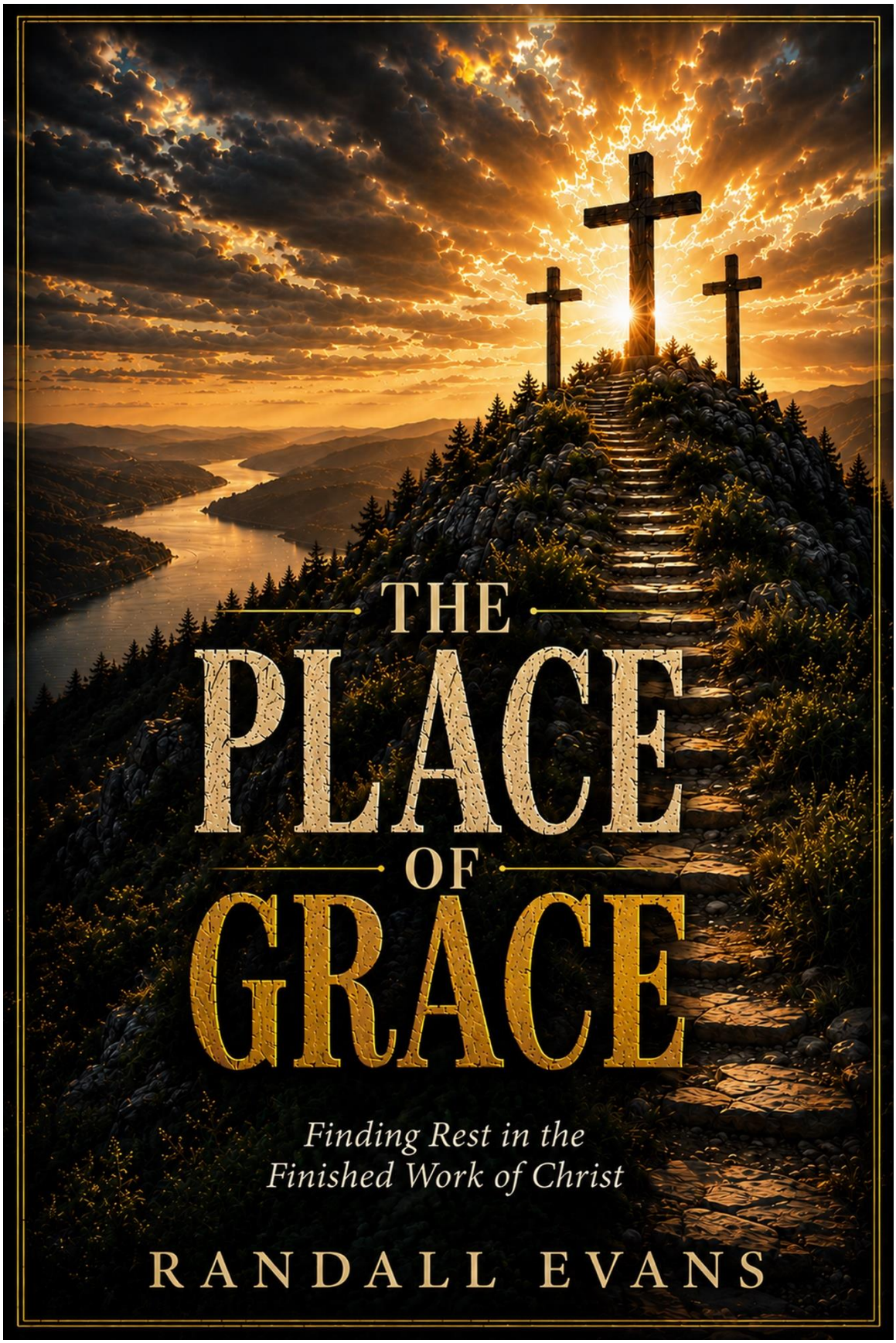

THE
PLACE
OF
GRACE
Finding Rest in the
Finished Work of Christ
RANDALL EVANS

The Place of Grace

Finding Rest in the Finished Work of Christ

by Randall Evans

The Place of Grace
Finding Rest in the Finished Work of Christ
Copyright © 2026 Randall Evans

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without prior written permission from the author, except for brief quotations used in reviews or scholarly works.

Scripture quotations are taken from various Bible translations, including the New Living Translation (NLT), New International Version (NIV), English Standard Version (ESV), and New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise noted. Scripture quotations marked (NLT) are taken from the Holy Bible, New Living Translation, copyright ©1996, 2004, 2015 by Tyndale House Foundation. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved. Scripture taken from the Holy Bible, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. ESV Text Edition: 2025. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated in whole or in part into any other language. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Published by Pester the Pastor Publications
www.pesterthepastor.org
First Edition

Dedication

I dedicate this book to my maternal grandmother, Jean Belew. She left a legacy of love that will forever remain in my heart.



I miss you Grannie. I will always love you. Till we meet again.

Special Thanks

I thank my wife Janice for all the hard work she put into helping me with this book. She is amazing!

I also thank my children, Marshall and Arielle, for their love and continued support.

Contents

1. Grace & Grannie
2. In the Beginning There Was Grace
3. A Heavenly Remedy
4. Jesus: Our Best Friend
5. The Scapegoat: Our Sins Carried Away
6. Three Wooden Crosses
7. The Gospel of Grace
8. Sinai Would Have Solved It
9. Grace Plus Nothing
10. Paul's Conversion: A Case Study in Grace
11. Seeing Our Need for Grace
12. Full of Grace and Truth
13. Terrifying Grace
14. The Transforming Power of Grace
15. The Chapter I Almost Didn't Write

✦

CHAPTER ONE

Grace and Grannie

✦

The Ticket I Deserved

In 1991, I was a sophomore at Murray State University. I traveled one weekend to Tennessee where my father, a minister, was preaching in view of working with a church. When the last amen was said, I made my way back to Murray. My route took me through Decatur County Tennessee, home of my maternal grandparents.

I was still on the outskirts of their county when I did something really dumb.

> **I started speeding.**
> **I just didn't care.**
> **I even dared God to give me a ticket.**

About the time I dared God, I met a state trooper going the other direction. When God says, "Ask and you shall receive," well ... I asked, and I received.

The trooper was gracious. He knocked my speed down to 84 mph in a 55 mph zone so I wouldn't be charged with driving more than thirty miles over the speed limit. I received the speeding ticket and hurried the rest of the way back to Murray State – going the speed limit this time.

The ticket required me to appear in court, so I would have to travel back to Decatur County. I told my grandparents what had happened. My maternal grandmother, whom I called Grannie (Jean Belew), told me she would go with me to appear before the judge. At nineteen years old, I appreciated having her by my side.

When the day arrived, Grannie went with me, and I stood before the judge. The trooper who had written the ticket was present. I pleaded guilty, and the judge quickly handed down my punishment: a fine.

I had done the crime.
Now it was time to pay.

The Fine I Didn't Pay

As I approached the clerk's window, I saw my Grannie pulling out her checkbook. I had come fully prepared to pay my penalty, but she stepped in and paid it for me. What a wonderful gesture of grace, especially in the eyes of a broke college student!

The Transforming Power of Grace

My actions did not merit favor. I had broken the law. Yet when I deserved to pay the penalty for my transgression, Grannie stepped in and paid it for me. She didn't offer grace because I deserved it. She offered grace because she loved me.

I never thought her paying my fine meant she condoned my speeding. I never thought it freed me to speed again, hoping she might pay the next ticket too. Her grace produced exactly the opposite effect. I never wanted to speed in Decatur County again.

Thankfully, I had the humility to accept her gracious gift. And it must have made an impression on me, because now I am writing a book about grace and telling you about it.

I'm now in my fifties, and I have traveled that same road literally hundreds of times since I was 19. Strangely enough, I have always been mindful of my speed on that stretch of 641. Perhaps more than any other road I have traveled in all those intervening years.

And since I know you're wondering ... I never earned another speeding ticket on that old familiar corridor ever again. That is the transformational power of grace.

A Long Line of Love

Grannie passed away in January of 1998, yet her legacy of love and grace remains. I've come to realize grace comes from a long line of love. The thread of grace runs from Adam to David to the Son of David. In fact, it has existed from eternity.

✦

CHAPTER TWO

In the Beginning There Was Grace

✦

In the beginning there was grace. Grace existed before the universe was created because God was there. God is love, and love fuels the engine of grace. Grace had been tucked away in the heart of God since eternity, ready to be unleashed. And unleashed it was all throughout Scripture.

Many assume grace began in the New Testament. They picture the Old Testament as the age of law and the New Testament as the age of grace. But that isn't the story the Bible tells. Grace didn't begin in Matthew. Grace didn't begin at Bethlehem. Grace didn't even begin at Calvary.

Grace had been tucked away in the heart of God since eternity.

Adam and Eve – Grace Promised

When Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit, they instantly regretted it. Shame and humiliation were feelings they had never known before. When God came calling, no wonder they were afraid. No wonder they hid from Him. We have all been there when it comes to our sins.

They had earned death. God had warned them that death would be the consequence of their rebellion, and His word was fulfilled. Death entered the human story. Yet God did not execute Adam and Eve that day. Instead, something remarkable happened.

God came looking for them. God promised a Deliverer. God covered them.

In the very context of their judgment, God revealed His plan. That plan would ultimately be fulfilled in a man, and that man's name was Jesus.

