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GRACE AT THE THRESHOLD

REFLECTIONS ON SALVATION, HOPE, AND THE LOVE OF GOD

BRENT DAVID MILLER

GRACE AT THE THRESHOLD

*Reflections on Salvation, Hope
and the Love of God*

By Brent David Miller

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*This book is dedicated to my wife Megen.
Knowing you is proof positive that in Jesus
Christ, I have been shown grace upon grace.*

*And to Kaeleigh and Caleb:
May this book help you know and love
the God who loves you with all his heart.*

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‘And all the wickedness in this world that
man might work or think is no more to the
mercy of God than an ember in the sea.’

- William Langland, 14th Century Monk¹

¹ William Langland, *The Vision of Piers the Plowman*, Passus 5:289-290 (14th Century). Author’s translation.

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Prologue: Two Questions

‘Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.’

1 Peter 3:15 NIV

Back in my seminary days, a friend told me a story I will never forget. He had been officiating at a funeral service for a young wife and mother who, as far as my friend knew, had never placed her faith in Jesus Christ. He conducted the service with grace, speaking of the hope of eternal life through Jesus Christ without making specific mention of the women’s faith (or lack thereof). It was one of those funeral services pastors are often called upon to perform: one where he or she doesn’t know much about the deceased but is nonetheless invited to offer words of comfort to the bereaved. As any pastor knows, that is a tough thing to do. Funerals are hard enough when you know something about the deceased. They are considerably more difficult when you do not.

After the service was over, my friend was standing in the funeral parlor hallway where he was approached by a boy, maybe 7 or 8 years old. The boy was the woman’s son, and he quite understandably had tears in his eyes. My friend asked the boy if there was anything he could do for him. The boy didn’t say anything at first, but then sobbed out his question, one that had perhaps arisen in his mind due to things he had heard various Christians say over the years

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concerning the fate of those who die without having accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. Perhaps my friend's well-intended words contributed to the question as well.

'Is my Mommy in hell?'

Years later, after I had been in pastoral ministry myself for about three and one-half years, I had a similar question asked of me. This time, the question was asked, not by a young boy, but by an older gentleman named Martin. At the time, Martin's acquaintance was a relatively new addition to my life. Martin was a quiet, private man (still is). He didn't talk much (still doesn't). But one Sunday after the morning service he came up to me in the receiving line and asked if I might be willing to come see him later in the week. His eyes overflowed with tears as he made this simple request, and I said of course I would come see him. I offered to come that very afternoon, but he said he needed a few days to gather his thoughts before he asked me a question. I told him I would see him in a few days.

When I went to Martin's apartment, he asked me to sit down on one of two fold-out chairs in his living room. Martin got right to the point. He told me that he had been taught, and believed, that Jesus was the only way to salvation, that you needed to put your faith in Christ to go to heaven and that if you didn't you went to hell.

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Martin's eyes filled with tears.

I reached out and patted his shoulder, a little unsure how much contact a private guy like Martin would appreciate, but feeling he needed the strength that comes from human touch. I asked Martin to go on.

Fighting back tears, Martin told me about someone he loved. She had been sick for a long time. He had tried to share his faith with her but had been unsuccessful. Martin struggled mightily as he told me that the week before she had been found dead in her apartment. He went on to explain that she had died in a manner that suggested, at least to him, that she had persisted in her obstinacy until the moment of her death. He then broke down and wept for a while. I kept my hand on his shoulder to offer him comfort as best as I could.

It was then that Martin asked me his question. He was looking at his hands as he asked it. It was only after he asked it that he looked at me. Tears were streaming down his cheeks as he did.

'Is there any hope for her?'

I have been a pastor for eleven years now. During that time I have asked and been asked all kinds of questions. But the two questions that most often return to me in times of prayer and contemplation are the ones asked by a little boy whose name I do not know and an old man who I have

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come to know as one of the most grace-filled Christians I have ever met.

'Is my Mommy in hell?'

'Is there any hope for her?'

This book is my attempt to speak words of hope and comfort into the hearts of those who ask such questions.

Chapter One

The Tapestry

'It is appointed to mortals to die once, and after that the judgment.' - Hebrews 9:27

'Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.'
And they came closer...' - Genesis 45:4

For many Christians, answering the two questions is a straightforward matter. Most might not have the heart to say what they think to the face of the little boy or the old man who asked them. But the answers would be straightforward all the same.

Question #1: 'Is my Mommy in hell?'

Answer: 'If she did not confess her sins and accept Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, acknowledging that he died for her sins on the cross and then rose from the dead, before the moment of her death, then I am afraid she is.'

Question #2: 'Is there any hope for her?'

Answer: see answer to question #1.

This straightforward answer to the two questions flows from a popular understanding of Christian theology. It goes something like this: the only hope human beings have for eternal life in the presence of God is Jesus Christ. It's right

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there in John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' It's also right there in John 14:6: 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' The idea is that you need to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior to obtain the gift of eternal life. This has been understood to mean that you need to accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior before the moment of your death. Hebrews 9:27 says that men and women live, die and then face judgment. At the judgment, God will then make it very simple for you. If you accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior before the moment of your death, you will pass through the judgment just fine and spend eternity with God in heaven. But if you had not accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior before the moment of your death, well, too bad for you. God will essentially ask you to take a step to your right (his left) so as to position you over the trap door in the floor of heaven, press the button hidden underneath his desk and send you down the chute that leads to hell. (Okay, maybe that last part isn't quite how most Christians would describe things, but you get the idea).

So the answer to the questions of the little boy and the old man is, according to this popular understanding of Christianity, as clear as day. If their loved ones had not confessed their sins and accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, acknowledging that he died for their sins on the

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cross and then rose from the dead, prior to their deaths, then they are in hell, and there is no hope for them.

There was a time when I would have given the same answer. But in the fall of 2001, God provided me with an experience that, ever since, has played on my mind so powerfully that I have been forced to realize that perhaps the answer to the two questions is not quite as straightforward as I had once supposed.

I was in seminary at the time, working at a local church in New Jersey. I wasn't the pastor, just a seminary intern, but some gracious friends at the church decided that I needed to be acknowledged for Pastor Appreciation Month all the same. They invited me to a concert they thought I might enjoy at Madison Square Garden in New York City. I was happy to accept the invitation.

We arrived in the city some time before the concert began and decided to pass the time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The featured exhibit was a collection of medieval tapestries. I had heard about this exhibit several weeks earlier, having been told by a couple who had seen it that many of the tapestries were religious in nature. Being a seminary student studying the theology of the era, I was excited to have the chance to see it. Who knew? Maybe I would learn something.

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Unfortunately, we did not manage our time very well, and by the time we arrived at the museum, it was nearly closing time. We were allowed to enter, but only had twenty or thirty minutes to see the exhibit. Nonetheless, we determined to make the most of it and rushed through the exhibit as quickly as we could, hoping to see as many of the tapestries as possible before the curator began flicking the light switches.

The exhibit was excellent. There were scenes depicting life in medieval times, and, just as I had heard, there were scenes reflecting the theology of the era. Looking at the tapestries, it was clear that the theology of the era was dark. There was an entire section filled with tapestries dedicated to the theme of judgment. They were dark, apocalyptic and filled with enough hellfire and brimstone to warm the heart of the most ardent fundamentalist. One in particular stood out for its gruesome depiction of the fate of sinners. God was sitting on his throne with a serenely detached look on his face as various sinners wandered along a meandering path that led to a cliff. There the sinners fell into hell, where demons stood at the ready to torture them for all eternity. Other tapestries may not have been quite as ghastly, but they were more or less on the same page theologically. These ‘judgment’ tapestries, as I have come to call them, all conveyed the same message: God is a harsh judge, and sinners had better watch out lest they face a terrible fate on the Day of Judgment.

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I was at the time a traditionally minded seminarian. I believed in both judgment and hell. In fact, as this book will make clear, I still do. But something about the way this subject was being addressed bothered me. Perhaps in medieval times, such images of judgment were popular. But they didn't speak to me at all. The God depicted in them didn't seem much like the God I knew in Jesus Christ. He didn't seem like the Father in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. He didn't seem like a God of love. He didn't seem like a God of grace.

The exhibit was turning out to be less than I had hoped it would be.

But then I turned the corner, and there before my eyes was a tapestry unlike any other in the exhibit. It too was a depiction of judgment. But it was a very different type of judgment.

The Tapestry captured a critical moment in the Biblical story of Joseph and his brothers. To understand what I saw as I first laid eyes upon it, you will need to know a bit about that story. The long version can be found in Genesis chapters 37-50. I'll give you the short version here.

Joseph was one of the twelve sons of Jacob. In fact, he was Jacob's favorite son. Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons and gave him a splendid coat of many colors. His brothers weren't too keen to have Joseph's

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avored status paraded before them in all the colors of the rainbow, especially after God sent Joseph dreams that indicated that one day, they would all bow down before him. It did not take long for the brothers to begin to hate their father's favorite son.

They hated him so much that one day, far from their father's watchful eyes, they decided to kill him. But after tossing Joseph into a well along the side of the road, they came up with the bright idea of selling him into slavery instead. This they did, pocketing 20 silver coins in exchange for their brother's freedom. They took Joseph's coat and dipped it in goat's blood, returned to their father, and allowed him to draw the obvious conclusion: Joseph had been killed by a wild animal. Jacob then put on sackcloth and ashes and wept like a baby. The brothers didn't say a word.

Eventually the traders who bought Joseph sold him to a man in Egypt named Potiphar. Potiphar was a man of influence in the Pharaoh's court (the Pharaoh was the King of Egypt). Joseph tried to make the most of it. He rose to the position of manager in Potiphar's household. But then things took a decidedly unfortunate turn. Potiphar's wife got a little warm for Joseph's form, and when Joseph rejected her, being unwilling to sleep with the wife of the man who had been so good to him, she accused Joseph of attacking her. Potiphar came to the defense of his wife and threw Joseph into prison, where he languished for years.

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In time however, and through a series of extraordinary events, it came to the attention of Pharaoh that Joseph had the gift of interpreting dreams. Pharaoh, who was having trouble sleeping at night because of two particularly weird dreams, called for Joseph to see if he might be able to tell him what the dreams meant. Joseph, giving full credit to God, did so. He told Pharaoh that the dreams, which involved fat and healthy cows, thin and sickly cows, tall and healthy stalks of grain and sickly-looking stalks of grain, were harbingers of a coming famine. Egypt would experience seven years of abundant crops, but then seven years of terrible famine would follow. Joseph suggested to Pharaoh a way to plan for the famine that would save all of Egypt. Pharaoh was so impressed that he made Joseph his Secretary of Agriculture, clothing Joseph with full authority to act on his behalf. After changing Joseph's name to Zaphenath-Paneah, he set him to work. Joseph did well, stored up huge food reserves during the time of abundance, and readied Egypt for the coming famine.

When the famine hit, it hit hard. It hit not only Egypt but the entire region, including Joseph's homeland. In other words, it hit Joseph's brothers and their families. To survive, Joseph's brothers were forced to go to the one place in the world where you could still buy grain: Egypt. It was a great twist of fate: in order to buy the grain needed to keep their families alive, the brothers had to ask Egypt's

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Secretary of Agriculture, Zaphenath-Paneah, if they could have some.

And so it was that they came before the brother they had so appallingly betrayed. Many years had passed, and they didn't recognize their long-lost brother. But Joseph recognized them. Boy did he ever! Sensing an opportunity to find out whether his brothers were the same bunch of jerks they had been all those years before, he messed with their heads a bit before revealing to them his true identity (the story on this score is quite good, you should really go pick up a Bible and read it). When he did, it was with eight simple words: 'I am Joseph. Is my Father still living?' (Genesis 45:3).

The brothers were terrified. They knew what they had done to Joseph. They had plotted to kill him. They had sold him into slavery. Now here they were, completely at his mercy. Joseph, the one they had once betrayed, now held the power of life and death over them. The one they had rejected was now their judge.

This is the moment depicted in the tapestry I saw at the Met; the moment when Joseph is recognized by his brothers. The tapestry captured the many emotions that must have run through the hearts of those men. One of the brothers was trying to run away. Some looked for Joseph in the hope of finding mercy. Some keeled over as if dead. One looked heavenward for mercy from God, clearly expecting there

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was none to be found. The tapestry revealed that for the brothers of Joseph, this moment was nothing other than Judgment Day. They knew they were guilty. They knew Joseph would have been completely within his rights to have ordered their executions on the spot, and they knew they completely deserved it.

I was for a time transfixed by the brothers' reaction. But after a few moments I saw something more. I saw what brings tears to my eyes to this day every time I think about it.

I saw Joseph.

For Joseph, this was not a time for revenge. It was not even a time to say, 'I told you so.' It was a time for grace. Joseph was reaching out to his brothers. He was stooping to lift those who had fallen onto the floor. His eyes held not a hint of judgment. His eyes were filled with mercy. It was as if he were crying to them, 'Wait! Don't run away! Don't you see? I know what you did. *But I still love you!* Come close to me. Take my hand. Everything will be alright. It's not too late for us!'

In my mind's eye I saw the brothers' reaction to all this (it's in the Bible). I saw them turn to Joseph. I saw them hugging Joseph and one another, weeping and filled with a crazy, unexpected, lunatic joy. They had expected Joseph to be their harsh judge. He turned out to be their savior.

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I was awestruck. There have been moments in my life when I have felt as if God were speaking to me. I call them ‘God Moments.’ This was one of them. I was overwhelmed by a feeling that God wanted me to know something. He wanted me to know something about judgment and grace. He wanted me to know something about His heart. I was sure of it.

As I stood there, I began to see what God wanted me to see. Standing before that tapestry and looking into Joseph’s face, I realized that I was not just looking into the face of Joseph. I was looking into the face of Jesus.

I believe the Bible. I believe it to be the inspired and authoritative word of God. I believe Hebrews 9:27 means what it says when it states that it is given to men and women once to die, and then to face judgment. I truly believe this. But that only begs the question: what does it mean to face judgment?

As I stood before the tapestry that day, a question entered my mind for the very first time. It is a question that has not left me alone these past thirteen years.

Could this be what Judgment Day is really like?

What if Judgment Day is the day when we look at our Judge and find grace? What if the greatest judgment we could ever face would be to look into the eyes of the one we have despised, realize all he has endured for us, and

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discover that he loves us anyway? What if, on the day of judgment, as people realize all they have done to grieve the heart of God, as they begin to run or fall to the ground, their judge, instead of condemning them, reaches out to them and offers forgiveness? What if he reaches out to them and says: 'Wait! Don't run away! Don't you see? I know what you did. *But I still love you!* Come close to me. Take my hand. Everything will be alright. It's not too late for us.'

What if?

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Chapter Two

Grace

'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God.'

Ephesians 2:8

*'Amazing Grace how sweet the sound
that saved a wretch like me' - John Newton¹*

It is a bedrock principle of Christian faith that people are saved by grace. Of course, that raises a couple of questions. First, from what do we need saving? And second, what is grace?

The short answer to the first question is that we need to be saved from sin and its consequences. Sin is anything we do that hurts God, ourselves or others (hurting ourselves or others always hurts God, that is, grieves his heart). The Bible teaches that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). The idea here is simple. God is pure and holy. He is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. When we do things that hurt God, ourselves or others, we make ourselves impure, unholy, and bring at least a touch of darkness into our hearts. The consequence of this is that we separate ourselves from God. A chasm opens

¹ John Newton, *Amazing Grace*, Hymn (1779).

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between us. We stand on one side in our sin. God stands on the other in his holiness.

This causes any number of problems for us. For one thing, it is sad to be separated from the one who made you, the one with whom you were meant to have infinite and eternal communion. To walk through life with a God-shaped hole in your heart is a pretty lousy way to live. You can try to fill that hole with all kinds of things, but in the end, it is precisely as Augustine said in the fourth century: ‘Our hearts are restless O God, until they find their rest in Thee.’² But what is worse is that this restless separation can become a permanent condition. If nothing ever happens to bridge the distance between yourself and God and undo the separation caused by your sin, you will remain separated from him, not just for your lifetime, but for all eternity.

Some say this is utter nonsense. They deny the very idea of sin. Once, while channel surfing on New Year’s Day, I made the mistake of pausing a moment or two on one of those entertainment shows that delve into the minutia of celebrities’ lives. An interviewer was asking a celebrity if she had made any New Year’s resolutions. She actually seemed offended by the question, and curtly replied, ‘Me? Why would I do that? I never do anything wrong.’

² Augustine, *Confessions*, 1:1 (397 AD).

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I had to wonder if she really believed what she was saying. My guess is that if the interviewer had pressed her further she might have been forced to admit that there had been times in her life when she had been angry without cause or said something hurtful or acted selfishly when an opportunity to be selfless arose. She might not have admitted to a belief in a God you could sin against, but at least she might have admitted that she had not always been as kind to others as she might have been. And perhaps, if really pressed, she might have even acknowledged that the word ‘sinful’ might be a good word to describe her behavior at such times. I know it seems like a good word to describe my behavior more times than I like to admit.

Whether we admit it or not, everyone sins. And that means that everyone separates themselves from God. The question thus becomes, what remedy can be found for the problem of sin? What is there that can bring God and people back together again? What can save us from the consequences of our sins?

Lest anyone believe these are merely Christian questions, let us be clear that every major world religion recognizes the problem of human sinfulness and the need for a remedy. The difference between Christianity and other religions is that, apart from Christianity, every major world religion essentially proposes the same remedy. They differ in their details, but essentially, they all come down to *karma*. A working definition of karma would be *you earn your own*

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way and you get what you deserve. Not all religions use that word. But when you come right down to it, they are all about karma, the idea that the remedy for the problem of sin is to earn forgiveness and salvation.

