

Reflections by the Pond

THE WRITINGS OF DAVID S LAMPEL


Seasons of

Grace

We cheapen God's grace, and the blood of Christ, when we forget that it is real sin in our life that has been forgiven. Christ did not suffer and die for "almost-sin"; He did not die for people who were "essentially good." He died for real, dark, despicable actions and thoughts—as well as our inherent sin nature. He died for people who were depraved from birth.

Absolute sin requires absolute grace. Because there is nothing halfway about our sin, there is nothing halfway about God's forgiveness. He takes us as we are—complete in our sin—without reservation, without condition save the one: Jesus Christ.

Broken Windows



WHEN I WAS BUT A YOUNG LAD, I spent the balance of one summer with my Uncle Floyd and Aunt Estelle in Beloit, Wisconsin. Three distinct memories from this summer remain with me. The first is the memory of seeing my very first (and, as it turned out, only) major league baseball game—the Chicago Cubs vs. the Milwaukee Braves. The second, rather unpleasant memory is of scaling and gutting my first fish.

The third, and most painful memory of all is of breaking Uncle Floyd and Aunt Estelle's back porch window.

The transgression occurred after we had returned home from that momentous baseball game. I was out back, tossing a newly-acquired ball against the side of the barn. Only, in my youthful imagination, I was really

standing on the mound, pitching for the Braves. My pitch fell squarely inside the imagined strike-zone and ricocheted back into my glove. I whipped around to throw the man out at first and the ball sailed unpleasantly through that large, expensive window.

Uncle Floyd was not at all impressed with my athletic prowess. His more pressing concern was for the eventual replacement of the window and the immediate warming of my backside. My solution to the inevitable was avoidance; if I could successfully avoid my uncle, I might avoid his punishment.

Uncle Floyd was a colorful character—especially for a young boy. He smoked big smelly cigars, had a cauliflower ear as a souvenir from his youthful boxing days, and could pepper his conversation with words I never heard in Sunday School. And, not unexpectedly, completing the package was his sometimes-explosive temper.



Hauled back by the scruff of my neck to the scene of my crime, I felt a chill pass down through my spine. Was this to be my day of reckoning? Was this to be my last day breathing the fresh air of freedom? Was this to be my last day on earth?

Uncle Floyd had a right to be angry with me.

So does my heavenly Father.

The difference is grace.

Who is a God like You, who pardons
iniquity

And passes over the rebellious act of the
remnant of His possession?

He does not retain His anger forever,
Because He delights in unchanging love.

Micah 7:18

Unmerited Favor

Too many Christians diminish the scope of God's grace by limiting it to His one-time grace exhibited at the cross. It is true that we came to Christ the first time utterly devoid of worth; there was nothing at all within us that would merit salvation. Because of this, our salvation required God's grace—His unmerited kindness or favor. But why would we think that after

that moment of first grace we henceforth now merit His favor?

The relationship of grace does not change. Before we came to Christ we did not deserve God's grace, and after even decades of walking with Him, we remain undeserving.

An understanding of God's continuing, tireless, inexhaustible grace is the foundation of our relationship with Him. For we will inevitably pass through times when our heart grows cold to Him. Weighed down by the gravity of flesh, we become selfish, short-tempered, arrogant, perhaps even rebellious. When we return to God in submission and confession, acknowledging Him as Lord, acknowledging our sins before Him, what will be His response? How will the Lord answer our confession?

Grace.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Therefore let us draw near with

confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16

Embracing an Imperfect Soul
Grace. Let the word linger on the tongue. Let it roll and tumble around in your mind.

G-r-a-c-e.

Don't let go of it too soon. Caress it, and let it caress you, for grace is a perfect God's warm, forgiving embrace of an imperfect soul. Grace is God putting His arm around us, looking the believer straight in the eye, and saying, "I know who you are. I know what you are. I know all about your problems, your frustrations, your failures. I know it all. And I love you anyway."

Grace is God saying, "Jesus."

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus.

