

Sometimes I DON'T FEEL LIKE *Praying*

Everyone has two faces.
One we show the world.
One we don't want anyone to see.



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Foreword

Mike has been there and done that! His personal spiritual journey caromed up and down like a roller coaster during sixteen long years outside the security of the Ship of Zion. So he writes from personal experience. Painful. Insightful. Thoughtful. And with self-deprecating humor.

Mike is a wordsmith. So you'll appreciate his easy-to-read, yet provocative style of writing as he tackles some of the toughest challenges life throws at all of us. I especially appreciated his practical, biblical solutions and also the anecdotes that made those solutions so much more understandable.

Absorb the principles of the exchanged life that Mike presents so effectively and receive God's resurrection power in your life. This is a very special power that we all need in order to be successful finishers in the race of life that we all have to run!

E. Lonnie Melashenko, Speaker/Director
Voice of Prophecy International Radio Broadcast
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A Note From the Author

I was counseling a couple whose marriage was in trouble. “If I had ‘grace pills’ that would enable you two to get through the challenges of living with each other”—and, believe me, they *really* had some—“would you take them every day?” I asked.

They said they would. I replied that I really did have grace I could share with them—though not in capsule form. Would they accept a dose from me?

They said Yes! So I prayed with them and claimed 2 Corinthians 12:9 in their behalf. I asked the Lord to give them a rich anointing of His grace.¹

Their marriage got better. Did all their issues fade away? No, but their ability to deal with those issues increased hugely. They did overcome some of them. And they are still together.

Most of us are pretty foggy when it comes to grasping grace. The purpose of this book is to demonstrate how God’s grace—His *spiritual power*—can enable you and me to exchange our old life for a new one—literally. When you’ve finished reading, I hope you’ll not only understand grace better, but also have a better handle on how to access it.

Combined with a new you, grace can enable you to handle the worst that life can throw at you (addictions, failing relationships, health prob-

1. “ ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ ” (2 Corinthians 12:9).



lems, being treated unfairly, even death) and still be OK. And not just be OK, but come out on top in the face of the most difficult and apparently hopeless situations—*because you’ve become a new you and because you’ve learned how to access God’s grace.*

Please hold that thought! Because it is my contention that the main reason Christianity doesn’t work for so many of us is that self (our human nature) remained alive when we became Christians. An alive self makes Christian behavior impossible! The natural self has to die in order for Christianity to work. Die *daily*, according to Jesus.² Die *daily*, according to the apostle Paul.³

Die a thousand deaths if that’s what it takes.

Why daily? Because, like the weeds in your yard, self is always trying to come back to life. And on this planet, being full of yourself is the worst possible condition to be in.

It is the Holy Spirit utilizing God’s grace that makes this dying-to-self business become a reality in your life. So I encourage you to go after grace with gusto, because when self is out of the way, a new you can emerge. But to get there, you may often find yourself praying when you don’t feel like it. Sometimes I don’t feel like praying either. But I’ll tell you one thing, I always feel much better *after* praying than I do at the start.

I view grace as a spiritual vaccine that the Holy Spirit provides and applies in at least two ways when we let Him: (1) to neutralize self and (2) to eradicate the fruits of self from our lives (sin, depression, fear, selfishness, addictions, insecurity, nasty disposition, being overly sensitive, etc.) much as a weed killer eradicates weeds.

Grace also enables the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, self-control, etc.) to flourish in the new you. But in order for these things to happen, you’ve got to ingest and absorb grace, not just read about it. More about that shortly.

I’m not a theologian, so you won’t be reading about the theological intricacies of grace in this book. But I will get personal and try to show you how grace has worked in my life. And I will describe how grace can help you deal with life’s toughest issues—and win. As you see how gracious

2. “‘Take up . . . [your] cross daily and follow me’ ” (Luke 9:23).

3. “I die every day—I mean that” (1 Corinthians 15:31).



Sometimes I DONT FEEL LIKE *Praying*

God has been to me through my divorce, my exit from the church, and my addictions, I hope you will learn how to find grace for dealing with the overwhelming challenges you face. I also pray that you'll learn the role of grace in helping you exchange your old life for an exciting new one.

You say you're a weak person who's made some terrible mistakes? Well, let me drop some good news on you. *Grace is available only to weak people who make a lot of mistakes.*

If that sounds like you, then ask God for some grace and read on. But ask humbly. The Bible says that God "gives grace to the humble" (Proverbs 3:34). It also says His grace is sufficient for whatever ails us (see 2 Corinthians 12:9). So ask, my friend. You just might be about to receive a new life and become a powerful new you!

And you might even find that those times when you don't feel like praying are becoming fewer and fewer!



CHAPTER 1

My Unsuccessful Search for Grace Growing Up

I was born into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Actually, I was born in Blodgett Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan. But you know what I mean.