"And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel." **(Genesis 3:15, NKJV)**

Even in the chapter where humanity fell, we find God whispering about the One who would one day crush the serpent.

Then God did something else. Adam and Eve had attempted to cover their own shame with fig leaves, but God provided a covering for them Himself.

"Also for Adam and his wife, the Lord God made tunics of skin, and clothed them." **(Genesis 3:21, NKJV)**

They could not undo what they had done. They could not repair what they had broken. But God sought them, covered them, and gave them a promise.

The New Testament never explicitly tells us that Adam and Eve were saved, so we should be careful not to say more than Scripture says. But if they trusted the promise God gave them, then the first sinners were saved in the same fundamental way sinners have always been saved—not because they repaired what they had broken, but because they trusted the God who promised to provide the remedy.

By the next generation, we know that kind of faith was already present. Hebrews tells us:

"By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain ..." **(Hebrews 11:4, NKJV)**

God's judgment in Eden was real, but so was His grace. Sin brought death, separation, and consequences that would reach every generation. But sin did not have the final word.

Before Adam and Eve ever left the garden, grace had already spoken.

Noah – Grace Provided

Genesis 6 says Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Think about that. The first person Scripture explicitly says found grace lived centuries before the birth of Christ. God provided Noah with a way of escape through the ark, preserving him and his family from destruction. The ark itself became a picture of God's saving provision, pointing forward to the greater provision found in Christ.

Noah witnessed God's judgment upon a wicked world and lost countless friends and neighbors in the flood. Afterward, Noah became drunk **(Genesis 9:21)**. While Scripture never tells us why, it does remind us that even those who receive God's grace remain imperfect people.

Isn't that why we all need grace in the first place?

Noah found grace, and that grace surely fueled every swing of the hammer and every slab of gopher wood that went into building the ark. God provided Noah a way to be saved from judgment, just as He has provided us a way today through Jesus.

Long before there was a cross, there was an ark. Both were God's provision. Both pointed to salvation. Both remind us that grace did not begin in the New Testament – it has always flowed from the heart of God.

Abraham – Grace Chosen

Abram (Abraham) found grace in **Genesis 12**. Instead of Abraham choosing God for a promise, God chose Abraham for one. God was seeking him, not casually but with purpose and intention. What was God's purpose? To bless Abraham. To bless his descendants. Ultimately, to bless the entire world through Jesus Christ. That was where the promise to Abraham had been headed all along **(Galatians 3)**.

Despite Abraham's best efforts to "help God out" by fathering a child through Hagar, God still fulfilled His promise through a miracle. Abraham did nothing to earn that promise. The miraculous birth of Isaac would one day point to an even greater miracle – the miraculous birth of Jesus.

The blessing was by promise not by performance.

Perhaps that is why, in **Genesis 15**, God alone passed between the pieces of the covenant sacrifice while Abraham slept. God alone obligated Himself to keep the covenant. He was, and always has been, the true Covenant Keeper **(Genesis 15:7-21)**.

Moses – Grace Commissioned

Moses killed an Egyptian and fled as a fugitive for forty years. Before Moses ever delivered the Law, he needed God's mercy. Grace was present at Sinai.

Before God entrusted Moses with the Law, He first extended grace to him. Though Moses was a guilty sinner, God commissioned him anyway. Moses would spend the rest of his life pointing Israel to God's commands, but his own story began with God's mercy.

Moses is named among the heroes of faith in **Hebrews 11**. Make that make sense without grace. You can't. Moses wasn't honored because he lived a flawless life, but because he trusted God. Grace does not ignore sin; it forgives sinners and then uses them for God's purposes.

David – Grace Restored

David was an accessory to murder, even though he didn't pull the trigger. Braver men would be needed for the task of taking out a noble warrior like Uriah. With an adultery charge already on his rap sheet, this man after God's own heart needed something – but not just any something. He needed God's grace.

David couldn't rely on his status to save him, though he was a king. He couldn't rely on his wealth because sin isn't paid for with cash. David couldn't even obey God to remedy his disobedience.

David was like Adam and Eve, and like every one of us, desperate, guilty, and in need of grace. Yet God's mercy and forgiveness can transform even the most broken heart. God forgave David and restored the fellowship David could never have restored on his own.

Grace was present in Eden. Grace was provided through the ark. Grace chose Abraham. Grace commissioned Moses. Grace restored David.

But every expression of grace in the Old Testament was pointing somewhere.

Every promise ...

Every provision ...

Every act of mercy ...

Every undeserved blessing ...

... led to one hill outside Jerusalem.

Grace did not begin at the cross. It culminated there. If there is a place where the heart of God is most clearly seen, it is Calvary.

CHAPTER THREE

A Heavenly Remedy

Sins are a lot like crimes. Both involve breaking the law. Both carry consequences. Both deserve punishment. If you do the crime, you do the time. And if the crime is bad enough, your time may simply be up.

Remember our spiritual ancestors? Remember when they committed spiritual crimes against God in the wilderness? Their crimes carried a death sentence, but God also provided a cure.

The Serpent and the Savior

"Then the people of Israel set out from Mount Hor, taking the road to the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. But the people grew impatient with the long journey, and they began to speak against God and Moses. 'Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die here in the wilderness?' they complained. 'There is nothing to eat here and nothing to drink. And we hate this horrible manna!'

So, the Lord sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many were bitten and died. Then the people came to Moses and cried out, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take away the snakes.' So, Moses prayed for the people. Then the Lord told him, 'Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to a pole. All who are bitten will live if they simply look at it!'

So, Moses made a snake out of bronze and attached it to a pole. Then anyone who was bitten by a snake could look at the bronze snake and be healed!" **(Numbers 21:4-9, NLT)**

In just a few verses, you have it all: the crime, the consequences, the punishment, and God's provision for redemption. The solution, however, seems almost unbelievable. Looking at a bronze serpent on a pole to be healed of a deadly snakebite? Human logic would never have invented such a cure.

Playing with sin is like playing with snakes – eventually one of them bites.

Yet Jesus would later reveal that the bronze serpent was never the destination. It was a signpost pointing to Someone greater.

"And as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in Him will have eternal life." **(John 3:14-15, NLT)**

The Only Cure Worth Trusting

Playing with sin is like playing with snakes – eventually one of them bites. The wages of sin are still death **(Romans 6:23)**, but God has provided the only cure for sin worth trusting.

When people become desperate, they'll look almost anywhere for hope. If the stakes are life and death, a cure becomes the only thing that matters. Sin puts us in a desperate situation. We are separated from God. Our relationship with Him is fractured. Brokenness becomes our reality.

In our desperation, we seek a cure. The Israelites had to trust God's provision enough to look at the bronze serpent. We are called to trust God's provision by looking to Christ.

When Moses lifted up the bronze serpent, he was pointing Israel toward a greater destination – and that destination was Calvary. The story of grace had been moving toward that hill all along.

Look and Live

The look-and-live principle still applies today. The bronze serpent was pointing to Christ. Just as the Israelites looked to God's provision and lived, we look to Jesus and receive eternal life. He is the author and finisher of our faith **(Hebrews 12:2)**. He is the cure for our sin problem. We look to Him and live.

However, some of us spend far more time looking at our wounds than looking at the cure. We replay our failures. We beat ourselves up over the damage we have caused. We promise God we will try harder and do better next time. And when we fall into the same sin again, the cycle starts all over.

We confess. We repent. We try harder. We fail. Then we confess, repent, and try harder again.

This isn't always willful defiance. Sometimes it is simply the painful reality of fleshly weakness. We genuinely hate the sin. We genuinely want to change. But somewhere along the way, we begin to believe that trying harder is the cure.

It isn't.

Imagine a dying Israelite staring at his snakebite, desperately trying to stop the venom himself, while God's remedy stood lifted up before him. His problem was real. His wound was real. But staring at the wound wasn't going to heal him.

He had to look up.

The gospel calls us to look outside ourselves for the cure. The cure for sin is not a home remedy. It is a Heavenly remedy. It is not something we accomplish, but something God has provided. Just as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, the Son of Man was lifted up at Calvary.

Yet we religious types have a hard time believing the cure could really be that simple. Surely there must be something more for us to do to complete the cure. Jesus did His part, and now we must do ours.

The truth is, God could have sent serpents long ago to destroy us all for our sins. But He didn't. Instead, He provided a remedy. God did not compromise His holiness or lessen the demands of His justice. He provided the cure Himself. At the Place of Grace – the cross – Jesus took the penalty our sins deserved.

The cure for sin is not found in what we do for Jesus, but in what Jesus has already done for us.

Look to Him.

Trust Him.

Look and live.

✦

CHAPTER FOUR

Jesus: Our Best Friend

✦

Imagine you're walking with your best friend along a busy city sidewalk. You're talking, laughing, and hurrying to lunch. While checking your phone, it slips from your hand and lands in the street. Without thinking, you step into traffic to retrieve it, and suddenly you are pushed violently out of the way of an oncoming vehicle by your friend who saves you.

Being saved is normally a good thing, but you soon realize your friend got hit. They were struck by the car instead. They saved your life but lost theirs.

Tragedy.

If this were to happen to any one of us, it would compete for the worst day of our lives. The loss of a dear friend is tragic no matter the circumstances, but this friend died to save you. They took your place.

But here's the thing: they didn't deserve for their life to be cut short. They didn't deserve to die. After all, they didn't fumble around and drop their phone onto a busy street. They didn't run irresponsibly into traffic to retrieve it. That was all your doing.

