

Searching
for the
GOD
of Grace



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“The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all.”

—TITUS 2:11

*“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—
and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”*

—EPHESIANS 2:8

*“If by grace, then it is no longer by works;
if it were, grace would no longer be grace.”*

—ROMANS 11:6

*“ ‘My grace is sufficient for you,
for My power is made perfect in weakness.’ ”*

—2 CORINTHIANS 12:9

*“I saw another angel flying in midair,
and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—
to every nation, tribe, language and people.”*

—REVELATION 14:6





INTRODUCTION
THE BURIED TREASURE:
The Discovery of Grace in the Kingdom of Light

H EAVEN'S GATES WILL OPEN WIDE TO LET GOOD BOYS AND GIRLS INSIDE." DID you ever hear such a cautionary note from a strict Sabbath School teacher who seemed to follow you from Kindergarten to Juniors to Earliteens? Did you grow up believing that God liked us Adventist boys and girls better than other kids because of the good things we did and the bad things we didn't do? Have you wondered about significant portions of your belief structure because you just cannot continue to accept such a narrow definition of God?

Did your parents ever take you through the ascending hierarchy of guilt? (*"How can you treat me this way?" "Your father is going to be so disappointed in you." "You make Jesus sad when you do that kind of thing."*) Did you sometimes feel like you couldn't pray anymore because you had offended heaven with your disobedience, your bad language, even your unconverted thoughts?

Did you ever look closely at older church members who seemed so firmly "settled into the truth" and wonder why their faces didn't reflect the "good news" they talked about? Or why their heart and their treasure didn't seem to be in the same place at all (Matthew 6:21)? Have you found yourself at a distance from the God we were told about?¹

This is a story about cautionary notes and narrow definitions. About distances that lead to disbelief. About buried treasure. This is an exploration of where religious people—including some of our parents, our Sabbath School teachers, our pastors, and our church leaders—have gotten off the gospel path and tried to forge their own way to heaven—a futile exercise that inevitably results in dissatisfaction, skepticism, and hostility. This is an examination of deliberate attempts and clumsy processes that end up burying the greatest treasure the human family has ever known—a treasure that, whenever and wherever it has been rediscovered, has transformed the spiritual

1. Peter Manseau speaks of "people made anxious by churches" (*Killing the Buddha* [New York: Free Press, 2004]). Steve Rabey describes a "mass exodus" of spiritually hungry young people from "both traditional and contemporary congregations" (*In Search of Authentic Faith* [Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2001]). Leonard Sweet reports that we live in a culture in which "there is no interest in a 'second-hand' God that someone else (church tradition, church professionals, church bureaucracies) defines for us" (*Post-Modern Pilgrims* [Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman, 2000]).

experience of the people who have found it.

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE TREASURE

Close to where I grew up on the central California coast was a corner of a tranquil Pacific bay that the locals called Pirate's Cove. Hidden in the cove, below the sloping hill behind my house and just above the tide pools on the shoreline, was a series of cramped, surf-washed caverns that were accessible only at low tide. I used to sneak out of my bedroom on moonlit nights, steal down the slope, and wade into the caverns to explore. Somewhere within them, the story was told, marauding Spanish swashbucklers had hidden chests of gold doubloons and precious jewels plundered in their exploits at sea.

I dreamed those nights of being the fabled Alexandre Dumas's character Edmond Dantès digging in the secret cave on the rocky island of Monte Cristo. Inside the gloomy subterranean grotto, with his knees trembling and his heart beating violently, Edmond uncovered "a casket of wood bound with iron" hidden beneath two feet of earth and rubble.

In an instant he had cleared every obstacle away, and he saw successively the lock, placed between two padlocks, and the two handles at each end. Dantès seized the handles, and strove to lift the coffer; it was impossible. He sought to open it; lock and padlock were fastened; these faithful guardians seemed unwilling to surrender their trust. Dantès inserted the sharp end of the pickaxe between the coffer and the lid, and pressing with all his force on the handle, burst open the fastenings. The hinges yielded in their turn and fell, still holding in their grasp fragments of the wood, and the chest was open.

Edmond was seized with vertigo; he closed his eyes as children do in order that they may see in the resplendent night of their own imagination more stars than are visible in the firmament; then he reopened them, and stood motionless with amazement. Three compartments divided the coffer. In the first, blazed piles of golden coin; in the second, were ranged bars of unpolished gold, which possessed nothing attractive save their value; in the third, Edmond grasped handfuls of diamonds, pearls, and rubies, which, as they fell on one another, sounded like hail against glass. After having touched, felt, examined these treasures, Edmond rushed through the caverns like a man seized with frenzy; he leaped on a rock, from whence he could behold the sea. He was alone—alone with these countless, these unheard-of treasures!

I never found the treasure of Pirate's Cove, though there certainly was a thrill in just imagining the discovery.

If not in my little cave, I reasoned, perhaps I'd find what I was looking for in the other of my childhood fantasies—in Egypt's mysterious Valley of the Kings. Howard Carter had described in his diary what a "magnificent discovery" meant to a seasoned archaeologist "after so many years of toilsome work." About two in the afternoon on Sunday, November 26, 1922, Carter stood before the door into King Tut's tomb.

