

>> CHAPTER 1

THE GRACE-  
SHAPED LIFE



See to it that no one misses the grace of God.

—HEBREWS 12:15 NIV

Christ lives in me.

—GALATIANS 2:20

I'll remove the stone heart from your body and replace  
it with a heart that's God-willed, not self-willed.

—EZEKIEL 36:26 MSG

The Christian is a man to whom something has happened.

—E. L. MASCALL

Should anyone knock at my heart and say,  
“Who lives here?” I should reply, “Not Martin  
Luther, but the Lord Jesus Christ.”

—MARTIN LUTHER

»» GOD'S GRACE HAS A DRENCHING  
ABOUT IT. A WILDNESS ABOUT IT.  
A WHITE-WATER, RIPTIDE,  
TURN-YOU-UPSIDE-DOWNNESS  
ABOUT IT.  
GRACE COMES AFTER YOU.

Some years ago I underwent a heart procedure. My heartbeat had the regularity of a telegraph operator sending Morse code. Fast, fast fast. Sloooooow. After several failed attempts to restore healthy rhythm with medication, my doctor decided I should have a catheter ablation. The plan went like this: a cardiologist would insert two cables in my heart via a blood vessel. One was a camera; the other was an ablation tool. To ablate is to burn. Yes, burn, cauterize, singe, brand. If all went well, the doctor, to use his coinage, would destroy the “misbehaving” parts of my heart.

As I was being wheeled into surgery, he asked if I had any final questions. (Not the best choice of words.) I tried to be witty.

“You’re burning the interior of my heart, right?”

“Correct.”

“You intend to kill the misbehaving cells, yes?”

“That is my plan.”

“As long as you are in there, could you take your little blowtorch to some of my greed, selfishness, superiority, and guilt?”

He smiled and answered, “Sorry, that’s out of my pay grade.”

Indeed it was, but it’s not out of God’s. He is in the business of changing hearts.

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We would be wrong to think this change happens overnight. But we would be equally wrong to assume change never happens at all. It may come in fits and spurts—an “aha” here, a breakthrough there. But it comes. “The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared” (Titus 2:11). The floodgates are open, and the water is out. You just never know when grace will seep in.

Could you use some?

- *You stare into the darkness.* Your husband slumbers next to you. The ceiling fan whirls above you. In fifteen minutes the alarm will sound, and the demands of the day will shoot you like a clown out of a cannon into a three-ring circus of meetings, bosses, and baseball practices. For the millionth time you’ll make breakfast, schedules, and payroll . . . but for the life of you, you can’t make sense of this thing called life. Its beginnings and endings. Cradles and cancers and cemeteries and questions. The why of it all keeps you awake. As he sleeps and the world waits, you stare.
- *You turn the page of your Bible and look at the words.* You might as well be gazing at a cemetery. Lifeless and stony. Nothing moves you. But you don’t dare close the book, no sirree. You trudge through the daily reading in the same fashion as you soldier through the prayers, penance, and offerings. You dare not miss a deed for fear that God will erase your name.
- *You run your finger over the photo of her face.* She was only five years old when you took it. Cheeks freckled by the summer sun, hair in pigtails, and feet in flippers. That

was twenty years ago. Your three marriages ago. A million flight miles and e-mails ago. Tonight she walks down the aisle on the arm of another father. You left your family bobbing in the wake of your high-speed career. Now that you have what you wanted, you don't want it at all. Oh, to have a second chance.

- *You listen to the preacher.* A tubby sort with jowls, bald dome, and a thick neck that hangs over his clerical collar. Your dad makes you come to church, but he can't make you listen. At least, that's what you've always muttered to yourself. But this morning you listen because the reverend speaks of a God who loves prodigals, and you feel like the worst sort of one. You can't keep the pregnancy a secret much longer. Soon your parents will know. The preacher will know. He says God already knows. You wonder what God thinks.

The meaning of life. The wasted years of life. The poor choices of life. God answers the mess of life with one word: *grace*.

We talk as though we understand the term. The bank gives us a *grace* period. The seedy politician falls from *grace*. Musicians speak of a *grace* note. We describe an actress as *gracious*, a dancer as *graceful*. We use the word for hospitals, baby girls, kings, and premeal prayers. We talk as though we know what *grace* means.

Especially at church. *Grace* graces the songs we sing and the Bible verses we read. *Grace* shares the church parsonage with its cousins: *forgiveness*, *faith*, and *fellowship*. Preachers explain it. Hymns proclaim it. Seminaries teach it.

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But do we really understand it?

Here's my hunch: we've settled for wimpy grace. It politely occupies a phrase in a hymn, fits nicely on a church sign. Never causes trouble or demands a response. When asked, "Do you believe in grace?" who could say no?

