

“A wonderful book of encouragement
for women of all ages. I loved it!”

—LIZ CURTIS HIGGS, bestselling author of *Bad Girls of the Bible*



Victim of
GRACE

When God's Goodness Prevails

Robin Jones Gunn

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 ZONDERVAN®

For my mother

*With heartfelt gratitude to
Moe, Sue, Janet, and Rachel,
who saw this book before it was formed
and believed these stories needed to be told.*

For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

—JOHN 1:16 ESV

*Why does this keep happening to me?
It's not fair. I never asked to be treated this way.
I did nothing to deserve this.
And yet
Every moment of every day, completely unprovoked,
God pours out His love on me
He blesses me in unexpected ways
His mercies are new every morning.
No matter what I do I am powerless to stop Him.
Even in the worst situations His goodness prevails. He is relentless.
I am a victim of grace.*

—Robin Jones Gunn

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Chapter 1

FREE FALL TO FULL CIRCLE

The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me.

—PSALM 138:8 ESV

On a quiet summer afternoon, I handed my friend Steph a glass of iced tea and offered a sympathetic smile before taking a seat beside her on the white wicker patio chair. A rousing Maui trade wind skimmed over us and rustled the outstretched limbs of our backyard plumeria tree. A single flower on the highest branch surrendered to the tug of the unseen breeze. Nudged by another breath, the flower fluttered to the ground with airy elegance.

“Waiting is the hardest part,” Steph said. “It’s been eleven days and still no word. I’m stuck. I don’t know if we should plan a move back to the mainland or if I should start buying school supplies since classes here start next week.”

I didn’t know what to tell her. I’d been in similar situations more than once in my life and felt her frustration. No winning words of encouragement came to me.

“It’s beginning to feel like a test,” she said. “As if God wants to see if I completely trust him no matter what. I wish he would tell me the answer but ...”

I finished the sentence for her with a line that was familiar to both of us. “But the teacher is always silent during the test.”

“Exactly.”

I released the thin pineapple wedge that balanced on the side of my glass and watched it float between the ice cubes. “I’m really sorry you’re going through this, Steph.”

“Thanks. I guess that’s why I came over. I needed the ‘tea and sympathy.’ ”

I smiled and noticed another plumeria flower being tugged from the tree by invisible fingers that sent it into a free fall. The fragrant offering landed softly on the grass. Later that afternoon, I would collect the scattered beauties and string them together to make a unique gift, a homemade lei to welcome someone special who was arriving on the island at sunset.

“You’re in a free fall, aren’t you?” I suggested.

“Is that what it is? I was thinking it feels more like I’m a victim.”

“A victim?”

“Yes. A victim of all the uncomfortable circumstances going on. I have no control over what’s happening. Everyone else seems to be making the decisions about our future.” She leaned back and gave a sigh. “I know God is in control. But I still feel like a victim.”

We sat together in silence for a moment. I leaned closer. “May I tell you a story? A true story?”

Steph knows me well, so my question made her grin. “It’s what you do,” she said. “Yes, please. Tell me a story.”

“Two days after our son’s thirteenth birthday, I walked into a building in downtown Portland in broad daylight. I was taken into a back room where all my clothes were removed. A man wearing a mask knocked me out. While I was unconscious, another masked man thrust a knife into my abdomen. Twice.”

Steph’s jaw went slack.

“When I finally came to, I was in a hospital bed with dozens of sutures holding my midriff together. I had done nothing to deserve what happened to me.”

“I never heard this before! I can’t believe it. Why would anyone do that to you?”

I tried to keep my expression steady as I gave her the bigger picture of the traumatic experience. “The building I walked into was a hospital. Providence Medical Center, to be exact. The man who rendered me unconscious was an anesthesiologist.”

“What?”

“The masked man with the knife was a surgeon. He removed several diseased masses and repaired my bile duct. I have a nine-inch scar right here.” I traced a diagonal line across my torso. “And another six-inch scar here.”

Steph narrowed her eyes. She looked like she might throw something at me. “Why didn’t you just say you had your gallbladder removed?”

I laughed. “Because the experience sounds so different when you don’t know the final outcome ahead of time. That’s what you’re going through right now; lots of painful steps without knowing the final punch line. When I only told you the painful facts of my experience, it seemed as though I were a victim of an act of violence.”

“It certainly did. But, obviously, the big picture is that the surgery was for your good. You’re still alive.”

“Yes, I am.” I drew my shoulders back and smiled. “I’m still here, twenty years later. So, I guess you could say that it’s true: I was a victim. I was a victim of grace.”