Feverishly we cleared away the remaining last scraps of rubbish on the floor of the passage before the doorway, until we had only the clean sealed doorway before us. We made a tiny breach in the top left hand corner of the doorway to see what

was beyond. Candles were procured—the all important tell-tale for foul gases when opening an ancient subterranean excavation—I widened the breach and by means of the candle looked in.

It was sometime before one could see, the hot air escaping caused the candle to flicker, but as soon as one's eyes became accustomed to the glimmer of light, the interior of the chamber gradually loomed before one, with its strange and wonderful medley of extraordinary and beautiful objects heaped upon one another.

There was naturally short suspense for those present who could not see, when Lord Carnarvon said to me "Can you see anything?" I replied to him, "Yes, it is wonderful." I then with precaution made the hole sufficiently large for both of us to see. With the light of an electric torch as well as an additional candle, we looked in. Our sensations and astonishment are difficult to describe as the better light revealed to us the marvelous collection of treasures.

I didn't know it while I was growing up, but there was available a treasure far more precious than the gold of Monte Cristo, far more spectacular than the extraordinary possessions of King Tut. I'm not sure I knew about the treasure when my kids were growing up, and now that their kids are growing up, I'm just beginning to realize the value of what's been buried time and time again. It's a treasure " 'that will not be exhausted' " (Luke 12:33)—the "incomparable riches" of God's grace "expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:7).

This is the story of that treasure. This is the record of how God chose us in Christ "before the creation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4),

how we have been adopted to be children of the King to the praise of God's glorious grace, "which he has freely given us in the One he loves" in accordance with the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:6, 7). It's the story of how the Father has qualified us "to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light" (Colossians 1:12). It's about how our names have been written "in the book of life belonging to the Lamb" (Revelation 13:8). It's about how this treasure and this treasure alone can reorient our identity in our deepest reality.

A TRAGIC PATTERN

Unfortunately, however, the story reveals a tragic pattern. We discover that, from the days of antiquity (chapter 3) through the long, turbulent Old Testament times (chapters 4 and 5), the burying of the treasure was done mostly by *religious* people, and as much by those whom we identify as God's chosen ones as by all those who knew of God only from a distance. From the Incarnation (chapter 6) through the early endeavors of the New Testament church (chapters 7 and 8), it was *religious leaders*, who, thinking of themselves as padlocks on the truth, "faithful guardians . . . unwilling to surrender their trust," sealed the treasure behind the discouraging obstacles and rubbish of a legalistic experience. The *theologians* of the Middle Ages (chapters 11–13) told us we could win God's love by our behavior and then left us in our failures to recoil in fear from the righteous presence of God. In more than 160 years of Adventist history (chapters 14–18), the treasure has been uncovered and then buried again numerous times.

Exploring all those centuries of the concealing of the treasure demands diligence, but it's well worth the effort. The secret of a relevant, personal spiritual foundation is revealed in every historical period. If we persevere in our

searching, “if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure” (Proverbs 2:4), the riches will be found and will make us wealthy beyond imagination.

I had already written three chapters about discovering the treasure when Philip Yancey’s superb study *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* was published. I was exhilarated by Yancey’s lucid unfolding of the doctrine of grace—and yet, at the same time, discouraged. I thought Yancey had said everything I wanted to say, that there was now no need for me to continue writing. During my third time through his book, however, I realized that an Adventist viewpoint still had something to add to the discussion. While our perspectives on grace are similar, my experience differs enough from Yancey’s to make me believe that other Adventists, especially those who also have grown up with the faulty notion that we must contribute something to the salvation process, might resonate with an Adventist journey. I decided to keep writing.

PLEASE NOTE . . .

Watch for this: The Thursday night study group that meets at my house played an important role in the development of this book. During our first meeting on this project, Sharilyn confessed to all of us that she didn’t like the title I had suggested for the manuscript: *Afraid of Grace*. “It sounds arrogant,” she observed, “as if you’re saying, ‘I’ve gotten over my fear, why don’t you?’ ” That is *not* at all what I’m trying to say. I want the reader to understand that right here at the very beginning.

I’ll admit it: I’ve been afraid of grace. Fear has characterized my approach to the doctrine of salvation for most of my life. I see that same

fear in religion’s common approach to God. I’m now convinced, however, that is not the Bible’s message of what our relationship to God should be. Look for the phrase “afraid of grace” in every chapter.

The tense of the discussion: Whoever writes about historical matters must live with the challenge of keeping the material fresh and interesting. It is so easy to doubt that people of long ago who may have mattered once upon a time still connect with us today. I read somewhere that when the rabbis repeat the words of the ancient sages, they always do so in the present tense, to further the feeling that they are carrying on a discussion today with those who lived centuries ago. I think that’s such a good idea that I’ve adopted the practice.

So, in addition to people who are alive and well and writing and speaking today, you’ll find in these pages references to lots of people who passed off the scene long ago: Paul Tillich, C. S. Lewis, James Moffatt, A. T. Jones and E. J. Waggoner, Luther, Augustine, Paul, Isaiah . . . Try to listen to their voices in the present tense, as if they are in the room and speaking to us today.