They simply pushed you out of the way and saved you from getting hit. And in the place where you were supposed to die, they did.

That is what happened at the Place of Grace.

That is what took place at the cross.

The Perfect Friend

Jesus is the perfect Friend. In every way. He will never leave us nor forsake us. He is faithful when we are weak, present when we are hurting, and gracious when we are guilty. He took our place and paid the penalty our sins deserved.

No greater love exists.

"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends." **(John 15:13, NKJV)**

Centuries before Jesus was born, Isaiah described His sacrifice with remarkable clarity.

"But He was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed." **(Isaiah 53:5, NLT)**

In **Acts 8**, the Ethiopian eunuch was reading this very passage in Isaiah when Philip approached him. Beginning with Isaiah's words, Philip preached Jesus to him. The connection couldn't be clearer. Jesus was the Lamb who was slain for the sins of the world. Jesus was a sin offering and the means by which we are made right with God.

"For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ." **(2 Corinthians 5:21, NLT)**

The Once-For-All Sacrifice

Someone might ask, why did Jesus die in our place? Why did anything or anyone have to die?

From the very beginning, sin demanded death. Throughout the Old Testament, God demonstrated this in the death of animals as sacrifices for sin.

The sacrificial animal had to be without defect – the very best they had. Every instruction mattered. Every ceremony carried significance. Every sacrifice reminded Israel that sin was serious. Yet every offering also pointed to the forgiveness God would one day provide through a perfect sacrifice, His Son.

In fact, according to the law of Moses, nearly everything was purified with blood.

"For without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. That is why the Tabernacle and everything in it, which were copies of things in heaven, had to be purified by the blood of animals. But the real things in heaven had to be purified with far better sacrifices than the blood of animals."
(Hebrews 9:22-23, NLT)

John the Baptist in **John 1:29** referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Millions of animal sacrifices were offered in Old Testament times. Every single one of them pointed to Jesus, who would be offered once for all the sins of mankind.

*"But now, once for all time, He has appeared at the end of the age to remove sin by His own death as a sacrifice."***(Hebrews 9:26, NLT)**

All the blood of bulls and goats never took away one sin **(Hebrews 10:4)**. It took a truly perfect sacrifice. Our best Friend had to die, and only His blood can take away sins.

What can wash away our sins?

Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

A Friend Like No Other

Remember your best friend? The one who died in your place.

Were you able to make it to the visitation? Did you attend the funeral? Or was life just too hectic to make the time? Did their death have an impact on you? Or was it just another set of facts to believe?

It was a fact your friend was dead, but their death was way more than just a fact. It meant everything. Impacted everything. Changed everything. Nothing would ever be the same because of their selfless and life-saving act.

Is it something you forget after a time? Or something you never forget, not even on your deathbed?

John tells us exactly why he recorded the signs and testimony about Jesus:

*"But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in Him you will have life by the power of His name."***(John 20:31, NLT)**

That kind of belief is more than simply believing the facts. You can believe your friend died. But when you realized your friend died for you – that you were alive because your friend took your place – the truth became personal.

That would change you.

The same is true of our best Friend, Jesus. We don't simply acknowledge the facts that Jesus lived, died, and rose again. We believe in Him. We trust the One those facts reveal. We believe that He is the Christ,

the Son of God. We believe in what He accomplished for us at the cross. We believe He is the way, the truth, and the life. And John says that through believing, we have life in His name.

Like our spiritual ancestors before us, each of us has made choices we knew were wrong. Looking back, we see how those choices have wounded others, wounded us, and strained our relationship with God.

But Jesus didn't die for us because we were deserving of His sacrifice. He died for us because He loved us despite our poor choices and sometimes unexplainable decisions.

He didn't just die; He died in our place.

He conquered death so we could have life.

We live because our Friend died for us – and rose again.

Because of this, Jesus truly is our Best Friend.

✦

CHAPTER FIVE

The Scapegoat:

Our Sins Carried Away

✦

There is another Old Testament picture of Christ that I completely overlooked for years. I understood the sacrificial lamb. However, I had never fully appreciated the theological richness of the scapegoat.

In **Leviticus 16:7-26** we find one of the most beautiful pictures of the cross in all of Scripture. On the Day of Atonement, Aaron was instructed to present two male goats before the Lord. Lots were cast to determine which goat would become the sacrifice and which would become the scapegoat (Azazel).

Jesus Takes Our Sin Burden

The sacrificial goat was put to death for the sins of the people. The other goat remained alive. Aaron placed both hands upon the head of the scapegoat and confessed over it all the sins of Israel. Symbolically, the people's sins were transferred to the goat, which was then led away into the wilderness, carrying those sins far away from the camp.

Both goats point us to Jesus Christ. Like the sacrificial goat, Jesus died for our sins. Like the scapegoat, our sins were placed upon Him.

"All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on Him the sins of us all." **(Isaiah 53:6, NLT)**

The cross fulfilled both pictures. Our sins were not only paid for, but they were also placed upon Him. The scapegoat wasn't merely carrying Israel's sins into the wilderness. It pointed forward to the day Christ would carry our sins upon Himself at the cross.

I was raised in church. I always knew Jesus died as the sacrificial Lamb for the sins of the world. But I never fully understood the richness of the scapegoat. Our sins being placed on the Lamb of God is more than just beautiful imagery. It changes everything. It makes His yoke easy and His burden light.

Our Sins Are Gone

When we, who have accepted Christ by faith, begin to appreciate this beautiful picture, a tremendous burden should be lifted. When we feel crushed beneath our failures, we can stop and remind ourselves:

"Wait a minute ... my sins are gone."

They have been forgiven. Every one of them. They were placed upon Jesus at the cross.

As **Colossians 2:14** reminds us, our sins have been nailed to the cross.

Not Asking for a Refund

Now don't misunderstand me.

1 John 1:8 reminds us that believers still sin. If we deny that reality, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Those sins have consequences. Our sins hurt us. They hurt the people we love, and they leave scars on everyone they touch.

But carrying the penalty for those sins is no longer ours to bear. Christ bore our sins on Himself so we wouldn't have to bear that burden anymore.

And I don't know about you ... but I'm not asking for a refund.

Accusing Lies and Forgiven Sins

Seasons of spiritual struggle come to all of us. The devil never stops scheming. He has already lost the war. His eternal destiny has already been determined, yet he continues seeking to devour and destroy everyone he can.

I have lost battles to that enemy. Can you relate?

There have been seasons when I allowed sin to become my master. I cannot deny that. But something even more tragic happened. Even during seasons when sin was no longer mastering me, I still allowed the devil to torture my mind over sins that had been confessed years before.

Have you ever noticed how quickly Satan reminds us of forgiven sins? He loves resurrecting guilt that Christ has already buried. He wants us living beneath a burden Christ has already carried.

Too often we continue carrying burdens He has already carried away.

Getting Carried Away

Why allow Satan to exercise dominion over our minds? Why continue to carry sins that Christ already bore at Calvary? Why allow yesterday's failures to define today's fellowship with God? Weren't those failures nailed to the cross over two thousand years ago?

At Calvary, the sins of the world were not merely paid for. They were placed upon Jesus. Christ accomplished everything necessary for our salvation. The weakness is not in His sacrifice but in our tendency to doubt it. Too often we continue carrying burdens He has already carried away.

Just as Israel's sins were placed upon the scapegoat, our sins were laid upon Christ. It is as though every sin from every generation gathered at one place.

The cross.

The Place of Grace.

That is where our Best Friend carried them away ...

As far as the east is from the west.

CHAPTER SIX

Three Wooden Crosses

Torture. Pain. Agony. Humiliation. Degradation. Death. Good News? On the surface, nothing is good news at the cross. Such evil there, such betrayal, such indifference. Good News? Hardly seems good. We are told that all the sins of the world were at Calvary that day. What darkness. What sadness. What injustice. What shame. What bad, bad news was there on that day.

And amidst the darkness there was light, the light of the world, Jesus. The Cross was a dreadful place, while at the same time being the best place ever. And since Jesus was there, so was salvation and forgiveness. Patience. Love. Mercy. Reconciliation. Because Jesus was there, the cross will forever stand, amidst the horror as The Place of Grace.

The Characters of the Cross

Jesus

Jesus was supposed to be there. Jesus belonged on the cross because that was the Father's plan, and His death fulfilled that plan, just as His life fulfilled the law. But at the same time, He shouldn't have been there because He was experiencing punishment for crimes He didn't commit. Remember **2 Corinthians 5:21**? Jesus never sinned at all, so he didn't deserve punishment, certainly not the death penalty.

This is where it's time to admit what deep down we already know. Grace, well, it just isn't fair. Grace is unmerited favor. And that concept goes against how we humans think. We operate on merit in life. You only get what you earn.

We expect to get paid for a job well done, and we don't believe we should be punished for things we didn't do. We would consider that unjust. And we don't blink or step back from that.

But then there's the conundrum of the cross because Jesus didn't do the crime, not any crime, not anything wrong, ever! And yet He paid for the crimes of others with His own life. There is no way to consider that fair. But then again, despite us thinking that it was unjust for Jesus to be crucified, none of us would want to have taken His place. No one is signing up for that.