1 Corinthians 1:3-4

After our submission and confession,

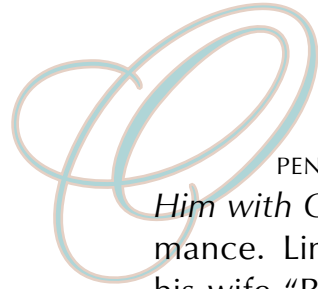
when our communion with Jesus Christ has been restored, all else fades into insignificance. The press of deadlines, the harried life of parenthood, tension with co-workers, personal failings that bludgeon our spirit—all these and more become manageable when they are shared with the One who envelops us in His grace.

In the eyes of Jesus we have broken many windows. We have stepped away from His righteousness, we have gone our own way, turned our back on Him. When we do return to Him, hat in hand, He has every right to be angry. He has every right to drag us back to the scene of our transgression and rub our nose in it.

But, in His mercy, He doesn't.
And *that* is grace.



His Gracious Discipline



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, just before the performance, 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?” Because of this 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, so He had determined to let me *complete* the journey on my own. And all night during that second performance 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 His 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 Insipid 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 insipid 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.

(from 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 years, I fear grace has gained little in price, but its stock has plummeted in value. Grace in *this* world is not cheap, but worthless. Such 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.

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.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

The Curse of Free Will



RECEIVED MY FIRST BIKE on my twelfth birthday. On the first day with my new bike, I rode it prudently, riding in genteel circuits around the block. But soon I was jumping the curb, launching myself off graded slopes and banks, careening dangerously close to vehicles both stationary and moving. In no time, instead of obeying my father to use the kickstand when dismounting, I had adopted the habit of leaping from my trusty steed while still moving, thereby letting it slam and scrape into the ground with a most satisfying crash.

Curiously, as my reckless riding habits increased, so did the cuts and scrapes and bruises upon my person. When I rode sensibly, I remained astride the seat in an upright position; when I rode with reckless abandon, I paid a price for my antics—usually with physical pain.

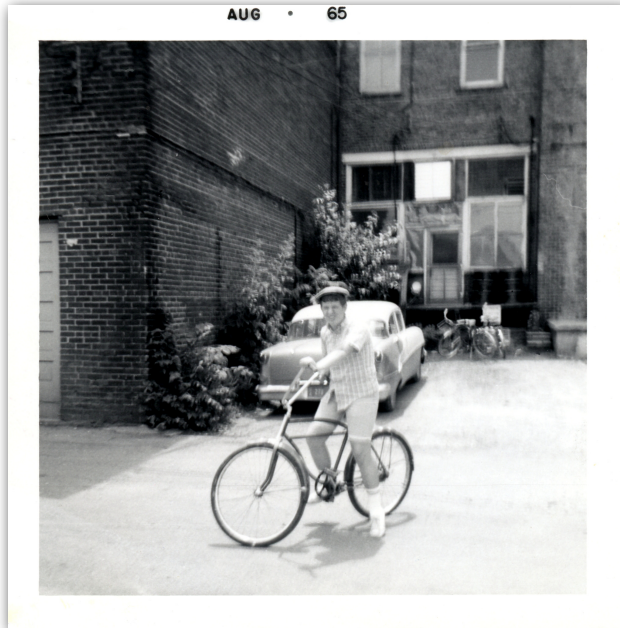
Now when evening came David arose

from his bed and walked around on the roof of the king's house, and from the roof he saw a woman bathing; and the woman was very beautiful in appearance. So David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" David sent messengers and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her...

2 Samuel 11:2-4a

The curse of free will is that we are free to do really stupid things. Sometimes we fall down purely by accident; it was never our intention. But very often we fall down because we have purposely put ourselves into a position where falling down is likely.

Nathan then said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of



Saul... Why have you despised the word of the LORD by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.”

2 Samuel 12:7, 9-10

Living under grace—under the blood of Christ—means that we will not die apart from God because of our foolish decisions to sin, but living under God’s justice means that we will forever bear the scars of our sin. God’s forgiving grace does not nullify the lingering effects of our wrong decisions.