The great central truth: I have been stirred by Ellen White’s declaration that “the sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster.”² It seems to me to be a clarion call for a distinctive, systematic Adventist theology built upon grace. Look for references in many of the chapters ahead to this urging that Ellen White voiced.

Grace in question: At the conclusion of each chapter, you’ll find a page that’s intended to spur discussion in small-group study or to give you a little extra focus as you consider the

2. Ellen G. White, *Gospel Workers* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1915), 315.

various topics. If you use the book in a study group, look at these questions before you read the chapter, and begin your discussion here. You'll also find on these pages a one-paragraph summary of the chapter.

Grace Notes: There may come times in your consideration of the doctrine of salvation by grace when you grow weary of slugging through the historical developments and the theological fine points—when you need to rest for a few moments from this pursuit and be rejuvenated by allowing your heart simply to embrace the biblical invitation to be saved by grace and grace alone. If and when this happens to you, turn to the Grace Notes pages in between the chapters.

Grace notes, you remember, are those little added notes that embellish a musical score. As a rule, the Grace Notes in this composition are short, are built on Bible passages about grace, and are more devotional in nature than the chapters they follow, with less commentary and opinion and footnotes. They are directed more to worship and praise than to investigation and analysis. Seems like we all benefit from frequent breaks like that.

At the same time, the Grace Notes follow the theme that already has been sounded

in the chapter. The questions that begin the Grace Notes suggest the connection between the chapter's emphasis and each Grace Note's song.

In the end, the treasure already is ours, but it's never forced upon us. We can refuse it, ignore it, trample on it, attempt to obscure it, or lock it up and bury it. We can be afraid of grace, as so many have been throughout history and as so many continue to be. We can try to confuse people into accepting another story of salvation. ("I am astonished," Paul said to the Galatian church members, "that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all" [Galatians 1:6, 7].)

However, in spite of all the efforts to bury it, the treasure remains. Sometimes it's out in the open for everyone to see. Sometimes it's hidden.

It is my prayer that these pages might clear away a few more obstacles, burst a few more padlocks, and illuminate a few more facets of the inexhaustible riches of God's grace.

"The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen" (Revelation 22:21).

GRACE NOTES

PSALM 90—THE LENGTH OF OUR DAYS

“Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations” (Psalm 90:1).

Q. What benefits are there to unlocking the Bible’s treasures of salvation by grace?

It’s Moses speaking. He has composed a hymn of praise to the Voice from the burning bush, the great I AM, the Ruler of the universe, the Creator God.

Q. What immediate advantage does enduring, unfailing love bring to our lives?

The “generations” he speaks about stretch back in time as far as he can see. Beyond the laborers suffering under the taskmasters’ whips. Before the settlers of Canaan: Joseph and his brothers; Jacob, Leah, and Rachel; Isaac and Rebekah; Abraham and Sarah. Back to those who escaped the waters of the great Flood. Back to the original, aged patriarchs. Back to the Garden dwellers, Adam and Eve. There, where humans love to tell the story, Moses finds the presence of God.

Before the mountains were born
or you brought forth the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God (Psalm 90:2).

The “generations” move our direction as well. With prophetic clarity, Moses sees the Promised Land, the Kingdom, the Division, the Exile, the coming of the Messiah. He looks into the future and sees God’s people in constant trouble, seeking an identity, a clue to our place in the universe.



For a thousand years in Your sight
are like a day that has just gone by,
or like a watch in the night . . .
The length of our days is seventy years—
or eighty, if we have the strength;
yet their span is but trouble and sorrow,
for they quickly pass, and we fly away (Psalm 90:4, 10).

Then the gospel begins to break through. None of us can return to God, “our dwelling place,” in our own strength. We are powerless to make the journey. We bring nothing to the endeavor except our confessed weakness, our great need. We are sinners in need of a Savior. Captives in need of a Redeemer. Hostages in need of ransom. We are estranged and in need of reconciliation.

We are consumed by your anger
and terrified by your indignation.

You have set our iniquities before you,
our secret sins in the light of your presence.
All our days pass away under your wrath;
we finish our years with a moan (Psalm 90:7–9).

But Moses doesn't end his hymn on a sour note. He continues because the gospel continues. God's goodness overwhelms the terror. We hear the rest of the story, the next verse in the hymn.

Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love,
that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days.
Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
for as many years as we have seen trouble (Psalm 90:14, 15).

The affliction of being separated from God melts away in the satisfaction of His unfailing love. "Unfailing love"! The psalmists seem never to tire of singing about this God of grace.

Give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love (Psalm 107:8).

With the LORD is unfailing love
and with him is full redemption (Psalm 130:7).

I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation (Psalm 13:5).

How priceless is your unfailing love! (Psalm 36:7).

Save me in your unfailing love (Psalm 31:16).

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love (Psalm 51:1).

With joy and gladness, accompanied by the music of lyres and harps, trumpets and cymbals, the God of satisfying mornings and unfailing love will be worshipped by His people throughout the generations. King David adds to the celebration the comforting, enticing aromas of freshly baked bread, date cakes, and raisin cakes (1 Chronicles 16:1–6). He sings of the splendor and wonder of God's deeds (Psalm 90:16; 1 Chronicles 16:9). He joins Moses in giving thanks to the Lord, calling on His name, making known among the nations what He has done (1 Chronicles 16:8), and praising God for remembering "his covenant forever, the word he commanded, for a thousand generations" (1 Chronicles 16:15).