We are the spiritual criminals when it comes to sin, and as believers we got off without so much as paying a fine, and certainly not being asked to pay for our own sins with our lives. No, we would rather someone else die. And someone did. Not because He deserved it, but because He loved us. He didn't die for us when we got our acts together. He died for us while we were in our sins **(Romans 5:8).**

The Accepting Thief

The company Jesus kept at Calvary was a sordid crew for sure. And it goes without saying, capital punishment by crucifixion was not for jay walkers. We are talking about offenses deemed worthy not only of death, but by a cruel agonizing process. We have two criminals crucified on either side of Jesus. They did the crime and now it was time to take the punishment.

These two convicts had some time to know their demise was coming. They had already been sentenced and had been on death row. Did they get a last meal? Doubtful. But that's not the point. The point is both thieves had warning they were going to die, and they realized this was not a case of mistaken identity. They knew they deserved to be there.

But at least one thief realized that Jesus was on the cross unjustly. In **Luke 23:39-43**, one of the thieves while hanging there awaiting his own last breath, acknowledged that the death penalty, while just for him, was unjust for Jesus. He claimed Jesus was innocent and therefore did not deserve to die. This is important because Jesus was there to be a sacrifice for sin, and that sacrifice had to be spotless. Even the thief recognized that Jesus was spotless. He was the spotless Lamb of God there to take care of the sins of the world.

The dialogue between this "accepting thief" and Jesus is recorded in Scripture. The accepting thief did more than just acknowledge Jesus was innocent. He trusted in Jesus for His salvation on that day. Did you read that? He trusted in Jesus for His salvation. And guess what? It worked.

This thief found his salvation in Christ Alone, which is logical because the Scriptures testify that salvation cannot be found in any other name. In Christ alone his hope was found. Let that reality sink in.

If there is one place where the theology of salvation comes into clearest focus, it is at the cross. Jesus is not a supporting actor in redemption. He is the center of the story.

When it comes to salvation, some of us have tried to focus on everything in Scripture but the cross. Some of us at times have been way more interested in our works than in the finished work of Christ. There are no good works of any value at Calvary. The only good work that was at the cross was the finished work of Jesus.

Just as the accepting thief had no good work that could save him, the same can be said of each of us. Good works are beneficial for sure, but not for salvation. And of course, I know of no one who takes issue with people doing good works, even if God does get the glory.

The controversy comes when good works become any part of what saves us. I don't see anyone saving themselves with their own good works or with anything else. No cash due upon arrival at the cross. The price was paid in full.

The Rejecting Thief

The rejecting thief, as we will call him, was hanging on the other side of Jesus. Both thieves were desperate, literally life and death hanging in the balance. But instead of crying out in reliance upon Jesus in realization of his true plight, as did his partner in crime, this rejecting thief questioned both Jesus' identity and ultimately His power. Not good. Bad decision.

He questioned whether Jesus was the Son of God or not. If He truly was the Son of God, then this thief reasoned Jesus should do something about their current predicament. He didn't believe. That was his grievous error. We sometimes refer to belief as just part of the whole. But ultimately, accepting Jesus for who He truly is and trusting in His ability to save us is what salvation by grace is all about.

The realization that salvation cannot be found outside Jesus and that we are 100% reliant upon Him for salvation is easily witnessed at the cross. As sinners we all have found ourselves in the same situation as the thieves spiritually. We are guilty of sin, just like both thieves, and reliant wholly upon the Son of God to save us. Just like them.

You don't find salvation by works at the cross. You find salvation by grace through faith. The cross is the central scene of all Scripture, along with the virgin birth and Jesus' resurrection. And what do we see when we look at Calvary closely? Salvation by grace, not works.

Despite their crimes and severe punishment, their good works could not spare them the penalty. No amount of human effort could erase their guilt or save them from their sins. Only the finished work of Christ could. His sacrifice was sufficient for both men and for the entire world. Yet only the one who placed his faith in Jesus received its saving benefits that day.

One Thief Found Hope

Ephesians 2:8-10 was written to believers. In the letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul expressed to those people that they had been saved by grace. And the saving grace they received was accessed by faith.

Saving grace is offered to all mankind **(Titus 2:11)**, but that grace is only accessed by those who receive it. Not everyone is willing to receive the saving grace, which is found in the personhood of Jesus, and the cross demonstrates that perfectly. Two men had the same desperation and the same choice, and the one that chose grace, chose salvation.

> ***Was the accepting thief saved because he sinned less than the rejecting thief? Or perhaps sinned less grievously? No, it was because he accepted in faith the only solution for his sins.***

The good news of salvation by grace is in no way opposed to good works. One produces the other. One flows from the other. However, they must not be combined together as the grounds for our salvation.

Jesus is the foundation of our salvation. He is the way, the truth, and the life. His love and mercy expressed in His sacrifice on the cross constitute the grounds for salvation for anyone who receives it by faith.

The difference between the accepting thief and the rejecting thief was faith. One turned to Christ in desperation for salvation, and the other scoffed at Jesus and looked the other way in unbelief. If salvation is truly a gift of grace received through faith, then the clearest picture of salvation by grace is found at Calvary.

Most of us have never committed crimes worthy of capital punishment like those thieves who hung there with Jesus. So, we don't think we are that bad. It's like we believe we haven't sinned as much as the next guy, or if we have, our sins aren't as bad as theirs. But is that what really matters?

Was the accepting thief saved because he sinned less than the rejecting thief? Or perhaps sinned less grievously? No, it was because he accepted in faith the only solution for his sins.

Grace has appeared to all, but for some, like the rejecting thief, they just don't want it. They just don't believe Jesus has the power to save them, and yet He did, and He still does have the power. He conquered death at the cross and by His eventual resurrection. He did so for the undeserving, and that applies to all of us.

There were three wooden crosses at Calvary. The cross in the middle where Jesus hung that day is the greatest expression of grace ever witnessed. Jesus died a death He didn't deserve to pay a price for crimes He didn't commit. Nothing fair about it. Jesus did nothing to earn His punishment. He took the punishment only sinners deserve.

What a loving expression, taking our place, and taking on Himself the punishment for all the sins of all humanity. And just like those two thieves, we all have a choice. One thief found hope in Christ at the final moments of his life. The other rejected the very grace that could have saved him. Will we acknowledge Jesus as the Son of God? Will we trust in Him for our salvation?

✦

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Gospel of Grace

✦

The Good News

In **1 Corinthians 15** Paul described the gospel as the good news of Christ's death for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection.

The gospel is not good advice about what we must do. It is good news about what Jesus has already done. He conquered death through His resurrection and offers immortality to those who place their faith in Him and Him alone!

Our allegiance, our obedience, our dedication, our profession, and our works are not the gospel. But all those things should flow from the gospel. All of those are understandable responses to someone who saved us from eternal death and gave us eternal life as a gift.

The gospel is not good advice about what we must do. It is good news about what Jesus has already done.

The Gift of Victory

"But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." **(1 Corinthians 15:57-58, NIV)**

In **verse 57** salvation by grace is described as a gift. It can't be earned, merited, or given as a reward for godly living. We have been given the victory through Jesus. It was Jesus who was on that cross, and Jesus who conquered death through His resurrection. We are called to believe in that reality, not

achieve it. We are thankful to God for the victory He has assured for us, and we stand in that assurance in faith just like Paul encouraged them to do **(1 Corinthians 15:1-2)**.

Grace That Produces Good Works

God's gift of victory through His grace produces in us a readiness and willingness to serve Him – not merely to serve, but to abound in His work **(1 Corinthians 15:58)**. But we must never confuse our response to the good news with the good news itself.

None of us deserve salvation at any point. Salvation is never a reward for a job well done, but rather an unmerited expression of pure mercy and love on behalf of a loving God. It is a gift.

Our works of obedience as God's children are both pleasing to the Father as well as being good and profitable to our fellow humans **(Titus 3:8)**. God has created us as His masterpiece for good works **(Ephesians 2:10)**. And I don't know about you, but doing good works, well, they just make us feel good.

We desire to participate in good works so that God's will can be accomplished through us and ultimately so that He can be glorified. We are so thankful, so grateful for salvation that we want to let God's goodness flow to us but also through us to the world.

The Only Currency That Counts

Imagine I had to go in town to pay my sin bill like you do your electric bill. I don't show up with a wallet. In my case, I show up with an armored truck full of cash. So, I attempt to pay my sin bill with cash, but the cashier says no we don't take cash here. Don't take cash? Well, that is a thing these days, so I whip out the plastic, and the cashier says we don't take credit cards here either.

In frustration I reach for a check only to realize they only take one form of payment, and I don't have it. What form of payment do they take? The precious blood of Jesus **(1 Peter 1:18-19)**. It is the only currency that pays for sins.

The Choice of Grace

So how could we ever claim to have earned something we never worked for? Salvation is given to those who receive it by faith. The choice before us is the same choice that stood before the two thieves. Only the acceptance or rejection of who Jesus truly is and His saving power is seen at the cross. It isn't, "I paid it all through my obedience, all to me He owes." The song says, "Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe."

I agree. Jesus paid it all. Therefore, we owe Him our everything. And yet we cannot repay the gift. Not with our allegiance. Not with our obedience. Not with our good works. Even our faith does not repay the debt.

We cannot repay the gift. We can only receive it by faith.

Receive it or refuse it.

That choice was presented to the thieves and is to each one of us today. We are every bit as desperate in our sins today as they were in theirs. And the power to cleanse both their sins and ours is found only in Jesus. What will we do with Jesus who is called the Christ?

I choose grace.

