understand what it means to live and minister in grace. Many Christians were blessed and hurting people were healed. That fact simply proves the truth of an axiom I heard in seminary: "God can hit a straight lick with a crooked stick." I

don't negate the work of God in my life during those days. In His grace, God looked beyond my confused mind and saw a sincere heart. But measurable results can't have the last word on the accuracy of one's message or methods, or else Christ-denying cult groups would be proven more accurate than many Christ-honoring churches.

Poison in the Pot

There is a story in 2 Kings that illustrates the kind of ministry that often exists in modern church life. It's a story about poison being served up by sincere men of God.

When Elisha returned to Gilgal, there was a famine in the land. As the sons of the prophets were sitting before him, he said to his servant, "Put on the large pot and boil stew for the sons of the prophets." Then one went out into the field to gather herbs, and found a wild vine and gathered from it his lap full of wild gourds, and came and sliced them into the pot of stew, for they did not know what they were. So they poured it out for the men to eat. And it came about as they were eating of the stew, that they cried out and said, "O man of God, there is death in the pot." And they were unable to eat (2 Kings 4:38-40).

Gilgal was the home of the renowned "School of the Prophets," founded by the great prophet Elisha. One day Elisha instructed one of the sons of the prophets to prepare a meal. Someone went out into the field and gathered wild gourds from a wild vine and put them in the stew. The prophets poured the stew out for everyone to eat when someone discovered, "There is death in the pot!" God's prophets were serving poison and eating out of the same pot.

That's what I did for many years. I took the liberating gospel of God's grace and mixed the *wild* gourds of religious performance in the same pot with it. The gourds came from a *wild* vine out in the field.² Grace doesn't grow in a wild field. It is cultivated only in an infinite garden of love planted and nurtured by God Himself. The idea of religious performance is a wild plant that poisons the grace of God and causes it to cease to be edible, although I did eat and serve it to my churches for many years. The tragedy of this kind of poison is that it won't kill you, but will be just toxic enough to keep you sick for the rest of your life.

The underlying foundation of all religion is *performance*—whether it's a tribal dance around a campfire to satisfy the fire god, or a dead religious activity performed week after week by an evangelical Christian with the intent of impressing his God. It's all religious performance, and God isn't impressed by our performance. What impresses Him is faith. "Without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6). He couldn't care less about religious ritual void of life. God is in the business of life. Nothing else interests Him. When it is all said and done, God will either raise dead things or else ultimately separate Himself from them as far as He can get. He is interested in living relationships, not dead religion.

The Wilderness of Religion

The announcement of the gospel of grace includes the good news that God wants to deliver us from religion. He has extended His grace for the purpose of rescuing us from a lifestyle of futile, feeble efforts to make ourselves acceptable to Him. The essence of religion is man's attempt to somehow convince himself that he has jumped through enough hoops for God to give him the approving nod. It's the way we try to validate our own self-worth, but our acts of self-righteousness actually separate us

from the very goal we seek to achieve. Religion is poison because it kills any opportunity one will ever have to experience genuine intimacy with God. Religion is a prostitute having sex with a man and telling him it's love, when all the while, deep in his heart, the man knows better. Religion offers the false hope that somehow there is *something* we can do to impress God enough to cause Him to accept us on the basis of our actions. Religion is what rushes in to fill the vacuum created by the absence of personal intimacy with God.

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In reality, when a person doesn't experience intimacy with God through Jesus Christ and attempts to approach God through his religious acts, his deeds will be an affront to the perfectly righteous God who demands nothing less than perfection. Since none of us can possibly walk perfectly, we might as well stay off that road altogether.

Yet many believers, who by divine sovereignty have been brought out of Egypt and miraculously placed on The King's Highway, have now filled their tank with the gasoline of religion and their engine with the oil of self-effort and think they are on their way to the land of victorious living. They are often making good speed, but what they don't know is that they are driving in circles. They are pleased with their performance, but don't know they are going nowhere fast.

The story of Israel's journey through the wilderness illustrates well the life of the Christian who is trying to achieve spiritual success through religious performance. God delivered the Jewish people from Egypt so that they could be led into the promised land of Canaan, and they are a picture of what God desires to do in the lives of those who trust Him. He wants to bring us from the bondage of an empty life into the land of amazing grace—a place where He showers us with good things for no other reason than because He loves us.

As Christians, there's nothing for us to do to deserve entry into this wonderful land of grace. Like Israel, we have been miraculously led out of our past slavery so that we can immediately take possession. We only need to walk into the land that is ours—without delay and without any cost or obligation on our part.