Sing to the LORD, all the earth;
 proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
 his marvelous deeds among all peoples. . . .
Splendor and majesty are before Him;
 strength and joy in his dwelling place.
Ascribe to the LORD, O families of nations,
 ascribe to the LORD glory and strength,
 ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name.
Bring an offering and come before him;
 worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness. . . .
Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
 let them say among the nations, “The LORD reigns!”
Let the sea resound, and all that is in it;
 let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them!
Then the trees of the forest will sing,
 they will sing for joy before the LORD,
 for he comes to judge the earth.
Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
 his love endures forever (1 Chronicles 16:23, 24, 27–29, 31–34).

There is no hesitation in the rejoicing. No exclusion in the invitation to be jubilant. No fear of the coming judgment. God’s grace extends the length of our days.



Giotto di Bondone's fresco masterpiece *Lamentation Over Jesus*, in the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy. Completed by 1306, the painting is a stunning reminder of the absolute incongruity between the everlasting gospel of God's saving grace and any attempt to earn eternal salvation (see chapter 2, pages 39 and 40).

*“There is absolutely no danger of saying too much
about the grace of God.”*

—WATCHMAN NEE, *GRACE FOR GRACE*

“Grace is the greatest discovery of my life.”

—MAX LUCADO, *IN THE GRIP OF GRACE*

“Grace is God’s attitude toward us.”

—RICHARD ROHR, *RADICAL GRACE*

“Grace is reconciliation.”

—PAUL TILlich, *SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY*

*“Grace is not something God Himself gives us;
it is the way God gives us Himself.”*

—ROBERT MCAFEE BROWN, *THE SPIRIT OF PROTESTANTISM*





CHAPTER 1 THE CRIMSON STAIN:

The Foundation of Grace in the Triumph of the Lamb

MY MOTHER NEVER TOLD ME NOT TO EAT SHRIMP. SHE DID INSTRUCT me to keep away from pork chops, ham-and-cheese sandwiches, and the all-American hot dog. But shrimp escaped the list of prohibited food in the nominal Seventh-day Adventist home of my childhood.

I'm sure the lapse in my mother's Adventist orthodoxy had something to do with my dad's seasoned appetite. He absolutely loved shrimp. With a Louisiana heritage, a Texas Gulf Coast upbringing, and a Southern Methodist mother who loved to cook, Dad had grown up knowing the pleasures of buying and frying the little crustaceans. "God must have put them in the water just to delight our taste buds!" Dad would say in a voice tinged with a Texas drawl. "What other purpose do they serve?"

And so, warm summer Saturday nights in our home in Navasota, Texas, were never more enjoyable than when accompanied by a platter of deep-fried shrimp dipped in ketchup and washed down with an ice-cold Dr Pepper. To this day, if a passenger next to me on an airplane has ordered a seafood meal, the smell of the shrimp transports me back to the Gulf, to happy, stress-free family times. Mom and Dad still enjoyed each other's company in those days, and, for a little while, our family walked together sweetly through the humid Texas evenings.

ADVENTIST SURPRISES

My dad probably had never heard of Seventh-day Adventists (and certainly had never read Leviticus 11) until quite some time after he and my mother married. Returning to the mainland from the shock of Pearl Harbor, Dad, who was a chief petty officer on a navy hospital ship, met and married my mother, then a young navy nurse. After the war, they settled down in Southern California close to her parents, who lived just east of Loma Linda in the sleepy little foothill town of Yucaipa.

Somewhere early in the story of their quickly troubled marriage, Mother began to talk about Adventists. While Mother was still a high-school student, a literature evangelist had introduced her family to the church, and the entire family had been baptized. Mom and her sister (whose name was Grace) attended Glendale Academy. Then, after her graduation, Mom rode the train north all the way to Walla Walla, Washington, to

take nursing at the Adventist college there. After her training, in the middle of World War II, Mother joined the navy. The next time she went to church with her parents in Yucaipa, she was wearing a striking, dark blue uniform with silver lieutenant's bars on her shoulders. Unfortunately, the love of the Adventist message was not firmly rooted in Mother's heart, and with the war, my dad, and freedom from her parents, the church became an increasingly distant reality.

Then one day something began to rekindle a little Adventist flame. Mother realized how nice it would be for her and her family (Dad, me, and my two little sisters, Jane and Julie) to have a common and active faith. So, she began talking about her parents' religion. She suddenly refused to go out with Dad on Friday night. She insisted we turn off the TV just before sundown on Friday evening and keep it off until sundown Saturday night. She began driving us seventy-five miles to attend the nearest Adventist church on Saturday morning. And she instituted the rule prohibiting pork chops, ham-and-cheese sandwiches, and hot dogs.

Fifty years later, long after Mother had passed away, Dad was still complaining about Mother's "Adventist surprises." The church issue drove a wedge between them that ultimately led to their divorce when I was twelve.

