Chapter 2
It's All By Grace

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit (Gal 6:18).
—The Apostle Paul

Don't run! You might fall!

This is what Linda and I heard a few months ago as we visited our son, Zachary in Montreal. We were having lunch in a park and the only thing challenging the beauty of the day were five words that were being yelled out by a nearby mother to her child. There among the wide-open spaces, the immaculately tended grass and the early afternoon sunshine was the bellowed warning of an over-anxious parent. "Don't run! You might fall!"

If we're afraid of making mistakes, we won't run. We won't jump over rocks and creeks. We won't climb trees. We won't know how to experience a life filled with joy. Instead, ours will be soaked in fear. To be an adventurous worshipper, we can't live with our hearts being told, "Don't run, you might fall!"

By nature I was a conscientious kid. Most of the time I tried hard to do everything right. When I met Jesus, I thought I should try much harder to be good. Here's what I wrote in my book *To Know You More* about my growth in grace:

> It took me a long time to get a grasp on God's grace. In my first ten years of following the Lord I received much teaching about his unconditional love. Through wonderful encounters with God in worship and prayer, I experienced his grace. I came to the realization that I had done nothing to earn the gift of God's love and revelation. God sought me out, not the other way around. I was no different than anyone I judged as being less spiritual—we're all in need of God's mercy.
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> But I had much more to learn. In 1985 I began working as a staff worship pastor at the Langley Vineyard in British Columbia. Because of my 'type A' hard-driving nature, I put a lot of pressure on myself to perform as a spiritual leader. I was being crushed under the weight of my own desire to succeed in the ministry. One Saturday night in 1985 as I was preparing for a worship service, the Lord's love broke through to me in a new song about his grace:

Precious Child

> Show me dear Lord, how you see me through your eyes
>
> So that I can realize your great love for me
>
> Teach me, oh Lord, that I am precious in your sight

That as a father loves his child, so you love me

I am yours because you have chosen me

I'm your child because you've called my name

And your steadfast love will never change

And I will always be your precious child.

Show me, dear Lord, that I can never earn your love

That a gift cannot be earned, only given

Teach me, oh Lord, that your love will never fade

That I can never drive away your great mercy[1]

> As I sang that song, the revelation of God's unconditional love flooded my heart. It was one of the moments when God's grace becomes real and tangible. Through the tears I could taste God's grace. It was one of those moments when God was redefining my view of Him. Instead of worshipping a God of my own imagination, he wanted me to see and *know* him as the loving God he really is. To know and worship anything else would be idolatry. He was dismantling my distorted view of him.[2]

I'll share one more story with you from my first book that portrays our great need for our Father's grace. This one is about a song I wrote for my second son, David. He was six years old at the time.

> I wanted him [David] to know that it didn't matter what career he chose, or how his path in life compared to the other children. His personality is very different from Zachary, my first son. Zac is the typical first-born (like me)—responsible, organized, and hard-working. Zac is successful at lots of things: school, music, and sports.

Sometimes I could see David feeling like an underachiever in his older brother's shadow. I wanted David to know I love him just as he is. It didn't matter what he would become as an adult—I would love him no matter what.

> … I wanted David to know that if his achievements weren't as impressive as some of the other kids, it wouldn't matter. I wanted him to know I love him. So I wrote this song for him and sang it to him in the presence of the whole family:

My son David, I love you; my son David

There are so many things that I like about you;

You have a sensitive heart and a bright mind and a keen imagination;

You make me laugh with the things that you say and do.

My son David, I love you; my son David,

> There are so many things that I like about you;
>
> But no matter what you become in this life,
>
> No matter what you do, there's one thing that will always be true;
>
> I will always, always, always love you.
>
> When David was about six years old, I sang this song to him in the gathered circle of our whole family. As I looked into his eyes and sang these words, I could see his eyes fill up with tears. It was a powerful affirmation of my love for him, given in front of his siblings.
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> This picture reminds me of looking into the eyes of Father God and hearing his song of love over me. In worship, this is a place we can go.
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> This is what can happen in worship when we're looking into the Father's face. All of a sudden, he lets us *see him*. It's the presence of the Father in the room with us that makes the difference. It's not just a one-way recitation of song lyrics. It's a dialogue with the most loving Person in the universe. In worship we can experience God's delight in us, and have the false images of God erased in our hearts.[3]

Seeing Jesus brings life and joy. When I lose sight of Jesus I quickly gravitate towards obligatory duty and a sense of not measuring up. I become stingy and inward and grumpy. As soon as the person of Jesus is marginalized in my life, my worship dries up. But when I know I am loved, I naturally want to yield to the Holy Spirit. When my eyes are open and focused, life is transformed.