The land of Canaan was where Israel was to become a great people who would be blessed by God and who would themselves be a blessing to others. It is often described in Scripture as a land flowing with milk and honey, a description that denotes a place where not only would their needs be met (milk), but they would also enjoy the sweet abundance (honey) that God planned to give them. God wanted to take the Israelites to this special place and pamper them with His goodness and generosity. Notice that God never gives the bare minimum; He generously *lavishes* gifts on those He loves. This new land would be a place where Israel would live in paradise, with God making everyone's lives more wonderful than they could ever imagine. Theirs would be an abundant life like they had never experienced before, and it would be in a land of rest.

However, the people couldn't accept God's promise at face value. It was too easy. "Surely we must do our part," they may have reasoned. Doing our part—that's the toxic element in religion. Religion is an insidious virus that infects the Christian and ruins

what would otherwise be a clean bill of health. We simply can't believe that God expects *nothing* of us after He delivers us from the sins of our own Egyptian bondage. Surely we must owe Him *something* despite the fact that any attempt to place a price on a priceless gift is to disparage its value. To enter a life of victory without any effort on our part? That's too simplistic. So it was with Israel: "And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:19).

Why would I suggest that Israel's life in the wilderness can serve as a picture of the lifestyle of believers whose lives are characterized by religious performance? There are at least two similarities between Israel and religious performers that are too glaring to ignore.

Both are characterized by a struggle to experience victory. The people of Israel knew what it was to struggle. They had spent 400 years enslaved in Egypt, serving cruel taskmasters who showed no mercy. Then they wandered in the wilderness for four decades, struggling to enter the place God had promised to Abraham. I'm sure that oftentimes this promise seemed like no more than a spiritual story taken from the past, which had little relevance to the daily struggles in their lives. Their actions often revealed their belief that somehow their own efforts were integral to entering into the promised land.

Their feelings weren't unlike the feelings of those today who desire to experience the victorious life that is promised in the Bible. They sincerely try to attain this life through religious efforts, but a successful, consistent walk with Christ seems to elude them constantly. No matter how hard they try, there is always a vast wilderness between where they are and where they want to be.

Both are characterized by repeated rededication to try harder. The biography of Israel in the wilderness shows a 40-year pattern of

trying, failing, and rededicating themselves to try again. The people sincerely wanted to enter into Canaan, but all the sincerity they could muster never could bring them into the land. Their life story is marked by short-lived moments of victory, followed by a decline in faith that led to failure, then a renewed commitment to try again. Sound familiar?

An Invitation to Canaan

Joshua must have become scared when he was told that he would be the man who would lead the children of Israel into Canaan. After all, there were two-and-a-half million of them and they had acted like fussy, spoiled children during most of their travels in the wilderness. Yet if the story of Israel's wandering in the wilderness and their entry into the promised land demonstrates anything, it shows how persistent God is in bringing about the good that He has promised to those who belong to Him. If God didn't lovingly and patiently continue to work with His immature children, we all would have been in trouble long ago.

Are you hungry for a more satisfying reality in your spiritual life? God loves you too much to leave you in a tawdry affair with religion. He wants you completely for Himself. You can file this away as an unalterable fact: God isn't going to give up on you. There's nothing you can ever do that will cause Him to shrug His shoulders and walk away. Nothing. By divine determination, His invisible hand will relentlessly guide your steps until He brings you to the place where He can do for you everything He wants to accomplish.

God wants to bring you out of the barren wilderness of religious performance and into the fullness of a life in grace. His intention from the beginning has been that you should *enjoy* your faith relationship with Him. He wants you to live in

Canaan—the land of amazing grace, where the most important thing is that you and He revel in the love that you share together.

Having served as a local church pastor for many years and having been a Christian since I was a young child, I know both by observation and experience the agony of substituting religious

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activity for spiritual intimacy with Jesus Christ. It is possible to do all the right things outwardly and still miss the inner peace and joy that come only from our union with Him. God doesn't want those He delivers from sin to get stuck in the wilderness of lifeless religious activity. He wants us to move into the enjoyment of His grace, knowing that when we experience our true life in Him, our activity will be animated by a divine power and accompanied by a personal satisfaction that can come only from Him.

