

Billy Graham Gets Busted

Read Titus 3:3-7

So that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. TITUS 3:7

Several years ago, *Progress* magazine reported that the famous preacher Billy Graham had been arrested. One of their reporters got the scoop: When he was driving through a small southern town Graham had been stopped by a policeman and charged with speeding. Graham admitted his guilt but was told by the officer that he'd have to appear in court.

On that day the judge asked him, "Guilty, or not guilty?" Graham pleaded guilty, and the judge replied, "That'll be ten dollars — a dollar for every mile you went over the limit." (This was a while back!) Then the judge revealed that he had recognized the famous minister. "You violated the law," he said. "The fine must be paid — but I'm going to pay it for you." So he takes a ten dollar bill from his own wallet, attaches it to the ticket, and takes Graham out and buys him a steak dinner!

You might think "nice to be a celebrity!" but what a great example of the grace you got from God! You were guilty. Guilty as sin, in fact. But God pays the fine, and then even lavishes more gifts on you. You could say he takes you out for a great dinner — and then buys you the restaurant — and then gives you a wing of his mansion — and then adopts you and makes you his heir!

That's what today's reading means when Paul says that God "poured out generously" this mercy! I think we under-appreciate grace. Grace is...

- Unearned

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. EPHESIANS 2:8-9 [NLT]

- Unconditional

And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. ROMANS 11:6

- Unlimited

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 2 CORINTHIANS 9:8

And the most amazing thing of all? God *desires* to be gracious to you!!

"The Lord longs to be gracious to you..." ISAIAH 30:18A

Grace is very cool! I hope you're blown away by it during our study in the days ahead.

Why do you think the doctrine of grace is under-appreciated?

Is it surprising to you to think that God longs to be gracious to you? Is this how you think of God when he forgives you?

Read through all the verses again, making them into prayers of thanksgiving to God that these things are true in your life!

Grace Anatomy

Read Romans 12:4-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:12-20

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. ROMANS 12:6A

Way back in my youth pastor days there was an edgy (for those days) Christian rock musician named Steve Taylor who wrote a song called "I Want To Be A Clone"! It actually has some great insights:

I asked the Lord into my heart
They said that that's the way to start,
But now you've got to play the part
I want to be a clone.

They told me that I'd fall away
Unless I followed what they say;
Who needs the Bible anyway?
I want to be a clone.
Their language, it was new to me,
But "Christianese" got through to me;
Now I can speak it fluently.
I want to be a clone.

So now I see the whole design:
My church is an assembly line.
The parts are there, I'm feeling fine.
I want to be a clone.
I've learned enough to stay afloat,
But not so much I rock the boat.
I'm glad they shoved it down my throat —
I want to be a clone.
Everybody must get cloned!

Legalism almost requires that we look alike, act alike, share the exact same convictions, pursue our spiritual growth in precisely the same way... but that's not *grace*. In today's verses Paul is addressing this tendency. He's saying, don't glorify certain gifts to the point where you think everyone must look and act as if we all have that gift. It's true that we're all one body, but it's also true that there are many parts! God needs the varied parts of the body to work together, not to try to be alike and discount their uniqueness.

As Charles Swindoll says, "Grace finds pleasure in differences, encourages individuality, smiles on variety, and leaves plenty of room for disagreement." Sounds like a church most people would love!

*What lessons about grace
are there in seeing the
church like a body?*

*What happens when churches
over-emphasize the "one
Body" truth to the point where
it becomes not unity but
uniformity? What are some
common ways this can happen?*

Ask God to help you see yourself
as an important part of the Body!
Thank Him that He has given you
certain gifts and abilities that are
needed in the church. Ask Him to
help you discover and use them!

Don't Receive Grace In Vain

3

Read 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; 6:1-2

As God's fellow workers we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. 2 CORINTHIANS 6:1

What a haunting sentence! In 2 Corinthians 6:1 Paul says he fears that the Corinthians have essentially received God's grace "in vain"; that is, they *believe* in God's grace for *themselves* but apparently it is not *changing their hearts* to the point they are willing to extend grace to another.