Not even fried shrimp could keep them together.

WHERE THEOLOGY BEGINS

In the beginning of his delightful little book *The Alphabet of Grace*, Frederick Buechner makes one of those statements that invites you to put down the book and stare out the window for a few moments of reflection. "At its heart," Buechner proposes, "most theology, like most fiction, is essentially autobiography."¹

THEOLOGY AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

AUGUSTINE: "Augustine conceded that his earlier works . . . should be corrected in the light of his later insights concerning the doctrine of grace. . . . It is clearly important to exclude any writings prior to his elevation to the episcopacy from our analysis of his mature doctrine of justification." —Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification: The Beginnings to the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 24.

MARTIN LUTHER: Luther's reforming doctrine of justification by grace through faith "developed over a period of years, being influenced by various strands of late medieval thought and undergoing several fundamental shifts." —Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988), 69.

CARDINAL NEWMAN: "Newman's copious writings gave ammunition to his foes, since he had moved with agonizing steps, each precisely marked, from one church to another, each stage in effect canceling what was said before so that his words could be pitted against each other in apparent contradiction." —Garry Wills, *Papal Sin* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 262.

HUSTON SMITH: After several autobiographical paragraphs in the preface to his book *Why Religion Matters*, philosopher Huston Smith says, "Everything in this book should be read in the light of the above paragraphs." —Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), xiv.

I certainly can testify to the truth of Buechner's formula. The values and priorities I learned at home conditioned my early lifestyle (includ-

1. Frederick Buechner, *The Alphabet of Grace* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1970), 3.

ing my diet), my interests, and even my politics. When my dad called Hubert Humphrey and Adlai Stevenson “idiots,” I naturally thought they were idiots, too. Only much later, studying political speeches for a college class in political science and hearing things in those speeches that I had accepted as a Christian, did I begin to question my parents’ political opinions.

And what was true of diet and politics was also true about the life of faith. Mother had been taught an Adventism that emphasized outward correctness of behavior as the church defined correctness. While she had distanced herself over the years from the church and most of those “correct” behaviors, the emphasis continued to produce guilt in her life: “You should be ashamed of not doing the things you should be doing and of doing things you shouldn’t be doing, and unless you quit doing those bad things and start doing the good things, you, and your children as well, will be disciplined by the church—you’ll be disfellowshipped from the communion of those who love the truth, and you’ll be lost when Jesus comes again.” At least that’s the way it felt to Mother—the way she spoke of it from that day on.

One summer while I still was in elementary school, Mom and Dad shipped me from Texas to Yucaipa to spend a few weeks with my grandparents. I remember sitting between them in church on Sabbath morning when the pastor held up a newspaper, put it down quickly, and said, “Have you seen this morning’s headlines?” Then, pretending to read from the front page of the paper, he reported, “President Signs National Sunday Law.” A gasp thundered through the congregation, some people began to weep, and a couple just down the pew from us slipped to their knees and started to pray out loud. One dear sister, sitting near the front of the church,

fainted and had to be carried out of church by the deacons. At that, the pastor apologized profusely and tried unsuccessfully to refocus our attention on his sermon.

I thought the great fuss was over the fact that the pastor had purchased a newspaper on Sabbath morning! Only later did I learn from my very angry grandfather that the pastor had been playing a trick on us, attempting to use the immediacy of the Second Coming to get people back to correct behavior and to avoiding incorrect behavior. That’s the Adventism my mother handed to me.

Two years in an Adventist elementary school did nothing to change my perspective. In an Adventist boarding academy, my Bible teacher posed a question to the class about being stranded on a desert island. “What if the only other life form on the island was a pig? Would you kill the pig and eat it in order to survive?” the Bible teacher asked us. “Or would you obey God, starve to death, and wait for God’s reward on resurrection morning?” The “right” answer was obvious. If we ate to survive, we’d end up being lost eternally.

In college theology classes, I had my first encounter with the apostle Paul. Studying Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians, I became increasingly frustrated with Paul’s emphasis on grace. “Paul clearly is wrong,” I concluded. “He just doesn’t understand Adventism. If he did, he’d realize how essential is our obedience to our eternal destiny.”

DISCOVERING GRACE

It took years and years for me to come to a genuinely biblical—and authentically Adventist—understanding. On November 9, 1990, I made my first discovery of what I would soon refer to as a “grace book.” Appropriately, it was Charles Swindoll’s *The Grace Awakening*.²

2. Charles Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990).

Though I bought the book for my wife, Karen, I was the one who really needed it. Judging by the message I wrote to her on the inside cover, I didn't have a clue about what grace really was.

What's more, when I did get around to reading the book, I became convinced that Swindoll was seriously mistaken. What could possibly motivate God to offer to us anything not tied specifically to our performance? What good would that do? Where was the essential emphasis on the law that was in the forefront of my young faith? Where was obedience? And overcoming? And cooperation? I determined to prove Swindoll wrong. Certainly, I could make the point from Ellen White, I thought. But even the Bible was clear on the point, wasn't it? (What was that text in James?)