In Hinduism, for example, the religion from which we get the word karma, the idea is simple: do good things, rack up good karma; do bad things, rack up bad karma. If at the end of your life your good karma outweighs the bad, you will be reincarnated as something better than you are now (maybe a prince!). If, on the other hand, your karmic balance tips the other way, you might come back as something worse (maybe a stink bug!). In Buddhism, salvation is found by strict adherence to something called the Eight-Fold Path. In Judaism, one is declared righteous before God by keeping the Law. In Islam, you have the five pillars and a host of other rules to follow. These religious systems are obviously very different from one another, and I am of course making some broad generalizations (this is not a book about comparative religion), but the basic idea is the same in most religious systems: salvation is found by working hard and earning your way. What you get in the end is what your deeds deserve.

Such thinking makes perfect sense to most people in this world, even non-religious people. When you stop to think about it, our entire society is predicated on the law of karma. Work hard. Earn rewards. Human societies reward effort. It only makes sense that many people would believe that

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salvation is found in the same way. Thus the law of karma reigns supreme throughout the world. You earn your own way and you get what you deserve.

Christians believe something very different. We believe that the remedy to the problem of sin lies outside of karma. We believe that what saves us from the consequences of our sin isn't anything we do, but rather what God does for us. We believe that salvation comes, not by works, but by grace.

Which takes us to the second question raised at the start of this chapter: what is grace?

Perhaps the best way to define grace is with an illustration. One of the greatest illustrations of grace is found in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. *Les Misérables* revolves around the life of the paroled convict Jean Valjean. Valjean spent nineteen years in prison at hard labor for the minor offense of stealing a loaf of bread. The years in prison have turned Valjean from a small time thief into a bitter, angry man; in the words of Hugo, 'a very dangerous man.'³ Traveling the countryside in search of food and work, he is rebuffed at every turn due to his status as a paroled convict. Feeling as if the world has no room for him, his anger festers in his soul until it threatens to

³ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* Book II, chapter VII, 'Profoundest Despair' (1862)

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consume the last vestiges of his humanity. He is truly a broken and lost man.

Eventually, Valjean's wanderings take him to the home of a local Bishop who takes pity on him. He takes Valjean in, feeds him, and, to show Valjean his worth as a child of God, breaks out his finest silverware and two beautiful silver candlesticks. The value of the cutlery and candlesticks is beyond anything Valjean has ever seen. Valjean is touched by the Bishop's generosity, but his bitterness is strong, and before long, Valjean is thinking of how he might steal the valuable items and use the proceeds to begin a new life.

Night falls, and the Bishop shows Valjean to his room. Valjean waits until everyone else in the house is asleep, and then rises from his bed (incidentally the most comfortable he has ever slept on). He sneaks to the cupboard and stuffs the silverware into his bag. In his haste to escape with the goods, he forgets the candlesticks as he rushes out the door.

The next morning, the Bishop awakes to discover the reward for his kindness. Before long, there is a knock on the door. It is the police. Valjean did not get far. He is brought in and stands accused and convicted before the Bishop who had shown him such kindness and hospitality. He offers no defense. He knows he has broken his parole. He knows he will now go back to jail for the rest of his life.

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He knows he deserves it. He cannot even look the Bishop in the eye.

But then, something extraordinary happens. Before the police can rightly accuse Valjean, the Bishop speaks. ‘Ah, here you are! I am glad to see you. Well, how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two-hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?’⁴

Valjean opens his eyes and looks at the Bishop with ‘an expression which no human tongue could render any account of,’ as the Bishop goes to the cupboard, retrieves the candlesticks, and hands them to him.⁵

The police shrug their shoulders and leave.

The Bishop then speaks to Valjean once more. ‘Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul that I buy from you! I withdraw it from dark thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!’⁶

It’s obvious that Valjean had done nothing to deserve mercy. But that is nonetheless what he received. Fortunately for him, he fell into the hands of a man who operated outside the law of karma. Valjean was not saved

⁴ Ibid., Book II Chapter XII, ‘The Bishop at Work.’

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

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from the consequences of his sin by anything he did. He was saved because of what was done for him by the Bishop.

The Christian word for this is grace. Grace is the antithesis of karma. It cannot be earned. You cannot work for it. It is free and falls like rain. It washes over us in waves of forgiveness for no other reason than this: God loves us and longs to set us free from the power of sin and its attendant consequences.

The Apostle Paul lays this out for us quite well in his letter to the Ephesians when he writes:

‘You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath’ (Ephesians 2:1-3).

That describes our condition. Jean Valjean’s condition. It’s a sad condition to be sure. But then Paul continues with words that break forth like the dawn of a new day:

‘But God, who is rich in mercy, out of his great love with which he loved us, even while we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with

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Christ – *by grace you have been saved*’ (Ephesians 2:4-5, emphasis added).

This is Christianity’s solution to the problem of sin. We are forgiven, the chasm is obliterated, and we are restored to intimate fellowship with God, not on the basis of anything we do, but on the basis of what God has done for us. This is the Christian revolution. Every other faith, the whole world, operates on the law of karma. Christianity operates on grace. Every other faith is based one way or another on the idea that you earn your own way. Christianity is based on the idea that you cannot earn your own way and you don’t have to, because God has earned it for you.

Christians believe that people are saved by grace, as Valjean was in *Les Misérables*.

But how does that happen in the real world? Who is the ‘Bishop’ who saves us? If grace means we aren’t saved by what we’ve done, but rather by what has been done for us, what has been done, and who has done it?

Keep reading.

Chapter Three

The Bishop

'For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.'

Romans 6:23

Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

John 14:6

He was of the humblest of origins, born to poor parents in a stable. For most of his life, he lived with his parents and worked as a carpenter in the small Galilean town of Nazareth. When he was about 30 years old, he became an itinerate preacher, traveling up and down the length of his country proclaiming the arrival of the Kingdom of God. He healed people and performed other signs and wonders. He talked about love: love for God and love for people. His message was beautiful. He offered mercy for sinners, hope for the broken hearted and a new way to live. He inspired people. But then, after about three and one-half years, his ministry ended abruptly. His words had threatened the religious and secular authorities of his time. He was arrested, tried and sentenced to die on a Roman cross. It was a tragic end for a tragic figure; another sad story of what happens to young men who dare challenge the status quo and powers that be.

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There is more to the story of course. Christians believe that Jesus' death was not the end, but rather the beginning. We believe that Jesus rose from the grave on the third day after his death on that Roman cross. We believe that he was not just another young man who challenged the status quo. He was the Son of God. The Second Person of the Trinity. Very God of very God. God in the flesh. God as one of us. The Bible teaches that this *God-Man* came into the world to save it, pay the wages of sin once for all, offer eternal life to all who would believe in him and, ultimately, make all things new. (See, John 3:16-17; Hebrews 10:10 and Revelation 21:5).

You might say Christians believe that the 'Bishop' who saves us is Jesus.

One aspect of the story of the encounter between the Bishop and Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* is that while it cost Valjean nothing to be saved by grace, it cost the Bishop considerably. He relinquished his priceless candlesticks and cutlery so that Valjean might have a new life. Similarly, Christians believe that while it does not cost us anything to obtain salvation, it cost God considerably.

In fact, it cost him everything.

This has been understood from the earliest days of the Christian Church. In Philippians 2:6-8, the Apostle Paul writes: 'Though he was God, he did not demand or cling to

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his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross' (NLT).

Charles Wesley's beautiful 18th Century hymn, *Amazing Love* captures the spirit of those verses this way:

‘He left his Father’s throne above,
So free, so infinite his grace;
Emptied himself of all but love
And bled for Adam’s helpless race.’

In other words, the Son of God traded heaven's throne for a human life that would begin in a barn and pass through the darkness of death on a Roman cross in order to save the world.

The prophet Isaiah, speaking of Jesus some 700 years before his birth, called him 'a man of sorrows' (Isaiah 53:3 NLT). There are many ways in which this is true, but for our present purposes it will help us to understand that phrase, as well as the price Jesus paid to set us free, by exploring the way he died. You can read about this in the Gospels (See, Matthew chapters 26-27, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23 and John 18-19). Historical accounts of Roman crucifixions help fill in the gruesome details the Gospel writers omitted in their accounts. It is sometimes thought they omitted such details as a matter of good taste, but it is

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more likely that they left them out because, tragically, those who lived under Roman rule were all too familiar with them.¹

Jesus, in the custody of the religious leaders who were eager to be rid of him, was taken to the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate had a hard time deciding what to do with Jesus, and at first, ordered that he be flogged. This was hardly a favor. Roman flogging was brutal punishment. Jesus was bound to a pillar. Sadistic Roman soldiers picked up leather whips with as many as nine thongs, each embedded with broken bits of metal, bone, glass or other sharp objects. As they flogged Jesus with these cruel instruments, they tore swaths of flesh from his body. This kind of punishment was so severe that it often killed its victims, but the Romans were quite adept at it, and if they so desired, could quite literally skin a victim alive, leaving him capable of facing whatever they had in store next. This was the kind of punishment Pilate first inflicted upon Jesus. Like I said, he was hardly doing Jesus a favor. By the time the soldiers were finished, Jesus was a bloody, God-awful looking mess.

Throughout this ordeal, which included being mocked and spat upon by Roman soldiers, Jesus suffered terribly.

¹ The crucifixion account that follows is based on both the Gospel narratives as well as the lectures of Ian Scott in the class, *New Testament Study*, given at the Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in the Fall of 2001.

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But the culmination of his suffering was the cross. Jesus was made to carry his crossbeam (the horizontal piece of the cross) through the streets of Jerusalem to the place of his execution. At some point he was unable to continue on his own, and the Romans picked a man from the crowd, Simon of Cyrene, to help him carry it the rest of the way. When they came to Golgotha, or 'The Place of the Skull' (Matthew 27:33), the Romans began the work of affixing Jesus to his cross. First, to maximize Jesus' humiliation, they stripped him of his clothing. Then, with the cross beam on the ground, they threw him over backwards upon it and drove the first spike through the bones of his wrist where nerves sent bursts of hot, searing pain up his arm. Then they did the same to the other wrist. Using ropes, they hoisted the cross beam to its position on the execution stake (the vertical piece of the cross). When the crossbeam was in place, they drove a third spike through Jesus' feet, again in a spot where nerves sent shockwaves of pain through his body.

This procedure placed Jesus, as it did all victims of crucifixion, in something of a catch-22 situation. Hanging from his arms, he was unable to breathe properly. To do so, he had to push up with his feet, which, due to the spike having been placed at its precise location, sent shockwaves of pain through his body. His upper body would also have moved as he did this, sending similar waves of pain up his arms. This is what Jesus endured in an effort to stave off

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asphyxiation, hour after hour for six hours, as with decreasing effectiveness he pushed himself up to breathe, only to be forced back down by the pain. As time progressed, fluid began to accumulate in and around his lungs and heart. Toxins built up in his bloodstream. He developed a pounding headache and a raging thirst. It is difficult to say what ultimately killed Jesus. It may have been simple cardiac arrest. It may have been the tremendous loss of blood. It may have been asphyxiation. Or it may have been that the fluid pressing against his heart eventually caused it to burst. If the latter, how tragically poetic is it that the Son of God died of a broken heart?

Sounds horrible, doesn't it? But as bad as what I just described sounds it wasn't the worst of it. The worst was the spiritual suffering Jesus endured on the cross. Jesus was dying for the sins of the world. He was taking the weight of all those sins upon himself that day. Every lie, every theft, every act of adultery, every harsh word that has ever belittled a child, every act of lust, every burglary, every sexual assault, every murder – every sin - was laid upon him. There are depths of suffering involved here that you and I will never be able to imagine. It was so bad that at one point Jesus cried out the most devastating sentence ever uttered: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!' (Mark 15:34). The Son of God, who had been one with the Father and the Spirit from all eternity, felt utterly alone, as if he had been abandoned by God. The suffering in Jesus'

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heart at that moment, not to mention the heart of the Father and the Spirit, is simply beyond telling.

Oh, and did I mention that during all this, people were making fun of Jesus? They were. The religious leaders, the soldiers, even the criminals crucified with him, mocked him as he died on the cross.

The only thing Jesus did in response was to love them all. He even prayed for them: ‘Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing’ (Luke 23:34).

Eventually, Jesus surrendered his spirit. His last words, as recorded in the Gospel of John, were ‘It is finished’ (John 19:30). What was finished? The answer is found by turning to the Greek text of the New Testament, the language in which it was originally written. There, we find that the three words found in our English translations are actually one Greek word: *tetelestai*, a word that means, quite literally, ‘*the price has been paid*,’ it is the word people in Jesus’ day wrote on a bill when it was paid in full.² That is the word picture we should get in our heads when we think of Jesus dying on the cross. Jesus paid the price that day. He cancelled our debt. He died in our place so that we might live.

² Tom (N.T.) Wright, *John for Everyone, Part II: Chapters 11-21 (New Testament for Everyone)*. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 131.

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The early chapters of Genesis tell the story of how God created a beautiful world. He made the stars and the seas, the planets and the porpoises. At the pinnacle of his creation he made the first man and woman, bestowing upon them the special grace of his own image. They were meant to live in perfect union with God and reign as his stewards over all the earth. God laid upon them a single rule: they were not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17). They were told that if they did eat of the tree, they would, in the words of the old King Jimmy version of the Bible, 'surely die.' The command was clear: if they disobeyed God, if they sought to supplant his will for their lives with their own, there would be consequences. In language so simple a toddler could understand it, those consequences were spelled out: the consequences of sin were death.

Most everyone knows what happened. Adam and Eve chose to do things their way rather than God's. God then watched as his beloved children, the ones he had made in his own image, fell into corruption. Human beings became alienated from God and from each other. Sin spun out into the world and corrupted the very fabric of existence. God knew where this would lead. Sin would multiply and increase. There would be murder, war, hate and brokenness everywhere. It surely broke God's heart. Thus arose what the fourth century theologian Athanasius of Alexandria

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called ‘the Divine Dilemma.’³ It was unthinkable for God to go back on his word and allow humankind to escape the penalty for actions which had and would continue to bring so much suffering into the world. A just God could not forsake his justice. But it was equally unthinkable for God to allow his beloved to fall irretrievably from grace. A loving God could not forsake his love. How could God uphold his justice and at the same time save the ones he loved? What was a God of infinite justice and infinite love to do?

The Cross was God’s answer to the Divine Dilemma. It was the breathtaking and mindboggling solution of an all-powerful God. He solved his dilemma with sacrificial love. God came to us as one of us in the person of his Son. He lived as one of us and died the death we deserved. At the cross, Jesus paid the wages of sin once for all. It was God’s way of reconciling the conflicting demands of love and justice. He did what none other could do. He found a way to uphold his justice while proving his love.

The good news for us is that when we acknowledge what Jesus did and accept his sacrifice on our behalf, his victory over sin becomes our victory and we are restored to right relationship with God. We are reconciled to God and promised the gift of eternal life with God. As Paul put it:

³ Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, written in the Fourth Century A.D.

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‘the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Romans 6:23).

That is what happened at the cross. Jesus paid the wages of sin. Through his death, the price has been paid.

The reason it happened is that God loves us too much to ever let us go.

God saw that we were in trouble. He saw that we were lost. He saw that we were suffering. He saw that we were careening toward death and eternity apart from him. He saw all this from the vantage point of eternity, before the Fall of humanity happened, before the foundations of the world were laid, and he could not bear it. And so, in the fullness of time, he ran to us, he became one of us, and he went to the cross for us. At the cross of Christ, we hear God shout for all to hear: ‘I love you! No matter what you have done. No matter what you do to me. This is who I am. I am Love. I will never stop loving you. I will never quit on you. I will never give up on you. I will go the distance for you, because that is what love does!’

If this is the first time you have read about the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross, it may sound strange to you. You may be wondering, among other things, why you would need to believe this in order to obtain salvation. You have every right to ask your questions, and I pray that you will find a Christian and ask them. If you want, you can

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even contact me (my contact information can be found at the end of this book). The truth is that there are many dimensions to the wondrous cross. I have only grazed the surface of them here.

But I hope you can understand at least this much: if this story is true (and it is), if the Son of God really did all of this, if he really became one of us and then gave his life in such a manner so that you and I might have eternal life, then it is the most remarkable thing that ever happened. It means that there is not only a God, but a God who loves us more wonderfully than we could ever imagine. It means that there is a God who won't give up on us; a God who won't give up on you.

And if this story is true, if this is how much God is willing to suffer for our sakes, then this God who loves, this God who has given everything for us, has every right to ask us to acknowledge what he has done before he grants us the gift of salvation and eternal life.

There are many things I may be accused of as a result of writing this book. But universalism is not one of them. Universalism is the idea that there is a God, or at least some sort of 'higher power,' and that all paths lead to him (or her, or it). That is, you can be a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a Rastafarian, a Wiccan, a New-Ager, an adherent to any religion the world has ever devised or even one you came up with on your own, you can be an agnostic or an atheist, or

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even just someone who never thinks about faith at all, and in the end, you will be accepted by God (or whatever he, she or it is) for who you are and what you believe. For after all, your path to ‘God’ is just as valid as anyone else’s path, and ‘God’ will have to acknowledge as much in the end.

That might sound wonderful to the ears of those with ‘Coexist’ stickers on their car bumpers, but it’s the biggest truckload of malarkey to ever come down the pike.