*O to grace how great a debtor
Daily I'm constrained to be!
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter,
Bind my wandering heart to Thee:
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love;
Here's my heart, O take and seal it;
Seal it for Thy courts above.*

Robert Robinson

The Refreshing



HERE WHERE THE IMMEDIATE neighbors have four legs, there are two bright moments in every year. The first is that glorious splash of warming spring that shakes off the long, winter doldrums, and the second is the refreshing arrival of crisp, dry autumn after a summer of withering heat and humidity. These two moments revive and cleanse not only the world about us, but our lagging spirits as well. Month after month of either oppressive heat or dull, aching cold can slowly beat us down, suppressing the brighter spirit that dwells within.

Months have passed since the first fresh buds of spring heralded new growth after the winter hush. After the dry brittle cold of the white season, even the damp heat that crept unevenly close was a welcome visitor. But the visitor stayed—stayed well-past the point of being a polite guest. It abused our generous nature, settled in and made itself at home.

Now the fragrant greens no longer herald fresh growth, but, old and tired, have joined to feed and be fed with the hovering dampness that pervades the land, the house—and the clammy sheets upon which one seeks relief.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Ezekiel 36:25-26 NIV

Then a new day breaks wide with a cool breeze from out of the north. Suddenly the surrounding greens are once again friends. No longer in conspiracy with the cloying damp, they are now kissed with the fresh clean air that heralds the approach of autumn. Trees gone long

without rain, drop their leaves to litter the crackling grass with the dry musk of new mulch.

Through the Prism of Grace

There are those who see life through the heavy mask of unrelieved sin—oppressive, mind-clouding, unrelenting muck that heaves the soul back down into the damp earth from which it was born. Philosophy does not conquer their frowning outlook; even their joy is muted by the emptiness of their heart. Discouraged, pessimistic, their days are a clouded blur, the distant horizon shrouded by the heat-shimmering mirage of depressed resignation.

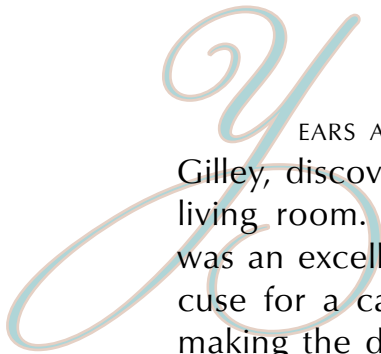
There are others, however, who see life through the colorful prism of unfettered grace—the fresh breeze that blows cool and dry, carrying within it wisps of fragrant hope. Their feet tread lightly, springing easily upon the soil that holds no claim upon them. Their outlook is clean and open, their joy deep and real. Each new day bears new hope, new opportunity. Their horizon is sparkling as crystalline glass, near, and as certain as yesterday. They see each today through the hope and promise of tomorrow.

This is the refreshment of God's Spirit. Day after day, month after month we are oppressed by the spirit of this world, submitting to the doldrums, living in the smog that we eventually come to believe is clean air.

But some times God's nature reminds us that it is all false, all a muck-coated sham meant to numb us to the true brightness of His refreshing Spirit. So we come to Him, bathing in His restorative grace to cleanse away the foul muck that has for too long numbed us to His presence.



Letting Us Struggle



YEARS AGO OUR FEISTY TOMBOY FELINE, Gilley, discovered a small mouse in the living room. Now, as a mouser, Gilley was an excellent pointer, but a poor excuse for a carnivore. She was good at making the discovery, but lousy at making the kill. So the little varmint was in no immediate danger.

In those days we had such occasions down to a regular drill: Linda would run to find her leather gloves while I would keep an eye on the critter and move whatever furniture was in the way of capture. Mom, who was living with us then, would sit clenched in her chair, praying that the ferocious beast wouldn't skitter up her legs. In the midst of all this turmoil, our three girls would sit in peaceful repose, watching us humans do their work for them.

It took only about ten minutes for us to get the frightened little mouse cornered under the desk by the front door. Trapped

in the enclosed area, Linda quickly had him captured between her hands. She carried him outside, to a point well away from the house, near the bushes alongside the drive. There she just loosened her grip, and slightly separated her fingers, giving the little critter the chance to believe he had orchestrated his own escape—which he did, at last scurrying to safety in the bushes.