Steph put her glass of plantation tea on the end table. Our voices lowered as we talked about the mysterious ways of God, his timing, and the challenge of seeing more than just the circumstances in our life experiences. We reminded each other of times in our lives when God accomplished his purposes in us and through us even though we couldn’t see the big picture and didn’t understand the difficult things we were going through.

As Steph stood to leave, she said, “I wish more people would tell the uncomfortable parts of their story instead of just the punch line. We need to know we’re not alone in the process, especially when it’s painful.”

We walked together to her car, gave each other a hug, and I returned to the backyard where I went about gathering plumerias, selecting just the right ones for the lei. I thought of how the lovely flowers had ended up on the grass after their free fall. All that beauty scattered at my feet, ready to be collected. Before me were dozens of delicate, uncomplaining victims of the unseen hand that had plucked them from the tree.

As I strung the flowers on the long lei needle, Steph’s earlier comment about how we need

to know we're not alone echoed in my thoughts. She had said she wished more people would tell the uncomfortable parts of their stories. We need to see the big picture and not just the punch line.

It occurred to me that that was what God did when he recorded the true tales of many of the women in the Bible. He didn't airbrush their lives or make excuses for their choices. He showed them as they were. Real. Human. Flawed. And also deeply loved by the One who fashioned them by hand and knew them by heart. Their stories are scattered throughout Scripture, ready to be gathered up. I wondered how many of them could see the big picture when they were in the midst of their own difficult experience.

The scent of afternoon rain breezed my way. I could smell the rain before I could see the misty drops. As I watched, the fluid grace gently covered, nourished, cleansed, and restored everything within view.

My thoughts ran to a deep place. I considered how there is nothing I can do, nothing to make the rain fall or the wind blow. Unprovoked by any act on my part, God gives me breath. He opens his hand and gives and gives and gives. I don't control his faithfulness. I don't initiate his mercy. I can do nothing to earn his kindness. I don't deserve his gifts.

The truth is, I am powerless to stop his love for me.

I did nothing to activate his goodness toward me. I am incapable of deflecting the endless showers of blessings that come from his storehouses and rain over my life. It's all grace upon grace. God's extravagant grace.

Indeed, I am a victim of grace.

Grace: (noun) a manifestation of unmerited favor

And so are you.

Returning to the fresh flowers cradled in my lap, I finished stringing the lei and tied the two ends together. I thought about how God gifted me to tell stories. In recent years I've been invited to speak around the world, and at each event, I'm asked to tell stories. I have stood before thousands and told true stories of how God manifests his unmerited favor in the lives of ordinary women.

Drawing in the fragrance of the lei in my hands, I wondered what it would look like if I gathered up my free-fall stories and strung them together side-by-side with stories of some of the women in the Bible. What if I shared, as one friend shares with another, the uncomfortable parts of the journey as well as the beauty of what happens when God's goodness prevails? I had a pretty good idea that the result would not be one long, meandering line, but rather, as each story touched the next, it would connect just right and turn into a full circle, like a lei.

In the same way that a lei is created so that it can be presented as a gift, I now offer the gift of full-circle stories to you, dear kindred victim of grace. May you see the big picture of your own story on these pages and may it be evident that God's goodness is prevailing even when you can't see the final punch line.

Chapter 2

THE DREAM THAT WOULD NOT GO AWAY

When I was twelve, a small dream took root inside of me. That dream grew and would not go away. I knew the dream was odd, especially for a preteen. But there it was, deeply embedded in my heart. I wanted to be a missionary.

From the moment I first saw a slide of a sunset at the end of a foreign-mission presentation, I knew that was what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to travel around the world and tell people about God's love. I wanted to translate God's stories in a way that people who had never heard them would be drawn in and want to know him more.

I shared my dream with my counselor at summer camp, and she said, "You can start by being a missionary at home."

So, while I was in middle school, I started a Christian club in the cafeteria at lunchtime. In high school I persuaded friends to come to church with me, and I went on numerous missionary trips to Mexico. My closest friends were missionary kids, and I secretly envied their childhoods spent in foreign lands among interesting cultures. My college roommate, Marjorie, spoke fluent Spanish because she was a missionary kid from Colombia. I was certain she had experienced more adventure in her eighteen years in South America than I ever had growing up in Southern California and spending my summers at Newport Beach with friends from church.

I couldn't wait to leave my familiar, comfortable surroundings and do something significant for God out there in the bigger world.

But during my sophomore year in college, my heart took a detour. I fell in love. My boyfriend and I became engaged a few weeks after he graduated from the Christian college we both attended. I understood that our future would not be spent on the mission field. That wasn't his calling. But it was okay. We'd have a good life together. After all, we were in love.

