

"Finding Our Way Back"

Chuck Carlson

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1 Samuel 2:1-10; Hebrews 10:11-25

Grace, like water, flows to the lowest level.

Our experiences of God's grace most often emerge when we become aware that we are lost and admit it to ourselves. "God is at home. It is we who have gone out for a walk", is the observation of Meister Eckhart, a Christian of the 14th century.

Some years ago Betty and I were on a picnic hike with some friends. We were on Orcas Island which is part of the San Juan Islands in the state of Washington. Finding the banks of a nice lake we sat down and ate our lunch. Finally it was time to find our way back to the parking lot.

After walking for about 30 minutes we wound up back to our original picnic spot. We were lost. We began discussing where we took a wrong turn. None of us really knew what had happened. We thought we were going the right way. So we began to retrace our earlier steps in our minds. Signs were looked for as well as places where the trail forked and we might have taken the wrong way. We tried again, this time being more intentional and focused, finally discovering our way out.

Jan Souman, a psychologist at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics in Tübingen, Germany, said that "Just walking in a straight line seems like such a simple and natural thing to do, but if you think about it, it is quite a complicated thing going on in the brain". He said that if you are lost in the woods and you feel you are walking in circles, you probably are.

We need landmarks to guide us. Dr. Souman said that "I would never go into a big forest or desert without a compass or GPS anymore". His project was initiated by a German popular-science television show which approached him with a viewer question: "Why do people walk in circles when they are lost?"

He set up the experiment by setting up nine people to walk as straight as possible in one direction for nine hours. Six walkers forged through a flat, forested region of Germany. Three others trekked through the Sahara Desert in Southern Tunisia. All walkers wore GPS receivers so that researchers could analyze their routes.

The results were printed in the journal 'Current Biology.' They showed that no matter how hard people tried to walk in a straight line, they often ended up going in circles without ever realizing they were crossing their own paths.

Here is the twist, however. Circular walking occurred only for the four forest walkers who had to walk in overcast conditions and the one desert walker who walked at night after the moon had set. Those who could see the sun or moon managed to travel fairly straight (Homiletics, Nov.-Dec. p.45).

Often in the course of life we may find ourselves walking in circles. How do we find our way out of an imprisonment to pleasure, success, power, money, people pleasing, perfectionism, or the need for popularity? These things entrap us. But grace, like water, flows to the lowest levels.

Father Albert Hasse, a Franciscan monk, author of nine books, and my teacher for two years in the spiritual direction course from which I recently graduated, told us about his entrapment to praise from others, his need for affirmation and appreciation. He had just had his first book published in the United States. In China at the time as a missionary, he was excited to get back to the States, find a bookstore, and see his book on the shelf. Stateside, he found a Christian book store. A clerk on staff was willing to offer reviews and recommendations upon request. He browsed the books which were on the shelves in alphabetical order. Finally he found his book, picked it up, and brought it to the cashier. He said, "I thought I would squeeze a compliment out of the helpful Franciscan Friar who managed the store".

Not telling the man who he was, Father Albert said, "Excuse me, Brother. I have ten dollars to spend on a book, and I was wondering if this book (his book) would be a good investment". He said that the Friar looked and grimaced at him, took his book from his hand and replaced it with a book by Henri Nouwen, saying, "Sir, if you have ten dollars, here's a better investment. It's a wonderful read".

Father Albert said that he was crest-fallen and that his final days in the States before he went back to China were ruined. He spent his time nursing a bruised ego, constantly being reminded by the words of Jesus from Luke 14:11, "For all who exalt themselves will be humbled" (Hasse, 'Coming Home to Your True Self', p.42).

Grace, like water, flows to the lowest level. Shear will power alone isn't going to pull us out of our emotional potholes. However, in God's economy of grace, these potholes of personal pain, self-absorption, or whatever it is that entraps us, can become blessings. The Apostle Paul, facing his personal limitations, reflects, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weaknesses....To keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh...Three times I appealed to the Lord about this...but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness...for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2Corinthians 12:1-10). Grace, like water, flows to the lowest level.