Brennan Manning, a Christian who, in my view, understood more about the love and grace of God than anyone in our time, said this about such thinking: ‘Universalism is a heresy that makes a mockery of the cross of Jesus Christ.’⁴

Amen Brother Brennan. Universalism is wrong. More than wrong, it is an affront to God and to reason. There is only one way, one path that leads to God: the path that passes through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the door through which you must pass to obtain salvation.

Jesus didn’t die on the cross to offer one more way for people to believe and come to God. He died on the cross because it was the only way for people to come to God. God takes sin seriously. He is a God of grace. But he is

⁴ I had the pleasure of hearing Brennan Manning speak on two occasions in my life. On both occasions he made this statement against universalism.

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also a God of justice. Jesus' death on the cross was the only way for God to satisfy his justice while allowing his grace to triumph. His death paid the price our sin deserves. His love drove him to do it. Justice has been served at the cross. Grace flows from it.

It would indeed mock the sacrifice of Jesus to say that following him is just one more way to get back to God. If there were others, particularly others that worked just as well, then why in the name of heaven would the Son of God have voluntarily endured such physical and spiritual pain?

In the end, it is just as Jesus himself said: 'I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6).

Jesus is the Bishop who offers to save you by his grace. He offers you the candlesticks of new and eternal life. But if you don't take them from him, you aren't going to get them any place else.

Chapter Four

The Judge

*‘Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse!
It’s rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness
he judges and makes war.’ - Revelation 19:11*

*‘He will have compassion on us; he will tread our
iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into
the depths of the sea.’ – Micah 7:19*

In the previous chapter, I asserted that Jesus is both *the Savior* of the world who saves us from the consequences of sin, and *the Way* to the experience of eternal life in the presence of God.

Jesus is the Savior: beautiful.

Jesus is the Way: cool.

But Jesus is also the Judge: gulp.

The Bible is crystal clear about this. John records this fact straight from the mouth of Jesus:

‘For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.’ (John 5:26-27).

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Similarly, Matthew records Jesus' words on another occasion:

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats’ (Matthew 25:31-32).

Here is one more for good measure, this time from the mouth of the Apostle Paul:

‘While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead’ (Acts 17:30-31).

The Bible is clear. One day, each one of us is going to stand before Jesus to give an account for our lives. This may happen at the moment of our death, or it may happen on the glorious day Jesus returns to earth to complete his work of making all things new (this book isn't about the second coming, but I should point out that the Bible promises that Jesus will one day come again to make earth and heaven one). What will hang in the balance will be

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whether we get to spend eternity *with* God or *apart* from God. Those who embrace Jesus share in his victory over sin and will spend eternity with God (John 3:16). Those who reject Jesus will remain in their sin and spend eternity apart from God (John 8:21). Such a state of existence is commonly referred to as hell.

The idea of having to appear before a judge is in a sense terrifying. It reminds us of that stomach lurching feeling we get when a police officer hands us a summons for speeding: *'you are hereby summoned to appear before the Court of the Honorable Judge Gallows on such and such a date. A trial and stern lecture await you. Make sure you bring your wallet and your toothbrush.'*

The very idea of having to appear before Jesus, the ultimate judge who will decide whether you will spend eternity in heaven or hell, sounds much worse. Especially when, if you are anything like me, you think about all the things you have done wrong in your life. Believe me, if I were to write all my sins down, there is no telling how long this book might be!

For many of us, the thought of standing before the Cosmic Judge on our personal Judgment Day is a terrifying prospect. It overwhelms us with fear, guilt and shame. In fact, the very thought of it drives many people away from faith in God altogether. Better to avoid thinking about such things, they reason, then to live in fear of a personal

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Judgment Day (I know that doesn't really make sense, but it is what some people do).

But in a sense, there is no reason to be afraid of Judgment Day. Not if you know that Jesus is your Judge.

Because Jesus is a different kind of judge.

Two stories will help illustrate this fact. The first is from the Bible. You can find it in John 7:53-8:11. It's the famous story of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus was teaching the crowds (Jesus always drew crowds; he was quite likeable) in the Temple in Jerusalem when the scribes and Pharisees, his perennial adversaries, came before him dragging a woman caught in the very act of adultery. John doesn't tell us how they caught her. You can almost imagine them lurking about in the bushes and peering through bedroom windows until they found one where people were being naughty. In any event, they brought this woman before Jesus and asked him what they should do to her. 'Teacher,' they said, 'this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?' (John 8:4-5).

John explains that the reason the Pharisees and scribes had brought this woman before Jesus was 'to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him' (John 8:6). In other words, they were trying to trap Jesus,

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and in this case, they felt they had the perfect trap. On the one hand, the Law of Moses required that anyone who committed the act of adultery be put to death (Leviticus 20:10). So if Jesus said, 'The law is clear, we should stone her immediately!' (something he never would have said), he would uphold the law, but find himself in a bit of trouble. For one thing, the Romans, for all their faults, did not go in for vigilante justice. They would have been none too pleased with Jesus' involvement in such a matter. For another, if he sanctioned the woman's death, he would undercut his well-deserved reputation for love and mercy, the very thing that made him so attractive to the crowds that followed him wherever he went. But on the other hand, if he said, 'We need to forgive her,' the scribes and Pharisees would then be able to accuse him of breaking the Law of Moses. Indeed, they would say, he was condoning the very act of adultery. I am sure they were proud of themselves for having come up with such a plan. They could not wait to see how Jesus would try to wriggle out of this one.

Jesus' well-known response must have nearly knocked them over. After doodling in the dirt with his finger (and wouldn't we love to know what he was writing!), he stood up and said, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her,' then bent back down to finish what he had been writing or drawing in the dust (John 8:7-8).

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His adversaries were floored. They didn't know what to say. Jesus had turned things around on them PDQ (pretty darn quick). They had sought to trap Jesus but were instead trapped themselves. If they were honest and said, 'well, even we have some sin in our lives,' the crowd would have eaten it up. They were sick to death of these self-righteous morality police acting as if they had no sin in their lives. Such an admission by the authorities would have brought on a chorus of whoops and cheers. But on the other hand, if one of them threw a stone, that one would be claiming perfection, which would have been an obvious lie, for only God is perfect (Psalm 14:3). And so, one by one, they dropped their stones (assuming they were carrying stones) and went away with their proverbial tails between their legs, probably muttering something like, 'Drat, foiled again!'

This is the point at which the story becomes truly beautiful. Jesus was left alone with the woman. She stood before him while he finished whatever he was doing in the dirt. My guess is she did her best to avoid his eyes. She knew she was guilty. She was filled with shame. Heck, they had caught her in the very act of adultery, so there is a good chance she was half-naked. But then something wonderful happened. Jesus straightened up. He looked her in the eye. We can imagine he may very well have touched her chin and raised her eyes to meet his own. What the woman saw was magical. She saw that in those eyes, there was not even a hint of condemnation. There was only grace.

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Judge Jesus was about to teach the world a lesson. The religious authorities had asked, ‘what do we do with someone who violates God’s law?’ Jesus’ answer? *Love and restore them.*

‘Woman,’ Jesus said, ‘where are they? Has no one condemned you?’

The woman sheepishly looked about her. ‘No one sir,’ she whispered.

Jesus smiled tenderly and said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’ (John 8:10-11).

Jesus’ words are full of amazing, life-changing grace. But they are also, if we are honest, a bit troubling. I mean, shouldn’t this woman’s act of adultery be condemned? Adultery is always hurtful. It is an act of betrayal. It destroys families. It carries such tremendous consequences that the Law of Moses imposed the strictest penalty for it. Shouldn’t such an act be condemned?

The answer is yes. Of course it should be condemned. *And it will be.* This woman’s adultery, along with every other act of adultery ever committed, will be condemned at the cross, where Jesus will bear the condemnation for all sin. The woman’s sin will be condemned, but not her. Because no matter who she was, where she had been or what she had done, no matter how ragged and bruised and

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broken she had become, she was still loved by her Creator. She had been made to bear the image of God, not the stain of condemnation. And so, instead of condemning her, Jesus set himself about the business of restoring her.

This is what sets Judge Jesus apart from the pharisaical judges of this world. For Jesus, the power to judge is not to be used to condemn. It is to be used to restore.

In Jesus' eyes, this woman, like each of us, was like the Christmas tree that looked like ten cents worth of God help us in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. If you are familiar with this delightful story that has become such a part of American Christmas tradition, you will remember that as the Peanuts crew gathers around the tree near the end of the story, Linus says, 'I never thought it was such a bad little tree. It's not bad at all, really. Maybe it just needs a little love.'¹ Then he and his friends dress up the tree and make it beautiful. That's the kind of thing Jesus did for the woman caught in adultery. He did not condemn her. He did not point out how ugly her life had become. He simply loved her and offered her a chance to be restored. He offered her a chance to become beautiful.

Of course, we don't know what the woman did with the rest of her life. The storybook ending is that she was forever changed by this encounter with Jesus. I have no

¹ Charles M. Schultz and Lee Mendelson, *A Charlie Brown Christmas: The Making of a Tradition* (New York: Harper Resource, 2000), 187.

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doubt that she was, although I suppose it is within the realm of possibility that she went back to her wild ways. But even if she did, that would not have changed Jesus' character as her judge. He, as her judge, had offered her a chance for restoration. The rest was up to her.

The bottom line in the story of the woman caught in adultery is this: in the courtroom of Jesus, the goal is restoration, not condemnation. You can reject his invitation to restoration if you want to, but that doesn't change his nature, his character, or his desire for you. You might be able to look into his eyes of love and reject him, but you will never succeed in changing his desire to make you whole.

The second story that speaks to me of the justice in the Courtroom of Judge Jesus comes from one of my favorite movies, *The Mission*.² The movie is so good, and the scene I am about to describe so wonderful, that I suggest you watch it if you really want to understand what I am driving at in this chapter. My words will scarcely do this incredible film, or even this one scene, justice.

The Mission tells the story of a mercenary slave trader, a Jesuit Priest, and their interactions with the Guarani Indian tribe in South America in the 1800s. As the story opens, the slave trader Rodrigo Mendoza is a man who captures

² *The Mission*, directed by Roland Joffe (Warner Brothers, 1986).

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members of the Guarani to sell as slaves to Spanish Colonists. He is a violent man who one day in a fit of jealous rage strikes down his own brother with his sword. He immediately feels a profound sense of guilt and wishes that he would die. The Spanish governor places Mendoza in the custody of Father Gabriel, a Jesuit priest who runs a mission to the Guarani. Father Gabriel attempts to speak to Mendoza about the possibility of redemption, but Mendoza believes he is beyond redemption; that there is no penance difficult enough for him. The only thing Mendoza asks is to be left to die.

Desperate for Mendoza's salvation, Father Gabriel takes Mendoza on a journey into Guarani territory. He tethers a heavy pack to Mendoza's back and forces him to carry it. The pack is filled with the paraphernalia of Mendoza's life as a mercenary and slave trader. It contains his sword, his armor and the nets and tools he used to capture the Guarani. It is a burden that aptly represents the full weight of his sins.

Mendoza carries the burden through the jungle. He drags it behind him as he climbs a steep cliff and waterfall, at the top of which is the home of the Guarani. He collapses from the long struggle as he reaches the top, still tethered to his burden. He knows where he is. What is more, the Guarani know who he is. They recognize him immediately as the man who captured their sons and daughters, their wives and their husbands, and sold them into slavery.

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A Guarani man begins to shout at him. Mendoza cannot understand him, as he doesn't speak the language of his former victims. The man races over to Mendoza, brandishing a knife. He holds the knife before Mendoza's eyes. Mendoza believes this is it: his own personal Judgment Day. He has come face to face with the people he has wronged, and they are now, collectively, his judge. Knowing he deserves whatever happens to him, he does nothing to defend himself. It would be justice if the Guarani man slit his throat. He waits for the thrust of the knife that will end his life.

But then: the inexplicable. Instead of slicing Mendoza's throat, the man grabs the rope that binds Mendoza's burden to his back, cuts it, rolls the burden to the edge of the waterfall and tosses it into the water below.

The effect is immediate. Mendoza is cut to the heart. He weeps like a baby. As he does, the entire Guarani tribe, men, women and children, race to his side. They hold his hands. They pat his shoulders. They tug lovingly on his beard. Mendoza continues to weep as Father Gabriel, like the Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, races over to embrace him. Mendoza is overwhelmed. His face, still wet with tears, breaks open into a smile as sweet, amazing grace breaks like an ocean wave upon his life.

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The rest of the movie tells us what becomes of Mendoza after this encounter. He becomes a Jesuit brother and spends the rest of his life with the Guarani.

Rodrigo Mendoza came face to face with the ones he had harmed. In that moment, he knew they were his judge. But in the eyes of his judge, he found no condemnation. Instead, his judge cut loose the burden of his sin, and cast it into the depths of the sea. Looking upon the ones whom he had pierced (See, Zechariah 12:10), Rodrigo Mendoza was cut to his heart, wept tears of genuine repentance, found blessed acceptance and discovered his heart's true home.

Together, these two stories speak volumes about what it means to find oneself in the Courtroom of Judge Jesus. Jesus' goal is never condemnation. It is always restoration. As it says in John 3:17: '*God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it*' (NLT).

The Judgment of Jesus is the Judgment of Grace. You can reject it if you want to. But you don't have to be afraid of it.

Because in the Courtroom of Judge Jesus, beautiful and unexpected things happen.

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Chapter Five

Threshold

*'When hoary time shall pass away,
and earthly thrones and kingdoms fall,
When men who here refuse to pray,
on rocks and hills and mountains call.
God's love, so sure, shall still endure,
all measureless and strong.
Redeeming Grace, to Adam's race -
the saints and angels song.'*

- Frederick M. Lehman¹

C.S. Lewis tells a wonderful parable about the beautiful and unexpected things that happen in the courtroom of Jesus. It can be found in the pages of *The Last Battle*, book seven in Lewis' beloved series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*.²

If you have read Lewis' books, you know that *Narnia* is a magical country in a world beyond our own space and time. It is a world created by the Great Lion Aslan, the Son of the Emperor Beyond the Sea. In the stories, children

¹ Frederick M. Lehman, *The Love of God*, Hymn (1917).

²C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001). The encounter between Emeth and Aslan described in the paragraphs that follow is taken from chapter 15 of *The Last Battle* and can be found on pages 756-757 in this compilation volume of Lewis' Narnian tales.

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from our world visit this magical place, sometimes by passing through the door of a wardrobe, other times by entering in other no less mysterious ways. Christians familiar with the stories recognize Aslan, the Lord, Creator and Savior of Narnia, as a parabolic representation of Jesus Christ.

The Last Battle tells the story of Narnia's last days and how Aslan saves those who belong to him. One of the most intriguing characters in the story is Emeth. Emeth is an eminently admirable character. He is a brave and noble soul who seeks the truth and tries to do what is right. He is the kind of guy you might want your daughter to marry.

He only has one problem: he doesn't believe in Aslan.

Emeth, you see, is not Narnian. He hails from Calormen, a country to the southeast of Narnia. The Calormene Empire is Narnia's most troublesome enemy. In fact, in *The Last Battle*, an army from Calormen invades and conquers Narnia. Emeth is a soldier in that army. Hailing from a foreign land, Emeth holds to a different worldview than the people (and animals) of Narnia. Instead of hailing Aslan as his Master and Lord, he, like all Calormen, worships the god Tash.

Emeth lives his entire life this way. It is only when Aslan draws Narnian history to a close that Emeth realizes he has been wrong about Aslan his entire life. Along with

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many others, both friends and enemies of Aslan, Emeth is brought through a magical door from the dying Narnia into Aslan's country. In passing through that door, he crosses the threshold between time and eternity. Aslan's country is, of course, what we commonly call heaven. More accurately though, it is the new world described in the book of Revelation, as well as elsewhere in the Bible. It is the place where earth and heaven are one.

Emeth is at first amazed at the beauty of Aslan's country. But he becomes frightened when he finds himself face to face with Aslan himself. He immediately realizes his mistake in life. He is captivated by the beauty, nobility and grace of Aslan. All at once he knows he has been following the wrong god his whole life and acknowledges in his heart that Aslan is the One True King. He falls to his knees, convinced that he has come to his hour of death. In this, he is not at all unlike the brothers of Joseph in Genesis or Rodrigo Mendoza in *The Mission*.

But then, as it did in those stories, the beautiful and unexpected happens. Aslan nods his head and welcomes Emeth into his country. The two talk a bit, and finally, Aslan breathes upon Emeth and takes away his fear. Aslan then invites Emeth to enter fully into his country, an invitation Emeth accepts with his whole heart.

It is a fascinating story: a man passes from time into eternity an unbeliever, meets the Lord and Savior of the

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world at the threshold of eternity, and is given the chance to believe.

Of course, Emeth's story is just that: a story. Narnia is a fictional place (though I would most certainly enjoy the chance to go there), and the events described in the pages of Lewis' book never actually happened. But the story of a man who accepts Christ beyond his own space and time is certainly one that should raise our eyebrows. The traditional Christian understanding is that people must accept Christ as Lord and Savior before the moment of death. People must accept him as such in time, not in eternity. But Lewis' story raises an intriguing possibility. What if the judgment we face in eternity looks something like what happened to Emeth? What if people might, as they pass from time into eternity, come face to face with the God they wronged all their lives, only to be offered an opportunity to repent and embrace him? Could the idea Lewis expressed in *The Last Battle* be true? Is it possible that as a person passes from time into eternity, they might have one last opportunity, at the threshold of eternity, to embrace Jesus?

Is there any Biblical support for such a possibility?

Surprisingly, there is.

