

Simple
Gospel

Simply
Grace

Bob Christopher



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*To my wife, Jeanna...
the most genuine person I know.*

Acknowledgments

First, I thank my mom and dad. I'm proud to say that you can find their fingerprints on almost every area of my life. I say almost because all the bad stuff is mine alone. Their support, encouragement, and belief have made a lasting impact. And I'm grateful that Dad is already enjoying what we all long for—life in Christ's presence.

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Foreword

Have you ever been so parched and thirsty that when you finally got a drink, you could feel that first fresh, cool gulp revive your whole body? That's what this book does to your spirit. Bob's writing is refreshing and crisp and awakens the soul. His simple and direct message gives you strength when you need it.

This book was so refreshing, I had a difficult time putting it down. Plenty of things in this world are working against me, so when I find something that nourishes my soul and offers a joy I can celebrate, I want to shout it out to everyone I know. Bob's book provides just that kind of nourishment. He writes with a simple directness that makes his point difficult to miss.

Have you ever read the Greek legend about the quest of Odysseus? In one of my favorite episodes, Odysseus had to sail past the island of the sirens. Anytime someone tried to sail past this island, the beautiful song of the sirens would lure the sailors toward the island and onto the rocks, causing them to crash their ships, sealing their fate forever. Odysseus knew the danger, so he persuaded his

men to tie him to the mast of the ship and fill their own ears with wax. The men would be unable to hear the song, so they wouldn't succumb to the sirens' call and crash their ship on the rocks. Odysseus could hear the song but couldn't respond because he was restrained. The men were deaf and Odysseus (whose Latin name was Ulysses) was powerless. Deaf and powerless is not the preferred way to travel through life, but it beats the alternative—shipwreck.

I like the Greek legend of Orpheus even better. When he sailed past the same island of the sirens, he began to play beautiful music from his harp. He was the greatest musician on earth. He could play music more beautiful than any siren could sing. The mariners aboard his ship longed to hear the music of Orpheus and heard the sirens only as a distant distraction. Shipwreck was avoided, and an affection for the most beautiful music led them safely and joyfully through the dangers.

Often people think the only way through this life is to live by “can't” and “don't.” They think restraint and avoidance will keep them from a shipwreck of a life. The feelings of “can't” and “don't” keep them feeling isolated or torn by what is going on around them. It is the only possibility they can imagine, but there is another possibility. His name is Jesus. He invites us to a love for him that leads to joy and life.

Simple Gospel, Simply Grace beautifully explains this other possibility. Bob's honest and engaging approach offers the sweet song of life. This message is the one that will refresh your soul.

Tom Davis, DMin

Introduction

God's Guy

The Christian life starts with grace, it must continue with grace, it ends with grace. Grace, wondrous grace.

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

The first day of my freshman year of college, I made a vow to God. Have you ever done that? Mine went something like this: “God, I know I’ve been a disappointment to you. Thank you for a clean slate and for the opportunity to start fresh in college. From this day forward, I promise to be your guy.”

This wasn’t the first promise I had made to God. This time, however, I was more committed to fulfilling it. I really wanted my life to count for him. I sincerely desired to turn my life around and was willing to do whatever it took. Much like the Israelites, my attitude was, “All you’ve commanded, Lord, I will do” (see Exodus 24:7).

I genuinely tried. I left everything on the court in my effort to be the best Christian I could be. I gave it my best shot. But my best shot wasn’t good enough. My promise was no match for the temptations

of college life. I gave in time and time again just as I had done in high school and junior high. Every time I did, I felt horrible, as if I had let God down.

Does this sound familiar? I've met many people through the years with a similar story. Frankly, I think every human being lives it to one degree or another. It's programmed into our DNA. I like to tell people that we're all natural-born legalists. We try to live for God, but it's impossible for us to do. The apostle Paul described his own experience this way: "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out" (Romans 7:18).

We can't carry it out or even figure it out. I tried for four years to make sense of the Christian life. Every "brilliant" idea I had turned out to be nothing more than the same old fear-based, guilt-driven plotline—*try harder*. And many of the messages I was listening to reinforced this thinking. Ironically, my favorite Bible verse at the time was Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." I guess I didn't see that little three-letter word "not." Everything I tried came right out of my own understanding. No wonder nothing ever clicked for me.

