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The Outcome of Grace

It's been ten years since the fateful day when the world I embraced changed forever. My husband, the man I love and respect more than any other man, the tender-hearted father of our five children, the much beloved founding pastor of our 14,000 member church, and the highly esteemed president of the 30 million member National Association of Evangelicals had been accused of a moral failure. The ensuing scandal shocked and perplexed the lives of not only my husband and me and our five children, but also our church, our friends, and many, many others from around the globe. News agencies blasted the report of the "fall" of a well-known evangelical pastor that competed for lead story with the capture of the brutal Iraqi Dictator, Saddam Hussein (*BBC News* front page headline; *CNN Transcripts*).

We were devastated as we were ripped from the comforts and support of our church and community. With reporters camping out in front of our home and dogging our every move, a friend offered us solace at a secluded beach home where we were left alone to try to make sense of it all—the scandal, the loss of our church and the separation from many of our friends, and our now tainted reputations. Everything we had invested our lives in—the 28 years of ministry, our friends, family, and our community—were now seen through a different lens, and our history, which we had so sincerely and genuinely built, was beginning to be re-written in the minds of those we'd loved and trusted.

Within a few days, friends either went silent or succumbed to the rumor campaign. The few that ventured to speak to Ted in the months that followed found him wounded and angry and

used that experience to fuel the gossip. I appreciated hearing about one friend who, when asked years later by another friend whether Ted was still angry, responded with “Wouldn’t you be?” He had willingly confessed and repented of his wrongdoing. He had asked church leaders for their help. Now it seemed many in the Church-world were inept at handling the pain of their brother or the hard questions he was asking.

I asked, “Where are the fathers? Where are those with wisdom and understanding, those who could help a brother in his hour of need, who could gently and humbly help him back onto the right path?” (see *Holy Bible: New Living Translation*, Gal. 6.1).

Courageous Grace

I’d often heard my husband say in the years prior, “One of the greatest tests of our character is how we respond to someone else’s sin.” When other people fall short of doing what we and they know to be good and right, when they suffer loss or shame, or when they hurt us, how we respond speaks volumes about our character and the condition of our own hearts. We may find that we possess tremendous ability to encourage others in their time of need, to heal and restore, if only we choose to do so. Untold lives have been changed, reprobates have become saints, and cowards have become heroes—all because of the response of some kindhearted soul in another’s moment of trial.

We all know the story of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo’s classic, *Les Misérables*. In short, an ex-convict becomes a benevolent mayor who employs the poor, rescues a dying prostitute, and provides for her orphaned daughter—all because an elderly bishop refused to press charges against the ex-convict for stealing his silver. Instead he covered the thief’s sin with compassion and protected him from his accusers. This wise bishop turned the ex-convict’s life around by

encouraging him to become a new man and offered him these kind words: “My brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good” (Hugo 161).

A failing student makes the honor roll because a caring teacher sacrifices her time to tutor him after school.

A parolee becomes a star employee because a kind employer risks giving him a job.

An addict is given a warm meal, a safe bed, and hope for a better future by an empathetic halfway-house worker.

We’ve all heard these heartwarming stories. They inspire grace in all of us.

I used to think extending grace was relatively easy. I used to equate it with simple kindness extended to another in an hour of need—like God’s kindness and forgiveness which not only redeem us, but also empower us to get back up when we’ve fallen.

But in 2006, as I sat alone on that Florida beach under an overcast sky, I had an epiphany about grace that shattered all my naive notions. My family was facing a dark time due to my husband’s moral failure, and the devastation was palpable for all of us. During the initial days following the shocking revelation, I went on long walks on the beach until I was sure I was out of view of any beachcombers. Once I secured a private spot, I would plant myself in the sand, feel the magnitude of my pain, and sink deep into my own thoughts. A storm of accusations was raining down on us. I felt weakened by the torrent. But I believed those near and dear to me needed me more than ever. On this particular day, my predicament became clear.

Grace isn’t easy after all. It challenges the core of our character and uncovers what we truly believe about God, about ourselves, and about others.

Forgiveness is tough. Sometimes it requires painful sacrifice.

And, extending mercy isn't the easy way out, as some people who associate it with weakness suggest. On the contrary, it often demands unusual strength.

I knew my epiphany that day was a call to courage to stand with what I believe about God, about the teachings of the Bible, and about marriage, family, and friendships. This was my test to reveal what I truly believe, and I determined on that day that our healing, reconciliation, and restoration were worth the challenge, the sacrifice, the fortitude—and even the pain.