I choose Jesus.

✦

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sinai Would Have Solved It

✦

Law or Grace?

If you could choose between law and grace for your salvation, which would you choose? The only criterion is you can't take both as the grounds or basis of your salvation. Which one are you choosing? I am choosing grace.

But what if someone were to say, "I choose law instead of grace"? That answer reveals something important. People who choose law for salvation usually believe they can keep it or at least keep it well enough for it to count. If obedience is viewed as the basis of salvation, then choosing law seems perfectly reasonable. The problem is that Scripture says no one keeps God's law perfectly, and a system based on law accepts nothing less than perfect obedience.

Perfect People Need Not Apply

So why not choose law? After all, don't we consider ourselves to be law-abiding citizens? Don't we consider ourselves to be law keepers? And when it comes to Jesus, if we love Him, shouldn't we be keeping His commandments **(John 14:15)**?

It sounds logical. Keep God's laws and be saved. Can't get much more logical than that. Right? The alternative would be to say that it's the law breakers who are saved and get to go to Heaven. And that, well that doesn't sound fair at all.

But wait. Isn't that exactly how the gospel system works? It isn't the rule keepers that get to be saved and inherit eternal life. It is the rule breakers. You must first be a lawbreaker before you can ever qualify for salvation. Perfect people need not apply for salvation, which is precisely why Jesus didn't.

Salvation is for lawbreakers. But how do we know who are the lawbreakers? Law is good for doing that. Law makes us aware of our sins **(Romans 3:20)**, and apparently, we have all failed to meet the law's perfect standard **(Romans 3:23)**. While the law can legislate or even direct behavior or lifestyle, it has no power to accomplish it or cause someone to obey it. Law doesn't possess the ability to make us right with God or save us.

"Is there a conflict, then, between God's law and God's promises? Absolutely not! If the law could give us new life, we could be made right with God by obeying it. But the Scriptures declare that we are all prisoners of sin, so we receive God's promise of freedom only by believing in Jesus Christ." **(Galatians 3:21-22, NLT)**

If law keeping was the solution to our sin problem, then Sinai would have solved it. But it wasn't. Salvation is not found on a mountain. It is found in the Cornerstone.

The Curse of Law-Keeping

Here is the other problem … a law isn't very graceful. It was never designed to be. The problem with picking any law for salvation is that all laws are unbending. It demands perfect obedience, every day, every hour, every minute, every second. Sound unbending yet?

There were never instructions God gave He didn't want obeyed and obeyed all the time. Unfortunately, that is an impossibility for humans. What happens when God's expectations are not met? What happens when we miss the mark? We sin. Furthermore, notice some things said in Scripture about law.

"For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, as it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything in the Book of the Law.'" **(Galatians 3:10, NIV)**

"For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of all of it." **(James 2:10, NIV)**

These two passages help us understand that a law system requires perfect obedience, which is why everyone looking to be saved by law keeping is under a curse. Law keeping as a means of salvation is cursed from the beginning because it's impossible. The law exposes our inability to save ourselves, preparing us to embrace the only hope we have – God's grace through Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER NINE

Grace Plus Nothing

Grace Plus Works Is Not Grace

Remember when Elijah thought he was the only faithful one left? God reminded him that seven thousand had not bowed to Baal. Paul tells us why they remained: grace.

"It is the same today, for a few of the people of Israel have remained faithful because of God's grace – His undeserved kindness in choosing them. And since it is through God's kindness, then it is not by their good works. For in that case, God's grace would not be what it really is – free and undeserved." **(Romans 11:5-6, NLT)**

Grace is not God doing most of the saving while we finish the job. Grace is God doing for us what we could never do for ourselves. That does not make obedience meaningless. It makes obedience a response instead of a requirement for earning salvation. We do not work our way into grace. We live differently because grace has found us.

Paul says it plainly:

"*I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die."* **(Galatians 2:21, NLT)**

If our obedience could save us, the cross was unnecessary. But the cross was necessary. That means salvation is not Christ plus our performance. It is not grace plus our goodness. It is not Jesus doing His part while we do ours.

It is Jesus.

When Jesus is enough, grace is finally allowed to be grace.

Falling From Grace

So, if salvation is by grace, can we ever fall from grace? The apostle Paul affirmed we can if we attempt to replace it with law keeping or anything else.

"For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, you have been cut off from Christ! You have fallen away from God's grace." **(Galatians 5:4, NLT)**

Most people believe they are good with God because they behave good most of the time and they ask for forgiveness when they don't. But the truth is we are made right with God by something that Jesus did.

"For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ." **(2 Corinthians 5:21, NLT)**

How do our wrongs get made right with God? Through Jesus. How have we been made right with God? Through the sacrifice of our Savior!

Two-Seat Salvation Bicycle

Upon this realization, some still want to do their part to help Jesus out with this salvation thing. Once they see the futility of salvation by law keeping, they adopt a hybrid approach. What does that mean? They view salvation as a team effort, kind of like a two-seat salvation bicycle.

Their theory is that Jesus did the heavy lifting on the cross. He is pedaling the salvation bike, and we pedal alongside Him through our obedience to His commands to reach the destination and stay there.

This hybrid theory says salvation is part God's work and part ours. It is our combined effort that brings us to salvation and keeps us saved.

Scripture says otherwise.

We do the sinning.

God does the saving.

Weak faith in a perfect Savior still saves because salvation rests upon His strength, not ours.

Jesus Gets the Credit

We don't get half credit for our own salvation. All the credit goes to Jesus. It's almost like there is nothing in my hands I bring, therefore, simply to the cross I cling. Sound familiar?

The truth is that salvation is 100% accomplished by Jesus, and He offers it to us as a gift to receive or reject. Just like the two thieves, we hear the gospel, and we are presented with a choice: receive it or reject it. The gospel is the good news of what Jesus did. Faith is trusting in Jesus as the Son of God and what He accomplished at Calvary. Saving faith is living and active, responding to God's grace with obedience and good works. Those works are the fruit and evidence of our salvation, never the grounds for it.

So, you might be on a two-seat salvation bike with Christ going through this life. But only His pedaling counts for salvation, not ours! Salvation has always been God's gracious plan, from the Garden to the Cross and up until present day.

Paul stated that his ministry, testifying of the grace of God, was given to Him by the Lord **(Acts 20:24)**. It seems some wish Paul had testified about the law of God, instead of the grace of God. His ministry would have been much less controversial had he preached a message of salvation by obedience to the laws of God. After all, he was a Pharisee of Pharisees. My experience with modern day Pharisees is that they are all about law keeping and about making sure you do the same.

Most legalists speak of grace as kind of a throw-in at the end. Thrown in to make up for all the things they couldn't get done for the Lord and all the bad things they did.

Salvation by grace is not about our performance. It is about trusting God's steadfast promise **(Galatians 3)** – the promise first made to Abraham and ultimately fulfilled through Christ. Salvation rests on His performance, not ours. Paul makes the distinction unmistakable:

"Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness." **(Romans 4:4-5, NIV)**

Wages are earned. Grace is received. Grace is not a reward for faithful living. It is not payment for our obedience or faithfulness. If it were, it would be wages – not grace. Grace is God's gift, offered in love and received by faith.

Weak Faith, Strong Savior

I once heard a famous evangelist say, "I would rather have weak faith in a strong bridge than strong faith in a weak bridge."

It is not even the quality of our faith that saves us. It is the object of our faith. Weak faith in a perfect Savior still saves because salvation rests upon His strength, not ours.

We don't have to be strong because Jesus is.

We don't have to be perfect because Jesus is.

We don't have to die for our sins on a cross because Jesus did.

We don't have to live a sinless life, Jesus did.

We don't have to fulfill the law, Jesus did.

We are weak. He is strong.

✦

CHAPTER TEN

Paul's Conversion: A Case Study in Grace

✦

Paul grew up as a legalist. That's right. Good old Paul grew up as a Pharisee **(Acts 22:3; Philippians 3:5-6)**. Instead of searching for grace, he was hunting Christians. Then everything changed. Jesus came looking for him. Grace always makes the first move.

From Egocentric to Theocentric

The difference between Saul before Christ and Paul after Christ is striking. Before he came to Christ, or before Christ came to him, he was a Pharisee, and he took pride in that. He was educated at the feet of Gamaliel about everything concerning the law. He was proud of his tribe (Benjamin). He believed he had kept the law faithfully, and he took great pride in that.

Keep in mind, while all this was going on, he was consenting to the death of Christians. Why, you might ask? Well, because they were Christians. But don't worry, he did it in all good conscience **(Acts 23:1)**.

After he was confronted by the Lord on that road headed for Damascus, he saw himself differently. It was as if he finally got grace, and grace got him, both in his life and his theology. Post-conversion Paul referred to himself as least of the apostles and chief of sinners. Sounds weird coming from such an educated religious man. Make it make sense.

The very sight of Jesus blinded Saul, while giving him spiritual vision he had never had before. Before Christ, Paul boasted in his religious pedigree. After his conversion, he boasted only in Christ **(1 Corinthians 2:1-2)**. Paul was transformed by grace, and his theology shifted from egocentric to theocentric almost overnight.

Righteousness Received by Faith

Paul realized he could never establish his own righteousness before God. His focus shifted from his own righteousness to the righteousness God provides through faith.

"I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have discarded everything else, counting it as all garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with Him. I no longer count my righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with Himself depends on faith." **(Philippians 3:7-9, NLT)**

Paul taught salvation by grace to the church at Ephesus.