It's All By Grace

Paul's life is a picture of the sort of extravagant devotion that results from receiving God's unmerited favor. He was an eager persecutor of the church, yet Christ set him apart, before he was born, to preach the gospel. God knew that underneath Paul's violent attitude towards the church was a heart that truly sought righteousness. On that fateful ride to Damascus, Jesus mercifully blinded Paul with a light of revelation and spoke the shocking words: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 26:5).

Imagine the thoughts going through Paul's head at that moment … "I'm in big trouble now. Boy, did I ever miss it." Slowly, over the next three blind days of receiving his calling to preach the gospel, he knew he was unutterably and undeservedly blessed. This encounter changed him forever.

He writes to Timothy: "The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly … Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst" (1 Tim 1:14-15). Formerly proud of his religious accomplishments, now all he could talk about was God's mercy. Paul sees his life as a demonstration of God's mercy to humankind: "I was

shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example" (1 Tim 1:16).

I'm the Worst

Do you ever have days (or at least moments) when you feel like "I am the worst?" Join the club. Some days I have the worst attitude toward life. Then I feel like a jerk when I realize how ungrateful I've been. That's when I jump in the pool of God's unchanging grace, right next to Paul.

The feeling "I'm the worst" leads directly to the prayer, "God, you're the best. I'm amazed that you love me despite all my mistakes." This failure of humankind and contrasting victory of Jesus is exactly how God arranged the course of human history! And it all leads to worship.

When Paul thinks about the amazing mercy of God, he explodes in worship. In his letter to the Romans he writes about an amazing fact: "For God has imprisoned everyone in disobedience so he could have mercy on everyone" (Rom 11:32 NLT). That thought is just too much for Paul and it launches him off into a glorious doxology of praise:

> For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.
>
> Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
>
> How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!
>
> … Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?
>
> For from him and through him and to him are all things.
>
> To him be the glory forever! Amen (Rom 11:32-33; 35-36).

In the very next line of Paul's letter he appeals to his readers to worship *because of this mercy*: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, *in view of God's mercy*, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship." (Rom 12:1, emphasis added). The *mercy* of God is the basis for our worship.

The simple truth is that we *can't* repay God. He set up creation so that we couldn't be good enough on our own, and then he showed us the mercy we could never earn. That truth alone is enough to make you leap and dance with joy for the rest of your life. When Paul writes to the Corinthians about God's "surpassing grace," he explodes with thanks: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" (2 Cor 9:14-15).

Trying to live a life of worship is an unbearable burden without the foundation of grace resounding in our hearts. Paul knew a little about burdens. He spent so much of his life trying to keep the whole law, growing up around the "experts in the law" who Jesus warned not to " … load people down with burdens they can hardly carry … " (Luke 11:46). Imagine the incredible relief for Paul who had been taught that to be

comprehensively set free, he had to obey not only the Old Testament Law, but also all the extra rules and regulations of the Talmud. Little wonder his words were so clear: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor 3:17).

Paul knew the agony of making mistake after mistake, but he drew on the power of God's rescuing grace even in the midst of his stumbling:

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me … waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin … What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom 7:21-24).

Pondering God's love in the face of my inability to do the right thing makes me say everyday "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

After his conversion Paul was energized to serve the Lord, not from a sense of duty, not spiked by guilt or shame, but because of God's empowering touch: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Cor 15:10). When our hearts are set free and we are compelled by love, we serve with joy:

> Where love is the compelling power, there is no sense of strain or conflict or bondage in doing what is right: the man or woman who is compelled by Jesus' love and empowered by his Spirit does the will of God from the heart.[4]

Christ is the mediator of our worship. We can't add to his once-for-all victory over sin and death. Salvation and favor from God is a gift, not something we can earn. Worshiping God everyday is a *joyful* thing when I keep God's mercy in view.

The Centrality of the Cross

In worship, we remember the story of Jesus. The story of Jesus remains constant, fixed and permanent. This message is timeless and relevant for all peoples of all cultures. And in post-modern, post-Christian society, it is a story that is needed more than ever.