Or so I thought.

On a cold February afternoon the following year, he looked me in the eye and said I wasn't going to work. He didn't love me. He said that one day I would thank him for making this decision for both of us.

My wedding dress was hanging in the closet. The invitations had been selected and were on hold at the printer. As I slid the engagement ring off my finger, the painful reality of what had just happened pounded in my ears. I was unwanted. Rejected.

During that season of my life, if the term *victim of grace* had flitted through my thoughts, it wouldn't have found a place to land. I hurt. Ached. All I knew was the blistering sting of rejection. I didn't dare think that God was accomplishing some ultimate good in my life through this.

I just wanted to be alone.

As an expression of true sisterhood, my friend Luanne came over to be with me on the

night of my disengagement. She told me I needed a new dream. Then she did two small things. First, she drove me to a restaurant, where she ordered hamburgers for both of us and coaxed me to take a few bites. Next, she asked if there was anything I wanted to do or any place I'd wanted to visit.

"I always wanted to go to Hawaii," I said. "Or Austria."

With a wave of her hand, Luanne made another decision for both of us. "I've been to Hawaii. You can go there another time. Let's go to Austria this summer. We can see if the hills really are alive with the sound of music. And we can go to Germany too. And Switzerland. And ..."

Her words of hope for the future released a wellspring of tears. She pushed the hamburger closer, but I couldn't eat until I told her about The Dream That Would Not Go Away—how it had been in my heart to go to the ends of the earth. I confessed that I had put it aside when my heart became all twitterpated over getting married. Wishes of seeing more of this wide world had been willingly relinquished in exchange for plans for a bridal shower, a student apartment, and a shared car payment with someone who didn't want to travel the globe.

"Then let this new dream be part of The Dream That Would Not Go Away," Luanne told me. "You can stay on in Europe after our jaunt and find a missions organization that needs some short-term help."

She made it sound so easy. And it was.

Four months later, I boarded a plane for the first time in my life, and we were on our way across "the pond." The ministry opportunity presented itself naturally while I was in Europe. I served as a courier, a smuggler. I traveled behind the Iron Curtain with three other young women to deliver thousands of Bibles to believers in underground churches in the former Soviet Union.

When I returned to Southern California, I was a changed woman and certain that I was ready to become a full-time missionary. The next step was attending the Urbana Student Missions Conference, where I hoped to receive direction on where I would spend the rest of my life serving the Lord after I finished college.

At the conference, I filled out an important form, carefully and prayerfully checking the boxes next to the terms that best described my unique gifting, interests, and abilities. The form was fed into the grand computer (circa 1977) to match up my skills and calling with the right ministry opening in some remote corner of the world.

As I stood in line at the conference, sporting long, seventies-style hair and wearing an embroidered muslin shirt from Mexico, I couldn't wait to receive the printout with the answer. What challenging and amazing position on the mission field awaited someone with my unique gifts and skills?

When the printout finally emerged, I held my breath and read the words: *Laundry Supervisor, Nairobi, Kenya.*

Silence. Blink. Shuffle. Blink again.

Not exactly what I'd expected, but there it was. God's will for my life.

I applied for the position of laundry supervisor and waited for the confirmation letter.

Around that time, the movie *The Hiding Place* debuted in theaters. It told the real-life story

of Corrie ten Boom, a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. I had taken a job as an assistant in the Southern California office where all the mail for Corrie was processed and met *Tante* (Aunt) Corrie, as those who worked there called her. I also read her books, including *Tramp for the Lord*.

I loved this Rosey Posey of a woman and longed to go to exotic places like Corrie did and tell people about God's great love for his children. It looked as if that exotic place for me was going to be Africa and not Eastern Europe, as I had thought it might be after my summer adventure as a Bible smuggler.

When I met with the teen girls in the Sunday school class I taught, I told them, "Pray for me, girls! I'm going to Africa."

"Why?" they asked.

"I'm going to be a laundry supervisor."

Blank stares. "What exactly will you do as a laundry supervisor?" they wanted to know.

I went a little overboard, I'm sure, as I spun the tale that had been forming in my imagination. "I'm going to learn how to carry a big basket on my head. Every day I'll walk down to the river and join the women of the village. We'll work together, side by side, singing, laughing, telling stories. The children will play beside us as we do the laundry. This is how I'm going to serve the Lord."