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." **(Ephesians 2:8-10, NIV)**

Our works are the product of salvation, not the means of obtaining it. The good works of **Ephesians 2:10** are the fruit of a saved life, not the cause of salvation or the means of maintaining it.

Paul made this same truth clear in his letter to Titus. There, he left little doubt about who saves us, why He saves us, and where the saving power comes from.

"But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing and rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life." **(Titus 3:4-7, NIV)**

Paul's reference to the "washing of rebirth" may refer here to baptism. If so, the saving power is not in the water or something we accomplish. God saves according to His mercy, the Holy Spirit brings new life and renewal, and we are justified by His grace. Others interpret the washing in **Titus 3:5** as the inward cleansing brought about by the Holy Spirit, with baptism following as an expression of what God has already done.

Either way, the central truth remains the same. Some may differ over when regeneration takes place – some placing it at the moment of belief and others at the moment of baptism. But there should be no disagreement about who does the regenerating. Salvation is God's work, accomplished through Christ, and given by grace.

Grace That Transforms

In Paul's day, many misunderstood grace. Some feared it would produce lawlessness. Others feared it would encourage people to sin. Paul answered both concerns. Grace was never intended to excuse sin. Grace was intended to transform sinners.

"For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good." **(Titus 2:11-14, NIV)**

Often, we believers, in the weakness of our flesh, find ways to use grace as a license to sin. However, that was never God's intention. Grace doesn't encourage sin. Grace encourages gratitude. And grateful people love the One who rescued them and therefore seek to please Him.

Grace Greater Than Our Sin

Grace's intention is to produce godly living just as Paul instructed Titus. God's intention for grace is for it to be transforming to us in a good way. However, as believers, if we sin more than we would like, or even sin a lot, Paul makes it clear that we cannot out sin God's grace.

"God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant. So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." **(Romans 5:20-21, NLT)**

God gave us law to know wrong from right. But law of any kind or brand has no power to make us do right, and because of that reality some of us have broken a few of God's laws a few too many times.

Abundant sin was never God's intention with grace. However, abundant sin does not intimidate grace. Abundant sin is still no match for the powerful grace of Jesus!

Grace doesn't encourage sin. Grace encourages gratitude.

So, while sin is never God's intention for our lives, every sin Christ's people have ever committed or will ever commit was paid for at Calvary. Even thieves worthy of the death penalty can't out-sin God's grace. However, thieves can reject it. Just ask the two men who hung next to Jesus on the cross. Both needed grace for salvation, but only one of them accepted it in faith.

God's intent for law is to open our eyes to our sinfulness, revealing our need for a Savior and His saving grace. We are confronted each day with our desperate need for His grace. Paul had to be blinded before he could truly see his need for grace. He finally saw himself as he really was. He finally saw Jesus as He really is. And once Paul saw grace, he never trusted his own righteousness again. Neither should we.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Seeing Our Need for Grace

The Danger of Comparison

None of us are saved because we are good enough, knowledgeable enough, or obedient enough. We are saved because God is gracious enough to bear the punishment we deserved.

It is easy to see someone else's need for grace, much easier than seeing our own need. The elder brother in the prodigal story could see his younger brother's need for grace but not his own. Of the two men who went up to the temple to pray, it was the old sinful tax collector who saw his need for grace, not the strictly religious Pharisee **(Luke 18:9-14)**.

Face to Face with a Holy God

If you could see into God's throne room in Heaven, what would you see? Isaiah revealed what he saw in **Isaiah 6:1-8**. He described angelic beings flying around the brilliant throne of the Majesty on High. Remember the one word they repeated in the presence of God continually day and night? Holy.

Holy is the word that perhaps describes God's essence the best. Perfectly pure. Sinless. Stainless. Just. Right. Righteous. The total absence of evil. The total absence of darkness. Good. God is set apart from all the universe as the perfect presentation of all these qualities. No darkness or impurity resides within the heart of God.

Not only is God set apart from mankind through His power, but also by His perfection. He cannot fellowship darkness, and in Him is no darkness **(1 John 1)**. So how is it then that a holy God can have

fellowship and a relationship with imperfect humans who have been forever tainted by the darkness of sin? Grace.

Self-Awareness

Isaiah encountered the glory of God in **Isaiah 6**, and instantaneously upon encountering the holiness of God he realized he was undone and unclean. Something it seems he hadn't noticed until witnessing God's pristine perfection in all its splendor and glory. And then almost immediately, Isaiah realized that his fellow humans were undone and unclean as well. God initiated Isaiah's cleansing. Isaiah simply received it. In faith, Isaiah allowed the hot coal from Heaven to touch his lips and provide the cleansing that only God could provide.

When Isaiah compared himself to others, he could have possibly thought of himself as superior in some way as God's prophet. But when he looked to Heaven, he saw he was messed up and thus saw his need for cleansing. That is what we do today when we turn to Jesus in faith relying on His blood to continually cleanse us from our sins.

If we compare ourselves to other believers, we might believe we gain some sense of superiority. When we compare ourselves with others, we can always find someone who makes us feel righteous. But Heaven's throne room destroys every comparison. When Isaiah saw God clearly, he also clearly saw his need for grace.

The best way to see our need for grace is not to look in the mirror. That won't do. We can't look at others, no ground to gain in a world where everyone needs grace. We only need to look at God. It is only in the presence of His pure light that we can see we have all fallen short of His glory **(Romans 3:23)** and need His cleansing power.

When Isaiah saw God clearly, he also clearly saw his need for grace.

Grace Mobilizes

What did seeing his own sin and seeing the sins of his fellow man do for Isaiah? What did realizing he was messed up cause him to do? Isaiah, confronted with his own sin, accepted by faith the cleansing only God could provide. Then he told the Lord, "Here I am, send me!"

Grace didn't paralyze Isaiah. It mobilized him. The same grace that forgave him also sent him. He wasn't ready and willing to serve the Lord because he thought he didn't need grace. He was ready and willing to serve the Lord because he realized his desperate need for grace. And he realized that His fellowship with God was possible only through grace.

Grace not only saves, it transforms the life of the recipient. The apostle Paul understood this when he wrote these words:

"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them, yet not, I but the grace of God that was with me." **(1 Corinthians 15:10, NIV)**

Remember when the church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch? Do you recall what he saw when he arrived that brought him such joy?

"When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts." **(Acts 11:23, NIV)**

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch, he found believers saved by grace flourishing in the work of the kingdom. I am certain it pleased God. Salvation by grace produces powerful results in communities of believers still today. And here is the thing:

Not one believer needs grace any less or any more than another.

Not one of us can be saved without it.

✦

CHAPTER TWELVE

Full of Grace and Truth

✦

Many people assume grace and truth are opposites. They imagine that if you emphasize grace, you must be soft on truth. If you emphasize truth, you must be short on grace. Jesus destroys that false choice. He was not partly grace and partly truth. He was and is full of grace and truth.

Grace From the Beginning

God hates sin, and He cannot fellowship with darkness. So, what did God do when humanity welcomed darkness into His creation for the very first time? He cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden.

Sin had consequences. It always does. But God did not cast them away and forget about them. Even as God pronounced judgment on their rebellion, He began revealing His plan to repair what sin had broken.

What happened in Eden was not a small mistake. It was rebellion against the God who had given them everything. Humanity had turned its back on its Creator, and God would have been perfectly just to leave them to the consequences of their choice.

But He didn't.

The God they had rebelled against became the God who pursued them. And thousands of years later, that same God became flesh and walked among us. This time, humanity's rejection became horrifyingly literal. They spat in His face. They mocked Him. They beat Him. They nailed Him to a cross.

He could have destroyed them. But He didn't. Why? Was it because God was not concerned with truth? Of course not. Truth demanded that sin be dealt with. But grace determined that God Himself would bear its cost.

Jesus came "full of grace and truth."

Truth declared that sin deserved judgment.

Grace stepped into the judgment and took our place.

That is the story of the Bible from the beginning to the end. From the Garden to Golgotha, sinful humanity kept running from God. And the God of grace kept pursuing them.

Grace and Truth Personified

I find the description of Jesus being full of grace and truth intriguing. It isn't that the only begotten of the Father just told the truth. It is that His essence is truth, He is truth **(John 14:6)**. He is full of truth. When Jesus spoke, He spoke the truth.

In **John 1**, the Scriptures teach that Jesus has existed from the beginning. And in **verse 14** Jesus is described as full of grace and truth. So many times, when we hear about grace, we immediately think, grace, well that compromises truth. After all, needing grace must mean we sin, and no legalist really wants to admit that. Normally they don't because they are focused on the specks in the eyes of everyone else. That's what legalists do.

Grace and Truth in Real Life

At first glance, grace and truth almost seem to pull in opposite directions. Truth confronts. Grace forgives. Truth exposes sin. Grace offers mercy. Yet in Jesus they never compete. They perfectly complement one another. Grace never required Jesus to compromise truth, and truth never prevented Jesus from extending grace. The encounter with the woman caught in adultery shows us exactly what that looks like.

"As He was speaking, the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in the act of adultery. They put her in front of the crowd. 'Teacher,' they said to Jesus, 'this woman was caught in the act of adultery. The law of Moses says to stone her. What do You say?' They were trying to trap Him into saying something they could use against Him, but Jesus stooped down and wrote in the dust with His finger.