This book asks a deeper question: Have you been changed by grace? Shaped by grace? Strengthened by grace? Emboldened by grace? Softened by grace? Snatched by the nape of your neck and shaken to your senses by grace? God's grace has a drenching about it. A wildness about it. A white-water, riptide, turn-you-upside-downness about it. Grace comes after you. It rewires you. From insecure to God secure. From regret-riddled to better-because-of-it. From afraid-to-die to ready-to-fly. Grace is the voice that calls us to change and then gives us the power to pull it off.<sup>1</sup>

When grace happens, we receive not a nice compliment from God but a new heart. Give your heart to Christ, and he returns the favor. "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you" (Ezek. 36:26).<sup>2</sup>

You might call it a spiritual heart transplant.

Tara Storch understands this miracle as much as anyone can. In the spring of 2010 a skiing accident took the life of her thirteen-year-old daughter, Taylor. What followed for Tara and her husband, Todd, was every parent's worst nightmare: a funeral, a burial, a flood of questions and tears. They decided to donate their daughter's organs to needy patients. Few people needed a heart more than Patricia Winters. Her heart had begun to fail five years earlier, leaving her too weak to do much more than sleep. Taylor's heart gave Patricia a fresh start on life.



Tara had only one request: she wanted to hear the heart of her daughter. She and Todd flew from Dallas to Phoenix and went to Patricia's home to listen to Taylor's heart.

The two mothers embraced for a long time. Then Patricia offered Tara and Todd a stethoscope.<sup>3</sup> When they listened to the healthy rhythm, whose heart did they hear? Did they not hear the still-beating heart of their daughter? It indwells a different body, but the heart is the heart of their child. And when God hears your heart, does he not hear the still-beating heart of his Son?

As Paul said, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). The apostle sensed within himself not just the philosophy, ideals, or influence of Christ but the person of Jesus. Christ moved in. He still does. When grace happens, Christ enters. "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27).

For many years I missed this truth. I believed all the other prepositions: Christ *for* me, *with* me, *ahead of* me. And I knew I was working *beside* Christ, *under* Christ, *with* Christ. But I never imagined that Christ was *in* me.

I can't blame my deficiency on Scripture. Paul refers to this union 216 times. John mentions it 26.<sup>4</sup> They describe a Christ who not only woos us to himself but "ones" us to himself. "Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, *God abides in him*, and he in God" (1 John 4:15, emphasis mine).

No other religion or philosophy makes such a claim. No other movement implies the living presence of its founder *in* his followers. Muhammad does not indwell Muslims. Buddha does not inhabit Buddhists. Hugh Hefner does not inhabit the pleasure-seeking hedonist. Influence? Instruct? Entice? Yes. But occupy? No.

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Yet Christians embrace this inscrutable promise. “The mystery in a nutshell is just this: Christ is in you” (Col. 1:27 MSG). The Christian is a person in whom Christ is happening.

We are Jesus Christ’s; we belong to him. But even more, we are *increasingly* him. He moves in and commandeers our hands and feet, requisitions our minds and tongues. We sense his rearranging: debris into the divine, pig’s ear into silk purse. He repurposes bad decisions and squalid choices. Little by little a new image emerges. “He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son” (Rom. 8:29 MSG).

Grace is God as heart surgeon, cracking open your chest, removing your heart—poisoned as it is with pride and pain—and replacing it with his own. Rather than tell you to change, he creates the change. Do you clean up so he can accept you? No, he accepts you and begins cleaning you up. His dream isn’t just to get you into heaven but to get heaven into you. What a difference this makes! Can’t forgive your enemy? Can’t face tomorrow? Can’t forgive your past? Christ can, and he is on the move, aggressively budging you from graceless to grace-shaped living. The gift-given giving gifts. Forgiven people forgiving people. Deep sighs of relief. Stumbles aplenty but despair seldom.

Grace is everything Jesus. Grace lives because he does, works because he works, and matters because he matters. He placed a term limit on sin and danced a victory jig in a graveyard. To be saved by grace is to be saved by him—not by an idea, doctrine, creed, or church membership, but by Jesus himself, who will sweep into heaven anyone who so much as gives him the nod.

Not in response to a finger snap, religious chant, or a secret

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handshake. Grace won't be stage-managed. I have no tips on how to *get* grace. Truth is, we don't get grace. But it sure can get us. Grace hugged the stink out of the prodigal and scared the hate out of Paul and pledges to do the same in us.

If you fear you've written too many checks on God's kindness account, drag regrets around like a broken bumper, huff and puff more than you delight and rest, and, most of all, if you wonder whether God can do something with the mess of your life, then grace is what you need.

Let's make certain it happens to you.