What about you?

Are you still stingy with forgiveness even after it's been richly lavished on you? Are you secretly annoyed that God will probably forgive someone more easily than you might? Is there anyone you'd be angry to see in heaven? Anyone who hasn't done quite enough to receive your mercy?

Max Lucado tells the true story of Kevin Tunell.

Convicted of manslaughter and drunken driving after killing a 17-year-old girl, Tunell served out his prison sentence and even campaigned against drunk driving. But the girl's family subsequently sued him for precisely \$936... to be paid *one dollar at a time*. This strange-but-true judgment calls for a check to be written by Kevin every single week for eighteen years. Every week he writes the check, puts it in the mail, and the family puts it in a scholarship fund. Why? Because that's exactly how many weeks — 18 years' worth — the girl he killed was alive.

Saying he's haunted by her death through these weekly reminders, Tunell has offered the family boxes of pre-written checks containing all 18 years' worth of payments, but the family has refused. "We want to receive the check *every week*," the girl's mother says. "We will go back to court every month if we have to."

So... when you're hurt, how many payments do you require?

How have you responded to your biggest hurts?

Why would someone who has received God's grace be stingy with grace toward others?

Is there anyone to whom you need to risk some radical grace?

Ask God to help you not receive His grace in vain. Ask Him to help you know how to show radical grace to others in a way that is wise and godly.

Grace: Classic Christianity

Read Romans 7:15–24

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ROMANS 7:24 [ESV]

In today's passage, I believe the Apostle Paul is describing the inner dialogue that happens when the lightbulb about grace finally goes on for a religious man trying to improve himself. He finally realizes that, even when he wants to do what's right, the desire to do wrong also lives within him. *He comes to realize that he is powerless over his self-destructive behavior and can only be delivered by the greater power of God.*

Someone once told me suspiciously, "This sounds more like the 12 Steps than the Bible!" You might also be suspecting that all this grace talk is something new, some post-modern twist to the real, ancient Christian message. But in fact, it is classic Christian theology. The problem is that the heresy of "try harder" keeps invading the church.

Augustine lived in the 300s and was called the Doctor of Grace. He wrote constantly about grace, correcting the "just try harder" Christianity of his time taught by a teacher named Pelagius. Augustine reminded his students: "The righteousness of God lies not in the commandment of the law, which incites fear, but in the aid afforded by the grace of Christ... This grace is rendered not for any merits, but is given *gratis* (freely), which is why it is also called grace." (From Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*)

As John Calvin wrote in the 1500s, "Paul, in order to bind us to God not by servile fear but by a voluntary and cheerful love... attracts us by the sweetness of that grace in which our salvation consists."

And check out these words from a New Testament commentary written by a man named John Darby way back in the 1800s, on today's verses from Romans 7:

Under divine grace the renewed man has come to the discovery that in him, that is, in his flesh, there is no good thing; (even) when he wills good, sin is too strong for him. Having thus acquired knowledge of himself, he does not seek to be better in the flesh; he seeks deliverance, and he has it in Christ. Power comes after. He has come to the discovery and to the confession that *he has no power*. He throws himself upon another. He does not say, *How can I?* or, *How shall I?* but, *Who shall deliver me?* Now it was when we were devoid of all strength that Christ died for the ungodly. This lack of strength is discovered; and we find grace at the end... *To all hope of improving ourselves, grace is our only resource...* But thankfully, when we cast ourselves upon grace, there is nothing but grace before us. (Adapted from John Darby's *Synopsis of the New Testament, Romans 7*)

Can you relate to the words of Paul in Romans 7:15–24? How?

What do you think of the quote from John Darby?

What do you think this part of the quote means: "when we cast ourselves upon grace, we find nothing but grace before us"? Do you believe this?

Make today's verses from Romans 7 your prayer to God!