Sometime during my senior year, I gave up the fight. Sin was too powerful to overcome. All my resistance was no match against its deceptive attractions. Jesus hit the nail on the head: "Everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (John 8:34). That's how I felt. Sin was having its way in my life, and I didn't seem to have a choice in the matter.

Here is the sad truth about sin. It promises everything and delivers nothing. I was finding that out.

One Friday night, our fraternity house hosted what was billed as the party to end all parties. All the ingredients were in place—the beer was flowing, the music was loud, and the people were wall to

wall. There were so many of us that the floor started swaying underneath all the weight.

In the middle of all the action, a bunch of my friends were standing on a coffee table. It looked like the place to be, so I jumped up to join the fun. But something strange came over me atop that perch. I looked at the whole scene and saw nothing but emptiness. I felt the way Solomon must have felt when he wrote, “Everything is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). That was my life—meaningless. Empty.

My dream when entering college had been to become a doctor and buy a horse farm outside Lexington, Kentucky. By my senior year, even that seemed meaningless. But sin wasn't content to steal my dreams and leave me adrift—it also heaped on guilt and shame in supersize quantities. I wasn't very happy or pleased with my life, and I knew God wasn't either. But what was I to do?

Surprisingly, even with all my confusion, I didn't abandon my belief in Christ. I didn't seek answers elsewhere. I knew I needed him above anything or anyone else. I knew the Bible contained what I needed, but I was so blinded by sin and my own human effort that I couldn't see the answers. Just like the Israelites, my mind was dull to the truth (2 Corinthians 3:14).

Then came the gut kick that knocked me to my knees. I got word that a good friend was in the hospital from a drug overdose. Everything turned out okay for my friend, but this got me thinking. Was I heading in the same direction? Could something like that happen to me? Just thinking about the what-ifs, I started to panic.

Several friends encouraged me to attend a Bible study in Atlanta. I had been to it before because I thought it would help me be God's guy. This time was different. I knew I had nothing to offer him. My record was stained with sin. Whatever was going to happen to me was on his shoulders.

I never met the Bible teacher personally, but somehow he knew exactly what was going on inside of me. He pinpointed the source of my frustration. I had chosen the path of trying harder, doing better, and being better. But on a map of the spiritual journey, that path doesn't lead to godliness. I was living proof. The harder I tried to be God's guy, the more I sinned. I was doing the Christian life all wrong. That was my frustration. I fit the well-known definition of insanity—repeating the same actions and expecting different results.

Funny thing—the phrase “try harder” is not in the Bible. You can't find it anywhere in the Word of God. Maybe you believe God is telling you to try harder or to do better. If so, would you consider letting go of that thought right now? It did not come from him. As a matter of fact, the Bible opposes such thinking. Take a look at the apostle Paul's question in Galatians 3:3 (NLT): “How foolish can you be? After starting your Christian lives in the Spirit, why are you now trying to become perfect by your own human effort?” Ouch!

I didn't know any other way to live the Christian life than by human effort. I applied it to every rule that I thought would help me become God's guy—things like reading the Bible and praying every day, eliminating sinful thoughts and desires, standing strong against sin, and maintaining an appearance of goodness. This all made sense to me; it seemed like the wise path to take.

Nothing could be further from the truth. “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” does not work. These rules may appear wise, “but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence” (Colossians 2:23). I had learned the lesson and was ready for a new way to live and a new path to walk.

James and Peter both shared a wonderful promise in the letters

they penned. It is this. “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”* For many years, I thought I had what it took to be God’s guy. That’s what the Bible calls pride. Pride takes you down the path of human effort every time. That’s the only path it knows, and that was the path I was walking. Maybe you’ve walked down that path or you are walking down it right now. Let me tell you, the final destination is not a pretty place.

But there is a bright side. Along this path, the failures, pain, struggles, fear, and guilt chip away at our pride. When we’ve had enough, humility comes along and opens us up to a whole new way. That’s what happened to me.

It all started with the most memorable night of my life.

Nagging Questions

I received Jesus when I was 12 years old at a church youth camp. It was my first year to attend. My cousin Steve built it up to me as one of the greatest experiences I would ever have as a kid, and he was right. It was an amazing week from the first day to the last. The standout moment, however, happened the last night of the camp.

I entered Mobley Hall along with 200 other kids, not knowing what to expect. The vibe in the room was almost magical. I sensed something special was about to happen.