Break Off Your Affair with Religion

"Steve, I'm glad I was finally caught. You can't imagine how exhausting it is to be involved in an affair! It is physically, mentally, emotionally, and even spiritually draining in a way that I can't describe. I'm glad it's over." I could tell that Rob was sincere. His yearlong affair with a lady at work had recently been discovered by his wife. Although it was obvious that their marriage would

require a long period of healing, it appeared that they were going to survive adultery.

Exhausting—that was the word Rob used to describe his affair. It's a good word to describe the lifestyle of one who is married to Jesus Christ and yet having an affair with religion too. An adulterous affair poisons a marriage. It takes one's time, energy, interest, and love from the one who should be the recipient of all these things and pulls them into a ruthless vortex of destruction, which isn't satisfied until every good thing meant to be known in marriage is destroyed.

That's what religion does in the life of the believer. Multitudes of Christians have abandoned the intimate, loving relationship they once enjoyed with Jesus Christ and have settled for a sleazy affair with religion. There was a time when they reveled in the union they share with Him, but gradually they took their eyes off Christ and began to focus on their own religious performance. They have, as Jesus once said to a church in Asia Minor, "lost [their] first love."³

If you can identify with those whose love for Christ has grown cold and who now try to find spiritual fulfillment in religious activity, I lovingly implore you: Break off the relationship you have with religion and return to your first love! Does it sound harsh that I should begin this book by saying that religion is poison? My only purpose in using harsh analogies and pointed remarks as we move together through this book is to sound the alarm in the church. Many of us have been seduced and deceived. We have been seduced by religion and deceived into thinking that as long as we *do* the right things, everything is okay spiritually. We've been enticed into an adulterous relationship with another lover, and an ugly one at that. Michael Yaconelli has rightly asked,

What happened to radical Christianity, the un-nice brand of Christianity that turned the world upside down? What happened to the category-smashing, life-threatening, anti-institutional gospel that spread through the first century like wildfire and was considered (by those in power) *dangerous*? What happened to the kind of Christians whose hearts were on fire, who had no fear, who spoke the truth no matter what the consequence, who made the world uncomfortable, who were willing to follow Jesus wherever He went? What happened to the kind of Christians who were filled with passion and gratitude, and who every day were unable to get over the grace of God?⁴

It is my hope that as we move through the chapters of this book together, your heart will be opened and your mind will be renewed to *that* kind of Christian lifestyle. It's not about religion. It's only Jesus. *Jesus*. He's all that really matters.

Let's walk together with Israel on their journey from the wilderness into Canaan. You may find that there are some paths along the way that you would rather not walk upon because they are unfamiliar. You might find a few thorns along the journey that prick your traditions and cause you to feel uncomfortable. You might even be tempted to put down the book and abandon the trip.

However, I encourage you to travel the distance with me. I may challenge your thinking in ways that make you feel uncomfortable at times along our journey, but I promise you one thing: I will always point you to Jesus Christ at every juncture along the journey. I will never intentionally encourage you to take one single step on this pilgrimage that isn't charted in God's unchanging Word. The Bible will be our map, and Jesus our destination.

Do you want to live enjoying God's amazing grace? Then let's possess the land. However, I must warn you: First, it will be necessary for us to pass together through some deep waters.

Walking Together

Let's walk together with the Holy Spirit through this book. As God reveals truth to you, it will be helpful to cooperate with Him at each step where He works in your life. If the prayers at the end of each chapter express your heart, then affirm to God that they reflect your thoughts and desires. You will get more out of this book if you pause at the end of each chapter and interact with your heavenly Father.



Dear Father,

I recognize that at times I have been more focused on religious duties than on You. I want more than to be religious in my lifestyle. What I do want is to experience Your life in me each day. Give me an open mind and heart, and help me discover the truths You want me to learn from this book.

G.R.A.C.E. Group Questions

A G.R.A.C.E. (Giving & Receiving Affirmative Christian Encouragement) Group is any group of people who gather together to encourage and strengthen each other in the grace of God. At the end of each chapter are questions to help facilitate further learning and discussion. The truths of this book will be worked further into your life as you consider these questions.

1. Read 2 Kings 4:38-40. What are some of the poisonous beliefs you've had in your life that have interfered with your ability to live a victorious Christian life?
2. Religion stresses a form of behavior without the presence of divine life. What are some common ways modern churches tend to be more religious than spiritual?
3. This chapter describes two ways that the wilderness could be compared to empty religion. Name two other similarities.
4. List three ways that Christians often try to find fulfillment through religious activities instead of from Jesus Christ.
5. Discuss the ways that the land of Canaan is a spiritual picture of the Christian life.