I began buying every book about grace I could find. In the Graduate Union Theological Seminary bookstore in Berkeley, at a time when my collection of grace books still numbered only a handful, I found a dozen new discussions about grace and left with an armload of books to pack into my small suitcase and carry home. But I found no anti-Swindoll ammunition there.

In the delightful mixture of new and used books in the never-disappointing Powell's Book Store in Portland, in the next-to-last row of the religion section, I stumbled across Paul Tournier's classic 1962 work, *Guilt and Grace*. There I discovered an intelligent and riveting discussion of the human "reflex of self-justification," which included the marvelous affirmation that "salvation is not an idea; it is a person."³ I was perplexed but fascinated. My own grace awakening was under way.

In a musty corner of the Archives Bookshop on East Washington Street in Pasadena, I discovered an almost perfect edition of James Moffatt's *Grace in the New Testament*, published in London in 1931.⁴ At the Willow Creek complex outside Chicago, in a Cokesbury bookstore in North Carolina, in a busy publisher's showroom in St. Louis, in the packed aisles of the gift shop beneath the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., in the stacks in Blackwell's Booksellers in Oxford—wherever I traveled, I searched for more understanding and found one book after another, each one painting the picture of grace in slightly different detail.

Several years ago, someone gave me a gift certificate to one of our local Christian bookstores here in Riverside. On an early Friday afternoon, with the temperature soaring over one hundred degrees and a surprising summer rainstorm about to burst upon us, I drove past the Galleria and the Sportsmart and parked in a space I'd parked in scores of times before. I didn't really expect to find anything I didn't already own, but there in the middle of the Christian Living section was Max Lucado's insightful study on Romans, *In the Grip of Grace*—a typical Lucado treasure.⁵ And with the gift certificate, it cost me only four dollars and thirty-six cents!

The titles have multiplied: *The Rest of Grace*, *The Discipline of Grace*, *The Parables of Grace*, *The Sovereignty of Grace*, *The Riddle of Grace*, *The Gospel of Grace*, *Radical Grace*, *Dangerous Grace*, *Responsible Grace*, *Future Grace*, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, *Grace and Faith*, *Grace and Law*, *Grace and Truth* . . . You'll see references to all of them in the footnotes.

3. Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 187.

4. James Moffatt, *Grace in the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1931).

5. Max Lucado, *In the Grip of Grace* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1996).

Here's what I concluded from all my study: I'd been wrong about grace. Wrong about Ellen White. Wrong about the Bible. Wrong about what I must do to be saved. Wrong about God.

WHY KEEP TALKING ABOUT GRACE?

So why shouldn't I just tell you about all those grace books now perched on the walls of my study? With all the chapters already written, with all the articles in all the Christian journals, with all the musical messages about the glories of amazing grace, why try to produce one more sentence on the subject?

The answer is a bit complicated. And fully personal.

I certainly don't think I can be *the final word* on God's immense capacity to forgive and accept us. It seems clear to me that in worship services ten million years from today, the unnumbered host of the redeemed still will be singing praises to the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world and to the triumph of His grace (see Revelation 5:12 and 13:8). "In all that shining throng," Ellen White assures us, "there are none to ascribe salvation to themselves, as if they had prevailed by their own power and goodness. Nothing is said of what they have done or suffered; but the burden of every song, the keynote of every anthem, is: Salvation to our God and unto the Lamb."⁶

Nor do I think I can end the debate between those who insist that grace is unconditional and those who believe that faith is the work *we do* in a *process* of justification. I'm convinced that the Lord Himself finally will have to set our theology straight and that in the years of the first post-planet Earth millennium, He will delight in doing just that.

"Remember what you used to preach about grace?" He may very well ask me one day with a celestial twinkle in His eyes. "Well, let Me tell you how We define grace here in heaven." I can hardly wait for His definition!

The reason for this book has more to do with how this one Seventh-day Adventist Christian finally got the good news. In my almost sixty years now of growing up in the Adventist Church, I often have encountered—and at times adopted—certain attitudes about how we are saved, and why we are saved, and what part we play in the salvation dynamic. These feelings tended to make me wary of anyone's single-minded emphasis on what God does for us. I became afraid of grace, fearful that a Paulinelike concentration on grace would be detrimental to Adventism by somehow undermining our commitment to a lifestyle of obedience, to commandment keeping, and especially to the centrality in our experience of the seventh-day Sabbath.

So I struggled for more years than I like to admit *against* the biblical presentation of a free, unmerited, undeserved, unconditional grace. I relied upon James's version of how we are saved—by what we do, not by faith alone (James 2:24). I discounted Ellen White's graphic insistence that the robe of Christ's righteousness "has in it not one thread of human devising."⁷ I listened most closely to those who appropriated prophetic power to focus on *our* role, *our* obedience, *our* overcoming, *our* perfecting of character, and *our* faith. Righteousness is *by the work of our faith*, I would have told you.

At a camp meeting during my seventh-grade year, I learned a song that I later sang in church after church. It went like this:

6. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press®, 1950), 665.

7. White, *Christ's Object Lessons* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1941), 311.

The theme of the Bible is Jesus and how
He died to save men.
The plan of salvation assures us He's
coming back again.
Are you ready for Jesus to come?
Are you faithful in all that you do?
Have you fought a good fight?
Have you stood for the right?
Have others seen Jesus in you?
Are you ready to stand in your place?
Are you ready to look in His face?
Can you look up and say, "This is my
Lord"?
Are you ready for Jesus to come?

