



Wittenberg Trail: A Present-Tense Gospel

by Edie Rudder Wadsworth

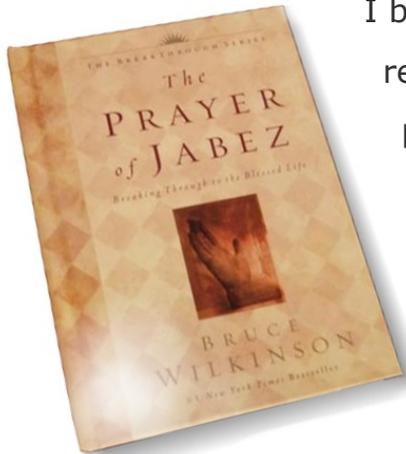
I grew up at the table of American evangelicalism.

I was the poster child for 'sold out Christian.' I memorized the Scriptures, wrote in my high school journal that I wanted to be a missionary, and was a member of all the right parachurch organizations from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes to Young Life to Campus Crusade for Christ. I listened to all the right Christian music, avoided the worldly temptations of alcohol, drugs, bad movies and rock 'n roll and took my role of personal evangelism to new heights of bravery. I was a pro at sharing my personal testimony.

But still there was an ache in the depth of my soul that could not be satisfied by clean living or personal witnessing or by a stellar quiet time. And sadly, I couldn't even sustain those for very long.

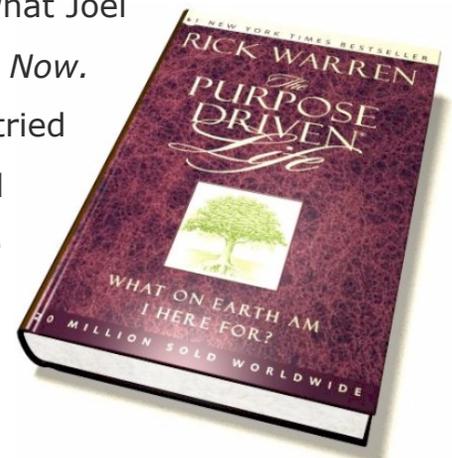
My tender conscious was so pricked by the law-dominant sermons of the various churches I attended that I was baptized at least eight times and could rarely stay in my pew when the "I Surrender All" altar call was given. I was always in tears. Always crushed by my sin. Always starving for something. I sat at the table of faith and was taught the important tenets of Christianity like the inerrancy of the Scriptures and the urgency of sharing the Gospel with the world. Apparently, there was a rich feast to be enjoyed in Christ, but it never seemed to be *for me*. It was for all the people we had

yet to bring into God's family. The gospel was 'feast food' for all those people who needed to get saved. I should be well past the point of needing that by now. I should be getting on with things. But it's hard to leave the table hungry.



I bought into the lie that since I couldn't find relief or rescue at church, surely I'd find it in the growing plethora of Christian (self-help) books. The Christian bookstore was bursting at the seams with them. I bought every one I could get my hands on. I prayed *The Prayer of Jabez*. I did Warren's *40 Days of Purpose*. And I longed for what Joel Osteen called *Your Best Life Now*.

I read them with passion and dutifully tried to follow all the advice (i.e. more law) they touted. I'd be on a *high* for a while but only long enough to leave me '*jonessing*' until the next new book came out. I was a Christian addicted to self-improvement. Addictions usually don't end well.



Fast forward a few years when I found myself married to a cradle Lutheran who had become agnostic during the heavy science years of his medical training. He was my new personal mission. Besides marrying him, I felt quite confident that I could evangelize him too. Only, he had been raised in an atmosphere of grace and he could smell legalism a mile away, even in his current state of post-modern agnosticism. I dragged him to evangelical church after evangelical church. He would sweat profusely during the meet and greet portion of the service (hard core Lutherans seldom like the 'passing of the peace') and then critique the sermon for its lack of gospel.

Who was *he* to be telling *me* what ought to be in a sermon? *I'm the spiritual one here, mister.* And why did he seem to be so singularly focused on the Gospel? What about the music and the kids' programs and the small groups?

But he had been raised at the gospel feast. And he knew that what we were being served was severely lacking.