The divinity and life of Jesus defines history for us. Christ's greatest victory—and ours—is the cross and resurrection. Robert Webber said, "The story of the gospel of Jesus Christ is … the thing that defines us, tests us, and judges us."

In current philosophical thought, everything is negotiable when it to comes to God and spirituality. The rule of the day is to make your own rules—you choose which narrative you want to live by, you "write your own story." There is no fixed vision of eternity that creates a context for daily living.

Amidst a spiritual climate devoid of a commitment to absolute truth, the simple message of Jesus and his cross is as relevant as ever. This makes it even more important to meditate on the story of the cross**,** giving us the right frame of reference for our lives.

Our Worship is Based on an Unchanging Historical Fact

In today's climate of contemporary worship, we're in danger of putting too much focus on how we feel in worship. This applies equally to the church's gathered worship experience and to our daily lives. Maybe someone has asked you this question after a worship service: "Was worship good for you?" There's a dangerous implication in this question that your *feelings* during worship indicate whether or not worship was "good."

We could repeat the mistakes of history and focus on spiritual phenomena instead of Christ himself. This was an issue that Jonathan Edwards, the revivalist of the 1800s, dealt with in his ministry. In Edwards' time, many people became so enamored with their ecstatic spiritual experiences that they lost sight of the beauty and worth of Christ.

The mindset that our feelings, during worship, are an indication of our spirituality leads to feelings of failure and self-condemnation. The truth is this: when we behold Jesus on the cross, and all that his death and resurrection mean for us, we don't have to *feel* anything else to have a valid worship experience. We are remembering a once-for-all act of unparalleled love and sacrifice that changes everything. It changes the way God sees us. The work of the cross can never be diminished: not by words, not by feelings, not by anything we could do.

It means that I can always be full of gratitude and wonder at God's love for me, no matter what I feel. There are other implications—we are called to follow Christ's example, to take up our cross and follow Him. We are called to die daily, as Paul says. Suffering is part of life in Christ. There is a way to worship through the suffering.

I love to feel God's presence, but my feelings aren't the focal point of my worship. When Christ is the focal point, we find security in the unchangeable historical event of the cross. The benefits for us are permanent, continual, and eternal.

Impressed with God or Ourselves?

Prior to his revelation of Jesus, Paul was proud of his religious accomplishments. He describes himself as the ultimate Pharisee—a Hebrew of Hebrews with all the right pedigree. After encountering God, he considered his good reputation to be worth less than garbage compared to knowing Christ.

It's impossible to be full of adoration for Jesus if we are also busy congratulating ourselves for our own righteousness. At the beginning of my walk with Christ I didn't have this figured out. I was zealous but not very wise. I was proud of my spiritual

discipline and commitment to Jesus and it took me a while to figure out that I was putting myself up on a pedestal, admiring my own good works.

But when I saw the *free gift* of God's love I was freed from self-consciousness enabling me to really worship. It wasn't about my accomplishments; it was about Jesus' work on the cross. Without Jesus' deliverance I would be enslaved to sin, and going to hell.

God doesn't want us to be worried about how "good" we are. Instead he wants us to be impressed with how *great* he is—something that (unlike our wavering feelings) never changes. When we think about his greatness we don't have time for moping around and feeling sorry for ourselves. My self-confidence rests on the unchanging merit of Jesus' righteousness, nothing else.

In remembering Jesus' death we see the depth of his love for us. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). If we fail to meditate on the depth of Jesus' suffering and the price he paid for us, we won't see the depth of his love.

If Jesus was willing to suffer the cross for us, it means we are of infinite value. It means that our shame and poor self-image are swallowed up in God's amazing love. The message of the cross is that *we are his passion*, and it is a unique message. It allows us to feel good about ourselves; you can love and accept yourself because God does. Even if people reject us, we know that God still loves us. Jesus' sacrifice for us makes us acceptable, even if we feel rejected.

This good news must be at the center of our worship, day-by-day and week-by-week. Putting Jesus and his cross at the center of our worship means we'll never lose sight of God's amazing grace. Through celebrating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the historical event of Christ becomes alive for today.