The more I sang the song to others, the worse I felt. I was trying my best to be a good Christian boy. But if "the theme of the Bible" and "the plan of salvation" really were about whether or not I was ready, I was pretty sure I wasn't! And the theme and the plan were incalculably discouraging—not at all good news. As with plenty of others who grew up in religious environments where the emphasis was on our readiness and faithfulness, our fighting and standing, two things were lacking in my Christian experience. One was victory. And the other was peace with God.

JESUS PAID IT ALL

One day, in an unsophisticated little Adventist church near Lake Tahoe, the words of a familiar hymn Elvina Hall wrote in 1865 absolutely arrested me:

Since nothing good have I,
Whereby Thy grace to claim,
I'll wash my garment white,
In the blood of Calvary's Lamb.
Jesus paid it all,
All to Him I owe;
Sin had left a crimson stain;
He washed it white as snow.

Unexpected tears streamed down my cheeks as I sang the chorus over and over again, finally listening to the words: "Jesus paid it *all*" the chorus insisted. That Sabbath morning, the gospel began to be an unassailable foundation for me—perhaps because so many authors were so passionate about it; perhaps because I never had needed the assurance of grace more; perhaps because I was tired of fighting unsuccessfully to overcome; perhaps because of the constant discouragement of a Christian experience that never felt good enough or ready enough, loved enough or accepted enough.

I'd like to believe, however, that I finally began to surrender to grace because that's exactly what the Holy Spirit intended for me—for all of us—to do. That's the point of the gospel, isn't it? "*Jesus* paid it all." That *is* the gospel (see Acts 20:24); "the gospel of [our] salvation" (Ephesians 1:13); the good news of God's grace reaching our stubborn hearts, winning our acceptance of our acceptance (Acts 15:8–11; Romans 15:7).⁸

8. In what has been called the most important sermon of the twentieth century, theologian Paul Tillich defined grace as "the acceptance of that which is rejected" and makes this impassioned plea: "Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual. . . . It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction and composure have become intolerable to us. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage. Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. *You are accepted*, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do

NO LONGER AFRAID

Of course, I'm still a long way from understanding all that grace means to us Christians. But what started in that little church and grew with every grace book I studied continues to grow. I love the way Anne Lamott confesses her growth in grace in her engaging little book *Traveling Mercies*: "I know more about grace," she says, "than I did two weeks ago."⁹ We should expect and welcome growth throughout our lives. The genius Leonardo da Vinci remarked in his eighty-seventh year, "*Ancora imparo*" ("I am still learning").

I fully realize that a month from now and a year from now, I'll wish I had said something a little bit differently than I've said it here. But there's a powerful difference between my life now and my life before: I'm no longer *afraid* of grace. That's why I'm writing this book.

I want others in the church that I love—others who also grew up in the guilt-laden years when so many of us put ourselves, our achievements, and our obedience at the center of our faith, as well as others who are searching for that center today—to find the peace (Romans 5:1; John 14:27) and the confidence (Hebrews 4:16) that comes from the "abundant provision" of God's incredible saving grace (Romans 5:17). If that describes your experience, please keep reading. Don't be afraid to "set your hope fully" (1 Peter 1:13) on the "incomparable riches of [God's] grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:7), "who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14)

anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. *Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!* If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement." —Paul Tillich, "Accepted," in *The Shaking of the Foundations* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1949), 161, 162.

9. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), 138.

THE ONLY STREAM

(Jill encounters the Lion, Aslan, C. S. Lewis's Christ figure in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.)

"Are you not thirsty?" said the Lion.

"I'm *dying* of thirst," said Jill.

"Then drink," said the Lion.

"May I—could I—would you mind going away while I do?" said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience.

The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

"Will you promise not to—do anything to me, if I do come?" said Jill.

"I make no promise," said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. . . .

"I dare not come and drink," said Jill.

"Then you will die of thirst," said the Lion.

"Oh dear!" said Jill, coming another step nearer. "I suppose I must go and look for another stream then."

"There is no other stream," said the Lion.
—C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, pages 16, 17.

and "through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand" (Romans 5:2).

GRACE IN QUESTION

CHAPTER 1: THE CRIMSON STAIN



The experience of grace is intensely personal. Each of us encounters grace at a different time in our lives, under different circumstances, with different emphases. Here in this chapter is another one of those stories, not a dramatic one, but one that produced a dramatically altered perspective on the Christian experience.

1. Watchman Nee says, “There is absolutely no danger of saying too much about the grace of God.” Why is this statement true for you?
2. If “most theology is essentially autobiography,” what has been the effect on your theology? Discuss the role your parents played in the development of your theology. Did they teach primarily with their words or with their actions? Who else made significant contributions to how you think about God? Are there aspects of your theology that you feel you should change to make it more biblical?
3. How did your “grace awakening” take place? Can you think of a time when the winning, unquenchable, crimson-stain-removing love of Jesus began to break through in your life?
4. Find a hymnal and sing together all the stanzas of “Jesus Paid It All.”
5. Use the sidebar “The Only Stream” from *The Silver Chair* (see page 33) as a script for a short skit. You’ll need a narrator, someone to play the Lion, and someone to play Jill. Have Jill read her part with a mixture of fear, respect, and longing. Be sure the Lion is firm and strong, yet kind rather than angry or rough. Remember, the Lion, Aslan, is Lewis’s Jesus character. What do you think the stream represents? What does it mean to come and drink?