The chairs were arranged in a big semicircle. We all had a perfect view of Frank, the camp pastor. He had long hair and a beard. All week he had portrayed different scenes from Jesus’s life. I was fascinated. Polio crippled him as a child, but he didn’t seem to mind using crutches to get around. He could move pretty quickly, and he was really funny. In one of his messages, he reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a tiny statue, and said, “God said, ‘Don’t have

* James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5; quoting Proverbs 3:34

any graven images before you.’ That’s why I keep mine in my side pocket.”

But on that last night, he put all joking aside. The message was the cross of Jesus Christ. Frank’s portrayal of Jesus’s final hours was so graphic, it was hard for me to take. I had heard the story many times in church, but this time was different. My heart was involved. The story was becoming real to me.

I don’t know how Frank did it, but I felt as if he were actually hanging on a cross and struggling for every breath. The pain and suffering were palpable. At the end, Frank uttered Jesus’s final words: “It is finished!” Then he bowed his head as if to die. We sat in stunned silence.

A few minutes later, Frank broke the silence. “Jesus did this for you.”

C.S. Lewis wrote, “When Christ died, he died for you individually just as much as if you had been the only person in the world.”¹ That’s the way I felt. Frank was talking directly to me, as if I were the only person in the room. What came next was something I could have never anticipated in a million years.

This single truth captured my total attention...Jesus Christ died for me.

Focusing on one thing and seeing it so clearly was not at all typical for me. My mind normally drifted from thought to thought, never staying on one for too long. I got bored quickly, and that often landed me in trouble. On this night, however, I was anything but bored. My mind’s eye saw nothing but the love of Jesus.

I didn’t know this verse at the time, but God was etching Romans 5:8 on my heart and in my mind: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” If I had known the verse that night, I would have quoted it this way, “God

demonstrated his own love for *me* in this: While *I* was still a sinner, Christ died for *me*.” It was that personal, that overwhelming.

Jesus’s love revealed my deepest need. It was right in front of me as plain as day. At that instant, I knew I needed Jesus Christ.

This was such a surprise to me. Until then, camp had been nothing but fun. There were nightly lemon-drop fights in the cabin, Ping-Pong tournaments, relay races, swimming...all mixed in with a few serious moments. But nothing like this. And it wasn’t like I saw a bright light or heard peals of thunder. Nor did I hear any audible voices. But a keen awareness of my need for Jesus overpowered me, and it was something I could not shake.

At the end of the service, Frank invited us to pray to receive Jesus into our lives. As he prayed, I prayed. Sitting in a chair in Mobley Hall at the state FFA/FHA camp in Covington, Georgia, with my heart beating out of my chest, I asked Jesus to come live in me.

Earlier that morning, I hadn’t been thinking about spiritual things. I wasn’t praying for God to do a work in my life. It just happened. Christ’s death for me became real. It pushed its way into my heart and soul and brought to life my need for Christ.

I didn’t talk about this moment with anyone for a long time. I wasn’t sure what to say or how to describe what had happened to me. I didn’t tell my counselors at the camp or any of my friends. And I kept my parents in the dark for almost ten years. I told them about all the fun I had and that I couldn’t wait to go back the next summer, but this was too personal and too deep.

I was much like Mary after she gave birth to Jesus. Shepherds arrived to see Jesus. Once they had seen him, they spread the word. All who heard were utterly amazed. Mary, however, “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). That’s what I did. I kept that night at youth camp in my heart for a long, long time.

Here's the thing. From that point forward, I never questioned my need for Jesus. This truth was in my heart to stay. Even when life was its messiest for me some eight years later, something deep down kept telling me that Jesus was my answer. However, as a twelve-year-old kid, I wasn't sure why I needed him in my life. I wasn't asking any of those nagging questions about identity, purpose, or destiny. I was just a kid, content to play sports and ride bikes and have fun with my friends. God, however, saw me as someone who needed his Son. He loved me enough to let me know. That's grace.

I didn't figure all this out until that Bible study in Atlanta years later. But that night at my first youth camp, the grace of God gripped my heart, and Jesus Christ became more than just a name to me. It was my first grace moment, the start of my new life in him.

One Christmas, after I finally told my mom and dad the full story, they gave me a framed charcoal sketch of that camp. I have it hanging in my office. It reminds me every day of that first heartfelt encounter with Jesus Christ.

Eight years later, however, I was wondering how it had turned out so badly. Following that camp, I continued all my church activities. I participated in the youth group, and if you can believe this, I even sang in the choir. (If you ever hear me sing, you'll understand why that's so surprising.) I went on mission trips and helped the underprivileged in our town through a church program called Faith in Action.