Each week the girls wanted to hear more about Africa, and I kept the stories coming, embellishing to my heart's content. Soon the girls were confiding that they hoped one day that they too would be selected to serve as laundry supervisors in Africa. They wanted to see the land where baby elephants bathed and laughing children splashed about in the river under the warm sun, and where women plunged the dirty laundry of Nairobi into the same river that flowed with the pure waters of Mount Kilimanjaro.

At last, many months after the Urbana conference, the response from the mission in Kenya arrived. I tore open the envelope and read the letter. My heart sank.

But I trust in you, LORD; I say, "You are my God."

My times are in your hands.

—Psalm 31:14 – 15

They turned me down. I was rejected. Again.

The letter stated that my "specific skills" weren't a "sufficient match" for the position. All I took in was the message hidden between the lines: I was unwanted. A loser. No one wanted to marry me, and now I couldn't even wash clothes for Jesus in Africa.

A few days later, I stood before the girls in my Sunday school class, letter in hand. With a weighted spirit, I gave my sad report: "You can stop praying. I'm not going to Africa. I didn't get the position."

One of the girls unsympathetically popped off with, "Good. We don't want you to leave. We want you to stay here. We think you should find a job telling stories. We love it when you tell us stories."

Something deep and shame-filled inside me winced at her suggestion. My self-image curled up into a ball like a roly-poly bug. I didn't want to be a writer. I didn't like that telling stories

had always been easy for me.

Growing up, I got in trouble for telling stories. Teachers called it “lying.” My sister called “exaggerating — again.” My parents would do the twirling-finger sign at the dinner table indicating that I should speed up my monologue and get to the point.

No. I did not want to be a writer. Telling stories got me in trouble. I didn’t see my imaginative way of thinking as a gift.

It wasn’t that I was trying to be dishonest when I told stories. I was only repeating what I saw in my imagination. And I only shared a small portion of what I saw. I learned early on to keep the rest of the whimsy to myself. No one wanted to hear about the images that chummed around in my mind—images of a kangaroo eating Cheerios out of the palm of my hand, of me singing at the top of my lungs from the Eiffel Tower, or of spending a warm winter night sleeping under the stars in a hammock strung between two palm trees.

All fanciful notions needed to be snuffed out, including *The Dream That Would Not Go Away*. I wasn’t special. I wasn’t missionary material. I needed to be more like everyone else and live a normal life.

So instead of returning to finish college, I found a respectable job at a bank where I used colorless, unbending numbers every day instead of vibrant, lithe, storytelling words. And I fell in love again. This time to a man who loved God and loved me — and who knew who he was.

This new dream, I found, wasn’t a bad dream at all: loving and being loved, marrying a godly man, putting my whole heart into making a cozy home, giving birth to two wonderful children and raising them together, serving alongside my husband in youth ministry. We had a good life.

My insightful husband urged me to develop my natural storytelling ability and sent me to a writers’ conference. I learned how to write devotions and articles and, to my surprise, the first few articles I submitted were accepted for publication. Accepted is such a wonderful word! I started working on a series of books for toddlers and knew deep down I should be grateful for all that God had done. And I was.

But somehow I couldn’t shake the quiet sadness that came over me whenever I heard an inspiring story of someone who served overseas and was working among an unreached people group. That had been my dream. And here I was, almost thirty, still living in California, changing diapers and writing children’s books. If this was how God was fulfilling his purpose for me, then why did he plant such crazy dreams in my heart so long ago? Where were the elephants?

I put aside all hopes of traveling to unknown corners of the world and for the next ten years I lived the life that had been given to me. During that time I kept writing, I kept loving my husband and our children, and I was grateful. Very grateful. It was not difficult to convince myself that it was enough. Life was abundant.

A Kindred Victim of Grace

Then came the surgery that altered my forty-year-old body as well as my overall health and mental outlook.

A nagging pain in my side followed by abnormal lab results sent me into the hospital. My husband and I thought I'd only be there overnight, not for a week. The "masked man with the knife" determined that it was necessary to remove more than just my gallbladder. A separate incision was made to extract two enlarged cysts, repair my colon, and remove my appendix. I was sent home to heal and instead of inviting Faith and Hope to be my companions during the convalescence, I allowed Fear to make himself comfortable on the end of my bed where he peppered me with vile questions:

What if more rogue cells still are inside you? What if they are multiplying at this very moment just waiting to take you down?

What will happen to your husband and children if you die?

What about all your unfinished projects and unfulfilled dreams?

When Fear paused long enough to catch his breath, Doubt was right there beside him ready to carry on the bedside vigil. The two of them delighted in taking turns at telling me how my life would end and convincing me it had been a small life, really. The Dream That Would Not Go Away would become the Dream That Never Was.