Peter's first epistle is an amazing letter. In it, Peter writes to Christians who are enduring suffering of various

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kinds, who will experience even worse suffering and persecution in the near future. He encourages his fellow believers to endure suffering patiently, to love their enemies and to refuse to return evil for evil. In short, he exhorts them to be like Jesus, who poured out grace and mercy upon even the ungrateful and wicked. In the midst of all this, to help drive home his message, Peter offers a shocking illustration, one you probably never heard much about in Sunday School (or anywhere else for that matter):

‘For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made proclamation to the *spirits in prison*, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah’ (1 Peter 3:18, emphasis added).

Huh? What on earth does Peter mean? Peter is saying that at some time after Jesus’ death on the cross, but before his Resurrection, during the time when his disciples were thinking their world had come to an end, Jesus was active and alive in the spirit. Just what he was doing has been debated by scholars. It has been suggested by some that the ‘spirits in prison’ were fallen angels. But that hardly makes sense in light of these words found in the next paragraph of Peter’s letter: ‘...the Gospel was proclaimed even to the dead, so that, though they had been judged in the flesh as everyone is judged, they might live in the spirit as God

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does' (1 Peter 4:6). In the light of that verse, it seems clear that what Jesus was doing between his death and resurrection was preaching the Good News of the Gospel to *people* who had died. In the Gospel of John, Jesus himself first advanced the idea that he would do something of the sort when he said, 'the hour is coming...when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live' (John 5:25). So the idea is: Jesus preached the Gospel, not just before his death and after his Resurrection to those who were alive in time, but also between his death and Resurrection to those who had died and entered eternity.

This all may sound new to you, so let me be clear about what I am suggesting. I am suggesting that Peter provides us with a Biblical basis to make the claim that Jesus meets people at a point beyond death. He meets them, not in time, but in eternity, and gives them the opportunity to embrace the Gospel.

It boggles the mind, doesn't it? How can Jesus do that?

To understand what Peter meant, and how Jesus can do such a thing, it will help us to have a better understanding of the first century Jewish conception of the afterlife.

In Old Testament times, people didn't talk about going to heaven or hell when they died. They talked about going to *Sheol*. *Sheol* wasn't the same as either heaven or hell. It was understood to be the abode of the dead, a vague,

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shadowy sort of place where people were believed to go when they died. James Kay describes Sheol as ‘a dark, lower world where the dead linger as shadows of their former selves, cut off from the living, and oblivious to (the praise of) God.’³ It wasn’t exactly the most thrilling understanding of the afterlife, but it must be remembered that people in those days did not have the full revelation of Jesus Christ, and so their understanding of life after death was a bit vague and shadowy, like Sheol itself was believed to be.

Over time, the Jews came to believe that one day, at the end of the age, there would be a general resurrection of the dead and a final judgment. Sheol thus became the place where the dead ‘waited’ until that day. In the New Testament, the word Sheol is often referred to by the Greek word Hades. Translators of the Bible have often, and erroneously, translated the word Hades as ‘hell’ in our English Bibles. But in the New Testament, when you see the word Hades in the Greek text, the reference is not to hell, as in the place of final judgment; rather, it is a reference to the interim holding place where the dead await the final judgment. The place of final judgment, the place we properly call hell, is most often in the New Testament referred to by the Greek word Gehenna, which refers to the

³ James Kay, as quoted in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles Creed*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 120.

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Valley of Gei Hinnom, the valley outside of Jerusalem where in Old Testament times people offered child sacrifices to the false god Molech (See, 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6 and Jeremiah 7:31; 32:35). In latter times, it was the municipal garbage dump, a public incinerator where fires burned day and night, as well as a place where a disgusting species of worm bred and multiplied.⁴ It was thus an excellent metaphor for the place of final judgment, i.e., hell (See, Matthew 23:33; Mark 9:43-47; Luke 12:5).

Thus, when Peter spoke of Jesus preaching the Gospel to the dead, we can conclude he meant that Jesus preached to those who had died and were awaiting the day of final judgment in the vague and shadowy place called Sheol. Now, of course, this concept of Sheol does not represent a fully informed, Christ-illuminated understanding of the afterlife, and it shouldn't be taken so literally as to make us believe that people actually sit around in some waiting room for the final judgment. It seems more likely that the concept of Sheol points to the reality, one Peter picks up on in his metaphor of 'the prison,' that, prior to Jesus, people were held captive to death. Death was the one enemy that no one, before Jesus, had been able to defeat. Everyone who ever lived faced the moment of death. Everyone passed from life to death. Everyone entered the shadowy land of Sheol.

⁴ William Barclay, *Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1 (Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 163.

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But then Jesus met them there. How? The victory of Christ on the cross was something that worked, not only forward in time, but backward as well. Jesus, you will remember, is described in the Bible as ‘the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world’ (Revelation 13:8, King James Version). When Jesus died, his spirit before his Resurrection (and his body after it) entered the realm of eternity, and from eternity, Jesus would have been able to be present at all times, all at once. I know that’s a bit cosmic, but what do you want in a discussion of the interplay between time and eternity? He would have been able to meet every single person who had ever lived in the moment of their deaths at the threshold between time and eternity. In other words, he would have been able to meet everyone in Sheol. He would have been able to present to each person the life-giving power of the Gospel. He would have been able to offer each person the gift of himself, just as Aslan offered himself to Emeth.

The most amazing thing about this is that, as the Apostle Paul suggests, some people took him up on the offer. Ephesians 4:8, which references Psalm 68:18, tells us that ‘when he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men’ (NIV). It is a mind-blowing idea: that even before Easter morning and the Resurrection, Jesus was hard at work setting those captive to death free.

Most Christians I know have tended to ignore these portions of scripture. Or at least they have tried to explain

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them away. Some say, ‘Sure, Jesus preached to the dead. He met the Old Testament saints; you know, folks like Abraham, Moses, Ruth and Esther, and gave them a chance to hear the Gospel so they could be saved. But he didn’t offer salvation to anyone else.’ Such a view ignores Peter’s plain words about Jesus making proclamation to those who lived in the days of Noah. Those people were hardly saints. In fact, they were so evil that God decided to destroy the world (Genesis 6:13). Jesus didn’t just preach to the so-called ‘good people,’ he preached to the worst of the worst! In specifically identifying them, Peter makes it clear that Jesus gave everyone who died the chance to accept the Gospel.

Others try to impose a chronological limitation on Peter’s words: ‘OK then, maybe he did offer salvation to more than the Old Testament saints. But clearly, he only did this for those who died before the time of the cross.’ I can understand how people might come to that conclusion. The reference to the days of Noah is of course a reference to a time prior to the cross. But that reference is merely illustrative of the type of people Jesus preached to, not a chronological limitation on what Jesus did. If we take the reference to the days of Noah as words of chronological limitation, then why not limit Jesus’ saving activity in the spirit to those people who lived and died in the time of Noah and not thereafter? That would hardly make sense; it would mean that Jesus offered salvation to those wicked enough to

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cause God to nearly destroy the world but left Old Testament heroes like David and Jeremiah (who came along later) out in the cold! It makes far more sense to see the reference to the days of Noah as illustrative of the kind of people to whom Jesus was willing to preach, not as a chronological limitation.

The simple and astounding truth is that Jesus may have done what he did, not just for those who died before his death, but for everyone who ever died or would die, whether before his death on the cross, the week after or 2000 years later. Remember, Jesus wasn't operating in time anymore. He was in eternity. From eternity, he could have been in all times and places at once. He would have been able to meet Moses at the threshold of eternity the moment after his death, and he would have been able to do the same for a woman who died in Indonesia in 1947. Both Moses, the woman and everyone else who has ever died, or ever will die, has passed or will pass beyond time into eternity. They have passed or will pass from life into Sheol. And as the Psalmist says, even in Sheol, God (Jesus) is there (Psalm 139:8).

This is apparently what C.S. Lewis believed. In a letter to a Mrs. Arnold in 1952, he referenced the line from the Apostle's Creed about Jesus descending into hell (Sheol) and said:

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‘the doctrine of Christ’s descending into Hell (i.e., the land of the dead; not Gehenna, the land of the lost) and preaching to the dead...that would be outside time and would include those who had died long after Him as well as those who died before He was born a Man.’⁵

Many Christians will be disturbed by this. They will continue to impose limits on what Peter meant in his letter, whether those limits are related to the type of people Jesus preached to or the time periods covered by his preaching. But it strikes me that they do this, not because the Bible clearly says that is the case (which it certainly does not) but because they have already decided that there must be limits to God’s grace.

But here’s the thing: what if grace knows no limits? It sure doesn’t seem to have them. If the Son of God emptied himself of all but love, died on a cross to save the world and prayed for the ones who crucified and mocked him as he died, doesn’t that in and of itself prove that God’s grace is beyond whatever puny limits we might set for it?

And if this is true, that grace knows no limits, and if there is a chance to accept grace at a different kind of judgment day at the threshold of eternity, then who knows how many people, as they meet Jesus there, might fall to

⁵ C.S. Lewis, Letter to Mrs. Arnold, 31 January 1952, found in *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. W.H. Lewis. (New York: Harcourt Inc., 1966), 418.

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their knees as Emeth did? Who knows how many people might cry out, as they see Jesus clearly for the first time, 'You are the one I have been looking for all my life!' Who knows how many lifelong doubters might echo the confession of Thomas: 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20:28).

No doubt some will be offended by such a thought. Even as I write this, I am imagining the email I will receive. I will be labeled a heretic and a blasphemer. This life, they will say, is the only chance to accept grace. Death seals the state of the unbeliever. If a person hasn't accepted Christ before the moment of their death, there is no second chance. There is no 'threshold moment' in or after death when a person gets to surrender their life to Christ. It just doesn't work that way.

I can only wonder why they will be so adamant about foreclosing the possibility.

I think C.S. Lewis was on to something in that story about Emeth. Maybe there is a moment at the threshold of eternity when everyone gets to see Jesus for the first time and for who he really is. Not for who people said he was, but for who he really is, in all his beauty, in all his nobility, in all his grace.

Maybe, in such a moment, some might reach to embrace him for the very first time.

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Maybe Jesus will reach to embrace them too.

O Lord let it be.

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Chapter Six

Inescapable

'Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.' - Psalm 139:7-8

'O Light that foll'west all my way, I yield my flick'ring torch to Thee' – George Matheson¹

My earliest memory of my Uncle Ronnie involves a bear. The teddy bear I cuddled at night for the first few years of my life was a toddler size bear he gave me on the day I was born. I obviously don't recall receiving it, but I know that as a little kid, Uncle Ronnie held a special place in my heart as the guy who gave me my teddy bear. At the risk of embarrassing myself further, I will tell you that as soon as I was old enough to talk, I named that bear 'Tude.' I hadn't been able to say 'Ted.'

When I was a bit older, Uncle Ronnie returned from a hunting trip and presented me with a smaller stuffed black bear. When I was older still, and had outgrown teddy bears, he came back from another hunting trip with a framed picture of a mother bear and her cub. I hung it on my bedroom wall.

¹ George Matheson, *O Love That Will Not Let Me Go*, Hymn (1882).

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Apparently, my Uncle Ronnie had a thing for bears.

Or maybe, Uncle Ronnie saw bears as his way of maintaining a special connection with me.

It worked.

Uncle Ronnie was the odd man out in our family. He was my Father's brother, one of ten siblings, and from what I have been told, always a bit of a loner. He served in the Army during the Vietnam War and carried deep emotional scars for the rest of his life as a result of his service. If he had been a bit of a loner before, the war likely made him more so. Unlike the rest of his siblings, Uncle Ronnie never married and for the most part kept to himself. We would see him occasionally, but for long stretches of time, Uncle Ronnie would slip off the radar screen. No one would know exactly where he was or what he was doing, but every so often he would pop up, usually on the heels of a hunting trip or, when he needed work, to see if my Dad, a builder, could use a little extra help on his jobs.

Whenever Uncle Ronnie showed up, you could be sure he would stick around a while. If he came to see you one day, you could almost guarantee he would keep coming around for the foreseeable future. My Mom got used to the idea that when Uncle Ronnie showed up, she would have to set another place setting at the dinner table for at least a couple of weeks.

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I believe that deep down, despite his lone wolf lifestyle, Uncle Ronnie yearned to be a part of a family. He craved affection. That's why he would pop up every once in a while and stick around. He loved being with us. He just didn't know how to be part of a family for long.

Usually, after hanging out with us for a couple of weeks or more, Uncle Ronnie would just stop coming. No explanations. You might not see him again for months or even years at a time after that. But you always knew that eventually, he would show up again.

I loved it whenever Uncle Ronnie showed up. Not just because he brought me bears (which did stop at a certain age), but because there was just something about him I adored. True, he was a loner who you couldn't count on to stick around, and he could sometimes be a bit surly. But he always brought with him moments of laughter and happiness. A visit from Uncle Ronnie added something to our family dynamic. In some ways, I think he brought out the best in all of us. I think we all knew how lonely he was, and we did our best to show him that we loved him. I think he did his best to show us that he loved us too, even if he did disappear on us for long stretches of time. Uncle Ronnie was just doing the best that he could do.

In late 1999, after Uncle Ronnie had been off the radar screen for a while, he suddenly popped up. He first appeared at my Aunt's house with some particularly bad

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news: a smoker all his days, he had been diagnosed with lung and esophageal cancer (he went cold turkey after his diagnosis). With my Aunt's help, he began treatment. His prognosis was not good, but he had some time left. Uncle Ronnie used that time to reconnect with the members of his family.

He made a special connection with my Aunt, with whom he lived during the final months of his illness, my Father, my Mother and me. Starting in the spring of 2000, Uncle Ronnie was a fixture at our house. He came over just about every night. If he hadn't eaten dinner with another of our relatives, he would eat with us. But the main thing he did with my Dad and I was watch baseball. All three of us were diehard Yankee fans, and those were the days of glory known as the Joe Torre years. Watching the Yankees as they worked their way toward another championship was fun for all of us. We had good times together, watching and cheering on our team. All through the spring, all through the summer and into the fall we did this. But in the fall, Uncle Ronnie began to fail.

It was during this time that I began seminary. As a budding theologian, one of the things I was most eager to do during this time was share my faith with Uncle Ronnie. He had done well at shutting many out of his life over the years, and God was one of the many. I knew he didn't have much longer and I wanted to share the Gospel with Uncle Ronnie before he died. But there was a problem. Uncle Ronnie

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wasn't open to discuss it. He didn't want to talk about such things. During the spring, summer and fall of 2000, Uncle Ronnie was living in a state of denial. He wanted to believe that he would go on living. He didn't want to discuss anything that brought up the prospect of his own death. Questions of faith and eternal life did just that, and so they were taboo around him. Given this state of affairs, I was a bit cautious, perhaps too much so, about bringing the matter up. I kept waiting for him to open up, for the right moment to come along. I prayed about it all the time. But I never felt the time was right.

But then one week, the clock ran out. I was at the time traveling back and forth between home and seminary. I would spend most of the week in the commuter rooms at my seminary outside Philadelphia, and then go to my parents' house at the Jersey Shore on weekends. It was also the week of the World Series, and the Yankees were playing (and beating) the Mets in the first ever New York Subway Series. I came home on a Friday and learned that Uncle Ronnie had taken a sudden and significant turn for the worse. 'It might not be long now,' I was told. My Father and I immediately made up our minds to go see him the following morning.

I don't remember exactly how, but that next day, everything seemed to go wrong. We planned on going in the morning, but something happened to prevent us from doing so. We planned on going in the afternoon, but again,

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the same thing happened. By the time we arrived at my Aunt's house, it was early evening. It seemed just as well. It was game four of the World Series that night, and the Yankees were up 3 games to 0. It was entirely possible that the Yankees would take home another championship that evening. Watching the game or at least part of it with Uncle Ronnie seemed a fine thing to do. We could celebrate their victory together. I figured it would be special for all of us.

When we arrived, and I saw Uncle Ronnie, I could hardly believe my eyes. He seemed to have aged twenty years in the previous week. He could barely open his eyes. He walked like every joint in his body was a rusty gate. We sat at my Aunt's kitchen table for a while as he downed some after dinner medications. Then we adjourned to the living room to put on the game.

We had been sitting only a few moments when my Uncle Ronnie said, 'what's this?' and held his arm up at a strange angle. Then, suddenly, a wave of pain severely contorted his face.

The end had come.

We would later deduce that he had a heart attack. The tumors had been compressing his aorta, and finally completed their evil work, closing it off entirely. My Aunt ran to call 911 as I ran to Uncle Ronnie's side to comfort him. I knelt on the floor beside his chair and prayed. It was

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a desperate prayer. I can remember it to this day (perhaps not word for word, but close). I prayed to God and talked to Uncle Ronnie at the same time:

Lord, hear our prayer right now. Uncle Ronnie, do you hear me? Listen Uncle Ronnie, and please God, accept this as our prayer. Uncle Ronnie, I've wanted to tell you this for so long. I've wanted to tell you how much God loves you. I've wanted to tell you how much Jesus loves you. God, please open Uncle Ronnie's heart to you. Uncle Ronnie, Jesus came to die for your sins and my sins. If you put your faith in him, if you believe in him, if you take his hand even now, you can be with him forever. This won't be the end. It will only be the beginning. You will be with Jesus forever. And someday, I'll join you. We'll watch all the baseball games you will ever want to see. I've wanted to talk with you about this for so long. I'm sorry to have taken this long to do it. But I know you have been lonely Uncle Ronnie, and I want you to know that God knows it too. He has loved you all the days of your life. No matter where you have been or what you have done, he loves you. He has been with you. He is with you even now. He loves you even now. Just take his hand Uncle Ronnie. Take it. Now. Please.'