Maturing

“But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves. I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. As You sent Me into

the world, I also have sent them into the world. For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth.”

John 17:13-19

Father God can do anything He likes. He could have let mankind remain perfect in the Garden of Eden, but, instead, He let Eve and Adam give in to temptation. He could have, with the greatest of ease, simply bestowed perfect holiness upon everyone on earth, but, instead, He accomplished it one person at a time, through that person’s belief in His sacrificed Son.

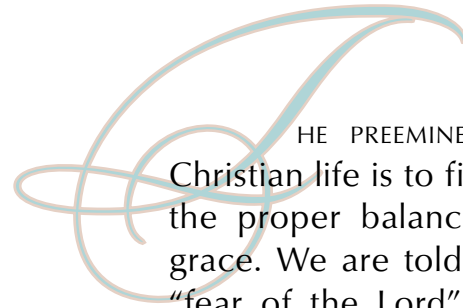
And God could have lifted out every believer, letting them come along with Jesus when He returned to the safety and peace of heaven, thereby saving them all from the temptations and trials of living on earth. But, instead, God left them behind, to live and hurt and struggle through life.

Oh, the believer is still cradled in the palm of His hands. Father God is still supreme: He possesses the power to squash us like bugs, and He possesses the mercy to free us from every imaginable trial. But, instead of doing either, He

simply cradles us, remaining near, while He lets us mature, and grow more dependent on Him, as we pass through the struggles of normal living.



Forgetting to Fear



THE PREEMINENT CHALLENGE of the Christian life is to find, embrace and live the proper balance between fear and grace. We are told in Proverbs that the “fear of the Lord” is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom, and that it prolongs life. Luke, writing in The Acts, tells us that the fear of the Lord is healthy and beneficial for the corporate church, as well.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.

Acts 9:31

We have sufficient evidence that a fear of God is not just proper, but that it also makes the transition from Old Covenant to New: it is not limited to Jews under the law, but is right and good for Christians

today. And let us not delude ourselves by rounding off all the sharp corners of this uncomfortable word. It means just that. Yes, it can refer to less-uncomfortable respect or reverence, but it also can mean alarm or fright—even terror and dread.

To fear the Lord means far more than just having a healthy respect for Him. I have that for my pastor, for our church elders and deacons, for my doctor. But I do not “fear” any of them.

My fear of the Lord keeps our relative positions in alignment. He is God, and I am not. He is without bounds or limitations, but I am restricted by physical laws, and the inherent weakness of my fallen nature.

But if I let this healthy fear go to seed, if it morphs into an overwhelming, quaking terror of my God, then it has become unhealthy. My fear of Him should draw me *toward* Him, not send me screaming from Him. When the blinding power of

His might—that of which my God is capable—becomes in my mind less a strong rock to which I run for safety, than a hateful wrath directed to consume me, then I am dangerously out of alignment.

I need grace.

I speak of God's grace, not human graciousness of holding a door open for someone, or pulling out a dining room chair for my wife. God's grace is the product of His Son's atoning sacrifice for our sins, and thus untainted by human resolve. His grace is God giving us what we do not—and cannot—merit. In truth we merit only His all-consuming, hateful wrath. Instead of that, because of Christ's sacrifice, He offers His grace. The death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ stands in place of the blood and death and eternal damnation we should rightly suffer for our sin.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

Romans 3:23-24

Immersed in the grace, and gracious behavior, of Father God, the Christian can,

over time, become anesthetized to His unapproachable holiness. Immersed in grace we forget to fear. The mistake we make is imagining we must choose between the two; we think that in fearing holy God we must relinquish His grace, or that by living under His grace there is no more need of fear. But He meant for both to be qualities in every believer.

If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.

1 Peter 1:17-19

God's grace should ignite thanksgiving and praise in the heart of every believer. His incomprehensible love for us should not numb us to His other-worldly majesty, but fan into flame a realization of—and fear of—His immense, all-encompassing power.

Only an utterly holy, omnipotent God could manifest such tender grace.

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