Grace Names

Read 2 Timothy 1:8–10

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus

Christ. ROMANS 1:7

When I was a kid I had a lot of trouble with my first name: “René” drew lots of laughs, especially in junior high, as our school’s wise guys mocked it for being “a girl’s name”. I grew to loathe it so much I told people my name was Ray! But that all changed when someone told me the origins of the word. “René” apparently comes from the same Latin root as “renaissance”, literally meaning “rebirth”. That made it cool (Well, that, and the fact that there was a Mister Universe winner named René!). It might sound funny, but as a young teen the discovery of my name’s meaning — and of cool athletes with my name — literally led to a redefinition of myself! My self-esteem and sense of destiny took a step up.

Names can do that to you. So can nicknames. Maybe you were called something on the playground, or at home, that was a put-down: “Loser”. “Disappointment”. “Stoner”. “Rebel”. Maybe that became a secret, internal name that, in your mind, partly defines you. But by His grace, God can change your name!

In fact, in the Bible God repeatedly changed names to reflect His grace toward people. In Genesis 17, he changes Abram (“high father”) to Abraham (“father of many nations”). In Genesis 32 he changes Jacob (“supplanter”) to Israel (“having power with God”). In John 1:42 he changes Simon (“small stone”) to Peter (“rock”). While Gideon is still hiding in a wine press, God calls him a “mighty man of valor”. In every case, God is predicting something about that person’s destiny. The new names are definitely not a description of what that person has accomplished; they’re a reflection of how God sees that person and their potential! He is calling them to a higher, bigger life!

Now think of how God describes you, as a believer, throughout the New Testament! Did you know that the word “saint” is used to describe Christians 51 times in the New Testament? If you read the context, it’s clear that these characters were far from perfect. Yet God calls them this because by His grace He is changing their identity! And He by His grace anoints you with a great destiny! Try this: Say “I am a saint!” out loud. Go ahead. Now did you say it with a sarcastic tone or a sneer? That’s probably a sign that the concept of grace still needs to seep down into your soul.

When you were growing up, what nicknames did kids give you?

Is it easy or hard to think of yourself as a saint?

Thank God today that by His grace you have a new name, a new identity: You are a saint!

Have I thanked God for His grace to me today?

Have I shown grace to someone today?

Hitting Bottom

Read Lamentations 3:19–26

'Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear.
And Grace, my fears relieved.
How precious did that Grace appear
The hour I first believed.

What did John Newton mean when he wrote that second stanza? How did God's grace teach my heart to *fear* — and then *relieve* those fears?

A California lifeguard once told me the key to learning how to swim in the ocean is, counter-intuitively, to first be *afraid* of the ocean. "Most people don't respect the sea," he explained. "They don't understand how dangerous it is. Once you respect it, then you know how to deal with it."

Similarly in 12-step groups people talk about "hitting bottom" — coming to realize that their lives are out of control, and being horrified at the consequences of their selfishness — as a *necessary* step to healing. Because it's only then they see that their only hope is in a power *greater than themselves*. If people think they're basically good folks with a few minor character flaws that just make them more eccentric and endearing, they're in for a rude awakening, if they wake up at all.

The prophet Jeremiah describes what this process feels like in the biblical Book of Lamentations. This sounds to me like the internal dialogue of a man living through the theology of Romans — he's hitting bottom, and then remembering God's grace:

*...I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath.
...I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall.
I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me.
Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope:
Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his
compassions never fail.
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him;
it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*

LAMENTATIONS 3:1, 19–26

Notice the words Jeremiah uses to describe God's gift when he makes that emotional turn: "great love, compassion, faithfulness, goodness, salvation"... That's the *good news*! Your *problem* is that in your own strength you really are *lost*. The *good news* is that by God's grace you really are *found*!

Which part of Jeremiah's description about his lostness have you experienced personally? How?

What gives Jeremiah hope?

How does the phrase "it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD" relate to the doctrine of grace?

Talk to God today about how lost you were without Him. Express your gratitude. If this devotion has caused you, as Jeremiah says, to remember your affliction and cause your soul to be downcast, please remind yourself that the mercies of God are new every morning. Thank Him for His great love to you!

How Dare You Sleep On Soft Pillows?!