GRACE NOTES

GENESIS 32— THE DANCE OF MAHANAIM

Esau was angry with Jacob again. And with reason. Again. (See Genesis 27:45.)

After mother's favorite son (Genesis 25:28) had manipulated Esau into giving up his birthright (verse 33); after he had stolen Esau's blessing (27:35); after all the lying and deceit, Esau's grudge was so bitter, so deeply founded, that he began to make plans *to kill* his brother (verses 34, 41).

Mother steps in again and gets Jacob out of harm's way by sending him to Uncle Laban (verse 43). Jacob runs out of the house, heads north (28:10), and keeps running until he gets all the way to the place we know as Bethel (verse 19). Shortly after sunset, Jacob lies down on the ground, props his head on a rock, and goes to sleep (verse 11). In the middle of the night, Jacob dreams about God. Surely God was as angry with Jacob as Esau was. The characteristics of God's government—as well as His expectations for His children—include fairness and courage and honesty. So, how will He treat a manipulative, cowardly deceiver? Listen to His words: “ ‘I am the LORD. . . . *I will give you* and your descendants the land on which you are lying. . . . *I am with you and will watch over you* wherever you go, and *I will bring you back* to this land. *I will not leave you* until *I have done what I have promised you*’ ” (verses 13, 15, emphasis supplied).

Don't worry about Jacob. God's amazing grace will turn him around, right? Initially, the prevaricator reacts in awe: “ ‘Surely the LORD is in this place, . . . this is the gate of heaven’ ” (verses 16, 17).

Then Jacob thinks about it—and retreats. Rather than take God's promise at face value, Jacob's grasping overwhelms his trust. He thinks of a bargain he can strike with God. Basically, it goes like this: *If* God will be with me, *if* He will watch over me, *if* He gives me food to eat and clothes to wear, and *if* I return safely to my father's house, *then* the Lord will be my God (see verses 20, 21).

Twenty years pass. Jacob takes two wives, Leah and Rachel, and two concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah, becomes the father of eleven boys and a girl, and becomes a wealthy shepherd. And along the way, his harsh, ingrained works-orientation deepens.

His treatment of Leah is nothing less than abominable. After Reuben's birth, Leah pines, “ ‘Surely my husband will love me now’ ” (29:32). Two births later, she says, “ ‘Now at last my husband will become attached to me’ ” (verse 34). After the birth of her sixth son, she wishes out loud, “ ‘This time my husband will treat me with honor’ ” (30:20).

When Jacob quarrels with Laban, he acts in concert with this works-based approach to living and reveals the list he's been keeping of his own good works

Q. How does Jacob's early life illustrate those who center their faith in their own experience?

Q. What difference does it make if we wrestle with God from the inside or the outside?



and of Laban's failures: "I have been with you for twenty years now. Your sheep and goats have not miscarried, nor have I eaten rams from your flocks. I did not bring you animals torn by wild beasts; I bore the loss myself. And you demanded payment from me for whatever was stolen by day or night. This was my situation: The heat consumed me in the daytime and the cold at night, and sleep fled from my eyes. It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household. I worked for you fourteen years for your two daughters and six years for your flocks, and you changed my wages ten times" (31:38–41).

But still God pursues Jacob, treating him just as if he had never sinned. God speaks to Jacob and invites him back to the homeland (verse 3). God speaks to Laban (verse 24), and he responds by giving Jacob his blessing instead of his insults (verse 49).

The next morning, Jacob suddenly is full of self-doubt. News of Esau's approach with four hundred men fills him with "great fear and distress" (32:7). He makes defensive moves, dividing his family and flocks into two groups, hoping that one group might escape if Esau attacks (verse 8). Then he prays: "O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper,' I am unworthy of all the kindness and faithfulness you have shown your servant. I had only my staff when I crossed this Jordan, but now I have become two groups. Save me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau, for I am afraid" (verses 9–11).

"Unworthy." "Afraid." Humble. Mindful of God's promises. Trusting. This is a different man, vulnerable and open. There are no conditions now. Just "save me, I pray."

Jacob called the place where he prayed *Mahanaim* (verses 1, 2). He caught a glimpse of two camps of angels there, guarding, protecting, welcoming. He recognized the angels from his experience twenty years earlier, from the place he called Bethel, "the gate of heaven." Now, spiritually, he moves *through the gate* into "the camp of God." From *inside* the camp he prays. From *inside* he makes plans. From *inside* he wrestles with God. From *inside* he approaches Esau and asks for his forgiveness.

"God has been gracious to me," the once grasping Jacob confesses. "I have all I need" (33:11).

Finally, Jacob says yes to God's grace. The dance of Mahanaim begins (see Song of Solomon 6:13).