If you're not a Seventh-day Adventist, please understand that I haven't written this book to persuade you to become one. I believe the major doctrines of the Adventist Church are biblical and that this church is special and worthy of your consideration if you're looking for a church that places Scripture as the foundation of its beliefs.¹ However, my primary purpose for writing this book is to help you find a healthy relationship with God—or at least to enhance the one you already have.

When I say “born into” the Adventist Church, I mean that all my childhood memories are Adventist. My mother, the dominant force in my religious life when I was growing up, was a member of the Grand Rapids Central Seventh-day Adventist Church. Dad was an agnostic and rarely attended church with Mother and me. I signed up at age eleven-and-a-half when some of the other kids my age were being baptized.

This was the era when your Sabbath School teacher would take record Saturday mornings and ask if you had studied your Bible lesson seven times the week before and could recite the “memory verse.” I still

1. I make this point simply because fewer and fewer churches today cite the Bible as the only authority for their major beliefs—and Seventh-day Adventists do.



remember reciting all fifty-two memory verses for the year when I was seven or eight in front of the adult Sabbath School members and being rewarded with a new Bible.

My relationship with my mother was challenging, to put it charitably. Once when I asked Mother why I had no brothers or sisters, she said, “We took one look at you when you came out, and said, ‘We don’t need any more of this.’”

Mother was eighteen when she married Dad and, I suspect, was still a woman-child. When I came along about five months later, she was forced to take on adult responsibilities when she still wanted to play. I’m not sure she ever forgave me for arriving so early in her life—although I don’t recall having had much say in the matter. At any rate, we did not enjoy each other’s company.

Did I know what I was doing when I was baptized and joined the church?

Somewhat. I knew I was accepting Jesus and not just joining a church. I believe, too, that I received the Holy Spirit in special measure at my baptism. A few days later, Mother found me in an empty field adjacent to our house with a sickle and garden hoe. I was trying to clear some ground to pitch a tent for evangelistic meetings that I would conduct in our neighborhood. People needed to know that Jesus was coming soon!

Mother stopped me, suggesting I wait until I was older. I’ve always wondered what might have happened if she had let me proceed. Out of the mouths of babes? Who knows?

My earliest memories of church are of an enjoyable youth Sabbath School, with lots of enthusiastic singing—and then great boredom after I was promoted to the adult Sabbath School division. I also remember attending the Friday evening Missionary Volunteer Society programs, not because they were all that exciting but because they got me out of the house.

My cousins, Jack and Ann Nelson, were my saviors when I became a teenager. Every Friday night they picked me up and took me with them to the MV meetings, dropping me off afterward on the way back to their home in Rockford, Michigan.

Mother shaped my early understanding of God. I don’t think she understood grace very well, but she knew a lot about the investigative judgment and the importance of saying your prayers before going to bed.



Not infrequently she warned me that if my name came up after the judgment had closed and I had even one unconfessed sin on God's record books, my goose would be cooked for eternity.

Since I perceived myself to be fairly sinful, I tried to be diligent about confessing my sins every night. Sometimes I worried about the sins I might have committed but couldn't remember. It would have been nice back then if I had known the text where God says He won't remember our sins either.² That bit of grace would have been comforting.

During the first ten or so years of my life, Mother always made me kiss her good night before I went to bed. As I got older and our disagreements multiplied, I didn't want to kiss her good night. Whereupon she would say, "OK, but if I die during the night, you'll have to live with the fact that you didn't kiss me when you had the opportunity."

Finally I tired of the manipulation and stopped the kissing business altogether. If she died unknissed before dawn, so be it. However, Mother lived on.

My early boyhood sins primarily consisted of behavior Mother had taught me was Sabbath-breaking and failures to do my chores properly. On Sabbath afternoons, Dad would often watch baseball games on TV and I, bored and with nothing to do, would slip out of my room to watch the ball game from the entrance to the living room while Mother was taking a nap. Sometimes she would emerge from her bedroom when I wasn't expecting her and catch me watching the ball game! At those times she would remind me that my guardian angel was writing down *everything* in God's record books and that Judgment Day would soon be coming.

Whether I was breaking the Sabbath or the rules of the house, grace was a rare commodity in our home. Dad disciplined me with his belt, and Mother took away privileges. And if it's true that our parents shape our picture of God, I learned early on that there was a painful price to pay for making either God or my parents unhappy. The system worked like this: I would commit an infraction, and Mother would say, "Just wait until your father gets home." When Dad got home, tired from a long day at the tool-and-die factory, Mother would face him with a recitation of my misdeeds while I watched in silent terror. Dad's pulsating jaw indicated his rising anger as he pulled off his work shoes and then his belt.

2. "I will . . . remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:34).



The welts on my behind and the backs of my legs were sore reminders there was a heaven to win and a hell to shun. At age sixteen, I sought out an attorney for advice on how to escape my home.