I was doing many "Christian" things. But even while I was doing them, I was struggling with sin. It didn't make sense to me at all. The bottom line is, I didn't know what it meant to be a Christian or how I was supposed to live as a Christian. I was hearing stuff in church—just not the right stuff. Based on what I was hearing and my own understanding, I developed a belief system to guide me

forward. Unfortunately, this system wasn't based on truth. Here is what I believed back then.

I was basically a good person.

Christianity was a self-improvement program.

Grace was the door into Christianity.

Jesus Christ came to help make me a better person.

I thought I needed Jesus to help me become a better person. But I wasn't getting better at all. Every step I took forward was followed by two steps back. By the time I reached my senior year in college, backward was the only direction I was going. It should have been different, right? But it wasn't, and I was left trying to answer two nagging questions.

- How can I call myself a Christian but experience so little power for change?
- How can I be so sincere and eager yet struggle so much with temptation?

Maybe you've been asking these questions as well. If so, I've got great news. There are answers. You can experience victory in life. You can truly know the joy and peace of the Lord. You can express the love and forgiveness of God to others. It is all there for you as a gift from God, given by grace.

That's what I discovered. Christianity is simply grace, from start to finish. Nothing more, nothing less. Grace is the believer's way of life. Not human effort. Not rules, or principles, or regulations.

We live exactly the same way we are saved. Paul laid it out in one of the most famous passages in all of Scripture, Ephesians 2:8-9. "By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one

may boast” (ESV). We are saved by grace through faith, and we are to live by grace through faith. It’s that simple. Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it this way:

It is grace at the beginning, grace at the end. So that when you and I come to lie upon our deathbeds, the one thing that should comfort and help and strengthen us there is the thing that helped us in the beginning. Not what we have been, not what we have done, but the grace of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. The Christian life starts with grace, it must continue with grace, it ends with grace. Grace, wondrous grace. “By the grace of God I am what I am.” “Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.”²

This is what hit me at that Bible study in Atlanta. It was a light-bulb moment for me, and grace flipped the switch. It cleared out the confusion in my mind and connected all the dots. It gave me hope. I wondered why I didn’t see this simple route to victorious living before. I will address this later, but I discovered that this five-letter word packs all the power I was missing in my Christian life. Here is the good news for you. Grace packs all the power you need for life and godliness. I’d had that power for a long time—everything I needed. I just didn’t know it.

Grace Defined

Let me tell you up front, “grace” is a bigger word than I ever dreamed imaginable. It’s big because it’s attached to Jesus Christ. Many call some of what I will be sharing in this book the grace message. In truth, it’s the Jesus message. There is no grace apart from him. Grace is not a thing. Grace is Jesus Christ himself.

Search the word “grace” online, and this is what you will find. In the English Standard Version, for example, the word “grace” occurs

138 times—7 times in the Old Testament and 131 times in the New. Stop and think about this fact for a moment. What does it suggest to you about the grace of God? I think it clearly suggests that grace is connected to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Even the Old Testament makes this connection. Remember God's promise to Abraham? On three different occasions, he told Abraham the world would be blessed through his offspring. What did this mean? Paul explained, "The promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). The blessing of God is found in Christ. That blessing is grace. This is exactly the point John makes in his Gospel account.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth... For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:14,16-17 ESV).

Grace is inextricably tied to Jesus Christ. When Christ showed up on the scene, his grace took center stage. If we are going to know anything about the grace of God, we need to look to Jesus.

So what is grace? This is an important question. After all, grace is the heart and soul of the gospel message. It is the good news. The short definition that most of us know is "unmerited favor as given to us in Christ." It is this but so much more. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* defines "grace" this way:

That which causes joy, pleasure, gratification, favor, acceptance for a kindness granted or desired. It is a favor done without expectation of return; the absolutely free

expression of the loving kindness of God to men finding its only motive in the bounty and benevolence of the Giver.

Recently, I posted an article on my blog titled “How Do You Define Grace?” I was impressed by the responses.