Read Colossians 2:16–19

Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration, or a Sabbath day. COLOSSIANS 2:16

Elisabeth Eliot is one amazing woman. Her missionary husband Jim made headlines in 1953 when he and four others were speared to death upon encountering the Auca people of Ecuador, a tribe no one had ever met without being killed. Elisabeth went on to forgive the very people who killed her husband, working and living with them until 1963 — not only surviving her encounter but effectively communicating the Christian message in their language. She became convinced that it's possible — and essential — to share the gospel with people like the Auca without destroying their unique indigenous culture.

Perhaps because she lived as a Christian in the Auca culture, Elisabeth has some great insights on how easily legalism in the form of a pseudo-Christian subculture comes to any earnest believer. In her book *The Liberty of Obedience* she writes about a young man in Europe eager to follow Christ. He asks, “What must I give up?” And here's the answer he gets from his teacher:

Colored clothes, for one thing. Get rid of everything in your wardrobe that is not white. Stop sleeping on a soft pillow. Sell your musical instruments and don't eat any more white bread. You cannot, if you are sincere about obeying Christ, take warm baths or shave your beard. To shave is to lie against Him who created us, to attempt to improve upon His work.

Does this answer sound absurd? It is the answer given in the most celebrated Christian schools of the second century!

And then she asks a question that might make you uncomfortable: “Is it possible that the rules that have been adopted by many Christians in our century will sound as absurd to earnest followers of Christ a few years hence?”

In today's Scripture reading Paul lists a few of the “extras” that legalists were trying to push on the Colossian church. They were teaching the Colossians to base their relationship with God on rule-keeping and on private visions. Big problem: These things lead to comparison and to pride, because people who are better at rule-keeping, or who happen to have more “spiritual” experiences, end up focusing on these things instead of on God.

Paul says that such people “have lost connection with the Head”, Jesus Christ. I don't think he means they've lost their salvation, but rather that they're *self*-focused instead of *Christ*-focused, operating in their own strength and wisdom rather than God's. Soon their joy, their energy, and their unique witness to the world as a product of grace, will weaken.

What additions to the gospel of grace have you encountered in your spiritual life?

What convinced you that trying to live up to religious rules couldn't change you on the inside?

Ask God to help you become skilled at discerning what standards are good, biblical aspects of following Christ, and what is really just our culture permeating our faith.

Live Free!

Peter says "you are a slave to whatever has mastered you."
What has mastered you?

Thanks God that He has set before you a lavish feast of life, by His grace. Ask Him to help you delight in the many positive options, and not to eat the garbage!

You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. GALATIANS 5:13

When my wife and I lived in the alpine resort town of South Lake Tahoe we were renting a small house from the executive chef of the fanciest, most expensive dining option in town. His restaurant was perched at the top of one of the high-rise hotels on the south shore, with a stunning view of the lake on one side and the mountain ski resorts on the other.

Once a year, he would give us a lavish gift: We could go to the restaurant, get the best table (which he reserved for us) and then choose anything from the menu, in any amount, as much as we wanted, and he would pick up the entire tab! We could have salmon, prime rib, calamari, escargot, caviar — anything! All at once! But one year, just to test his offer, when the waiter came to take my order I said, "This all looks great, but I would like to go into the kitchen and order something *special!*" So he took me to the chef and I said, "Special order: I would like to eat... *your garbage.* Your kitchen scraps. Put 'em on a plate and send 'em to me!"

No, I didn't really do that. I'm not completely nuts! Although I was free to order anything, it would have been beyond foolish to eat garbage!

Well, for a Christian, life is like a menu in a fancy restaurant. Under grace you're free to choose whatever you want. There are a lot of amazing options on the menu! But if you choose to eat the garbage, grace does not prevent you from getting sick! *Grace* means you are *set free*. It does *not* mean that there will be no natural consequences of your foolish and self-destructive behaviors.

In today's verse Paul warns about eating the garbage. This kind of "garbage eating" has been going on ever since grace was first preached. Paul had to address this in Romans: "*Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!*" (ROMANS 6:15). Jude says, "*godless men... change the grace of our God into a license for immorality*" (JUDE 1:4). Peter put it this way: "*You are free... but don't use your freedom as an excuse to do evil.*" (1 PETER 2:16 [NLT]) Why not? Well, Peter says, because "*you are a slave of whatever controls you*" (2 PETER 2:20B).