This is the paradox of grace. An African American professor at Denver Seminary, reacting to the disproportionately high rates of police profiling and incarceration of African Americans, observes that the racial tensions have only increased in the aftermath of the shooting of Trayvon Martin, the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the arrest of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, the mass shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, S.C., and now the University of Missouri. Observing that these events are symptomatic of deeper issues surrounding race relations that remain unresolved in our nation, he says, "The only hope our culture has for deliverance from sin and restoration of relationships lies in the power of God's grace", quoting then from Romans 5:20, where Paul, speaking of the power of God's grace, writes, "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more" ('Engage Magazine', Denver Seminary, Fall 2015, p.9).

God's grace exceeds the magnitude of any sin. That grace is sufficient to forgive the worst of our misdeeds, both in thought and action. Our Hebrews text lifts us into the theological air where the source of this grace originates and is sustained. We are introduced to the inadequacy of the sacrificial practices of the Temple worship. Those sacrifices have to be enacted daily, monthly, and yearly for the big one, The Day of Atonement. David could write of the inadequacy of these sacrifices even before God; "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased" (Psalm 51:15-16).

When it comes to grace, it is the heart that matters. And only God has the power through unconditional love and grace to change and heal a lost and broken heart. Hebrews declares that this once for all sacrifice of Christ perfectly demonstrates the love and heart of God. In the end, it is not the power of God which conquers, but the love of God. And it is Jesus' love that provides the open road into the presence of God. As Peterson's, 'The Message', translates, "It was a perfect sacrifice by a perfect person to perfect some very imperfect people. By that single offering, he did everything that needed to be done for everyone who takes part in the purifying process". Grace, like water, flows to the lowest level.

Grace is the heart of God seeking to transform our hearts. Again, 'The Message' frames the essence of the Jeremiah quote well; "The Holy Spirit confirms this: 'This new plan I'm making with Israel isn't going to be written on paper, isn't going to be chiseled in stone; This time I'm writing out the plan in them, carving it on the lining of their hearts'. He concludes, "I'll forever wipe the slate clean of their sins". Grace is written on our hearts.

The central activity is what God has done, is doing, and will do. And it is all for you and me. God in Christ, as Paul writes, "Was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2Corinthians 5:19). Grace reconciles and heals. It restores and renews. And Christ's once for all sacrifice tattoos grace and love into the soul of God's universe. It is cosmic and waiting to be accessed by each of us this very moment.

Our access point is simple recognition and acknowledgement of our need. King David owns the mess he makes of his life. After he commits adultery with Bathsheba, has her husband Uriah, a noble soldier killed in battle, fathering an illegitimate child, God confronts him through the prophet Nathan. God's judgement is always in order for his grace to be revealed. Who has God used in your life to lead you to the waters of grace? Is God trying to reach you through someone now?

No wonder David could say in the end that "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). Grace, like water, flows to the lowest level.

Grace always elicits praise. Hannah, plagued by a barren womb and the taunts of others who judge her, cries out to God in her state of ungrace. Through her persistence God answers. A multitude of God's actions trigger that praise. God's grace allows her to overcome opposition from others. God's grace humbles her. What appears to be strength in this life is not. God fills her barren womb. She encounters God's sovereignty, experiencing God's faithfulness.

That's what grace does. We see God and life through new eyes, the eyes of grace and love. Philip Yancey describes Russia in 1991 as a nation of people starved for grace. The whole society is in a free fall, politically, economically, and socially. Nobody could trust anybody.

Yancey tells of a meeting in which Moscow journalists wept. Ron Nikkel of Prison Fellowship International told of underground churches thriving in Russia's penal colony. It was in prison that people such as Solzhenitsyn found God. For seventy years the Communist party tried to stamp out the church and belief in God. One party official said, "The Christian's faith outlasted any ideology. The church is now resurging in a way unlike anything I have witnessed" (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.121).

And so it is through the grace of Christ's redemptive love that our Hebrews text can admonish us "to hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful".

Grace, God's grace in Christ, is like water, flowing to the lowest level and lifting us up. All that awaits is our recognition, acknowledgement, and a willingness to receive from the hand of the source of that grace.