If you're experiencing anything similar to what I was as I sat on that desolate beach under a darkened sky, you know full well the pain I'm talking about. Maybe someone has wronged you and betrayed your trust. As a result, you've felt the brew of anger, bitterness, and confusion swirling deep inside you for months—maybe for years. Extending grace to someone who has wronged you can be hard work.

Or maybe you're the one in need of grace. (The truth is, we all need it.) Perhaps you have strayed somewhere along the path of life. Others—maybe even those who once called themselves friends—are accusing you. Or perhaps you're hiding secret shame. You may think that if others really knew the truth about you, they would reject you. Your own soul sits in judgment over you. Learning to forgive yourself is sometimes the hardest work of all.

Here is what became clear to me that day: offering grace and mercy would take every ounce of strength and courage I had, but reconciliation for us was worth it. It was worth the pain.

As I contemplated these ideas that day on the beach, I felt as if a beacon of light had broken through the gloom surrounding me and illumined my clouded mind. I began to understand the plight we were facing as common to the human experience. We all come to a point in our lives when we recognize our own fallibility. None of us is immune. Some of us suffer with debilitating physical sickness and disease, some with brain dysfunction, others with

destructive behaviors or addictions. **But isn't it our human condition that makes the gospel—the mercy and grace of God—so meaningful to all of us?** Suddenly, on the beach that day, I no longer felt weak or hopeless. I felt my heart lift and my spirit fill with resolve. I could see clearly what had to be done to bring healing and restoration to those I love, and I believed that everything we've taught and said we believed about our faith, our family, and friendships depended on it. In that hour, my epiphany became a call to courageously demonstrate the grace and love the Bible identifies as the outward expressions of our faith.

Jesus and the Immoral Woman

John the beloved disciple tells the story of a woman who was caught in the act of adultery. When the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees brought her to Jesus, they asked him if she should be stoned for her sin according to the laws of Moses. Their intent was not only to condemn the woman, but also to trap Jesus so they could validate their judgments against him for breaching their Jewish customs and laws. I can only imagine the fear and embarrassment the woman felt as perhaps hundreds of accusing eyes bore down on her. No doubt some in the crowd were aligning themselves with the religious leaders and were readying themselves to pick up stones and shout insults.

On one side crouched the woman stained by sin, shielding herself from an impending onslaught of rocks and stones. On the other stood her accusers—the religious leaders and the crowd trained to follow their cues.

In the middle . . . was Jesus.

Everyone watched to see what he would do.

Jesus knew the woman's sins. He also knew the expectations of everyone present. He responded by simply stooping down and writing in the dust with his finger.

We don't know what he wrote. Some speculate that he began listing the sins of those present (Barclay 4). What I appreciate most, however, is the way Jesus appeared unruffled in the face of the accusations and intended entrapment. His goal was to point out to the accusers that not one of them was in a position to judge this woman. His response to them was, "All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" (John. 8.7).

The Bible goes on to say,

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. 8.9-11)

Jesus refused to yield to the religious leaders' demand that he condemn the woman—instead, he offered her grace.

I've read this story many times. But I had never before experienced it the way I did when I sat alone on the beach that day. I realized that those dark days were my moment "in the middle." I had a choice. Was I going to stand with the broken one—in this case, my husband—or was I going to join his accusers and the people who were ready to throw stones?

For me, the choice wasn't that difficult. I had a long history with Ted. We'd built a marriage, a family, and a great church together. I knew he loved me and was himself heartbroken and ashamed. I knew he was earnestly seeking restoration and reconciliation. And I was

determined not to let his sin negate everything good I knew to be true of him. I also knew it was my opportunity to put into practice all that I'd said I believe as a Christian.

The challenge I faced was that in choosing to stand *with* my husband, I was going to have to stand *against* the tide of condemnation that was swelling against him. I knew I would need courage to stand beside him as the arrows, the stones, and the accusations rained down heavily upon him. I had to be prepared to withstand the brunt of those attacks. And I'll be honest—they tore at the fiber of my soul.

Yet it took this public scandal, this loss of dignity and position, this stripping away of the life I'd embraced, for me to grasp the truth that God extends his grace freely toward people we humans are prone to condemn. He doesn't withhold it as we humans sometimes do. We may fear that extending grace will dissociate us from our in-crowd, or that the recipient of our grace will take advantage of us and will fail us, hurt us, or embarrass us again. But God does not withhold his grace in this manner. Instead, he pours out his grace time and again, knowing full well that we humans are weak and will continue to stumble and to fail. Yet he extends his grace all the same.