In a lighter vein, I recall Mother telling me, when I was about fourteen or fifteen, not to sneak around if I was ever going to engage in wrong activities. "I'd rather you just did them in front of me. I'll respect you more," she told me.

Dad smoked cigarettes while I was growing up, and I think Mother suspected I might be experimenting with tobacco. I wanted Mother's respect, so several days later I came home with a corncob pipe and a tin of Prince Albert® tobacco! Taking a seat in the living room, I lit up and began puffing away, pretending to read a book while Mother sat glaring at me.

After the room had turned blue from the smoke, she told me if I had to smoke, it would be better to do so outside. Years later she told me how angry she was at herself for giving me the opportunity to smoke in front of her—and at me for having the gall to take her at her word!

This incident would have ramifications for the future. Not many years later, as a young adult with no Jesus in my life (keep in mind that I had no idea how to maintain the relationship I had started with Jesus at eleven-and-a-half), I would become a closet smoker addicted to cigarettes. Ironically, my tobacco habit began while I was working at the General Conference Temperance Department as assistant editor of *Listen* magazine! Smoking grew into an addiction I would not be able to shake until I formed a relationship with Jesus at the age of thirty. That story appears in chapter 4.

As a teenager, I attended Central High School and found my religious beliefs to be a constant source of frustration. There always seemed to be something I couldn't do because I was a Seventh-day Adventist. Life, for me, was a lot like the poem that Morris Venden used to recite during weeks of prayer in the seventies. Entitled, "I Don't," as I remember it, each stanza of the poem dealt with some forbidden behavior and ended:

*I don't do this and I don't do that.
You must think I don't have much fun.
I don't.*



That was my life in the fifties. Lots of dos and don'ts. Not much grace. Not much fun!

When I took up cross-country running and became Central's top distance runner, the track coach invited me to join the track team and run the mile. I told him that I'd be happy to do so, but that I couldn't run on Friday nights or on Saturdays. He told me that wouldn't be fair to the other guys. And so ended my track career.

On the social front, despite being insecure and shy, I wanted to be able to date like the other kids did. Mary Marcusse was cute and a member of Central High's most popular clique. She liked me and asked her girlfriends to get me to take her to a movie. Alas, that was another *don't*. A *can't*, actually. Attending movies was not an option for a young Adventist guy in the mid fifties.

And so it went. I wanted to attend the proms and dances. But good Adventists didn't dance. Anyway, my parents wouldn't let me use the family cars, and since we lived in the country, my social life happened only in my fantasies.

Ah, yes, my fantasies! As a young teenager well past puberty and being alone much of the time, I learned to have a social life through fantasy. Over time, I acquired wrongful thought patterns that led to a sexual addiction that took me more than forty years to overcome. You'll find that story in chapter 10.

In the meantime, I had graduated from the youth Sabbath School to the adult division and still hadn't found grace. The closest I had come was a blue-eyed blonde named Grace who I fell in love with when I was fourteen. Really, her name was Sally, and she was a brunette. Also, she was an older woman—fifteen. Too old for me. She dumped me after three weeks for a guy who was sixteen and had a hot car.

Now that I'd been promoted to the adult Sabbath School division, my religious life had become boring on all fronts. Adventist evangelist Ron Halvorsen Sr. asks, "Why do we give our kids a joyful religious experience when they're young, then take it all away when they become adults and wonder why 50 percent of them leave the church?"

Ron's right. But back then I knew that the Adventist Church had "the truth" (whatever that meant). To me, it meant that Sunday laws were about to occur and Jesus would likely return within five years because



world conditions were so terrible.³ With heaven just around the corner, I hung in with the church.

And so in my largely graceless young life, I grew up saying my prayers, sinning and repenting, always fearing that I'd be lost because I knew I wasn't good enough for heaven.

Of course I wasn't good enough! I needed Jesus to cover for me. If only I had known then what I know now! That Jesus was extremely anxious to cover for me with His righteousness and that a wonderful commodity called grace would be sufficient for all of my issues.

In other ways, things were looking up. I caught some grace from the lawyer I visited when I was sixteen, seeking to leave my home. (He didn't charge me.) But he did tell me I could declare myself legally independent when I reached seventeen.

That was great news. I was just about to turn seventeen and leave home for college. Although I had begun breaking the ties that bound me to my childhood home, I still had strong ties to the church. Because, you see, not yet understanding God's grace, I still thought the church would be my ride to heaven. So I wasn't ready to bail.

Not yet.

3. It was largely the consensus in Adventism when I was growing up that Jesus would return within five years. I still remember once talking between classes with a girl named Bonnie during my freshman year at college. Both of us were bemoaning the thought that Jesus would likely return too soon for us to get married and have families. Between us, we ended up with eight children and many grandchildren!