- “Grace is the fierce, strong, shocking, surprising, heart-melting, intentional pursuit of God in giving us what we really need, even if that differs from what we thought we needed.”
- “Grace is Christ himself! Simply replace the word ‘grace’ with ‘Christ’ and see how the Bible reads differently.”
- “The grace of God is what saves us, sustains us, and will eventually bring us into the presence of God when we leave this earthly shell. Grace is not a thing but a person—Jesus Christ.”
- “Grace has given me permission to stop gutting it out for God. To stop feeling guilty when once again, I’ve failed to ‘behave.’ Grace seems so simple when we sing songs like ‘Amazing Grace,’ but as we live each day in Christ, we find that grace is so deep.”

Grace is where we stand, live, and breathe. It is the realm of our existence. It is Christ in us and us in him. Far too often, Christians think of grace as merely a covering for their past sins. Grace is active in our present and moves us into our future. I’ve defined it as God’s work in Jesus Christ to make us spiritually alive and to empower us to live in this world as his children.

Grace is not only the means of salvation; it is the way of the Christian life. It’s not only the door that grants us entry into God’s

house; it's also the way we live once we are in. Once grace starts in a person's life, it never quits. The simple gospel is simply grace.

That's what this book is all about. I invite you to explore with me the way of grace. Here are several of the key verses we will examine together.

- “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us” (Ephesians 1:7-8).
- “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:4-5).
- “The grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:11-14).
- “Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).
- “Sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace” (Romans 6:14).
- “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 Corinthians 15:10).

- “But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Through these verses, you will discover that grace...

redeems you and forgives your sins
saves you
makes you alive with Christ
teaches you to say no to sin
teaches you to live a self-controlled, upright, and godly life
makes you eager to do good
builds you up
gives you an inheritance
frees you from the power of sin
makes you who you are as a child of God
works within you
carries you through the trials and tribulations of life

As John Newton penned in the most famous hymn of all, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound.” God’s grace is the good-news story. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the very thing that will make your life a good-news story.

Part 1

Life

We believe that new life, given supernaturally through spiritual regeneration, is a necessity as well as a gift, and that the lifelong conversion that results is the only pathway to a radically changed character and way of life. Thus for us, the only sufficient power for a life of Christian faithfulness and moral integrity in this world is that of Christ's resurrection and the power of the Holy Spirit.

OS GUINNESS, *THE LAST CHRISTIAN ON EARTH*

1

First Things First

Jerusalem is the most fascinating city in the world. I'll never forget the first time I saw it. On day five of our tour through Israel, we left the region around the Sea of Galilee and ventured south to the holy city.

The last leg of the trip took us up the back side of Mount Scopus, one of the seven hills that surround Jerusalem. Let me tell you, the anticipation at this point of the drive is off the charts. The road takes you through a tunnel, and then, as you crest the hill, the city comes into full view. Our driver pulled the bus to the side of the road. Everyone got out to soak it all in. I wasn't expecting the emotions. Tears ran down my cheeks, and my heart pounded with thankfulness.

I was looking at the place where Jesus ministered, died, was buried, and then was raised back to life. The realization was

overwhelming. I looked at my wife, Jeanna, and my dad. Their eyes were filled with tears just like mine. It was the same for every person who was with us.

What we experienced at that moment was just a taste of what Jeanna and I would experience several days later.

Monday morning arrived. It was Jeanna's last day in Israel. She was to fly back to Dallas that afternoon. The group would visit the Holocaust museum and explore the Western Wall Tunnel excavations, but the day held other plans for Jeanna and me. We were about to experience the most spiritually fulfilling day of our lives.

That morning we journeyed to the center of Christianity. We ventured off by ourselves to retrace Jesus's final steps—his path to the cross and to the empty tomb. This was a journey we will never forget. Our walk from the Mount of Olives to the empty tomb brought us to a point of personal revelation concerning the central issue of Christianity—the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As Paul wrote, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). His resurrection from the dead is the hinge on which the Christian faith hangs. Without Christ's resurrection, Christianity would not exist.

This is the sticking point for the critics and skeptics. They laugh and jeer at us for believing such nonsense. But it did happen. Christ was raised from the dead. We believers stake everything on this one historical fact. It is so important to us that Paul boldly asserted, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:14). The resurrection of Jesus Christ makes up the basic matter, or substance, of our faith.

Without the resurrection, we might as well eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. But with it, everything changes. This is the point that struck Jeanna and me most profoundly.

A Journey to the Center of Christianity

Our journey that morning began at the top of the Mount of Olives. When Jesus returns, this is where he will set his feet, according to the Bible. Jeanna and I stood there, taking in the panoramic view of the city. The Dome of the Rock, the Muslim shrine adorned with brilliant gold, dominates the scene and draws your eye at first glance. But as we contemplated the good news of the gospel, this iconic structure faded into the background.

