

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is the gift of God;*
not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

Ephesians 2:8-9

All of Grace

IN THE MOVIE *HAWAII* (1966), based on the James A. Michener novel of the same name, the story is told of a zealous missionary from New England going to the Hawaiian islands to save the “pagan heathen.” But the man (played by Max von Sydow) is so strident, so unbendingly legalistic that he repels more people than his preaching attracts. For him the Bible is a bludgeon with which to browbeat the prospective converts into Christianity, rather than a message of hope in the good news Christ offers. In the face of such abusive preaching, ultimately even his own wife rebels against his dictates.

In the native island culture at that time, the early nineteenth century, it was perfectly acceptable for a brother and sister to be married. The queen is married to her brother, and they love each other deeply. But the missionary insists that before she can be a Christian she must send away her husband/brother, calling their marriage a “mortal sin.” He says to her, “You will not be in a state of grace unless you do this.” Finally, on her deathbed, she sends her husband away. Once she has done this, the missionary baptizes her and assures her that *now* she will go to heaven.



Years ago Linda and I did some work for the care center where my mother was a

resident. Though the work was voluntary, without thought of remuneration on our part, apparently the staff considered it worthy of reward, and afterward gave us a collection of “gifts.” But those gifts were the result of work we had done; if we had not performed the work, we never would have received the gifts. So, in reality, they were not gifts, but payment.

The grace of God does not work that way. It is based on the work of Christ, not the work of man. The common perception is that the individual believes—that is, makes a step of faith—in Christ, and as a result, God extends to the new believer His grace. But this sequence still means that we did something to earn, to deserve His grace—just like Linda and I earned those gifts from the care center.

In reality God demonstrates His grace long before we believe anything about Him.

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.

2 Timothy 1:8-9

Even our response to His call is made possible by His work in our hearts—what

is called *regeneration*, or the moment in which we are born again. Jesus, speaking to Nicodemus, explained it as being “born of the Spirit.”

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

John 3:5-6

In God’s grace, before we have done anything at all, He softens our heart to the message of the gospel, making it possible for us to respond in faith. Absent that work of the Holy Spirit, we would remain lost.

Contrary to the teaching of that missionary in the film *Hawaii*, changes in a life occur as the *result* of God’s grace, not as the means to obtain it.



*All that I was, my sin, my guilt,
My death, was all my own;
All that I am I owe to Thee,
My gracious God, alone.*

Horatius Bonar