I was babbling, and my statement about baseball in heaven might be disputable theologically (although I stand

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by it), but it was as honest a prayer as I had ever prayed, and I trusted that God understood that.

But as I prayed, and this was what made my prayer as urgent as it was, I sensed Uncle Ronnie slipping from my grasp.

By the time I was halfway through the prayer there was no sign of life; no breath.

As I uttered that last ‘please’ I checked his pulse: nothing.

But I kept praying. ‘God, please let him hear me. Jesus, please meet him even now. Please take him to be with you forever. Uncle Ronnie, can you hear me? Please, take Jesus’ hand.’

That’s when it happened.

Uncle Ronnie took in a deep breath. His eyes opened ever so slightly, and he grabbed me by the hand. He didn’t just touch my hand. He didn’t just take hold of it. He GRABBED it. He turned his face to mine and pumped my arm several times, the way you might shake the hand of a long-lost friend. The way someone might shake your hand while saying, ‘Yeah! That’s what I’m talking about!’ He held on tight as if he would never let go.

As he pumped my arm, I knew what he was doing. I knew it as surely as I knew I was drawing breath. He

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wasn't just grabbing my hand. He was grabbing the hand of Jesus.

Then he was gone.

My Uncle Ronnie had been a loner. He had pretty much avoided getting deeply and emotionally involved with others all his life, God included. But in his final moment, he gave in. He opened his heart to Jesus.

Looking back, I can see things played out just as God planned it. As I said, my Father and I had been trying to go see Uncle Ronnie all day long. But every time we started out, something happened that prevented us. Good thing. If we had arrived earlier, I may not have been there at the crucial moment. I might not have been there to pray for and with my Uncle Ronnie as he died. I might not have been there to ask Jesus to meet him. I might not have been there to ask Uncle Ronnie to embrace Jesus as he passed over the threshold between time and eternity.

You might say then that the real miracle was that God arranged for me to be there to invite Uncle Ronnie to accept Jesus in his final moment. I suppose that's true. I'm very thankful to God for that. That may well have been a miracle. But the greatest miracle wasn't that I was there.

The greatest miracle was that Jesus was there.

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Psalm 139 is one of my favorites. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible captions it, '*The Inescapable God.*' The Psalmist writes of a God who is there for us wherever we go. He writes, in verses 1-8:

'O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my paths and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high I cannot attain it. Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

Even if we make our bed in Sheol, the Psalmist writes, God is there.

Even in death.

God is there.

Just like he was there for my Uncle Ronnie.

I have often heard it said that the Hebrew name for God, *Yahweh*, is a name that echoes our breath. We breathe in and out and form the sound – *Yah-weh*. It is a beautiful

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thought: that God is as close as our breath; that from a baby's first breath to the last breath of a lifetime, every person speaks the name of God. That in every breath we take, from first to last, God is there.

God is always there. Even in Sheol. He meets people even in the moment of death. And since he is there, so is his grace. His grace is present, and available, for all who want it, for all who will simply take his hand.

I believe this with all my heart. I believe it because I believe it reflects the God we read about in the Bible; the God who travels any road to find us; the God who is *inescapable*.

Oh, and by the way, the Yankees won that night. And even though I didn't get to share the moment of victory with my Uncle Ronnie then, I went to sleep that night looking forward to the day when we will celebrate it together in the presence of Jesus.

I am confident that we will.

Chapter 7

Objections

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.' – Isaiah 55:8-9

'Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?'

Matthew 20:15

It has been many years since I first saw the Tapestry depicting Joseph and his brothers; many years since I began to wonder if Judgment Day might be different from what I had been taught to believe; many years during which I have wrestled with the possibility of a person finding salvation at the threshold of eternity. For the longest time, I fought against such a possibility with all I was worth. It went against everything I had been taught from my earliest days in Sunday School. I began to wonder if I was a heretic for even considering it. I am aware that by publicly embracing such a possibility now, some will say that I am. But I can honestly say that I don't believe there is an objection anyone can raise that I haven't wrestled with myself. I've raised them all, and in the end, I've found them wanting. Today I am confident in saying that God's grace is wider and more wonderful than I ever imagined and that we should be

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surprised at nothing God does in his relentless pursuit of the lost.

In this chapter, I will raise and answer some of the objections I have wrestled with and listened to in developing the ideas expressed in this book. In the process, I hope to clarify both what I am saying and what I am not saying.

Some will no doubt dismiss this book as just another offering of thinly disguised universalism. As I have already made clear, I believe universalism, the notion that all roads lead to salvation, to be utter heresy. Still, much of what I am saying could lead people to believe that I am a ‘Christian Universalist,’ or ‘Christian Restorationist,’ that is, one who believes that when all is said and done, everyone will surrender to Christ, accept his grace, and be ushered into the presence of God and eternal life.¹ I will have more to say about Christian Restorationism in the next chapter, but for now, suffice it to say that, though it pains me to say so, I do not believe that everyone will embrace Jesus Christ. Tragically, there will be people who, on the day they meet Christ face to face, look into his love-filled eyes and say what they had always been saying throughout the course of their lives (whether they knew it or not): ‘No thanks.’

¹ In this book, the terms Restoration, Restorationist and Restorationism are used in connection with the theological view described here. They are not to be confused with other theological views or movements that may use such terms.

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The Gospels bear sad witness to this heartbreaking fact. During the days Jesus walked the earth, people said ‘no thanks’ to his face all the time. John 11, for example, tells the story of how Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus had been in his tomb four days when Jesus arrived in Bethany to bring him back to life. After explaining to Lazarus’ sister Martha that he was ‘the resurrection and the life’ and that anyone who believed in him would never die (John 11:25-26), Jesus approached Lazarus’ tomb. Entering fully into the grief of the mourners, Jesus himself wept openly (11:35). Arriving at the tomb, he commanded that the stone sealing it be taken away. He then shouted for all to hear: ‘Lazarus, come out!’ and incredibly, Lazarus stepped forth from his tomb and rejoined the world of the living (11:43-44).

Jesus did not do this in secret. He did it in full view of many witnesses. Many of these witnesses, having seen Jesus’ compassion and power, believed in him and became his followers (11:45). But believe it or not, some who saw this miraculous event (including some folks connected with the religious authorities in nearby Jerusalem) did not. They ran off to tell the religious authorities what Jesus had done. The religious authorities were astounded. It was a miracle they could not deny. Lazarus had been dead and was alive again. Jesus had the power to raise the dead.

So you would think they might have thought it was time to start believing in Jesus, right? Wrong. Instead, they

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immediately held a council and decided there was only one thing to do: kill Jesus (John 11:45-53).

These men had encountered Jesus before. They had seen his compassion. They had seen his grace. They had seen him perform miracles. They had heard his amazing teaching about the Kingdom of God. They had experienced him reaching out to them. They had looked into his eyes of love. Now they knew he had the power to raise the dead. And still they said, ‘No thanks.’ In fact, they continued to say no thanks to the very end: even as these same leaders stood at the foot of his cross, they mocked him (Luke 23:35).

Nor were they the only ones. Sadly, people were able to look into the eyes of Jesus and reject him all the time. It’s hard to believe, but it happened. In fact, it still does. People encounter the love of Jesus in life all the time, through the lives of tenderhearted people who carry his love in ways that no one with a heart could possibly miss (think Mother Teresa), and still, people scoff and laugh at Jesus.

Tragically, it seems things won’t be all that different at the threshold of eternity.

In chapter 5, I recounted the story of Emeth and his encounter with Aslan at the threshold of eternity in C.S. Lewis’ *The Last Battle*. I did so in support of my contention that some might accept grace for the first time when they

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meet Jesus face to face. But Lewis tells of others who did not respond to Aslan's overture of grace as did Emeth. Lewis dedicates an entire chapter in his story to a group of self-absorbed dwarves who 'refused to be taken in.'² Sitting in a circle beyond the gateway to Aslan's country, one might say at the very threshold of heaven, they refuse to see the beauty that lies all around them. To them, everything is dark. Aslan and his friends make several attempts to reach them, but they refuse each gesture. They cannot even hear the Great Lion's roar. All their lives they had lived for themselves, and sitting in eternity, they are unable to come out of themselves. They are trapped in a hell of their own making.

It is possible for people, through the choices they make in life, to render themselves incapable of recognizing beauty and truth, even when it is staring them right in the face. People do it in time, and, sadly, there is little reason to believe they will do otherwise in eternity. It is possible for people to become so bitter, obstinate, callous, or downright hateful that they will not even then be able to respond appropriately to the beauty and grace of Jesus Christ.

N.T. Wright has written:

² C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 742. The refusal of the dwarves to respond to Aslan is found in chapter 13 of *The Last Battle*.

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‘...if it is possible, as I’ve suggested, for human beings to choose to live more and more out of tune with the divine intention, to reflect the image of God less and less, there is nothing to stop them finally ceasing to bear that image, and so to be, as it were, beings who were once human but are not now. Those who persistently refuse to follow Jesus, the true Image of God, will by their own choice become less and less like him, that is, less and less truly human. We sometimes say, even of living people, that they have become inhuman, or that they have turned into monsters. Drugs can do that to people; so can drink. So can jealousy. So can unemployment. So can homelessness, or lovelessness. I don’t believe, myself, that any living human being ever quite loses the divine image. But that some seem to work towards it as though (so to speak) hell-bent on it seems to me beyond a shadow of doubt.

I see nothing in the New Testament to make me reject the possibility that some, perhaps many, of God’s human creatures do choose, and will choose, to dehumanize themselves completely. Nor do I see anything to make me suppose that God, who gave his human creatures the risky gift of freedom and choice, will not honour that choice, albeit through the deep sorrow and sense of loss that any God we

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can truly imagine must carry in his heart, a sorrow lived out fully on Calvary.’³

It is a tragic fact that breaks the heart of God: some people choose hell. They choose to reject Christ, grace and salvation. They choose to spend eternity apart from God. It is a choice people make all their lives, bit by bit, as they lose their humanity, and it is a choice they will sadly confirm on the day they stand before Jesus as people who have lost the ability to see what is most real. Such people will have lived as rebels against their Creator, and, by making a final confirmation of a choice made over the course of a lifetime, will prove themselves to be, in the words of C.S. Lewis, ‘successful rebels to the end.’⁴

So, one more time, just to be clear: I am not saying that everyone will be saved. I wish I could say that. But it just doesn’t appear to be the case.

Still, I am saying that some who do not accept Christ during their lifetime might do so either in the moment of death or even after death, and while many might go along with the idea that a person can be saved in the moment of death (i.e., they will accept that where there is even the slightest spark of life there is hope) they will go positively

³ N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus: Biblical Reflections on Discipleship* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 95-96.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperOne 2001), 130.

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apoplectic over the possibility of someone accepting grace, as they might phrase it, post-mortem. The objection (and you might be making it right now yourself) goes like this: *‘You’re saying people get a second chance! That’s not fair!’*

I have three things to say about that.

First, I would suggest that for some people, offering a so-called second chance seems to be the only fair thing for God to do. There are some people in the world, even 2000 years after the birth of Christ, who have never heard the Gospel. Is that the fault of the people who haven’t heard, or the rich comfortable Christians who have been so busy living their lives and hoarding their riches that they haven’t told them? There are some people who, like Emeth in the world of C.S. Lewis, have lived their whole lives in a country and culture that has indoctrinated them with a false worldview, thus preventing them from ever truly hearing the Gospel for what it is, while, again, comfortable Christians have done nothing about it. Have they ever really had a chance to accept the Gospel? There are still others who may have heard the Gospel, but not in a way they could reasonably be expected to accept it. For example, centuries ago slave traders would sometimes preach to captured Africans on the trans-Atlantic voyage to the New World. Then, halfway through the voyage came the dreaded Middle-Passage, where some of the slaves would be dumped overboard and left to drown.

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Can anyone reasonably say that those poor drowned souls heard the Gospel in a way they could have accepted it?

In Harriet Beecher Stowe's pre-Civil War novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, there is a character named Prue. Her 'fictional' story is based on the story of a real-life person. Prue is a slave in New Orleans who is whipped and beaten on a regular basis by her 'Christian' masters. Her previous 'Christian' masters, in Kentucky, had destroyed her family by selling off her husband and all their children but one. Prue and her last child were then sold to her current owner in New Orleans. Because Prue's child kept her up at night and made her tired, her masters announced they wished it was dead, and when it became sick, refused to allow her to care for it. The child was kept in another room while Prue tended her mistress, and there, alone and sick, it cried itself to death. Prue, rather understandably, started drinking to numb her pain, and turned into something of an angry drunk. When asked by Tom (the novel's title character) if she had ever heard of Jesus Christ, Prue could only wonder who he was talking about. She had heard the name, she says, but all she knows in connection with him concerns judgment and torment. When Tom asks if she knows Jesus loves her, she responds that no one has loved her since her husband died. And when Tom asks if she knows that Jesus died for her, and will take her one day to heaven if she lets him, Prue responds that heaven is where her Masters are going, and if that is the case, she would rather go to torment.

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It is soon after this failed good faith attempt at evangelism by Tom that Prue is whipped to death by her ‘Christian’ masters.⁵

Prue never accepted Jesus in her lifetime. But for the love of God, can anyone blame her?

It is a sad but undeniable fact that one of the greatest deterrents to Christian faith is the behavior of so-called Christians.

Would it be unfair for God to reveal himself in all his beauty and truth to people such as these? It strikes me as eminently fair that God would give the kind of people illustrated in the above examples a ‘second chance’ either in the moment of death or even after. Indeed, such a second chance would more accurately be termed the first one. If God is just and fair, and he most certainly is, that strikes me as just the sort of thing he might do.

But secondly, to the objection that a ‘second chance’ isn’t fair, I ask: since when was grace ever fair? My Lord, the whole point of grace is that it *isn’t* fair! It certainly wasn’t fair that Jesus, who never sinned, had to die on a Roman cross to pay the wages of sin for those who had sinned. But he did. When you come right down to it, the real objection raised by the ‘no second chance’ crowd is an objection to grace itself. They think certain people don’t

⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), chapters 18 and 19.

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deserve it, while they, because of their supposedly exemplary Christian lives, do. But as the character Will Munny says in *Unforgiven*, ‘deserves got nothin’ to do with it.’⁶ Thank God for that. Because if they did, we would all be lost.

Finally, the third thing I have to say to those who say that a so-called ‘second chance’ for grace at the threshold wouldn’t be fair is this: why shouldn’t people be given a second chance? You had one.

A different sort of objection people may raise to the notion of grace at the threshold centers around *justice*. This objection goes like this: ‘In a world where horrible things happen, where nations commit genocide, where children are forced to work in sweat shops while wealthy companies profit from their labor, where young girls are abducted and made to perform sexual favors in brothels and where the perpetrators of such injustice escape punishment all their lives, there must, in the end, be justice. Any God worth calling God must and will deal with such people.’

I could not possibly agree more. The good news here is that God *will* deal with such people. Again, let me emphasize I am not denying the reality of hell. Some people, perhaps many, go there. I have little doubt that among those who do (though by no means should we think

⁶ *Unforgiven*, directed by Clint Eastwood (Warner Brothers, 1992).

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they will be the only ones) are those who commit horrible atrocities and injustices such as the ones mentioned above. Such people strike me as precisely the kind of people who, through the choices they make in life, render themselves incapable of responding to grace. God is just. He will deal with those who perpetrate injustice. He will balance the scales. God will take care of unrepentant evildoers, and he will do so by giving them just what they asked for: a one-way ticket to hell.

‘But still,’ the objector will say, ‘what if such a perpetrator of injustice surrenders and accepts Christ at the threshold?’ I will admit that such a possibility exists. Sometimes, extremely bad people find salvation in life; sometimes they find it in the final moments of life. There might be some who will find it at the threshold of time and eternity. And there, of course, is where the objector’s claim arises: would not the salvation of even one such person be a denial of justice?

Again, I have three things to say about that.

First, even if such a person repents, there will be justice. Think for a moment about Joseph’s brothers. In the moment they recognized Joseph, they were terrified. That moment was terrible for them. Or think of Rodrigo Mendoza in *The Mission*. When faced by the Guarani, he knew he deserved to die. The best punishments are always the ones that rehabilitate the offenders. If people can realize

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their wrongs as they look into the face of their judge, if they are able to see the depths of their depravity and shed sincere and hot tears of repentance, isn't that enough? Just how much contrition, just how much punishment, do we require before a person can be saved? The Bible says that God will take care of those who do wrong. 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay' (Romans 12:19). Maybe we should just trust God to know what level of punishment is needed for everyone who comes before him for sentencing and stop demanding that some people receive more punishment for their sins than we endured for ours.

Second, does it really make that much of a difference whether a person repents just before their physical death or at the threshold of eternity? Many traditionally minded Christians have no trouble accepting the heartfelt confession of a condemned murderer moments before the lethal injection is administered. If the possibility for grace for such a person at such a time doesn't offend us, why should it bother us if the confession happens seconds later in eternity?

And third, while it might bother us to think of such a person receiving grace, we need to remember that it is God's prerogative to extend grace to whomever he chooses. In Dostoyevsky's classic novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov explains his objections to God and grace to his brother Alyosha. Specifically, Ivan imagines a situation in which the murderer of a child accepts grace and then

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stands in the presence of God embracing and being embraced by both the child and its mother. Such a scenario is despicable to Ivan (and admittedly, he poses a very hard case). No one, Ivan argues, not even the child or its mother, has the right to forgive such a wrongdoer.