We walked down the hill to the Garden of Gethsemane, the place where Jesus's agony began. From there we zigzagged our way through the Old City to see the places where Christ stood on trial before Annas, Caiaphas, Pilate, and Herod.

Pilate, the Roman governor, was the last person to question Jesus. He was the one who condemned Jesus to death, had him flogged, and handed him over to be crucified. Soldiers led him to Calvary.

We then traced Jesus's steps through the streets of Old Jerusalem and out the Damascus gate to Gordon's Calvary. Gordon's Calvary, or the Garden Tomb, sits behind a bus station in one of the Arab sections of Jerusalem. The rocky face of the hillside forms the likeness of a skull. When the British Major-General Charles Gordon first saw this, he concluded that it must be the place where Christ was crucified. Very near, he discovered a garden with an empty tomb.

The British have maintained this area since the late 1800s. A guide escorted us to the place of the skull. It is startling to see. The features of a skull—the eye sockets and nose—are so prominent that you can't help but think this was the place. No one knows for sure, but Gordon's Calvary provides a strong connection to the Gospel accounts.

We sat overlooking that hillside, contemplating what Christ endured on our behalf. The Roman soldiers nailed his hands and

feet to a cross, they pressed a crown of thorns on his head, they pierced his side with a spear, and they gambled for his robe. When Jesus was thirsty, they gave him vinegar to drink. He struggled for every breath. For three agonizing hours, under darkened skies, Jesus hung suspended between heaven and earth. Then he cried out, “It is finished!” And with those words, he died. He had carried out the will of his Father for you and for me. Our sins were taken away by the One who loved us and gave himself for us.

This is the place where our stale, empty lives end. Not far away is the place where our new lives begin. Our guide led us down a path through the garden area to the empty tomb. We walked in and saw the chamber where Joseph of Arimathea would have laid Jesus’s body. We found a bench close by. The words from Don Francisco’s song reverberated through our minds—“He’s Alive”!

This is the story of Christianity. What’s more, it is our individual story. Because he lives, we live—not at a point in the future, but right here, right now.

The power that released Jesus’s body from death and clothed it with immortality is the same power that is available to us for living here and now. Living in this power should change us and enable us to experience a quality of life we’ve never known before.

But how? How do we live in the power of Christ’s resurrection? How does this amazing, earthshaking event become the central issue of our lives?

Finding the answer to these questions is the key to experiencing the newness of life God has for us in Jesus. Let’s face it—most of us are longing for something new and better.

The hope of breaking free from a stale, empty life and experiencing a different quality of life altogether is bound up in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The empty tomb announces this victorious hope and invites you to experience the power of the resurrection.

First Life

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the heart and soul of Christianity because it solves our deepest problem.

For a long time, I would have told you that my deepest need was the forgiveness of sins. But that's not true. Yes, I needed forgiveness, but according to the Bible, I had an even greater problem. Consider these passages of Scripture.

- “Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned...” (Romans 5:12).
- “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1).

Sin was a big problem. And it brought a horrific consequence—spiritual death.

Your mom and dad passed this spiritual condition to you. Their parents passed it to them. Follow the trail, and this condition traces back to Adam and Eve. They forfeited spiritual life in exchange for the chance to be like God. God had warned them of the consequence: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17).

Adam and Eve ate from that tree, and they died. Not physically—Adam lived to the ripe old age of 930. The death they experienced was spiritual. The relationship they enjoyed with God was now gone. The life he had breathed into them vanished. They were now fallen human beings. As a result, when they died spiritually, we died with them.

That doesn't seem fair, does it? Why should we share in the consequences of their sin? The simple answer is this: Spiritual death is hereditary. When you entered the world, you inherited Adam and

Eve's spiritual DNA. What they became after the Fall, they passed on to you. After the Fall, they had physical life—their souls were functional. Yet their spirits were dead, which simply means they no longer had God's life in them. That's how you came into the world. Your body and soul were alive, but your human spirit was dead because it wasn't connected to the life of God. You were separated from him and from his love.

Adam and Eve's spiritual death worked its way into their souls and bodies. The damage to their souls showed up immediately after they ate the forbidden fruit. They realized their nakedness and hid from God in fear. Their friendship with God died. And from that point forward, their bodies started to age and head toward the grave. Spiritual death changed everything for Adam and Eve.