They kept demanding an answer, so He stood up again and said, 'Alright, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!' Then He stooped down again and wrote in the dust.

When the accusers heard this, they slipped away one by one, beginning with the oldest, until only Jesus was left in the middle of the crowd with the woman. Then Jesus stood up again and said to the woman, 'Where are your accusers? Didn't even one of them condemn you?' 'No, Lord,' she said. And Jesus said, 'Neither do I. Go and sin no more.'" **(John 8:3-11, NLT)**

Notice what Jesus did not say ...
He did not deny her guilt.
He did not excuse adultery.
He did not pretend sin wasn't serious.
He simply extended grace without abandoning truth.

The truth about adultery is that it is sinful. It is wrong. And in this case the punishment was the death penalty, which is why these men carried stones. They were about to stone this woman to death for her adultery. And it appears there was a lawful case, since the woman in no way denied the charges and Jesus basically acknowledged her guilt when He admonished her to go and sin no more.

Does this situation end up any differently if Jesus is just full of truth but not grace? Have you ever thought about that? Thankfully we don't have to consider that because Jesus is full of both, and we know how the story ended. If Jesus had only been operating with truth, He would have simply verified the accusation, determined the woman's guilt, and perhaps sought for her adulterous partner to be found and brought forward to be part of the stoning party, since he was guilty too.

Grace never required Jesus to compromise truth, and truth never prevented Jesus from extending grace.

Jesus told her the truth by confronting her sin. He also extended grace by refusing to condemn her. Jesus also offered the woman's accusers a good dose of truth as well. But favor was given to the woman even though she was guilty of sin and undeserving.

The unmerited favor Jesus offered her ... it's called grace. No truth had to be compromised to offer grace. God still maintained His position on the woman's sin, but where death was deserved, a second chance and life was offered.

Truth and Grace Embrace

At Calvary, grace did not ignore truth.

Truth declared that sin deserved death.

Grace declared that Jesus would die in our place.

The cross was where perfect truth and perfect grace embraced.

When grace looks in the mirror, it sees the face of Jesus.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Terrifying Grace

Who doesn't want favor from God, even if they don't deserve it, especially if they don't deserve it?

I believe I am saved by grace, and I rest in that assurance. Jesus is my Sabbath rest every day I live. I accept the reality of who Jesus is and by faith what Jesus did. I trust in His atoning sacrifice completely for my salvation. But it wasn't always like that for me.

I rejected grace for decades because I believed I knew better. I believed that law keeping got me saved and kept me that way. My ability to obey God's commands, worship "correctly," repent properly, do good, and avoid evil were all directly related to my salvation. I knew that Jesus died for me, and I was happy He did. But I had no idea He did all the heavy lifting on the cross when it came to paying for my sins and providing my salvation.

Why do we seek to add our own efforts to grace as the basis of our salvation? Why can't grace be enough? The truth is surrender can feel terrifying for people who have spent their whole lives trying to earn God's approval.

It's All About Surrender

Salvation is about surrender. Many years ago, I was terrified to fly on a plane, but I had to do it almost every week. I knew death was a possibility if something went wrong with the flight, after all pulling over on the interstate with a flat tire wasn't an option at 30,000 feet. The pilots (whom I had never met) were in control, not me. On those flights I had to surrender. I had to surrender and give it all to God. And I did, kicking and screaming. A lot of praying took place before and during those sometimes-scary flights.

Salvation and flying both require surrender. Both require faith. In both cases, your confidence is not in yourself but in Someone greater than yourself.

If you grew up in legalism, surrender is scary because you feel like you need to do your part, which is probably what made flying uncomfortable for me in the first place. Looking back now, I realize grace wasn't terrifying because it was dangerous. It was terrifying because it required me to stop trusting myself and completely trust Someone greater than myself.

For years I had confidence in my own performance – my own ability to get everything in the New Testament doctrinally right. But through years of study and prayer, I slowly realized that God wasn't inviting me to trust my understanding of Christ. He was inviting me to trust Christ Himself. That kind of surrender can feel frightening. But I've discovered something on the other side of surrender. Rest.

Slow to Surrender

If surrender is key to a God directed life, then why was I so late to the game? Why did it take me so long to see salvation by grace? One reason was because I believed my doctrine was right. I believed in Scripture and just knew my interpretation and the interpretation of the church I grew up in was doctrinally correct. After all, we had the truth, and doesn't the truth set you free? That was really all I thought I needed. But no one told me the truth about saving grace.

I wasn't resisting grace because I hated Jesus. I was resisting grace because I didn't realize how desperately I needed it. I thought I already understood Jesus. Pride wasn't shouting inside me. It whispered, "You've already got this figured out."

In time, I began to realize Scripture was pointing me beyond itself to Someone greater. Something was more important than being right. I realized eternal life came through a man not a book. Jesus said it to the Pharisees this way:

"You search the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. But the Scriptures point to Me!" **(John 5:39, NLT)**

One realization quietly began to change my thinking. For much of history, most Christians never owned a Bible, and many who eventually had access to one couldn't even read it. If salvation depended on every believer perfectly interpreting Scripture, what hope did they have? What hope would anyone have?

That realization didn't lessen my respect for Scripture. It increased my appreciation for the Savior to whom Scripture points. I slowly began to realize that eternal life rests ultimately in trusting a Person, not in my ability to master a book.

I once thought winning religious debates was my job. After all, I had to defend the truth, especially since I knew the truth so few seemed to know. I never considered there was something I needed to see or more I needed to know. In fairness, neither did Saul till he encountered Jesus.

In the past, I was convinced that getting every doctrinal detail exactly right was the key to pleasing God. Every disagreement became another battle to fight, another position to defend, another opportunity to prove I had the truth. I was basically obsessed over the bride while not trusting in the groom.

I stopped reading the Bible like a debate manual and started reading it like a love letter.

Christ – The Basis of Our Faith and Fellowship

I wondered aloud throughout my grace journey. If fellowship based upon truth means we have to agree on Scripture on literally hundreds of different things, then no wonder division was the result.

One question changed everything. What if the Truth is not merely something to defend but Someone to trust? Jesus didn't merely teach the truth. He said, "I am the truth."

What if that is to be the basis of not only our hope, but also the tie that binds us together in love? And what about that love? That is something else I discovered. You can have knowledge, even supernatural knowledge, and if you don't have love, you have nothing. If you have spiritual gifts that would make the pope jealous, and you don't love, you have nothing. You could even be willing to die for Christ, but without love, all you're left with is nothing (**1 Corinthians 13**).

I stopped reading the Bible like a debate manual and started reading it like a love letter. It changed how I viewed myself. I could see God as a loving Father ready to run to meet me upon my return if I ever walked away from His saving provision.

I saw for the first time His unconditional love and His saving grace that I could accept by promise, instead of by my performance. Now I could love myself because I realized I was lovable. And that freed me up to love others, including people who didn't have some of the same views I did on Scripture.

How could that happen, you might ask?

Because we shared a Savior.

And He is the basis of our kinship one with another.

My grace journey didn't happen overnight. It challenged everything I had spent years defending. I wasn't simply changing an opinion. I was changing the foundation upon which I had built my understanding of God. That was both frightening and freeing.

For years, I believed surrender meant giving up control. I finally discovered it meant placing my confidence where it belonged all along. Salvation doesn't ask us to achieve. It asks us to receive. The only achievement in salvation is Christ's. Because of that, He deserves all the glory and all our praise.

✦

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Transforming Power of Grace

✦

Grace Makes Us More Graceful

Every person must decide what to do with God's grace. We can receive it as Paul did, or we can reject it. But what then? Salvation is received by grace, but it was never meant to stop there. God's intention is for His grace to produce gracious people.

"Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment." **(James 2:13, NIV)**

God gives us grace with the intention that we will pay it forward. That's right. Saving grace was never meant to end with us. God intends for those who have received grace to become people who extend it to others, even when we deem they don't deserve it.

We are supposed to be more than just grace takers – we are supposed to be grace givers. We extend grace because that's exactly what God did for us. Grace, by its very nature, is favor shown to the undeserving. God has extended grace to every human **(Titus 2:11)**.

What is our job then?

Receive it.
Rest in it.
Pass it on.

Grace Fuels Transformation

Grace doesn't merely save us. It transforms us.

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, ***in view of God's mercy****, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing, and perfect will."* **(Romans 12:1-2, NIV)**

It is God's mercy and grace that fuels transformation in the life of a believer. Grace allows us to accept forgiveness without performing for it. It also frees us up to live for God without guilt and to extend that same freedom to others through forgiveness.

Many misunderstand grace. They believe God's grace is sufficient to forgive us, but not sufficient to transform us. They preach forgiveness but then place people right back under the burden of performance, telling them that if they simply try harder, they'll finally be transformed. But God changes us in a different way. His love comes first, and our love and obedience follow. "We love because He first loved us."

That is what grace does. The recipient realizes up front that they don't deserve grace, and when he or she receives it, then they adore the One who gave it. That adoration leads to action. Service. Inspired worship offered. God was aiming for our hearts all along. When our hearts are transformed by grace, our lives follow.

This process is not static. It continues throughout our lives. The day we think we've outgrown our need for grace is the day we've forgotten why we needed it in the first place.

Growing in Grace

So why fight it? Shouldn't we believers seek to be merciful and gracious people if for no other reason than we have been recipients of the same? And why wouldn't we want mercy to triumph over judgment?