Sin makes people slaves, whether it's sexual sin, substance abuse, laziness, gossip, anger, or anything else. You become a *servant* to it, following your master around as it leads you on a leash. You lose control over your own desires and behaviors. Then your master begins to rob you... of your health, your reputation, your relationships. It robs you of time. It robs you of freedom. It robs you of motivation. As surely as eating garbage would bring you stomach pain, sin leads to slavery.

Now that you are free spiritually from the slavery of performance-oriented religion, why rush right back into another kind of captivity? Stay free!

Distracted from Him by It

9

Read 2 Corinthians 11:1-4

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 2 CORINTHIANS 11:3

"I tried Christianity and it doesn't work."

"I don't know how to do it."

"It's too hard."

I listened as the man unloaded his frustrations in my office. Then I wrote down those phrases on a piece of paper as he watched.

"Look at the sentences you've been repeating," I told him. "What's the most common word here?"

He looked at the paper and answered: "'It'".

"There's your trouble," I went on, paraphrasing one of my favorite Bible teachers, a man who'd helped me through my own struggles with legalism. "The Christian life is not an 'it'. The Christian life is Christ: A real relationship with Jesus!"

In today's Scripture reading, Paul corrects the Corinthian Christians for being led astray by teachers who were peddling Christian "extras". It was that same old "Christ Plus" teaching again. Sure, they said, believe in Jesus. But we have a new extra special secret to true spiritual power! And they taught the early believers all sorts of these new "secrets."

The faddish nature of contemporary Christianity shows this dynamic is still at work. Christians seem to always want the latest spiritual fad. The new bestseller. The new teacher. The new worship style. The new church. In verse 4, Paul says he's afraid they'll be led astray from a simple and pure devotion to Jesus. The best way to ensure we won't be led astray? Remembering your faith is a person, not a system!

This is a truth I've been rediscovering myself with great enthusiasm. Jesus told us, *"I am the vine... remain in me... I loved you... Now remain in my love"* (JOHN 15:1, 5, 9). The Apostle Paul says that as we behold Christ, we are transformed incrementally into His likeness (2 CORINTHIANS 3:18).

This is how grace works: As I fall in love with Jesus because He first loved me, I am changed — just as surely as falling in love with a human changes my priorities and my behavior. Just thinking about Jesus and what He did for me changes me!

How can Christians today be led astray from a "sincere and pure devotion to Christ"?

How can you keep a simple focus on Jesus? How does this relate to growing in grace?

In the spirit of today's verse, spend some time in prayer simply thinking of how God first loved you. Then bring him any of your burdens.

The Grace Boat

Read 2 Corinthians 9:8–11

And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 2 CORINTHIANS 9:8

For my in-laws' 50th anniversary, they invited all their children and grandchildren to join them on an ocean cruise — and they paid the price! It was probably the most lavish gift any of us will ever receive.

I'd never been on a cruise before so I explored every corner of the ship. The sheer size of the vessel amazed me. The cleanliness seemed supernatural. But what was really stunning? The fact that, once you paid for the cruise, it was all-inclusive. I mean, we never had to pay for a thing: Not the breakfast, lunches, and dinners we ate, not the comedians, concerts, movies, and Broadway-style shows we enjoyed, not the pools, not the hotel-style rooms... it was all covered in the single cost of the ticket. It was all already paid for by my wife's loving parents! With joyful gratitude we enjoyed their company at every meal, thanking them enthusiastically for their great gift to us.

What an analogy of grace. As author Jerry Bridges puts it in his book *Transforming Grace*: "One of the best-kept secrets among Christians today is this: Jesus paid it all. I mean all. He not only purchased your ticket to heaven, He purchased every blessing you will ever receive."