The worst part was that I listened to them. I could have told them to go away, to be gone in the name of Jesus. But I didn't. I didn't speak the golden command that would make them flee. I didn't choose to believe that God was accomplishing his purpose for me and that my times were in his hands. After many days of feeling overwhelmed with pain and deep discouragement, I finally turned to God's Word. In the book of 1 Samuel I found the story of a kindred victim of grace. Her name was Hannah. For years she had longed for a baby, but she couldn't conceive. Fear and Doubt must have assigned themselves to be her traveling companions, plaguing her with their life-sapping accusations as she and her husband made their yearly pilgrimage to Shiloh. The effects of those two unwelcome companions and their accusations have played out the same way from generation to generation.

By the time Hannah arrived at the feast, she was heartbroken and wept a thousand tears. I knew exactly how she felt.

Her husband said, "Why be downhearted just because you have no children? You have more than enough— isn't that better than having ten sons?" (1:8 NLT).

No! My spirit answered loud and clear for Hannah. We were sisters at heart across many centuries, and I knew her answer had to be, *It is not better! It is not the same as having a Dream That Would Not Go Away.* Hannah's dream was to have a child. Mine was to be a missionary. Neither of us had been successful in fulfilling our own dreams and the older we got the more impossible it seemed.

Hannah left the feast. She went to find a private place in the temple where she could pray. In her deep anguish she wept bitterly, crying out to the Lord. Hannah pleaded with God to give her a son. Just one child. That's all she asked. Just one. She made a vow, promising to the LORD Almighty, or literally, "the Lord of Heaven's Armies," that if he gave her a son, she would dedicate him to be a servant in the Lord's temple as soon as he was old enough.

Eli the priest was sitting by the temple door watching Hannah as she prayed her heart out. It was a curious sight to him. As she prayed, her lips moved, but no sounds came out of her mouth.

How intensely focused her heart must have been on those prayers. How passionate and

intimate were her expressions. She thought she was alone in the Lord's presence, and in her honesty before God, she gave the appearance of having lost control of her senses.

Eli concluded that she must be drunk. He toddled over to Hannah and told her to put away her wine and sober up.

The story doesn't reveal whether she told Eli the subject of her desperate prayers. Neither the specific problem nor her sincere vow were included in her response to him. She made no excuses for her actions or the way she appeared to Eli. It was enough for her to tell Eli the words:

"I'm a woman who is deeply troubled. I haven't been drinking wine or beer. I was telling the LORD all of my troubles. Don't think of me as an evil woman. I've been praying here because I'm very sad. My pain is so great" (verses 15–16 NIV).

Eli then fulfilled his priestly role. He blessed her and said, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him" (verse 17).

I wonder if either of them had any glimpse of the big picture at that point. That if God answered Hannah's prayer and gave her a son, and if she kept her vow and the child returned to serve in the temple, Eli would be the one who raised him. Regardless of what either of them understood at the moment, Eli's blessing must have filled Hannah with hope, because "she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast" (verse 18). Some things don't change in a thousand generations. Just as my friend Luanne had urged me to eat a little something, to be blessed, and to dream a new dream on the eve of my disengagement, Eli did the same for Hannah. The result was that Hannah went on her way with hope. Fear and Doubt had no choice but to spread their dark wings and fly away.

As I read about Hannah, I wanted to experience that same transformation; that same infusion of Hope. What would happen if I dared to dream again? What would those dreams look like in this season of life? They would certainly be different than the childhood dreams I'd clung to all these years.

Sequestered in the bedroom, confined to my bed, I followed Hannah's lead and poured out my heart to the Lord. I called upon the Lord Almighty, the Lord of Heaven's Armies, and when I did, Fear and Doubt fled. Hope returned. I tearfully asked the Lord to heal my body and restore my health. With soul-level honesty I relinquished my childhood dream and humbly asked, "So what is it that you want of me, Lord? What's next?"

Victim: (noun) from the Latin, *victima*, a live sacrifice

A line from a verse in Romans 12:1 settled in my thoughts. My Bible was still in my lap, so I turned there and found the verse: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship."

The term *living sacrifice* stood out. This was the starting point if I was going to dare to dream a new dream. I needed to offer my body as a living sacrifice. His Word said that to do so was an act of worship and was pleasing to Him.

How can that be pleasing to you, Lord? You know how broken I am right now. I don't even have all my original parts. I'm so inadequate in so many ways.