Alyosha listens to his brother's impassioned objection to God and grace. At first, he knows not what to say. But then he finds the words:

‘...you asked just now, is there a being in the whole world who would have the right to forgive and could forgive? But there is a Being and He can forgive everything, all and for all, because He gave His innocent blood for all and everything. You have forgotten Him, and on Him is built the edifice, and it is to Him that they [the mother, the child and the murderer] cry aloud, ‘Thou art just, O Lord, for Thy ways are revealed!’⁷

In other words, Christ has the right to forgive anyone. People do terrible things. But Christ has borne the punishment for those things on the cross. If he chooses to forgive anyone for whom he has suffered, who are we to complain?

⁷ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880). Book 5, chapter 4: ‘Rebellion.’

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In any event, maybe Ivan's image of a murderer, his victim and his victim's family embracing in heaven isn't so offensive. I once saw a picture of some young children being baptized by the man who murdered their father. The man had repented and become a sincere and devout Christian, and the children had embraced him as a member of their family. It is one of the most beautiful and moving images I have ever seen.

Maybe I found it to be so beautiful and moving because, someday, I hope to be embraced by the one I murdered. He's the same one you murdered too: Jesus Christ. We sometimes forget that it was our sin that put Jesus on that cross.

There are, no doubt, other objections that can be raised to my reflections in this book. But it strikes me that most of them are at bottom objections to grace itself, and objecting to grace itself seems a rather silly thing to do. It is kind of like sawing off the branch of a tree on which you are sitting.

In the end, we will be surprised by grace. It will embrace some whom we might never have expected to make it; maybe even some we hoped wouldn't make it. But in the presence of Jesus, that really shouldn't bother us. Not if our hearts are truly beating with Christ-like love.

Jesus once told a parable about the owner of a vineyard who was, by most people's standards, a terrible

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businessman. Early in the morning he went down to the marketplace to hire some workers for his land. There, he met and hired a group of early risers; eager beavers willing to put in a full day's work. A bit later, at 9:00 AM, he found and hired some additional workers, the ones who had hit their snooze alarms a few too many times and barely made it to the marketplace in time for the workday. He went back to the marketplace again at noon and at 3:00 PM to hire some more workers (apparently, he had a large vineyard) and found the kind of men who liked to sleep in till noon (or later!). Finally, he went back to the market at around 5:00 PM (you really must wonder about his sanity at this point). There he found a bunch of guys who had wasted the day away. One wonders how they even had the nerve to show up at the hiring line at such a time of day. But the owner hired them as well, and sent them to work in his vineyard, where, undoubtedly, they did as little work as possible.

An hour later, when the workday was done, the owner called all the workers in to pay their wages. He called the ones who came at 5:00 first. The others watched eagerly as they watched their boss pay them the usual daily wage for their negligible work. The eager beavers who had been at the hiring line early were excited. They were sure they would receive more. But to their surprise and chagrin, he paid them the same as he had the lazy loafers who showed up at quitting time! The early risers didn't even try to hide

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their disgust, and grumbled against the owner of the vineyard: ‘These last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat’ (Matthew 20:12). I think most of us can understand their complaint. To pay those who came late the same as those who worked all day just doesn’t seem fair.

But then the vineyard’s owner responded to one of the grumblers:

‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to the last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’ (Matthew 20:13-15).

If in the end we wind up in the company of Jesus along with some folks who came late, who nonetheless receive in eternity the same grace we received in time, will we really have a right to complain? Or does God have a right to do what he chooses with what belongs to him?

Will we be envious if God is generous?

If our hearts are truly beating with Christ-like love, the love of the one who was willing to sacrifice himself to save even the worst of sinners, we won’t be envious at all. We

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will rejoice. Even if the ‘workers’ showed up 5:00; even if they showed up at 6:01. In fact, if there ends up being a line we have to wait in to ‘receive our wages,’ it won’t surprise me at all to see some folks whose hearts are beating with Christ-like love turn to the late comers and say, ‘Hey, do you want to get in front of me?’

In C.S. Lewis’ *The Last Battle*, there is a remarkable passage describing the final judgment of Aslan. Some don’t make the cut. They are swallowed up to Aslan’s left in his huge shadow and never seen again. Through the eyes of Eustace Scrubb, one of the visitors from our world who has become a hero in Narnia, Lewis describes what happened next:

‘But the others looked in the face of Aslan and loved him, though some of them were very frightened at the same time. And all these came in at the Door, in on Aslan’s right. There were some queer specimens among them. Eustace even recognized one of those very Dwarfs who had helped to shoot the horses. But he had not time to wonder about that sort of thing (and anyway it was no business of his) for a great joy put everything else out of his head.’⁸

I suspect that at the Final Judgment we too will see some surprises, some ‘queer specimens’ among the saved. But

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Last Battle*, in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 751.

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even if, in a moment of shock, we think for an instant, ‘oh no!’ my guess is that if our hearts are truly right with God (as they will be in that moment) we will only say, ‘Oh yes!’

One day I was sitting at the breakfast table with my five-year-old daughter. We were talking about this and that, when out of nowhere she came up with this spit-take worthy line: *‘Daddy, I sure hope Judas learned his lesson.’*

I asked her why she asked, and she told me that she hoped that Judas and Jesus could be friends again.

I don’t know if Judas learned his lesson or not. But my daughter’s Christ-like compassion, a compassion that would hope even for the salvation of Judas, brought tears to my eyes.

‘Me too sweetheart,’ I said, ‘me too.’

No wonder Jesus said that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, you must come as a child.

Chapter 8

Restoration

*'I have a dream that all the world will meet You, and know
You Jesus, in Your Living power, that someday soon all
people everywhere will hear Your story and hear it in a way
they understand'* – Caedmon Liturgy¹

*'When we preach on hell, we might at least do it with
tears in our eyes'* – Dwight L. Moody

In the last chapter, I referred to Christian Restorationism. Christian Restorationism is not the same as universalism. While proponents of universalism believe all roads lead to God, Christian Restorationists affirm that Jesus is the only way to salvation; that no one can be saved apart from him. Nonetheless, Restorationists do believe that in the end, all will be saved. They believe that everyone will ultimately make a confession of faith in Christ. Those who fail to do so in life will do so after death. This belief has been around since the earliest centuries of Christianity. Proponents have included early Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus, nineteenth century Scottish pastor and author George MacDonald and popular twentieth century New Testament scholar William Barclay.

¹ *Celtic Daily Prayer: Prayer and Readings from the Northumbria Community*, "Caedmon – In Declaration of a Dream" (Collins, 2000).

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I sympathize with the Restorationists' view that there may be an opportunity for salvation after death, although I prefer to phrase it as an opportunity that persists as one crosses the threshold between time and eternity. However, as I noted in the last chapter, I do not agree with the notion that everyone will be saved.

It is however a provocative idea that deserves further discussion.

Christian Restorationists find support for their position in many Biblical passages, passages which, at least on their face, seem to suggest that the Restorationists are on to something. Here are some of those passages:

‘My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world’ (1 John 2:1-2).

‘For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross’ (Colossians 1:19-20).

‘All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall

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worship before him. For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations. To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust...' (Psalm 22:27-29).

'Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets' (Acts 3:19-21).

'In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his good will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' (Ephesians 1:7-10).

'Therefore, just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous' (Romans 5:18-19).

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‘Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’ (Philippians 2:9-11).

‘O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him to receive a gift in return?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen’ (Romans 11:33-36).

Any Christian who can read such passages and not feel a shiver run the length of their spine has something wrong with them. The vision of these passages is as beautiful as it is breathtaking. Whenever I read them, my heart swells in my chest. Joy floods my soul. I find myself hoping, wishing, that they could be literally true.

In saying this, I am of course aware that many solid Bible scholars have interpreted these passages and explained away any such possibility. For example, I have heard many a preacher point out that when Paul wrote in Philippians of every knee bowing and every tongue confessing that Jesus

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Christ is Lord, he was drawing from the Old Testament book of Isaiah:

‘Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: ‘to me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.’ Only in the Lord, it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; all who were incensed against him shall come to him and be ashamed’ (Isaiah 45:22-24).

Since Paul was drawing from Isaiah, the argument goes, we must consider the full text of Paul’s source material, which supplements the image of every knee bowing and every tongue confessing with an image of shame for those who battled against God. Thus, opponents of Restorationism argue, we need to read Paul as saying that while everyone will be made to acknowledge Jesus as Lord, not everyone will do so from a position of salvation. Some will make the acknowledgment grudgingly and too late as those who have been removed from the presence of God forever.

Restorationists would ask in reply: is that really what Paul meant? Granted, Paul was certainly drawing from Isaiah, but that hardly means that the shame Isaiah wrote about, let alone the shame Paul was thinking about, was the shame one experiences in an eternal hell. More likely, a

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Christian Restorationist might say, it is the shame one feels when they realize they have been wrong. Perhaps it is the kind of shame Joseph's brothers experienced in the moment they recognized him. Or the shame Rodrigo Mendoza felt as he knelt before the Guarani. Or the shame of the woman caught in adultery as she knelt before Jesus. In every one of those instances, shame led, not to eternal condemnation, but to repentance and restoration. Indeed, Christian Restorationists might add, neither Isaiah nor Paul mentions anything about eternal punishment or hell when speaking of every knee bowing and every tongue confessing. Finally, they might point out for good measure that all that bowing and confessing will, according to Paul, result in glory to God the Father (Philippians 2:11). How, they might ask, would sending people to hell accomplish that?

Most traditionally minded Christians would be quick to counter that there are many passages in the Bible that speak of eternal punishment. Certainly, such Christians would say, we need to read the 'every knee' passages in the light of those others. It cannot be simultaneously true that some on Judgment Day will be 'sent away into eternal punishment' (See, Matthew 25:46) and that every knee will bow before Christ in the sense that they experience eternal salvation. Something has to give, and obviously, to these Christians, it is the notion that all will be saved.

Exegetically faithful Christian Restorationists would agree that we need to read scripture in light of scripture.

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Still, they might say, it isn't the 'every knee' passages that have to give. What if, for example, the references to eternal punishment were meant to convey, not a punishment that endures forever, but rather the chastisement one receives in eternity for having lived a life opposed to Christ? What if, they would say, while receiving such chastisement, people contemporaneously kneel in repentance before God? Perhaps it is not the case that we need to read the 'every knee' passages in light of the 'eternal punishment' passages. Perhaps it is the other way around. Perhaps it is the eternal punishment passages that must give way to the notion of universal restoration in Christ.

And so it goes. I could continue with this point-counterpoint until my fingers fall off. If I were to take the time and space to fully exegete each of what I am calling the 'every knee' passages and were I to fully expound the arguments on both sides, this book would be at least twice as long as it is. I will leave such efforts to others. But I will say that while my heart swells every time I put myself in the shoes of the Christian Restorationists and argue their case, I cannot, in the final analysis, embrace their view. There are too many Biblical passages that speak of eternal punishment that would need to be pushed aside. While it may be possible to interpret some of them as referring to the chastisement one receives in eternity, or even, in some cases, as a metaphor for the self-inflicted punishment one faces in this world for going against the plan and design of

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God, it seems to me a dubious and even dangerous supposition that *every* reference in the New Testament to hell or eternal punishment falls within the scope of such interpretations. The severity of the warnings speaks to me of a terrifying possibility we cannot afford to take lightly: it is possible to live life in such a way that we become incapable of responding to God's grace and remove ourselves from his presence forever (See, 2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Moreover, there is the matter of free will and the consequent problem of human suffering. We live in a world full of evil and pain. According to the book of Genesis, all evil and pain stemmed from the Fall of Humanity, which took place because God gave human beings the wonderful yet dangerous gift of free will. We were given the ability to freely choose God or freely reject him. Our rejection of him has led to a world of pain. God is of course in the process of redeeming his world and removing the pain (Revelation 21:1-4), but in the meantime, pain and suffering is all too real. If, in the end, everyone's free will is overwhelmed, and all come back to God, it causes me to wonder: what was God's point in granting us free will in the first place? Was it so that we could endure horrible suffering for a while? So that people could die from cancer? So that babies could be hacked to death by machetes during the Rwandan genocide? If, in the end, God's will overrules the free will of all

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humanity, then what was the point of life? What was the point of human history, with all its suffering and pain?

It makes far more sense to believe that God gave us free will because he wanted us to have the ability to choose to love him. Love is only true love when the lover freely chooses to love. Anything else is robotics. In granting us freedom, God created the possibility of pain and suffering in a world where people could choose their own way over God's. God desires to redeem all of us, but not against our will. Each day we make choices, and by those choices we become more and more people who either will or will not accept grace. I truly hope with all my heart that no one will ever go so far as to render themselves eternally unable to receive grace. But when I look around me at the indifference, cruelty, selfishness and hatred in our world, it strikes me that some undeniably do.

C.S. Lewis had some interesting words on this subject. In his book, *The Problem of Pain*, he wrote:

‘Some will not be redeemed. There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay within my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and specially, of Our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason. If a game is played, it must be possible to lose it. If the happiness of a creature lies in self-surrender, no one

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can make that surrender but himself (though many can help him make it) and he may refuse. I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully, “All will be saved.” But my reason retorts “Without their will, or with it?” If I say, ‘Without their will’ I at once perceive a contradiction: how can the supreme voluntary act of self-surrender be involuntary? If I say “With their will,” my reason replies “How if they will not give in?”²

Elsewhere, in *The Great Divorce*, Lewis wrote words that bear no less on this subject: ‘there are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘*thy* will be done.’³

Sadly, according to Lewis, and I am compelled to agree, not everyone will be saved. Not everyone will be ‘restored’ to God.

Yet I cannot end the discussion on such a note. For even as I write, the words of Almighty God rise within my soul: ‘my heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender’ (Hosea 11:8).

I am not a Christian Restorationist.

But every once in a while, I wish I could be.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 119-120.

³ C.S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 130.

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Primarily, I wish this for God's sake; for the sake of my Lord and Savior. In 2 Peter we find words that reveal the desire of God's heart. Peter is writing to believers and explaining why Christ has not yet returned. In the course of his explanation, Peter writes, 'The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some might think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance' (2 Peter 3:9).

God's desire is that no one should perish. His desire is that all come to repentance.

What Christian could ever possibly hope for anything less than the fulfillment of God's desire? What Christian could ever possibly hope for anything less than the salvation of every person who has lived, lives or will live on the face of the earth?

There is a scene in *The Passion of the Christ* that depicts hell the moment Jesus dies on the cross. He has said the words, 'It is accomplished,' and breathed his last. In a flash, we are taken to a heaven's eye view of Satan in hell. He is howling, screaming *and all alone*.⁴ I love that scene. I love it because it speaks to me of a complete victory. God takes everyone. Hell gets only Satan and his demons. I know the scene is just an artistic way of expressing Christ's victory over Satan, and that I should not take it as a literal

⁴ *The Passion of the Christ*, directed by Mel Gibson (Icon Productions, 2004).

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expression of Biblical truth, but even so, I cannot think of that scene without wishing it were literally true.

Some time ago, while preaching through the Missionary journeys of Paul as described in the book of Acts, I conducted an interesting experiment. I read through Paul's letters, not as they appear in the Bible, but chronologically, in the order in which he wrote them. It was my way of tracing how Paul matured both in his theological writing and as a missionary as the years passed. It was quite illuminating. I learned many things. But one of the most beautiful things I discovered was that as time went on, Paul began to sound at times as if he were a Christian Restorationist. It seemed to me that, when Paul started out, he believed he could reach the whole world for Christ, but as the years went by, and he realized he would not be able to do so, he began to rely increasingly on the hope that God would take care of saving those he had not been able to reach.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that Paul was a Christian Restorationist. I am simply stating that at times, and especially in his later letters, he often sounds like one. If you doubt me on this, try doing what I did: read through Paul's letters chronologically. I am willing to bet that you will at least get the sense of what I am talking about. Which makes me wonder: why would Paul, who was such a meticulously careful theologian, write things in his letters that could and would be taken by some as

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evidence that he believed everyone would be saved? And why would God, who inspired every single word he wrote (See, 2 Timothy 3:16), have allowed him to write things that would be so open to such an interpretation?

I have a few thoughts. Maybe Paul wrote as he did because he lived with such fervent hope that God's desire for all to be saved would be fulfilled. Maybe he wrote as he did because he figured if God could save a wretch like him, a man who once tried to eradicate the Church of Jesus Christ from the face of the earth, he might just find a way to save all the other wretches on the planet. Maybe it was because Paul, who had been 'forgiven much, loved much' (See, Luke 7:47) and wanted to see the whole world saved. And so, even if he didn't quite believe that it would be, the hope that lay in his heart for all to come to Jesus would from time to time sneak out through his 'pen' (with the permission and assistance of the Holy Spirit) and find its way onto the pages of parchment that would eventually become the largest part of what we now call the New Testament.

And maybe the Holy Spirit let that happen to remind us that God himself doesn't want us to ever desire anything less for his world than he does.

Again, I don't believe Paul was a Restorationist, and I am not one myself. But I believe Paul's great hope that all might be saved, a hope that found expression from time to time in his letters, is an entirely admirable one to carry in

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our hearts. Maybe we can't embrace Restorationism. But we can, like Paul, dream, at least occasionally. I do, at least in my better moments. In the moments when I ponder the fact that the worst sinner I know is the one I see when I look in the mirror, I cannot help but dream that one day, when every knee bows and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father, everyone will be doing so, not grudgingly, but willingly and happily, with tears of joy and gratitude in their eyes. Not too late, but right on time.

The way I figure it, if Paul can dream from time to time, I can too.