Think about it. You are saved by grace; you are sanctified (that means the process of growing as a Christian) by grace; you already have "every spiritual blessing in Christ" by grace (SEE EPHESIANS 1); you are given spiritual gifts by grace; you are enabled to serve by grace; you are motivated to obey God by grace; you are repeatedly set back on track by grace; you are given strength to endure by grace; and finally you are glorified (transformed into your heavenly body) by grace. It's all grace. It was all already paid for by your loving Heavenly Father. There is no extra charge. Just like today's verse says!

Yet very few believers think of the Christian life this way. They live as if Jesus bought the entry ticket, but they've got to work for every other blessing! I should know. I lived just like that for years. I missed out on so much joy, so many blessings...

But if you see the Christian life as a gift lavished on you by your loving Father you'll want to enjoy exploring it and being with your Father out of gratitude and joy — kind of like I enjoyed that cruise!

Why is the "all-inclusive" nature of salvation a well-kept secret?

Many Christians believe their justification is based on grace, but the blessings of the Christian life are theirs by works. How would you point out the error in this thinking? (See Galatians 3:3 and Philippians 1:6)

Why do you think Christians often slide toward works and away from grace?

Pray through the list of things we have by grace from today's devotional. Thank God for each one of them. Ask Him to help you understand this more.

Grace Teaches Me To Say No **11**

Read Titus 2:11–14

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age. TITUS 2:11–12

Major league baseball legend Yogi Berra was famous for his fractured-English quotes, like:

“Nobody goes there anymore. It’s too crowded.”

“A nickel ain’t worth a dime anymore.”

“If people don’t want to come out to the ball park, nobody’s gonna stop ‘em.”

“It gets late early out there.”

“Half the lies they tell about me aren’t true.” And of course:

“I never said most of the things I said.”

For some people the sentence “grace teaches us to say no” is in the same category as a Yogi Berra quote — the very idea of grace-taught restrictions seems like an oxymoron! Living a “self-controlled, upright” life smacks of legalism, not grace. Yet in today’s verses Paul says grace actually *teaches* you self-control.

How can this be? Well, grace is really the *only* thing that teaches self-control. Legalism doesn’t really teach you *self*-control; it teaches you to be controlled — to be controlled by an outside force imposing rules on your impulses. And as soon as the rules are lifted or a loophole is found, selfish desires are indulged. But the grace-oriented person understands that uncontrolled impulses are self-destructive and harmful to others and to the name of Christ, and so learns — over time — to live *righteously* not *legalistically*.

Jerry Bridges, an author famous for writing about the spiritual disciplines, gives an urgent warning: “My spiritual disciplines, like a quiet time, Bible study, Scripture memory... formed the foundation for my spiritual growth. However, I came to believe that my day-to-day relationship with God depended on how faithfully I performed them. My experience is not unusual. One student told a friend of mine that he was diligent in his daily quiet time ‘so that nothing bad will happen to me.’”

Instead, you need to remember that even in your spiritual disciplines God is dealing with you in grace. He wants you to leave behind your addictions, compulsions, negative emotions, etc., so that you are free to live in love, peace, and joy.

But it’s all by grace. The same grace that brings *salvation* teaches you liberating *personal discipline*.

Why do people get the idea that God is smiling or frowning at them based on how well they are practicing spiritual disciplines (such as a daily quiet time, etc.)?

Have you ever struggled with this?

How does grace teach me to say no?

Ask God to help you become motivated by grace to grow spiritually. Ask Him to help you see Bible reading, prayer, quiet times all as ways to tap into His love and grace and power, instead of seeing them as ways to earn brownie points from Him.

Listen to the Music

Read Ephesians 5:1–20

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth). EPHESIANS 5:8–9

I heard this example once and it really stuck with me: Imagine you live in a house with both hearing and hearing-impaired people.

One of the residents, one of the guys who can hear, wanders into the living room, pops his iPod into the entertainment center, turns up the speakers, and starts rocking out to one of his favorite tunes. He's snapping his fingers, tapping his feet, bobbing his head, and even clapping to the music — I mean, he's into it, with a huge grin on his face! He isn't even thinking much about his response — it just comes naturally.