I thought of Hannah, crying out to the Lord from a body that had been unable to conceive and carry new life. In spite of her inadequacies and her deep pain, she was willing to offer to God both her body and the life of her yet unborn son. Two living sacrifices.

Almighty God was asking the same of me; to willingly become a live sacrifice. And in doing so, I was becoming a victim. I was putting myself completely at the mercy of God. I surrendered anew, offering not only my body, but all that I was or ever would be. With deep longing, I asked God to give me a new dream, and then I asked him to give me Faith to fill up the space that Doubt had vacated in my spirit. Like Hannah, I immediately felt lifted. My countenance was no longer downcast.

I turned back to the book of 1 Samuel to find out what happened to Hannah. How did her story end? How did God answer her prayer?

The words are recorded with understated simplicity. The Lord remembered Hannah, and in the course of time, she became pregnant and gave birth to a son. Her dream came true. God's plan was fulfilled. Hannah named her son Samuel. And as she had promised, she consecrated Samuel to the Lord. When Samuel was old enough, she took him to Eli so that the boy might be trained to serve the Lord.

Hannah wrote a poem about her answered prayer, and God included it in his Book. This small slice of common ground between Hannah and me made me smile. Hannah was a writer. She wrote a poem and God published it. How could she ever have imagined that her poem would stay in print and be read 4,000 years later by another woman who was desperately in need of hope?

The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

—Psalm 145:9

I was about to close my Bible and give in to the nap my aching body was calling for when my gaze fell on one more verse in chapter 2 of 1 Samuel. There it was. An added whisper of hope.

“The LORD was gracious to Hannah ... Over a period of years she had three more sons and two daughters” (verse 21 NIrV).

My heart began to pound wildly as I read the verse again and took in the abundance of those words. God gave Hannah six babies. Six!

And she had only asked him for one.

This is the extravagance of God. This is how he chose to bless a woman who surrendered everything to him. With Hannah's life example in mind, I dared to believe that I wasn't a victim of circumstances or genetic maladies. I was a living sacrifice and that made me a victim of grace; God's extravagant grace.

Chapter 3

EVERYTHING IS REDEEMABLE

“I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

—JEREMIAH 29:11

Seven months after I read about Hannah from the confines of my bed, I was up and about and our family started looking for a new place to live. During our house hunting, our nine-year-old daughter kept asking if we could buy a house with a gazebo in the front yard. She wanted to see the gazebo from her bedroom window.

My husband and I refrained from rolling our eyes and responded with the parental answer, “We’ll see.” We soon added “probably not” to the response.

Her descriptions grew to fairy-tale proportions when she talked about her dream of dancing in the gazebo, and how one day she was going to get married in a gazebo. We finally had to give her the cold, hard facts: “Honey, we’re not going to move into a house with a gazebo.”

“Where are we going to live?”

“We don’t know yet. We haven’t found a house. But we know it won’t have a gazebo.”

Undaunted, she asked her daddy, who could do anything, “Whatever house we move into, would you build me a gazebo? In the front yard, please.”

His answer was the same all twenty-three times she asked. “No.”

That was that.

We sorted and packed in preparation for the move — our seventh in six years. After so much shuffling and downsizing, I thought I’d gone through every box at least once before. Not so. This time I came across a manila envelope stuffed with old report cards. What I read gave me pause. My first-grade teacher had written on the back of my report card, “Robin has not yet grasped her basic math skills, but she does keep the entire class entertained at recess time.”

There it was. Evidence that our daughter came by her fanciful wishes and imagination genetically. From my earliest years, I couldn’t keep my imagination quiet, nor could I keep the expressions of my thoughts from coming out in story form.

Where do these foundational inklings inside us come from? Does God plant the seeds of our dreams deep within before we’re born? Is it his bidding and his doing when those seeds take root and grow? How is it that some dreams seem to have been planted in us from the beginning and yet never grow tall, spread their frilly leaves, or bear luscious fruit? We all have whims and wishes that never came true. And yet we keep wishing. Why?

I thought about our daughter and how her father had given her a clear no about building a gazebo. My heavenly Father had given me a clear no on many things in my life. Good things, as well as things that would not have been good for me. The things we hope for in life can

be wished into existence no matter how delightful or spiritual those possibilities might be. Why is that?

It seems to have very little to do with the dreams themselves but everything to do with the One who first planted the dreams inside us. God has been a Planter, a Gardener, from the beginning. He planted a garden east of Eden. He is the one who plants and uproots. God gives; God takes away.

As I was waiting to see what new dream might be springing up in my heart, I thought a lot about my long-term relationship with the Lord. The conclusion I came to was this: God is God. He can do whatever he wants. But what he wants most is a relationship with us.

