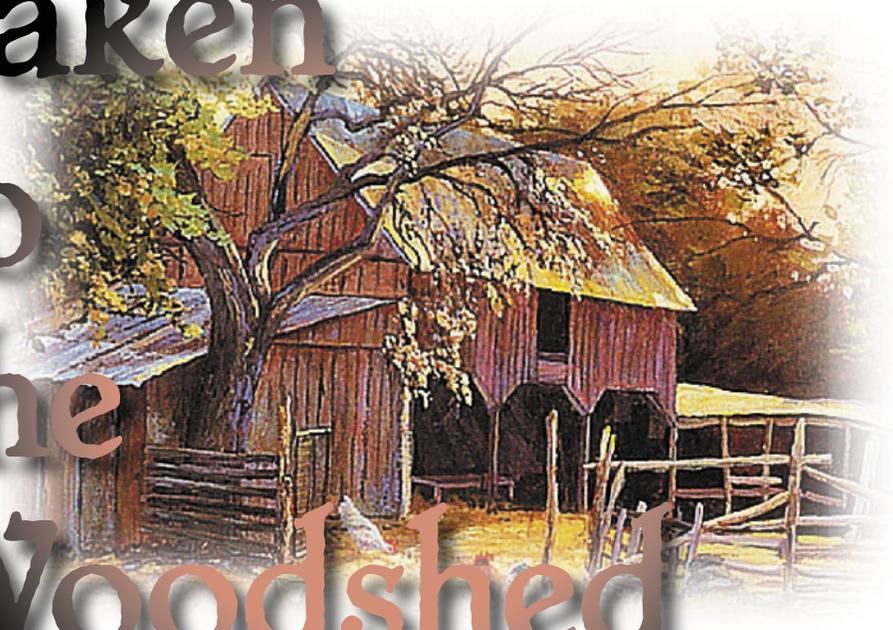


Taken to the Woodshed



Opening night of my musical, *Crown Him with Glory*, had been a solid performance. Linda and I, playing Peter and his wife “Rachel,” worked together with a confident rhythm, and the characters were believable. The Holy Spirit was in attendance and was enabling our individual performances. We were relying on Him, and it showed.

During the week between the first and second performances, however, I went about my business pretty much ignoring God, and thus approached the Friday night performance with an attitude of “well, I can just check in with Him the night of the performance and everything will be squared up.”

When I went into that evening and did check in with Him, instead of being revived and energized, I came away feeling as if the Father was saying to me: “Listen boy, you spent the week taking advantage of My grace—and now, at the last minute, you come to Me with that smug, off-hand prayer?” So I felt that I was on my own that night—that it would have to be *acting* that carried the performance, and not the power of the Spirit working through me.

In that second performance I did my job and acted well. I’m sure that no one in the audience was the wiser about the turmoil inside. But during the evening I could not feel the Spirit working through me. God had caught me trying to do it on my own, and so He had determined to let me *complete* the journey on my own. And all night I knew I would be having a real “woodshed” session with the Lord once it was over.

Hay and Straw

Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If

any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:12-15)

Driving home alone that evening, I sobbed my confession, ashamed that I had treated the Lord—and His grace—so shabbily. And I wept for the lost blessings, expecting that my work in the second performance had been wasted and would be of no account in the Kingdom. Because it had been done without the hand of God, on my own strength alone, surely it would be burned up with the rest of the chaff, counting for nothing in the eyes of the Lord.

Then on the following Sunday morning, as I was packing up our lighting equipment and props, a member of the church stepped backstage and touched me, through his words and countenance, with the gracious hand of a forgiving God. He shared with me how he had brought an unsaved friend to the second performance, that this friend would not consider showing up for a Sunday morning service, but had agreed to attend the musical for Easter. And for maybe the first time in his life, this friend saw the plaster saints of the Bible come to life before his eyes. He could see and hear this person Peter and—more important—see that even though Peter was just as weak and flawed as himself, God loved him anyway.

To learn that a stranger in need of the Lord was impacted in such a positive way by that second performance was like the hand of God coming down out of heaven. It was as if He had placed His arms around me and said: "It's all right. I forgive you. Don't worry, even in your weakness and pride I can use you." The message this dear brother unwittingly brought to me was that our failings are never larger than God's grace.

An Inspid Grace

Out of all of His attributes and qualities, God's grace may just be the most precious to the descendants of Adam. By His *saving* grace we are rescued from an eternity in hell; by His *forgiving* grace—His daily graciousness—we are sustained through moments of arrogance and stupidity. Perhaps no other of God the Father's limitless qualities touches us so personally, so deeply as His grace.

The "God" of so many in this world is one of inspid detachment. Because their concept of God is so simplistic, and his grace so all-encompassing (why else would the hymn "Amazing Grace" have become the unofficial anthem of virtually every celebrity death and/or public tragedy?) they are practically struck dumb when faced with the reality of His true personality. "How could a loving God have done this?" they cry in their ignorance.

The late Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote eloquently of "cheap grace"—that "grace we bestow on ourselves,"

the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.
(*The Cost of Discipleship*)

Those words were first published in 1937, shortly before the beginning of the second World War in 1939. During the ensuing fifty years, I fear grace has gained little in price, but its stock has plummeted in value. Grace to this world is not cheap, but worthless. Grace is bubble gum, it is cotton candy: sweet and rotting to the teeth.

Real Grace

God displayed immeasurable grace toward me when I took advantage of Him. When

I took credit for the success of the first performance, and thus felt it unnecessary to consult with Him for the second, He could have upbraided me in any number of unpleasant ways. But though He had every right to, He displayed, instead, grace. But it was *real* grace, not the sickening sweet grace imagined by this world. It wasn't cotton candy, but fresh vegetables.

God's grace is full-bodied, tangible, real. It is sober, realistic, clear-minded. After my arrogant disregard for the part He played in that first performance, the world would have had the Almighty pat me lovingly on my shoulder, purring, "There, there. You poor thing. Yes, I understand; you've been under a lot of stress lately. Maybe a vacation—even a sabbatical. Yes, you need some time off! You've been under so much stress." Instead, God took me firmly by the shoulders and said, "Now listen, I will never forsake you, but your behavior is unacceptable. Because I love you, we're going to have to hash this out."

So we hashed it out. And it was painful. But through it all—both during the chastisement and after—God's limitless, forgiving grace surrounded me. He did not abandon me to my bad manners, nor did He excuse them. As a loving, attentive Father, His grace was demonstrated through discipline.

And that is *real* grace.



Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock. Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. It is costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies the sinner. Above all it is costly because it cost God the life of His Son; above all it is grace because God did not reckon His Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered Him up for us. Costly grace is the Incarnation of God. (Bonhoeffer)