Nothing New Under the Sun

We have only to look at the Bible greats to find other examples of God's response to human failings. Think of God's patience with Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Moses, Miriam, his people the Israelites, David, Peter, Paul, and many other biblical figures. Their journeys consisted of monumental successes and catastrophic failures, yet the significance of their stories was God's interaction with them in the midst of their human struggles and imperfections. God did not forsake them. He was not so disgusted with their sins that he abandoned them. Instead, he

continued to guide them and draw them back to himself and a renewed revelation of his love for them, like the good father in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke. 15.11-32).

I experienced this grace alone on that desolate beach that day. I felt God draw near to me, and all the way to the core of my being, I felt safe with him. I knew he could turn our present trials into something good and I believed he had purpose for us beyond our human frailty. But I was also keenly aware that our trials were not yet over.

Following My Epiphany

After returning home from the beach house, Ted and I were met with an onslaught of letters and emails. Many were meant to encourage us, but they provided little relief from the reality that we were being ripped from our church and the people we loved in a way that was contrary to everything we had previously believed and practiced. We knew others could not understand the depths of what we were experiencing because we were kept silent as the rumors spread. As a result, the Christian platitudes others sent to us that had once served as a healing balm for minor troubles, no longer sufficed. **I was looking for those who would boldly and publicly take the same faith position I had—fathers of the faith who understood and could apply timeworn, biblical wisdom to our situation.** Finally, I found solace in the writings of the 16th century monk and father of the Reformation—Martin Luther. I turned to his writings and found a comrade in spirit—like the great Apostle Paul, he had discovered the grace and truth of the gospel.

I contemplated the fact that both the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther had been zealous in their religious service to God early in their lives when they assumed they could earn holiness and right standing with God by their own efforts. In their own words they described their former “merits” mentality. Paul wrote, “Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts

[to achieve godliness], I have even more!” (Phil. 3.4). And Luther wrote “I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I” (Bainton 45). Yet sometime later both Paul and Luther gained a revelation of the grace and truth of the gospel—that salvation rests on faith in Jesus, not on our own merits—and it totally transformed their hearts, lives, and ministries. In fact, this revelation so impacted each of them that they devoted the remainder of their lives spreading its message, even at great risk to their own lives.

As I read Luther’s writings, I appreciated his temerity and found that it resonated with the raw, earthiness of my pain. I also loved his confidence in the gospel and was heartened by hischutzpah in his letter to his dear friend, George Spalatin:

It seems to me, my dear Spalatin, that you have still but a limited experience in battling against sin, an evil conscience, the Law, and the terrors of death. Or Satan has removed from your vision and memory every consolation which you have read in the Scriptures. In days when you were not afflicted, you were well fortified and knew very well what the office and benefits of Christ are. To be sure, the devil has now plucked from your heart all the beautiful Christian sermons concerning the grace and mercy of God in Christ by which you used to teach, admonish, and comfort others with a cheerful spirit and a great, buoyant courage. Or it must surely be that heretofore you have been only a trifling sinner, conscious only of paltry and insignificant faults and frailties.

Therefore my faithful request and admonition is that you join our company and associate with us, who are real, great, and hard-boiled sinners. **You must by no means make Christ to seem paltry and trifling to us, as though He could be our Helper only when**

we want to be rid from imaginary, nominal, and childish sins [emphasis added]. No, no! That would not be good for us. He must rather be a Savior and Redeemer from real, great, grievous, and damnable transgressions and iniquities, yea, from the very greatest and most shocking sins; to be brief, from all sins added together in a grand total. (qtd. in Brown 69)

I relished a similar confidence in the gospel of God's grace, and discovered it capable of healing my broken soul and buoying me through my darkest days. It enabled the reconciliation I sought with my husband and with others in the church who believed as I did. And it unveiled God's ongoing purposes for my husband and me.

My Return

Several years later, I returned to the secluded beach where I first experienced my epiphany. I was working on the final pages of a book about what I had learned from my experience when I received an unexpected gift from heaven. In a "turn of events," some dear friends were unable to use their vacation time-share, so they offered it to Ted and me. The time frame worked for us, and after a remarkable series of trial-and-error attempts, we secured a beachfront hotel not far from the spot where I had years earlier experienced my epiphany.

It didn't even occur to us how close we would be to that beach, until, on our way from the airport to our vacation villa, we passed a sign pointing to the very beach where we had spent those distraught days following our crisis. This was our first time back in that area. It had been six years, almost to the day, since we first arrived there, fearful and heartbroken.

I turned to Ted and said, "I have to go back."

He was reluctant. His memories of that time were filled with sorrow and pain. Mine were too. But I felt a spiritual fervor about setting foot on that beach again—God had brought me here for a reason, and I knew it.