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Chapter 9

Now

‘As God’s partners, we beg you not to reject this marvelous message of God’s great kindness. For God says, ‘At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you.’ Indeed God is ready to help you right now. Today is the Day of Salvation.’ - 2 Corinthians 6:2 (NLT)

‘Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace, freely bestowed on all who believe; you that are longing to see His face, will you this moment His grace receive?’- Julia H. Johnston¹

I am aware of the significant danger presented by this book, and that it is a double danger.

The first danger is to the non-Christian, who might be tempted to say: ‘If I can receive God’s grace at the threshold between time and eternity, I might as well live as I wish in the here and now! If Jesus is as wonderful as you say, he will love me and accept me no matter how I lived my life!’

The second danger is to the Christian (and consequently to the non-Christian as well) who might say: ‘If Jesus can save people at the end, I’ll just leave it to him. What a relief! I was never comfortable sharing my faith in the first place. I guess I don’t have to do that now!’

¹ Julia H. Johnston, *Grace Greater Than Our Sin*, Hymn (1911).

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To both the non-Christian and the Christian who say (or think) such things, I want to make one thing perfectly clear: *you are drawing the wrong conclusions from this book.*

Non-Christians, you need to surrender your lives to Jesus *now.*

Christians, you need to be out there spreading the Good News of Salvation through Jesus Christ *today.*

This chapter presents some of the reasons why those two statements are true. The discussion here will be directed at the non-Christian who believes they do not need to accept Jesus now. I will simply trust that as my argument in that vein progresses, my fellow Christians will understand why they need to get out there and share their faith (as if we need any inducement beyond our Lord's clear command to do so in the Great Commission. See, Matthew 28:19-20). I will offer six reasons why people need to accept Christ's offer of grace now, rather than wait for the hoped for moment discussed in this book. The first three I will refer to as temporal reasons, the last three eternal reasons.

Temporal Reasons

One evening, after Jesus and his disciples had been ministering on the western side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus turned to his friends and said, 'Hey guys, let's go to the other side of the sea.' The disciples got the boat ready and piled in. Jesus, for his part, curled up in the stern of the

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boat, laid his head on a cushion, and fell fast asleep. Sometime during the night, a frightened disciple woke him up. Jesus immediately saw the panic in his eyes and sensed the reason. The wind was howling and the boat lurching on monster waves. They had been caught in a terrible storm. The disciples could not believe that Jesus had been able to sleep through it and asked whether he cared that they were all about to die. Jesus simply stretched, yawned nonchalantly and said, ‘Oh come on guys. Where’s your faith?’ He then turned his face into the wind and shouted two words: ‘Be still!’ Suddenly there was a dead calm. The storm was gone. The disciples were amazed. ‘Who is this guy,’ they asked, ‘that he can even control the wind and the waves!’

They sailed on to the east. As morning approached, the sun rose before them. The sky was a grayish blue. Soon the shore came into sight. ‘Over there,’ Jesus said to his disciples, ‘land over there.’ The disciples maneuvered their little boat toward the limestone embankment that rose above the shoreline. As they drew closer, they saw that there were clefts in the rock. As they drew even closer, they recognized those clefts for what they were: tombs. They could hardly believe it. Jesus had taken them to a graveyard.

As the boat reached the shallows, an otherworldly howl pierced the morning mist and carried down to the shore. The disciples looked up and saw a sight that scared the

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daylights out of them. It was a man: ghastly, wild-eyed and naked. His body was covered with bruises. He had shackles on his wrists and feet. He carried the bearing of one who was engaged in an immense struggle with life. He staggered down the embankment, stopping every few feet to pick up a rock and beat himself with it. He shouted obscenities and words that might have come from another world. The disciples wanted to turn the boat around and find a safer place to land, but knowing that no protest would deter their Master, they allowed the boat to drift toward the shore.

When the boat landed, Jesus stepped onto the beach. As he did, the disciples heard him whisper, ‘Come out of him!’ There was both compassion and righteous anger in his words. The man raced toward the shoreline as Jesus approached. Just as the two were about to collide, the man fell at Jesus’ feet. He sobbed uncontrollably. It was as if he were crying from the deepest recesses of his soul. Suddenly, his countenance changed. His eyes went blank. The disciples looked into his eyes and saw, well, nothing. It was as if the man wasn’t there. A serpentine voice begged Jesus to go away. It was then that the disciples knew: the man was possessed. Jesus demanded to know the man’s name. ‘Legion,’ was the slithery reply. Legion: a word that designated a Roman army contingent of up to 6000 men. This poor man was bound by a force of unspeakable evil.

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No wonder he was living alone among the tombs. His life was a living hell.

Jesus continued to speak with the voice. He drove the demons from the man. They entered a herd of pigs at the top of the embankment. The pigs began squealing like the devil, ran to the edge of the embankment, and catapulted themselves into the sea. It was a terrifying scene all the way around, far more terrifying than the previous night's storm.

But then they looked to Jesus and saw something amazing. It was an image of perfect peace. Jesus was on his knees. He had taken off his outer tunic and wrapped it around the man's shoulders. He was holding him, rocking him ever so gently, whispering again and again, 'It's alright now. They're gone. You're safe with me.' The disciples couldn't believe it. Surely their wonder from the previous night was magnified one-hundred-fold. 'Who is this guy,' they must have thought, 'who can not only still the storms on the sea, but also the storms in a man's soul?'

This story is a dramatization of events described in the Gospels. For the complete Biblical account, see Mark 4:35 to 5:20 and Luke 8:22-39 (Matthew tells of an incident involving not one, but two demon possessed men in Matthew 8:23-9:1). It is a story that illustrates how Jesus can bring peace to the most troubled life.

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It is a story that points to the first reason why people need to accept Jesus now: *Jesus has the power to still the storms that rage within us. Jesus has the power to bring peace to our souls.*

The demon-possessed man is an extreme example, but the truth is that every human heart is plagued by storms: storms of loss, loneliness, bitterness, confusion, guilt and shame. Every human heart aches to have these storms stilled. Every human heart searches for the one who can still them. Most of those searches lead to non-solutions. They may numb the pain and bring temporary relief, but they do not bring lasting peace. Only Jesus can do that. True enough, Jesus may not still your storm as quickly, all in one swoop, as he did in the story of the demoniac (then again, he might), but he will begin the healing process within your soul, and in time bring it to completion (Philippians 1:6).

The truth is that you need Jesus now. Jesus said, ‘Come unto me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest’ (Matthew 11:28). Jesus can bring peace into your life, right here, right now.

A second, related temporal reason to receive Jesus now concerns *the very nature of what the Bible calls ‘eternal life.’* People, both non-Christian and Christian, typically make a big mistake when they talk about eternal life. They think that eternal life is something that begins after you die.

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Nothing could be further from the truth. The Bible was written in Koine Greek, and the Koine Greek phrase that we so blithely translate ‘eternal life’ is *Zoe Aiwnios*. It means more than life that lasts forever. It means the life of the ages. It means life that is abundant and wonderful, life that is filled with beauty and truth, life that overflows with love, joy, peace and compassion. And it doesn’t just begin when you die. Jesus, in the course of the prayer he offered up to his Father at the threshold of his arrest and crucifixion, said, ‘this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent’ (John 17:3).

Eternal life, the life of the ages, the life that fills our hearts with joy, begins when we come to know Jesus.

There is no greater gift than the gift of knowing Jesus. Some people (again, both non-Christian and Christian) look at me funny whenever I speak of this, but the truth is that I really know Jesus. I walk with Jesus. I talk with Jesus. Best of all, he walks and talks with me. No, I’m not saying I hear voices, but I am saying, well, just start walking and talking with Jesus and you will find out exactly what I mean. Jesus has filled my life with joy and peace. He has made me a better person. He fills me with his love and then uses me to spread his love to those around me. I wouldn’t trade the gift of knowing Jesus for everything else in the world. Knowing Jesus is everything. The Apostle Paul felt the same way. He wrote:

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‘Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ’ (Philippians 3:7-8).

The second reason you need Jesus in your life now is that without him, you are really missing out. Jesus is the difference between life lived in black and white and life lived in Technicolor and High Definition. Jesus makes life worth living. Jesus is eternal life.

The third temporal reason to accept Jesus’ offer of grace now is this: *Jesus wants and needs you to join his movement to change the world.*

The truth is, and sadly it is often lost on large segments of the contemporary Christian Church, that Jesus never asked people to believe in him just so they could wait around to die and go to heaven. His mission wasn’t limited to providing people with get out of hell free cards. He called people to follow him and become part of a movement that would last into eternity. Jesus was not interested in making mere converts who would believe the right things so they could live forever. He was interested in making disciples who would live as he lived and work to change both themselves and the world forever.

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Too many Christians operate as functional Gnostics. The Gnostics were heretics who plagued the early church. At the risk of oversimplifying their beliefs, the Gnostics taught, among other things, that the world was evil and that the goal of life was to escape the material world by means of secret knowledge into an ethereal, spiritual existence. Many Christians today hold similar, if not precisely the same, views. They sing songs about how the world is not their home and look forward to casting off their physical bodies to enjoy a spiritual life in heaven. The problem with such a view is that it is completely unbiblical. The world is fallen to be sure, but the physicality of our world is not evil. When God created the world, he pronounced that it was 'very good' (Genesis 1:31). Moreover, as John 3:16, the most famous verse in the Bible tells us, God loves his world. The entire history of salvation is the history of a God who is working to redeem his broken world. The end game for God is not the end of physicality. The end game for God is the renewal and restoration of all things, the fusion of heaven and earth as one (See, Isaiah 11:6-9; Acts 3:21; Revelation 21:1-5). The end game for us is not a spiritual life in which we sit on ethereal clouds playing hymns on harps. The end game for us is the Resurrection of the body and life in a heaven infused world (See, 1 Corinthians 15).

The simple truth is that God cares about his world and our lives in it. In the fourth chapter of Luke's Gospel, we

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read about the day Jesus was given the opportunity to preach in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth. He opened the scroll to Isaiah 61 and read:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor’ (Luke 4:18-19).

While many have tried to spiritualize Jesus’ words, the fact of the matter is that Jesus was laying out the things he had come to do. Yes, he had come to set us free from the power of sin. I get that. But he also came to help people in the here and now. He came to bring hope to people in poverty. He came to set those in captivity free. He came to bring sight to the blind, that is, to bring healing. He came to end oppression and to make things acceptable in God’s sight. He came, to borrow a phrase from his most famous prayer, to make things on earth as they are in heaven (See, Matthew 6:10).

Jesus of course began this work in his own life on earth. But after his Resurrection and Ascension, and until he comes again, he continues that work through those who follow him. This is why it is so important for us to turn to Jesus now. We need to be his hands and feet. We need to carry on his movement, his revolution. We need to follow

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his way of Calvary Love and let him work through us as he continues to transform the world.

Faithful Christians throughout the ages have understood this. The early Christians, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, shared with each other, cared for the poor, healed the sick and loved their enemies. History chronicles how they helped plague victims in cities when everyone else fled to the countryside, how they rescued children with birth defects who had been abandoned and left by the side of the road and how they loved their enemies, even to the point of death. In the fifth century, Patrick, who had escaped from slavery in Ireland, returned to that land of barbarism and cruelty (as it was then), a land where human sacrifices were made to appease false gods, and taught the people there, with his words and by his example, the way of Christ's love, thereby transforming an entire nation. In the 19th Century, the devout Christian William Wilberforce led a movement to abolish the slave trade in England. In the 20th Century, Martin Luther King and thousands of other faithful Christians stood at the heart of the Civil Rights movement. It was their faith in God that drove them in the fight to end segregation in America. These and so many other examples in history are all part of the great movement Jesus started, a movement that is ongoing, a movement that has a special place for each one of us. And there remains so much to be done. Our world is plagued by problems: the sex trade, human trafficking, hunger, disease, the orphan crisis,

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racism, bone-crunching poverty. There are so many fights that still need to be fought until the day Jesus returns.

The amazing thing is that when we fight them, we become a part of what God is doing to restore the world. In fact, there is even continuity between what we do now and the new heaven infused world that is to come. In 1 Corinthians 15, at the conclusion of his discussion on the resurrection of the body and the life of the age to come, Paul writes: ‘Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain’ (1 Corinthians 15:58). In other words, everything we do in Christ’s name matters. Everything will be a part of the new world that Christ will one day bring. Every time we do something that brings a touch of heaven to this present world, we raise a signpost pointing to the life of the age to come.

Jesus launched a movement that will last into eternity. He wants and needs soldiers in his army. He wants and needs you to join it now. He wants and needs you to help him change the present world. He wants and needs you to help him point people to the world that is to come.

Eternal Reasons

But if that still doesn’t do it for you (and quite honestly, if you can’t bring yourself to respond to that, I have to wonder if you will respond to anything) there are also

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eternal reasons for you to accept Jesus now. The first of these can be introduced with a simple phrase: *wherever you go, there you are*.

If you are thinking that you can live however you want in the here and now, and that somehow on the day you meet Jesus you will, if it turns out to be necessary, accept him then, you better think again. It just doesn't work that way. As I have stated earlier in this book, every day we make choices, and those choices help determine who we become. Every day, we make choices that make us people who are more capable of responding to grace, or else, people who are less capable, and ultimately incapable, of responding to grace.

On the day you stand before Jesus, be it the day he returns or the day you die and pass over the threshold between time and eternity, you will be no one other than the person you created by the sum of your choices. You will either be someone who can accept grace or someone who cannot.

As is obvious by now, I believe with all my heart that there will be surprises on that day. But you shouldn't gamble everything on the hope that you may be one of them. Joseph's brothers were surprised and saved on the day they met their brother. But in the Genesis story, there are signs that they felt bad about what they had done even before they recognized Joseph (See Genesis 44). Similarly,

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Rodrigo Mendoza in *The Mission*, while perhaps not fully repentant for the life he had lived before his encounter with the Guarani, had not completely lost his humanity. He had felt remorse over what he had done to his brother. A person who has never heard the truth about God, or at least not in a way they could be expected to accept it, might nonetheless be a person who had sought after what was true and beautiful in life, and, like Emeth in *The Last Battle*, might respond to a threshold invitation to grace. Such people, it seems to me, are the kind of people who may be open to grace when they meet Jesus face to face.

But not everyone meets those descriptions. Some people hear the Gospel in ways that would make even hard-hearted cynics weep. Some see the love of Jesus demonstrated before their eyes and turn away, again and again. Some see the beauty of Jesus in the eyes of the broken and just keep on going deeper and deeper into their self-absorbed way of life. Some people, as the result of their choices in life, become hard cases. They become incapable of responding to grace.

Of course, some will say, that's not me. After all, I'm not a child murderer or a human trafficker. Be careful! Don't make the mistake of thinking that only the worst of the worst are incapable of receiving grace. There are as many ways to becoming impervious to grace as there are ways to sin (See, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10; 1 Timothy 1:8-10; Revelation 21:8). There are all sorts of ways that a person

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can harden their heart and lose their ability to respond to Jesus.

In fact, sometimes, all you have to do is nothing.

The world is filled with people who live selfish, self-absorbed lives, all the while believing themselves to be wonderful. They build bigger and bigger castles for themselves. They spare no expense at experiencing the finer things in life. And they show no concern whatsoever for the poor, the starving, the hungry, the enslaved or the fatherless.

Jesus had a lot to say about such people, and none of it was good.

Jesus once told a parable about a rich man who lived luxuriously while a beggar named Lazarus begged for crumbs outside his gate. The rich man did nothing to help Lazarus. In the parable, both men die. Lazarus then experiences the comfort of heaven. The rich man, whose only sin was that he did nothing to help, ends up in torment and in fire (Luke 16:19-31).

Jesus told another parable about a rich man whom he called a fool. This guy's land produced so abundantly he had no room for his crops. But instead of sharing his abundance with the poor or using it in some other way to advance God's Kingdom, he built bigger barns and stored his goods so that he could live a life of luxury for years to

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come. In the end, God showed up, called him a fool, told him his very life was demanded of him that night and pointed out that the hoarding of his possessions had gotten him nowhere (Luke 12:13-21). Again, a sin of omission led to chastisement from God.

Most telling of all is Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). There, Jesus spoke of the day when he will judge the nations of the earth. He explained that he will separate people one from another the way a shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will put the 'sheep' on his right and the 'goats' on his left. To the sheep, he will say, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me' (verses 34-36). Jesus goes on to say that the sheep will then ask him when they did these things, and he will explain to them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me' (verse 40).

But then, as the parable goes, Jesus will turn to the goats and say: 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not

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welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me' (verses 41-43). The goats will plead with Jesus: 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?' (verse 44). Then Jesus will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me' (verse 45).

The parable ends with these words: 'And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life' (verse 46).

It is a telling parable that speaks to me of two things. First, it indicates that hell isn't just the place for unrepentant child murderers. It is also the place for, among others, those who do not repent of their indifference toward those in need. Second, it is confirmation that even on Judgment Day, as people stand in the very presence of Jesus, there will be those who will not be able to repent. In the parable, the goats do not say, 'O my Lord! I am so sorry!' They try to excuse their indifference. They seek to justify themselves. They prove just how self-absorbed they were in life, and they go away to their eternal punishment as self-absorbed as ever.

I am afraid that is how it goes. On Judgment Day, each of us will be the person we made ourselves to be. If in life you were coldhearted and indifferent to Jesus, either to him

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directly or vicariously through your actions toward the poor and hurting, you will be no less so on Judgment Day. If in life you became so totally absorbed in any type of sin that you left no room in your heart for Jesus as you walked through time, it is extremely unlikely that you will find room for him at the threshold of eternity. And by the way, this warning applies as much to Christians (perhaps I should say nominal Christians) as it does to non-Christians. Jesus once explained that come Judgment Day, there will be many professing Christians whom he will send away from his presence (Matthew 7:21-23). Sitting in a church and calling yourself a Christian doesn't make you any more a Christian than sitting in a hospital and calling yourself a doctor makes you a doctor.