I am the LORD, and there is no other.

I form the light and create darkness.

I bring prosperity and create disaster;

I, the LORD, do all these things.

—Isaiah 45:6 – 7

Until we come to peace with the realization that a relationship with almighty God can happen only on his terms, not ours, we won't have an authentic relationship with him. As that truth permeated my heart, I realized that any dreams sprouting up in me were dreams that God was nurturing. If wishes lingered in my heart but weren't bearing fruit, most likely God was the one hindering their growth. The question was, what was bearing fruit in my life?

The answer was right in front of me on the bookshelf. The new dream that had sprouted in my heart had nothing to do with Africa or laundry. This new dream was about telling stories. Then telling more stories. And then a few more.

Ironically, I had been working with several publishers for years by this time. More than thirty books had been published, and yet I still viewed storytelling as my downfall, my weakness. My natural bent toward embellishing was something I'd tried to hide. How could that impulse be a good thing?

From the moment a life is surrendered to Christ, the redeeming work of sanctification begins. My inclination to tell stories was being sifted in this sanctification process. My heart was being tested, my motives purified. Why would God carry out such a process in the life of a weak human?

A Kindred Victim of Grace

I found the answer in the life of another kindred victim of grace. Her name was Eve. She was the only woman not born into the wreckage all of us have shuffled through ever since the fall. Life for her on planet Earth was as God intended it to be.

Then one conversation changed everything. Words from the Deceiver led her to disobey God, even though she knew the penalty was death. And death did come. Spiritual death—the previously unexperienced place of being separated from God. Ongoing communion with God was lost.

As soon as Eve and Adam ate of the fruit, their eyes were opened. They looked at each

other and saw their differences, their failings, their flaws. Their inadequacies were obvious.

That's when another death took place: the death of the first animal. The consequences of Adam and Eve's disobedience affected even the animals. God slayed an animal and used its skin to fashion coverings for Eve and her husband.

Love covers over a multitude of sins.

—1 Peter 4:8

Could it be that part of what was lost in the fall was a covering of grace? People who love each other know what that covering of grace looks like. They choose to love in spite of differences. They overlook flaws. They choose to extend grace — over and over and over. But when that love is removed and that covering of grace is taken away, certain death occurs in the relationship.

Adam and Eve knew what it was like to be in a relationship in which, despite all the quirks and differences, they weren't ashamed. Not ashamed of their individual peculiarities, not ashamed of the other person's uniqueness and not ashamed of their flesh. But when their eyes were opened, they saw themselves and each other without that magnificent covering of grace. No longer able to look at each other through the eyes of unconditional love, they became painfully aware of their differences. Their disobedience led to death, and death had stripped them bare. For the first time since they were placed in the garden, they felt ashamed.

The solution seemed to be stitching together fig leaves as a man-made covering to hide their outward differences. Fig leaves, however, were inadequate. Only the invisible covering of perfect love and grace was sufficient for them. But now that covering was gone.

Fig leaves could never replace the covering God had provided. When the leaves were connected to the tree, they were living, green, and vibrant. When they were separated from that source of life, they slowly shriveled up and turned to dust. In Adam and Eve's separation from almighty God, their bodies would experience the same process of slowly shriveling and returning to dust.

Aware of what had happened, terrified and ashamed, Adam and Eve went into hiding.

So much pain. So much sorrow. Such a great loss.

Yet something happened on that day of catastrophic loss that draws in the rest of us with a gasp of hope. Yes, the paradise that Adam and Eve had known was lost through disobedience. The magnificent covering of unbridled love and grace was stripped away. Fellowship with the Creator was broken. A death sentence hung over their heads.

But in the midst of it all, God came. He made himself accessible.

While Adam and Eve were in hiding, they "heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Genesis 3:8). They were awaiting their annihilation, and yet no lightning bolt struck them from the heavens. No invisible hand reached down and choked their last breath from them. Instead, the Lord God came to them in a very personal way. He came looking for them, seeking to restore what had been demolished. Even though they didn't ask for it, God was about to cover them with his love.

Adam and Eve were about to become the first victims of grace.

What did it sound like when the Lord God came walking in the garden? Were his footsteps heavy and earth pounding? Or was the sound of the Lord God more like a telling breeze or rushing wind that set the birds to singing and the leaves of the trees to clapping their hands? Did he come with a gentle rain to wash away all that was soiled?

Whatever God sounded like when he walked in the garden in the cool of the day, Eve knew the sound. She knew it was God, not a deer or a rabbit or any other created being. It was God and God alone. And he was coming for her.