At the Foot of the Cross

When I meditate on Christ and his cross, I picture myself laying prostrate in front of the cross, absolutely surrendered and dependent on Jesus. The cross towers over me as I make myself as low as I can, facedown on the ground. I am full of thankfulness for the unrivaled love of Jesus as expressed in his supreme sacrifice. I realize that everything makes sense because of the cross. Because of the cross, I know I'm loved. Even if my life falls apart, the historical fact of God's cross is unchanged. Nothing that happens to me, no mistake I make can undo the steadfast love of God for me.

We lose control to whatever we worship. If I lose control to drugs, sex, money or power, I am worshiping or giving myself to those things. What sweet peace there is in losing control to our gracious and compassionate Father God. What joy there is in knowing that I don't have to figure out the rest of my life because God is in control. What

peace there is in knowing I've been bought with a price—the precious blood of Jesus Christ. What relief there is in knowing that I am not my own, that I belong to Him. I find great security in belonging to him who made the planets and stars and farthest galaxies yet he became small and suffered death for our sake.

As I lay before Jesus, I meditate on his suffering and realize that I am called not just to know " … the power of his resurrection … " but also to " … share in his sufferings …" (Phil 3:10); suffering leads to greater intimacy in knowing God. Dying daily is part of the Christian journey, and only in dying do we experience new life; only in letting go do we receive the generous gifts of God. At the foot of the cross is the place where grace and suffering meet, a place where, in times of despair and discouragement, God's grace profoundly lifts us; we connect to Jesus more fully, identifying with his suffering.

At the cross, we can trade our ashes for a crown of beauty. We trade in the ashes of disappointment, failed projects, shattered dreams and broken relationships to find contentment in the love of God. Where death has been at work, new life will spring up as I wait patiently before the cross.

At the cross we can forget about our tasks and accomplishments and wear forgiveness like a crown—a crown of *belonging* instead of a crown of *power*. Not only that, but the cross is the place where I am made complete. My possessions don't complete me. My gifts and achievements can't complete me. Even my family can't complete me. What a relief it is to jettison the world's false definition of being complete and fulfilled. It's all about knowing God and abiding in his love; it's about experiencing the spirit of adoption. Every good act and ambition proceeds from the rest of faith, from my completeness in Christ.

At the foot of the cross, we lay every burden down. When you're lying flat on the ground, you can't carry anything. That picture helps me. When I think about the finished work of Christ's cross, I know I can't add anything to what he has done. I don't have to be perfect because He is the Perfect One. I lay down the burden of living up to other people's expectations, and even *my own* unreasonable expectations of myself.

Gazing on the cross, I see not only the suffering Servant, but also the gloriously empty cross. I see the resurrection—a demonstration of the almighty power of God. I can lay every burden down because the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in me, helping me to get through every day.

The cross is not just a *theological concept*. It's a historical reality that we experience in prayer, song and partaking in the Lord's Supper. As we worship him, laying before his cross, we soak in the reality of the unmatched, unquenchable love of God.

Worship Flows Out of a Sense of Privilege

When I found out that this omnipotent God isn't just powerful and creative and the smartest Person in the history of the universe, but a loving Father who gave His only Son for me, I wanted nothing other than to love him and live my life according to his wise design.

I still feel the same way. I feel overwhelmed by the privilege of knowing and even being *related* to this Person. I'm thunderstruck with the realization that I am His beloved child and that I've found my true *home*, my permanent place of belonging.

I'm bowled over with the fact that "… there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live" (1 Cor 8:6). I know there is no other logical choice but to worship Him and take my cues for living from Him.

What an amazing truth that I actually get to participate in His master plan by representing him on the earth and doing my part to spread the bounty of his goodness. There's no reason for futility or boredom; I have a reason to live. I'm affiliated with the King of the Universe! I'm in the Royal family! I've hit the jackpot!

What a privilege it is to be created, chosen, forgiven and redeemed. Through the cross, Jesus conquered sin and death. By his power, he literally holds the universe together. Without Him we wouldn't be able to breathe, stand or speak. Everyday is a gift. From this place of gratitude, we live our life as an offering to Him.

Chapter 2: It's All by Grace

1. Andy Park, "Precious Child," Mercy/Vineyard Music, 1989.
2. Andy Park, *To Know You More, Cultivating the Heart of a Worship Leader* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 44-45.
3. Ibid., 46-47.
4. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free,* 21.