When we realize that God has forgiven us, it makes us want to show Him our love in return. We truly fall in love when we realize we don't deserve forgiveness and instead deserve death. This realization should help us grow in grace for ourselves and for others.

"But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be glory both now and forever! Amen." **(2 Peter 3:18, NIV)**

Grow in grace? Absolutely! We don't move beyond grace because it is the fluffy stuff. As we grow in grace, we grow deeper into it. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, God's grace continues transforming us into more gracious people.

Growing in grace doesn't mean we seek to abuse grace, God forbid. Growing in grace means realizing that while sin is destructive and serious, God's grace is greater than our failures.

It also means we grow in our ability to give grace to others, even when they don't deserve it, especially when they don't.

> ***The day we think we've outgrown our need for grace is the day we've forgotten why we needed it in the first place.***

I used to think grace was fluff, but guess what was lacking when I thought grace was fluff? Assurance. I would say things like I hope to go to Heaven, but I didn't have the confidence the Scriptures seemed to exude about that hope.

Once I encountered grace, my hope changed from a wish based on me to an anticipation and expectation of eternal life based on Jesus.

Grace broke the shackles of fear that legalism had ingrained in my heart for so long and replaced it with confidence, not in myself but in Jesus. Today I can be found singing the song ***Come Jesus Come*** which is weird because when I was legalistic, I used to secretly dread His return. But the Jesus whose return I once feared is the very Jesus I now can't wait to see face to face.

✦

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Chapter I Almost Didn't Write

✦

I thought this book was finished. Then I went searching for a fact. I wanted to verify a detail about the young Tennessee state trooper you met at the beginning of this book. I found the answer I was looking for. But in the process, I discovered a connection I never knew existed.

Fifty-Five Days

In the fall of 1991, I was a nineteen-year-old college student speeding down Highway 641. Trooper George "Van" Holcomb clocked me at 87 mph. Instead of writing the ticket for my actual speed, he reduced it to 84 mph so I could avoid a more severe penalty. He didn't pretend I was innocent that day. He just showed me grace when I was guilty.

I saw Trooper Holcomb again when I appeared in court. When it was my turn to stand before the judge, I nodded at him. He nodded back. I pleaded guilty. And Grannie, of course, paid my fine.

Afterward, I traveled across the county to visit my paternal grandparents. I mentioned the ticket and told some of my family the trooper's name. They knew him. They told me that if Van had known who I was, he might have let me go. I traveled back to college, and life went on.

Fifty-five days later, Trooper Holcomb was struck and killed while working the scene of a DUI related accident. He was just twenty-eight years old.

When this happened in 1992, my family got word to me that Van had been killed. The news hit me harder than I expected. We had crossed paths only twice, yet I grieved the death of a man I didn't know.

In the years since, I have driven that stretch of Highway 641 hundreds of times. And many times, as I've passed the place where Van stopped me, I've thought about the young trooper who gave me a break that day.

I thought that was the end of the story. I was wrong.

The Rest of the Story

I found what I was looking for and more. Turns out my uncle and Van were part of the same church family. My uncle led the singing for his funeral service.

I spoke to my uncle who recalled a sea of state troopers attending the service. Tennessee Governor Ned McWherter, whom Van had gotten to know while working on the governor's security detail, was in attendance as well.

I also discovered that my cousin had been friends with Van growing up. They rode the school bus together and graduated a year apart in high school. Years before Van pulled me over, he and my cousin had been involved in a serious automobile accident together. Van was fortunate to recover from the accident and eventually train and serve in law enforcement.

I spent months writing a book that included a story about a brief encounter with a man I didn't know. Yet, for thirty-four years, Trooper Holcomb had occupied a small but meaningful place in my memory. He was the trooper who gave me a break. The young officer who showed me kindness. The man whose death only weeks later affected me more deeply than I understood.

And while finishing a book about grace – a book that begins with Van – I was discovering just how closely his story had been connected to my own.

He Didn't Let Me Go

I'm thankful Van didn't let me go. The speed limit was posted. I knew it. I crossed the boundary anyway. The law wasn't the problem. I was. Van's grace didn't make me innocent. It didn't erase the law or make what I had done right.

I stood before the judge. I acknowledged my guilt. There was a penalty to be paid. And Grannie paid it. At nineteen, I thought I was dealing with a speeding ticket. Now, I see something I couldn't see then.

The law exposed my guilt.
Van showed me mercy.
Grannie paid a debt that belonged to me.
And I walked out of the courthouse free.

The Check

There is something else I haven't told you. I still have a copy of the check. Why?

Of all the things I've lost, discarded, or forgotten over the years, why did I keep this? Maybe because long before I understood grace theologically, something about what happened in that courthouse stayed with me.

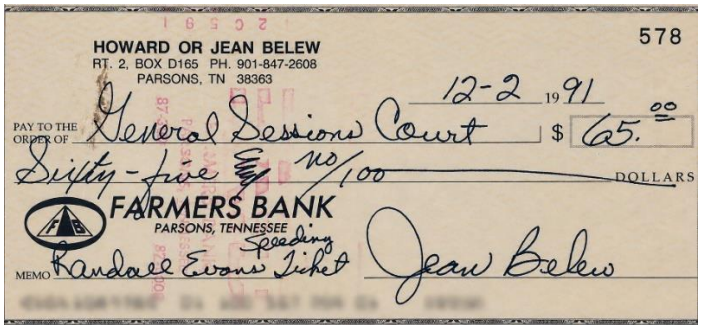
I was guilty. I had broken the law, and there was a penalty to pay. Grannie didn't pretend otherwise. Grace didn't erase the consequences. Grace meant someone who loved me was willing to bear the cost.

Grannie's love for me didn't change because I had failed. She stepped in and paid a debt that belonged to me, then never treated me as though her payment had created a new debt between us. She didn't hold it over my head. She didn't ask me to earn back what she had freely given. But her grace did something more. It changed me.

I told you at the beginning of this book that I didn't want to speed through Decatur County again after that day. Now I understand why. The speed limit hadn't changed. I had. Not because I feared the law more, but because I loved my Grannie. After what she had done for me, I didn't want to disappoint her. That's what grace does.

Grace doesn't make us care less about how we live. Love makes us want to live differently. The law exposed my guilt. Love defined the relationship. Grace determined her response. And grace changed mine.

She paid the debt. I received the gift. I still have the check. She still has my love.



The Place of Grace

Today I think I understand why that day has stayed with me for so long. I have broken more than a traffic law in my life. Sin left me with a debt no grandmother could pay, no good deed could erase, and no amount of law keeping could undo. But Someone who loved me stepped in. Jesus Christ paid what I could never pay.

Grace didn't pretend I was innocent. Grace paid the penalty for my transgression. The law could expose me. It could condemn me. But the law could not climb onto a cross for me and take my place. Jesus did.

Sometimes we recognize grace the moment it arrives. Sometimes it takes thirty-four years to understand what we received. I caught a glimpse of grace in a young trooper who chose kindness when he didn't have to. I caught another glimpse of grace in a grandmother who reached for her checkbook and paid a debt that wasn't hers.

Neither Van nor Grannie knew I would someday write this book. Neither knew their acts of grace would become part of its story. Neither did I. Both were only glimpses of grace. The ultimate Place of Grace isn't a Tennessee highway. It isn't a county courtroom. The Place of Grace is the cross. It's where guilty people come with nothing to offer, nothing to prove, and a debt they could never pay – only to discover that Someone already has.

Grace Is Sufficient

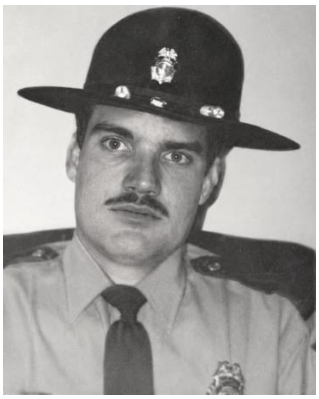
If there is one final lesson God has taught me, it is that His grace is sufficient **(2 Corinthians 12:9)** – not just for salvation, but for life.

God has not given me everything I wanted, and I shudder to think what might have happened if He had. Life has brought disappointments. Some came through no fault of my own. Others were self-inflicted. How did I survive my most difficult days? God's grace.

Grace isn't a genie in a bottle that exists to grant our wishes. God's grace is far greater than that. Sometimes He gives blessings we don't anticipate, meets needs we don't recognize, and provides grace we don't realize we need.

The invitation to The Place of Grace remains open. Grace has been God's story from the beginning. I now realize it has always been a part of mine. My prayer is that it becomes a part of yours.

So, come. Receive it in faith. Rest in it. Pass it on.



Trooper George "Van" Holcomb
1963-1992

About the Author



Randall Evans is a former pastor and the creator of Pester the Pastor, a faith-based ministry dedicated to providing biblical encouragement, practical counsel, and a Christ-centered community for those seeking to grow in their faith.

After serving in ministry for nearly twenty years, life took him down an unexpected path. Broken by life and rebuilt by grace, Randall has experienced firsthand the restoring power of God's mercy.

Today, he is passionate about sharing the story of Jesus Christ and the life-changing message of God's amazing grace. Through his writing and ministry, he seeks to help people exchange fear for faith, performance for promise, and striving for rest in the finished work of Christ.

If this book has encouraged you and you would like faith-based counsel, additional faith-based content, or a faith-based community, please visit www.pesterthepastor.org.