We never went to a church during that period that passed his test. We went to an evangelical church in our town for 14 weeks straight without hearing the Gospel. Yes, we were counting. And that's when he put his foot down. If I was gonna drag him to yet another church, it would have to be Lutheran. Apparently, he believed that if you didn't have the Gospel, you didn't have church. He wasn't all that crazy about going to the Lutheran church either but we were running out of options and I wanted our girls to be raised in the faith. We both went reluctantly, 'kicking and screaming', as C.S. Lewis would say. In retrospect, I was so arrogant and critical of everything back then. I criticized the formality of the worship, the pomp and circumstance, the pastor's vestments, the stodgy hymns, and all the old people.



I wanted something hip and relevant and alive! (Notice, my criteria didn't involve 'Jesus'.)

But I stayed. And I took the pastor's adult bible class. Oh, the patience of that precious man. His kindness toward me and lack of defensiveness as I shot rapid fire questions at him about infant baptism and the real presence in the Lord's Supper was utterly astounding. He was a brilliant man, fluent in

German, Latin and Greek. He was never impatient. He never got rattled. He had a deep abiding peace in the power of God's grace and he knew that he didn't need to coerce me into anything. He trusted the Word to do its work. He wasn't trying to manipulate me in the least. I didn't feel any pressure at all to agree with him and **he was so generous with the Gospel**. I would dismiss him at first and say, "Well, yes I know Jesus died for me, but....."

He was so singularly focused on God's grace and Jesus finished work on the cross that I got frustrated sometimes.

I KNOW THAT BUT WHAT ABOUT NOW? HE DIED. I GET IT. **BUT WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO NOW?**

I was so well trained to rush right past the Gospel. I belittled it, dismissed it, wanted something more tangible, more doable. Give me 10 steps. A new book. A better devotional. Anything, I beg you.

Finally, after months of struggling, of truly 'working out my salvation', it began to sink in: **Jesus died for me, a sinner.**

It is finished.

It is finished.

It is finished.

ΤΕΤΕΛΕΣΤΑΙ

It hit me like a ton of bricks. That's what I had been missing all this time. A present-tense Gospel. The very Gospel that I'm supposed to be sharing with others is also *for me, now, and everyday.*

But because He knows that I will continue to struggle with doubt, He invites me every week to a feast, where He himself is the passover Lamb

and His body and blood are served for the forgiveness of sins. And like a baby, I learn to listen closely to my Father's voice, to hear His words, "You are forgiven. I forgive you all your sins. It is finished."

Communion is his present tense love for me on display. It is relevant and alive, just not in the way I was expecting.

And to this very day, I seldom go to the rail without deep emotion -- that this Gospel feast is free and it's FOR ME.

In a nutshell, here's what I've learned: I don't crave the next new book of christian living because I have the very body and blood of the Savior and His very own words of forgiveness.

I don't worry that I'm not getting better and better. Christ died for *sinners*, "of whom I am chief." I stand in good company with Paul when I stand as saint and sinner and trust in the perfect life of Christ.

I don't live with guilt because I'm not a missionary in Africa. The Lutheran teaching of vocation has freed me to serve my family and community right here in the good ole South.

When I doubt, I have learned to say with Luther, "Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief."

I live life to the fullest, in the beautiful tension and joy of the broken but baptized life, without the constraints of legalism and the seductive draw of evangelical mysticism.

I am in chains. But only to Christ.

Lutherans have taught me to feast! Christ is the Lamb of God, the bread and elixir of life, whose body and blood are broken and shed for me.

It took me awhile to see it but there is a genius of evangelicalism too. They are masters at getting people to the table and making them feel welcome. And we would do well to see the beauty of their gifts. Despite the fact that there was a Lutheran church 2 miles from my house growing up, the evangelical church 10 miles away knocked on my door and invited me to come. Not only that, they picked me up on a bus and took me to church. And for a little while, they fed me the feast of Christ's forgiveness. I will be forever grateful for that.

But Lutheranism has offered a deep well, a cistern of the best that Christianity has to offer. Lutheranism offers Christ and him alone, for you and for me.

To God be the glory that my latest attempt at personal evangelism was a complete failure.

And I'm perfectly okay with that.



Edie Wadsworth is a mother of 4, homeschooler, blogger and former evangelical who has that contagious enthusiasm that only a new Lutheran can have. She writes about a multitude of topics, including her faith journey, at her blog [LifeinGrace](#). Besides homeschooling her two daughters in the classical tradition, she loves cooking, decorating and design, cowboy boots, C.S. Lewis and banjo music. She and her husband Steve recently rebuilt their home in Tennessee after a devastating house fire. She and Steve and have been long-time listeners and supporters of Issues, Etc.