After a few days of writing and resting in our cozy beach haven, I asked Ted to drive with me back to that beach where my sorrows had given way to my epiphany.

He understood that it was important to me to return, so he agreed. When we arrived, we located the secluded house where we had stayed and the foliage-shaded trail I had walked every day to the beach. After we parked the car, we strolled the sandy path.

Soon the leafy boughs gave way to a beautiful sunny beach. It looked different from the dismal spot I remembered. I was surprised to find a clean, straight shoreline, and soft, white sand. The beach of my memories was darkened by cloudy skies. It had a scraggly, uneven shoreline, and the sand was difficult to walk on and had felt hard under my feet due to the abundance of shells left by the tide. I kept wondering whether it really was the same beach, but I knew it had to be—I recognized some of the houses and a few landmarks.

Ted and I walked quietly, hand in hand, letting the rushing tide splash over our feet. I was deep in thought, trying to recreate some of the memories in my mind, while Ted, no doubt, tried to forget any that emerged in his, focusing instead on the beauty of the moment. This was a new day for him. He had put the past behind him and was happy to be moving forward. As we approached the area where I had years earlier sunk into the sand and my sorrows to contemplate our plight, Ted suggested I go on alone while he planted himself in the sand by the shore to watch the waves.

Soon I arrived at the place where I'd experienced my epiphany. As I knelt in the sand behind a mound of sea grass, I expected to feel or hear something from God that would make

this divine appointment meaningful. But what happened next came from deep within me. The words welled up as my mind raced over the blessings in my life.

Thank you, God.

I said it over and over in my mind. *Thank you, God. Thank you.* Soon the words spilled over my lips, and I said them out loud over and over, embracing each one. I thanked God for every blessing in my life—the survival of my marriage to Ted, our hard-earned forgiveness and healing, our abiding trust and loyalty, our shared faith and vision for our futures, our intimacy, and our friendship. I thanked God for our children—their sustained dignity, my admiration of each one, their commitment to family, and their love for us and for one another. I thanked God for new friends and for stronger bonds with the few old friends who had stuck with us. I thanked him for our new church family and for the enriched appreciation we’ve gained for the gospel and our deeper understanding of how it impacts our human condition.

In those moments I was surprised by the discovery that I was happy again. And my happiness wasn’t just a fleeting emotion. I felt it deep in my core.

I had won. I had overcome the pain and heartache and sorrow. I smiled at the revelation that I was free to laugh again. And laugh I did, unabashedly, with the sun shining brightly on my face.

The Better Way

Jesus demonstrated tremendous courage in the story of the woman caught in adultery. The religious leaders were challenging him to prove his godliness by following the requirements of the religious law. They had thrown down the gauntlet in front of a crowd of onlookers who were well aware of the implications and were watching to see what Jesus would do. What he did

astounded them. Instead of bowing to the pressure to appear righteous or succumbing to the religious groupthink, he stood his ground and courageously showed them a better way.

I love this about Jesus. He offered grace courageously.

Like him, we are sometimes called on to demonstrate grace regardless of the opinions of others or the response of those to whom we offer it. On those occasions, we demonstrate grace because of *who we are* as God's children; we know we are secure in his grace and are therefore able to offer grace to others.

When my husband and I felt despised and rejected and realized we were counted among outcasts and sinners, we experienced God's courageous love and grace—overwhelming, wonderful grace that never departed. God guided us through our darkest days and comforted us in our darkest moments through the Scriptures, through a sense of his presence, through the encouraging writings of our dear brother, Luther, and through a few courageous friends.

Jesus said the world would be able to identify his followers by their love for one another (John. 13.35). And this is what our love should look like: we never give up on one another, we never lose faith, we are always hopeful, and we endure through every circumstance (1 Cor. 13.7). I like how Fredericka Mathewes-Green describes it, “In God's presence we discover ourselves able to love one another, to be vessels of heroic love” (Mathewes-Green 4).

We will all experience defining moments in our lives when we must face our greatest fears, difficulties, and disappointments. During those times we have unparalleled opportunity to draw on God-given strength and courage to act according to our faith. And, when these defining moments happen to someone else, we have unparalleled opportunity to offer grace. It's in times like these that we need to decide who we are, what we really believe, and what is worth fighting for. These decisions can guide us when darkness overshadows our way. The Bible challenges us

with these words: “If you falter in a time of trouble, how small is your strength!” (*NIV*, Prov. 24.10). When troubles come your way, I hope my life’s story so far will inspire you to rise to the challenge, face it head-on, and let it reveal your true conviction and courage, whether for yourself or for others.

[This article includes excerpts from *Courageous Grace* (Haggard).]

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