So here's the deal: if you have heard about Jesus and if you know what he expects from you (and you should have a good idea by now), don't delay. Don't live another moment without Jesus. Invite him into your heart. Let him transform you from the inside out. Let him turn your hard heart of stone into a compassionate heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26), and start living for him now, before you grow impervious to his grace. If you are capable of rejecting him now, there is no reason to believe with confidence that you will be any different come Judgment Day.

The second eternal reason to accept Jesus now might surprise you. Most authors don't say such things in their books. But I will. I believe there is grace at the threshold. I

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believe there is grace available as we pass from life into death, from time into eternity. *But I could be wrong.* There are many who strenuously disagree with my ideas, and although I just as strenuously disagree with them, I will acknowledge that what I am talking about in this book is a matter of hope and possibility. It does not rise to the level of absolute certainty.

This much I know for sure: the opportunity to surrender one's life to Jesus does not last forever. At some point the door closes. In Luke 13, we read about a time when Jesus was traveling from village to village while on his way to Jerusalem. Someone asked him if only a few would be saved. Jesus offered the following answer:

‘Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door saying, ‘Lord, open to us,’ then he will reply to you, ‘I do not know where you come from.’ Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.’ But he will say, ‘I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!’ (Luke 13:24-27).

There is a point at which it is too late to respond to grace. Not because God's mercy has come to an end. But because

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God knows that some people, in the exercise of their freedom, will never change.

I believe my arguments about grace at the threshold are persuasive. But I cannot and do not say they are a 100% lock. For the sake of your eternal destiny, please don't wait to test my theories. None of us knows for certain when the door will be shut. Don't risk eternity. Turn to Jesus now while you know you can.

That might seem the most compelling reason of all to embrace Jesus now. But for me, the most compelling reason to surrender your life to Christ now is the final one. I call it *the greatest treasure*.

Several years ago, I watched *Journey of the Heart - the Life of Henri Nouwen*, a beautifully made documentary produced by Windborne Productions. Nouwen was a priest and scholar who spent much of his life working with the poor and disabled, choosing to seek the lowest places to serve rather than the most prestigious. I had always loved Nouwen's soul-stirring books, but I had never seen him or heard him speak, and so I was deeply moved as I watched and listened to Nouwen answering questions on video. The man was the very embodiment of humility. He exuded tenderness and grace.

Henri Nouwen passed away in 1996. I look forward to meeting him someday in the presence of Jesus. But until

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then, my image of Henri Nouwen will always be that of the man I saw in that video, sitting on the edge of his seat while talking about the love of God. He was so animated, so alive, as he spoke of it. This is what he said:

‘...I am God’s beloved child, long before I was born and my father and mother and my teachers in the church got involved, and I will be God’s beloved child long after I’ve died. I go from God’s intimate embrace into God’s intimate embrace. God says, ‘I’ve loved you with an everlasting love. I’ve loved you before you were born. I’ve knitted you together in your mother’s womb. I’ve molded you in the depths of the world. I was there long, long before any human being was there and I loved you. I loved you and I’ve written your name in my hand. You’re safe in the palm of my hand. Long before you were born. And I’m sending you into this world for a little time: 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80 years – that’s just a little bit - so that you have the chance to say, ‘I love you too.’’²

Nouwen was right. Our lives, right now, are our opportunities to express our love for the God who has revealed himself to us in Jesus Christ. I want my life to do that. I want my life to be a love song to God, every

² *Journey of the Heart – The Life of Henri Nouwen*, directed by Karen Pascal (Windborne Productions 2005).

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moment, every day. I want to share his love with everyone I meet. I want to fight for the causes close to his heart. I want to place orphans in families and set slaves free. I want everyone to know of the God who loves them so much that he came to us in the person of the Son, lived as one of us and died on a Roman Cross for us. I want every moment of my life to be about such things. It is my way of saying to God, the Father, Son and Spirit, 'I love you too.'

And one day, when I stand before Jesus and see him face to face, what I want more than anything else is to hear him say: 'Brent, I heard your song. Thanks for telling me that you love me.'

At the end of our days, if we have submitted our lives to Jesus and done our best for him, we will hear him speak words like that. 'Well done good and faithful servant' is the way Jesus put it in the Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:21 and 23, NIV). But it means the same thing.

That is the greatest treasure any of us could ever receive. To hear God say: 'Well done, good and faithful servant. I heard your song. Thanks for telling me that you love me.'

Don't you want that?

Well then, what are you waiting for?

Start singing.

Chapter 10

Relentless

'His love knows no limit, His grace has no measure, His power has no boundary known until men; For out of His infinite riches in Jesus, He giveth, and giveth and giveth again - Annie Johnston Flint¹

'What is impossible from a human perspective is possible with God' – Luke 18:27 (NLT)

Next to the books of the Bible, my favorite books are those authored by Charles Dickens. Dickens' personal favorite from among his books was *David Copperfield*. It is a lovely book, filled, as all Dickens books are, with strikingly colorful characters. There's Mr. Micawber, Betsy Trotwood, Mr. Barkis, Agnes Wickfield and the slithery villain Uriah Heep. But of all the characters in *David Copperfield*, my favorite is Daniel Peggotty. Mr. Peggotty is a man after God's own heart. He lives in an upside-down boat on the shores of Yarmouth, where he makes his living as a lobster man (he also deals in crayfish and crabs; anything with a shell). His abode might not seem like much of a paradise, but it is. He has fashioned his boat into the clean and comfortable home he shares with a delightful collection of castaways: his nephew Ham - the son of his

¹ Annie Johnston Flint, *He Giveth More Grace*, (1862-1962).

drowned brother; his niece Emily - the daughter of his drowned sister; and old Missus Gummidge - the wife of his drowned business partner (apparently life was dangerous on the shores of Yarmouth!). Together they live blissfully, like so many rescued animals on Noah's ark.

Until tragedy strikes. Mr. Peggotty's darling niece Emily falls in with a scoundrel and becomes pregnant. She runs away from home to hide her shame. Mr. Peggotty responds to the news with grace. Rather than judge her, he seeks to restore her. He announces to the rest of his family, in his thick Yarmouth accent, 'I'm a going to seek my niece. I'm a going to seek my Em'ly.' His nephew Ham, knowing that no one has any idea where Emily has gone, asks the obvious question: 'Where?' 'Anywhere!' the old lobster man replies. 'I'm a going to seek my niece through the wuerld. I'm a going to find my poor niece in her shame, and bring her back. No one stop me! I tell you I'm a going to seek my niece!'²

After having himself a good cry, that's just what he does. He leaves instructions to the family that they burn a candle in the window every night while he is away, just in case Emily decides to come back, so that she will know she is welcome. His parting words as he leaves to find his Emily are these:

² Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1867), chapter 31 'A Greater Loss.'

‘I’m a going to seek her, fur and wide. If she should come home while I’m away – but ah, that ain’t like to be! – or if I should bring her back, my meaning is, that she and me shall live and die where no one can’t reproach her. If any hurt should come to me, remember that the last words I left for her was, ‘My unchanged love is with my darling child, and I forgive her.’³

Thus begins a long train of years in which Mr. Peggotty travels ‘fur and wide’ in search of his niece. He is relentless in his pursuit. He travels the breadth of Europe. He ages with every step. His skin burns in the sun. His hair becomes grayer. His wrinkles deepen. Dickens writes: ‘he had every appearance of having toiled and wandered through all varieties of weather; but he looked very strong, and like a man upheld by steadfastness of purpose, whom nothing could tire out.’⁴ It is a long time before he finds Emily, but he eventually does. In the company of David Copperfield, he finds her working in a house of prostitution. ‘Uncle!’ she cries upon seeing him, undoubtedly filled with shame, and passes out, an ‘insensible figure in his arms.’ Dickens describes Mr. Peggotty’s reaction:

³ Ibid., chapter 32, ‘The Beginning of a Longer Journey.’

⁴ Ibid., chapter 40, ‘*The Wanderer*.’

‘He gazed for a few seconds in the face; then stooped to kiss it – oh, how tenderly! – and drew a handkerchief before it.

‘Mas’r Davy,’ he said, in a low, tremulous voice, when it was covered, ‘I thank my Heav’nly Father as my dream’s come true! I thank Him hearty for having guided of me, in His own ways, to my darling!’

With those words he took her up in his arms; and with the veiled face lying on his bosom, and addressed towards his own, carried her, motionless and unconscious, down the stairs.’⁵

As I said, Mr. Peggotty is a man after God’s own heart. Jesus once told a parable about a shepherd who lost one of his sheep (Luke 15:3-7). The shepherd had charge of one hundred sheep and noticed one was missing. Knowing the trouble a lost sheep can get into, he immediately left the ninety-nine and embarked on a wilderness expedition to find the one who was lost. He did not stop until he found her, and when he did, he carried her back on his shoulders, called all his friends and neighbors, and threw a party. Such a party, Jesus explained, is what happens in heaven whenever even one lost sinner is found by God.

⁵ Ibid., chapter 50, ‘Mr. Peggotty’s Dream Comes True.’

Whether we speak of the parable of Dickens or the parable of Jesus, the point is the same: when it comes to seeking and searching for the lost, *God is relentless*. He is willing to go anywhere and do anything to find the lost, and he doesn't stop searching until he finds them. We need look no further than the life of Christ to see this. In Christ, God left Heaven's throne and entered the far country of our world to rescue us. He went the distance. He died on a cross. He passed into death. There is no length God will not go in order to find us.

There is no place we can run where he cannot find us. Even if we make our bed in Sheol, that is, even in our death, at the threshold between time and eternity, God can find us (Psalm 139:8).

Is it so surprising to think that when he does, even at the threshold of eternity, he will look into our eyes, yes, even into the eyes of those who until that moment have not believed, and reach out with his hands? Is it really so surprising to think that the friend of sinners who died at Calvary to save the world, might, even at such a moment, stoop to raise their faces to meet his gaze, tenderly kiss them, and say, 'Finally, here you are. This is my dream come true.'

Well, yes, I suppose that would be surprising.

But that's just the thing about grace. *Grace is always surprising.* It was surprising to Jonah to learn that God's grace extended to the wicked Gentiles in Nineveh. It was surprising to the Prodigal Son who returned home with his tail between his legs and a prepared speech hoping that his father might take him back as a servant, when the father raced down the road with tears in his eyes, flung his arms round the boy, and nearly kissed him to death (Luke 15:11-24). It was surprising to Zacchaeus, that corrupt tax collector, not to mention the crowds who had been following Jesus, when Jesus came over to the tree Zacchaeus was hiding in and invited himself to dinner, noting that it was, after all, his mission to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:1-10).⁶ It was surprising to Paul (then Saul) and remained surprising to him all his life, that Jesus would meet him on the road while he was muttering murderous threats against the Church and tell him that he was nonetheless the one chosen to preach the Gospel to the Gentile world (Acts 9). And it has been, and always will be, surprising to me that years ago, after I had all but turned my back on Jesus, he not only didn't turn his back on me, but came running after me, let me know how much he loved me and called me to share his love with others.

⁶ It is not insignificant that the people who grumbled when Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house had been following Jesus at the time. Sometimes, even followers of Jesus misunderstand the depths of his grace.

And of course, returning to where we began in chapter one, it was certainly surprising to the wayward sons of Jacob when their brother Joseph, whom they had betrayed, refused his right of vengeance and instead said, in effect, ‘Wait! Don’t you see? I know what you did. *But I still love you!* Come close to me. Take my hand. Everything will be alright. It’s not too late for us.’

Yes, grace is always surprising.

Jesus once had an encounter with a rich young man who thought he was all that and a bag of chips (See Matthew 19:16-26; Mark 10:17-27 and Luke 18:18-27). The man had come to Jesus looking for a way to ensure that he would receive the gift of eternal life. Jesus responded that he should sell everything he had, give it to the poor, and then follow him. In other words, he should stop living for money and start living for Jesus. This request flabbergasted the young man, who loved being rich. Saddened by the high cost of obtaining eternal life, he walked away from Jesus. Jesus, loving the man, was saddened as well. He turned to his disciples and with a wistful sigh explained that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven. The disciples could hardly believe their ears. To their way of thinking (and they were wrong about this) the fact that the man was rich was a sure sign of God’s favor. If he couldn’t get into heaven, who could? They came right out and asked Jesus that very question.

Jesus response to his confused disciples was as succinct as it was theologically magnificent: ‘what is impossible with men is possible with God’ (Luke 18:27 NIV).

That right there is grace and salvation in a nutshell for you. People can’t save themselves. Only God can. Salvation is not the result of anything we do. It is the result of grace. God’s grace. Grace is how God saves people. It is how he saves all sorts of notorious sinners. I have always believed that when Jesus delivered that line to his disciples about the possibilities of man and God, he was holding out hope that one day, this stubborn rich man might change his mind; that as Jesus watched him walk away he was hoping that maybe someday he might be saved in spite of his foolishness. Sure, maybe the guy was a bit too much in love with his money, and maybe it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a guy like him to surrender to Jesus, but hey, it was always to be remembered that nothing is impossible with God.

Which is why, in the end, I won’t be at all surprised if God’s grace turns out to be wilder and more wonderful than any of us ever dared to imagine, even more wild and wonderful than I have dared express in this book. I won’t be at all surprised to discover that the divine mercy exceeds our greatest expectations. I won’t be at all surprised to find that all the limits that we in our misguided ‘orthodoxy’ placed on the exercise of God’s grace turn out to be bogus.

Because when it comes to God's relentless pursuit of the lost, nothing is impossible.

Nothing.

Epilogue: Hope

‘May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit’ – Romans 15:13

Martin asked his question. He was looking at his hands as he asked it. It was only after he asked it that he looked up at me. Tears were streaming down his cheeks as he did.

‘Is there any hope for her?’

I swallowed hard. What could I say? Martin had explained to me that she had been closed off to his presentations of the Gospel. She had died in a manner that, at least to Martin’s way of thinking, suggested that she had persisted in her obstinacy until the moment of her death.

But then again, I knew nothing about her life. I knew nothing about the hardships she had faced. I knew nothing about the inner struggles of her mind and heart. I knew nothing about her interactions with Christians and the Church, whether they were good or bad. I knew nothing that said definitively that, Martin’s good faith efforts notwithstanding, life had given her the opportunity to hear the Gospel in a way she could have understood.

What I did know was that God loved her even more than Martin did, and that Jesus had traded heaven’s throne for a cross because he couldn’t bear the thought of spending

eternity without her. And I knew that he, not I, was her judge.

I took a deep breath, uttered a quick, silent prayer and then shared the story I had been carrying in my heart ever since that day at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I had never shared my thoughts about that Tapestry until that moment. But I felt God calling me to do so. I told Martin about Joseph and his brothers. I told him what I saw on that Tapestry of Grace. I told him, in a rough, short-hand way, of the hope I have attempted to express in the pages of this book.

Martin looked at me with a blank expression as I spoke. I wasn't sure what he was thinking, whether he thought my words to be those of a compassionate pastor and friend or an absolute heretic. As I finished speaking, his initial response was to once again look down at his hands. His shoulders began to shudder. A wellspring of tears he had been holding deep within his heart came flooding forth. It flowed for quite a while. Finally, he looked up, and the moment he did, the room brightened. Martin was smiling amidst the tears that shined in his sparkling eyes.

‘So you think there’s hope for her?’ he asked.

‘Martin,’ I said, ‘I believe there is.’

Thank you for reading *Grace at the Threshold*. I hope it has helped you understand more about the God who loves you more than you can imagine. If you enjoyed it, would you please be so kind as to take a moment to write a review either on amazon.com or whatever store's website you purchased this book from? Reviews help get the message of this book out to a wider audience and help me as a writer. I would appreciate your feedback and encouragement.

If you liked this book, you can check out other titles of mine on Amazon, including, *Deleting Jesus*, *Royal Mistakes*, and *The Dawn from On High*. Happy reading and God bless!

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Like all books, this one could not have been written without the support of others. I would like to offer a few words of thanks to everyone who encouraged me on this project.

I'll begin with the personal stuff.

First, thanks to my Mom and Dad, who first introduced me to Jesus. Mom, you have been a constant witness for Christ throughout my days. Dad, it was through your love that I learned the love of my Heavenly Father. Together you modeled the unconditional love of God. What I understand of God, I first learned from the two of you.

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About the Author

Brent David Miller is Senior Pastor at the First Baptist Church of Collingswood. Before going to seminary, Brent was an attorney and spent several years as a prosecutor. His goal in life is to share with as many people as possible the Good News that there is a God who loves them unconditionally and limitlessly, and that He has revealed Himself through Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of the world. Brent currently lives in Collingswood, New Jersey with his wife Megen, daughter Kaeleigh, and son Caleb. You can follow Brent's blog, *Stars Above Me* at www.thestarsaboveme.com.

If you ever find yourself in the Collingswood area, Brent is always ready to hang out in a local coffee shop and talk about Jesus.

Also by Brent David Miller

The Dawn from on High: Advent through the Eyes of Those Who Were There

Advent is the story of God becoming human, the most mind-blowing event in the history of the universe. In *The Dawn from On High* you will hear the story from the perspective of eyewitnesses, specifically Zechariah, Mary, Joseph, a Shepherd, Simeon, Anna, Herod, and Gabriel. These dramatic pieces are ideal for personal reflection, meditation, or preaching. You will experience the Christmas story in a whole new way: through the eyes of those who were there.

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