Now let's say one of the totally hearing impaired people walks in, sees this man, and thinks, "Now that guy looks like he's having fun! I'll do what he does." So the second guy starts doing the head-bob, snapping his fingers, tapping his toes, and even plasters a smile on his face. But after a while he thinks to himself, "This isn't very fun! In fact, it's kind of repetitive and boring. But maybe it'll get to be fun! I'll just keep doing it!"

Now a third party comes into the room. This is a man who doesn't live in the home, doesn't know these people, doesn't know even know there are hearing-impaired folks there. What does he see? Two guys apparently both listening to the stereo.

One seems a little grim, a little off-kilter. The other seems totally blissed out. What's the difference? One's just naturally responding to a song he loves and feels in his very soul. The other's just mimicking the first guy.

See the point? A lot of Christians don't really hear the rhythm of grace that should propel every response and underscore every discipline in the Christian life. They don't hear the music. All they know is, "That guy seems like a godly man. And he does these motions. So I'm gonna do those motions too! Go to church! Memorize scripture! Study the Bible! After all, that's what a happy, good Christian does. Even though just going through these motions is not much fun..."

To others they may even look like they're doing the same "Christian" things as those who are motivated by grace, but without the same sense of joy.

We find out in Revelation 2 that this was where the Ephesian church was at. Dry. They'd lost their first love. They were doing the right motions. But they weren't hearing the love song anymore.

If that's your problem then you need to approach the Christian life in a different way. Your attitudes and actions need to be a response to the awesome grace of God!

Are you hearing the music or just going through the motions?

Do you think that everyone gets to points in their spiritual life where the music is hard to hear? If so, what should they do then?

Spend some time quietly "listening to the music" of God's love for you in prayer. Perhaps just sit quietly for a few minutes. If you need input for meditation, try reading through the first chapter of Ephesians again. Choose one of the verses to memorize and repeat during your prayer time.

Grace In Disguise

My purpose in writing is to encourage you and assure you that what you are experiencing is truly part of God's grace for you. Stand firm in this grace. 1 PETER 5:12 [NLT]

Dan and Lynn Wagner are friends of mine who experienced every parents' nightmare: Both of their children, two beautiful and beloved teenage girls named Mandy and Carrie, were killed by a drunk driver when the family van was struck while traveling home from a Christian concert. Dan and Lynn have astounded our community with their very sincere forgiveness of the woman who struck their vehicle; in fact the three of them, Dan, Lynn, and the woman who killed their daughters, now speak to various groups about the dangers of drunk driving, and about the beauty of grace-driven forgiveness.

Dan wrote me an intriguing email the other day:

People have heaped a good deal of praise on us for forgiving her, and we have felt uncomfortable about that. We recently figured out why: We never really blamed her for the accident... We realized that we were holding God responsible; certainly He had the power to stop it... [But now] we understand a little about God: He is sovereign; it was by God's love and grace that He chose to allow this, seeing a much bigger picture than we are capable of seeing, the many people He would touch and save through this. We are thankful that there is no bitterness or hatred in our hearts toward Lisa or any other human being; and even, now, toward God... as Gerald Sittser said in *A Grace Disguised*, "I wonder about how my own experience and loss will someday serve a greater purpose that I do not yet see or understand... Perhaps people suffering catastrophic loss will someday look to our family for hope and inspiration. I do not know. Yet I choose to believe that God is working toward some ultimate purpose, even using my loss to that end."

Do you agree with Dan? I can tell you that as I've shared their story I've seen so many lives changed. Just yesterday I got an email from a pastor in Brazil profoundly affected by Dan and Lynn after watching them on our podcast. I'm so glad they were able to choose, eventually, to open their eyes to these hints of a greater purpose, instead of only seeing their own very real pain.

The theology of *grace* promises you, too, that although you may never see it in this lifetime, God will redeem every tear you cry (see Romans 8:28). In fact, your *greatest ministry* will come from your *greatest pain*. That's why Paul says "*I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses.*" He's willing to be transparent about his emotions, his frustrations, his checkered past — so people see God's grace rather than some facade of human strength. Grace means I am saved from sin; but it also means I am brought through life's trials — and all the way home to heaven — in God's strength and not my own.