It affects every part of you as well. Let me explain what I mean. The day you were born, you were a miracle of life. You were innocent, untarnished by the world. Your parents probably envisioned a life filled with hope and promise. Yet deep within, your human spirit wasn't right. No one noticed at first, but as you grew, this spiritual condition started showing up in your life.

You probably didn't pay too much attention to the early signs. Maybe you lied to your parents or fought with your brother and sister. These are things kids do. But they start adding up, and eventually you start to ask why. Then the big questions about life start to hit. Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

Adam and Eve weren't asking these questions when they lived in the Garden and enjoyed God's life. These questions became a part of the human conversation after the Fall. We ask them because we are spiritually dead. Pastor Frank Friedmann says, "We were designed to live in a garden paradise." That's why we know something is missing; we just don't know what it is.

For my youngest daughter, McKenzie, these questions surfaced

when Caitlin and Coleman, her sister and brother, told her about having Jesus in their hearts. The conversation happened in the car as Jeanna was taking them to a school event. They asked McKenzie if she had received Jesus into her heart. With childlike honesty, she replied, “I guess I have the devil living in my heart.” She knew something wasn’t right.

This is the way it is. At some point in life, we sense deep down that something is terribly wrong, or we feel empty inside, or we experience an unexplained restlessness. We feel as if God is a million miles away. All of these are symptoms of spiritual death. Have you felt any of these symptoms in your life? If so, what did you do to fill the emptiness or to find peace?

One day a man named Calvin called our radio broadcast, hoping we could help him sort out his life. In the course of the conversation, he described spiritual death to a T. Of all the problems he shared, the one that was most troubling to him was a sense of emptiness in his heart. He had tried everything imaginable to fill that void, but nothing worked. He turned to drugs and alcohol to mask the underlying pain and emptiness, but these substances weren’t helping. He wanted to change. He had asked God over and over to make his life different, but all his prayers seemed to go unanswered. His struggle to change led him to a point of desperation.

He was a blistered soul, tired and weary. He told me, “I’ve tried to do the right things. I pray for God’s help night and day, but I keep going back to my old ways. Is there hope?”

Calvin wanted change in his life. God had something else in mind for him. God’s priority for Calvin was life itself. It is *life* first and *then* change. Calvin was spiritually dead. There is only one solution. Spiritual life. That life comes through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Life first and then change. That’s the process God works in our lives.

So many of us short-circuit the process. We leave new life out of the equation and focus merely on the change we hope and pray God can bring to our lives. In other words, we view Christianity as a self-improvement program as if God were there to help us better our lives. I viewed Christianity this way. Like so many, I cried out to God time and time again for his help, but nothing changed. If anything, my feeble efforts made matters worse. I didn't know I needed life because I didn't know I was spiritually dead.

Death is the problem.

The gospel offers us life.

Jesus made this abundantly clear throughout his teaching ministry. Listen to his words: "Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it" (John 5:21).

The Case for Grace

The most fundamental definition of grace is "God's unmerited favor." He shows it to us by doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

Dead people cannot make themselves alive. In fact, no one can bring something that is dead back to life—that is, no one but God. With him all things are possible. He proved it by resurrecting Jesus. This is what God does. He gives life to the dead. If we are dead, salvation can only mean receiving life. How else could we be saved?

The idea of resurrection seems far-fetched to many. It does today, and it did in the first century. Time and again the apostles were maligned for their unwavering conviction that God had indeed raised Jesus from the dead. The religious leaders arrested Peter and John for proclaiming the resurrection. The same happened to Paul. He did not let the unbelief of his accusers go unchallenged. In

making his defense before King Agrippa, Paul asked, “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:8).

I ask you to consider Paul’s question as well.

Resurrection is the only means for you to have life. That’s what God wants for you. It is his first priority. Nothing else can happen until you have been made alive spiritually. That’s why Jesus came to earth. As he said, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

A miracle of new life occurs every time someone turns to Christ by faith. It happens daily in every corner of the world. Someone dead in sin is born again of the Spirit and is raised to walk in the newness of life. That is the power of the gospel, the amazing grace God pours out on those who look to him for life.

Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:4-9).

To be saved by grace means you have been made alive with Jesus Christ. Just as he was physically resurrected, you have been given new life.

You were dead, and now you are alive in him.