How do you feel about Dan's email to René? Do you agree or disagree?

Have you seen God bring good out of a catastrophe in your own life? What happened?

Give to God your pain and worries and shame now; ask Him to help you trust that He will, by His grace, work together all things, even these things, for good.

The 3:16 Promise

Not only does a better understanding of grace help you understand the Bible as a whole; it also helps you see familiar verses more clearly.

One year Laurie and I were returning home from a three-week trip to Europe visiting my family. She was expecting our first child and after we landed in San Francisco she just really wanted to get on the plane to get back home to Lake Tahoe.

But our flight was delayed, and when we finally get to the customs line at SFO the wait is unusually long and it looks like we're going to miss our flight home. So I tell her, "Hey, cheer up — maybe the airline will give us a free night in a San Francisco hotel if we miss our connection! We can have a romantic night in the city!" She's tired and sick and looks at me like, "If you continue being happy about that possibility I may be forced to kill you."

So I go to the customs official and say, "Look, I know this is out of the ordinary but my wife is pregnant — and between us, she is possibly homicidal right now — and we need to make our flight, so can you bump us to the front of the line so we can make the connection?"

He responds, "Hmmm." And I don't know why he asked me this next, but he says, "What's your job?"

I say, "Well, I'm a pastor."

And he goes, "Riiiiight. You have no idea how often people try to use that line." And then he challenges me, "If you're really a pastor, recite John 3:16." Like, it was his fail-safe! As if no one but a pastor could possibly know this!

He folds his arms and looks at me. My wife is looking at me. And I think, "I'm gonna choke! I'll end up spitting out the Gettysburg Address or something!" So I take a deep breath... and say...

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

(JOHN 3:16)

And he says, "Wow, you must be a pastor! Move to the front of the line, Reverend!"

We got home on time. But it was no prodigious feat of memory. Of course I knew John 3:16 — as a church kid, I learned it before I entered Kindergarten. It must be the very first verse that any little kid growing up in Sunday School is taught. And it's a good one. Only problem: It suffers from what I call the "Pledge of Allegiance factor". We know the words, the very cadence, so well that the syllables have almost lost all meaning.

Ever really listen to kids saying the Pledge? The older they get the more familiar they are with it and the more familiar they are with it, the more it's just a string of sounds. For all the comprehension they're showing it might as well say: "I pledge

all agents to the flag of the United States of a miracle, and total reap puppets four witch it's sands, won Asian, under guard, with libber tea and just its fur all."

The same can be said of the truths in John 3:16. Just like the doctrine of grace itself, people can think they know what it means when they really haven't given its meaning much thought in years!

So check this out: This may seem obvious, but John 3:16 is set up by John 3:14-15, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life." Jesus is referring to a story in Numbers 21. In that passage the Israelites are in the desert, dying from poisonous snake bites. There is no antidote.

So God tells Moses that He's going to do a miracle. He tells him to make a brass symbol of the snake, put it on a pole and lift it high, and anyone who merely looks on it in faith will be healed by God's grace (That healing symbol, by the way, is where we get the caduceus, the symbol for physicians in our society today).

See the parallels? The Bible says we're all dying of a poison in our soul. So Jesus sacrifices Himself on a "pole", a cross, lifted up for all humans to see. If we look on it in faith, we are healed as an act of grace from God.

As John 3:16 says, "whoever believes" does not perish from the poison. Not whoever works real hard. Not whoever proves himself. Not whoever prays the most. Whoever believes.

It's that simple. Just look to Jesus. That's grace.

I presume there were people back in Numbers 21 who refused to look at the bronze snake to be healed, because the Bible talks about those who died. In their pride they refused the grace that could have been theirs. Why would people do that? Do you ever see that tendency in yourself?

The obvious prayer that I encourage you to pray: Humbly tell God that you believe in Jesus Christ as your Healer and Savior. If you have already received this gift, pray that others may believe in Christ through this Grace Immersion.