God called out, "Where are you?" (verse 9).

Eve was the first woman to hear the cry of the Relentless Lover. From that ancient moment until this very day, Father God hasn't stopped calling out to each of us. He comes walking in the garden of our hearts, pursuing us, making himself accessible, and inviting us to come out of hiding.

Why does he continue to do this millennia after millennia, when all of us continue to disobey? We go into hiding, inadequately covered from the fear and shame that paralyze us. Yet God, the Relentless Lover, comes walking in the gardens of our hearts, calling out, "Where are you?" because we are his first love, and he wants us back.

Certainly God knew right where Adam and Eve were when he called out his passionate question. No one and nothing is hidden from him.

Could it be that his question was an invitation? By answering him, Adam and Eve were responding to God's gesture of mercy. He didn't demolish them as they had demolished their relationship with him. God didn't wipe them off the face of the earth. He didn't ignore their sin and leave them in their terror and misery.

He came to them. He invited them to respond to his question. In this first expression of an extraordinary and extravagant outpouring of grace, God established through their lives the theme of his Book: everything is redeemable.

Do we still believe that today? Every life can be ransomed. That which was broken and worthless can be restored. Everything is redeemable.

What happens when we come out of hiding, are honest with God, and receive the provisions he has prepared for us?

For Eve it meant that she lived. Her days on earth were extended. God provided the skin of an animal to cover her nakedness. Eve was the first woman to give birth, the first mother to experience the joy of cradling her child and kissing his brow as he slept in her arms.

A bittersweet mercy.

We know this same mercy because we also deserve death. But just like Eve, we are "graced." God has provided a way for us to return to communion with him. In spite of all our failings, he remains faithful. Always. Forever. He continues to beckon us into a close relationship with him. Everything in our lives is still redeemable. Hope pervades every situation because grace covers us like the handmade clothing God gave Eve. A covering that was provided only by the shedding of blood.

If you extract the precious from the worthless, You will become My spokesman.

—Jeremiah 15:19 NASB

As I looked back over my life, I saw evidence of this sanctification at work as my childhood propensity toward exaggeration and “lying” was redeemed and transformed into the craft of storytelling. The Lord turned what I saw as a weakness I was ashamed of into strength that was accomplishing his purposes. I wonder what would have happened to the “bent” in my personality if God hadn’t redeemed it.

Retracing the Steps to Discover the Treasure

I thought back to those girls in my Sunday school class who said they were glad I wasn’t going to Africa to wash clothes, because they wanted me to keep telling stories. At the time their suggestion seemed like a bad idea. I saw my inclination toward telling tales as a bad habit that needed to be purged from my life.

Even so, I began to wonder whether my tendency toward telling tales could be used for good instead of getting me into trouble.

My husband believed it could. He urged me to attend a writers’ conference soon after we were married. One of the speakers delivered a memorable talk on what Paul must have meant when he told Timothy to “stir up the gift of God which is in you” (2 Timothy 1:6 NKJV).

I knew I had words in me, and that those words needed to find a way to line up and dance into the world in some useful way. If this was how God created me, then certainly he had a purpose for me, a specific use for this gift of storytelling. I felt like I needed to be a good steward of the gift, but I didn’t fully see my ability as a treasure.

During the first five years of our marriage, I struggled with my work at the bank, making numbers, not words, line up and march across the page with precision. The process drained me, discouraged me. But I needed a job, and this was the one that met our needs. That’s why I stayed there for half a decade.

However, nearly every day at noon, I would take my sack lunch and leave the main branch of Oceanside Federal Savings and Loan. I’d walk two blocks to the small Christian bookstore next to the ice-cream shop and do some market research. Danielle and her staff always welcomed me and let me eat my lunch in the beanbag chair in the children’s section. If I wasn’t busy, they’d let me interview them and take notes in my journal.

“What sorts of books do people come in asking for that you don’t have?”

“What books are the most popular?”

“Who is your favorite author? Why?”

On many afternoons I sat in the children’s section nibbling my sandwich and writing anything and everything that came to mind. I had no idea how to be a writer, but after attending the weekend writers’ conference at Forest Home, I did have an idea of where to start. I needed to get an article published. Then I could honestly say I was a published author.

I wrote and rewrote a short devotional piece for *The Upper Room* about a Christian I had met while smuggling Bibles into what was then Czechoslovakia. I also shared that nothing in life is wasted. Everything is redeemable. Even experiences on a summer missions trip.

It was a banner day when my acceptance letter finally arrived in the mail. The magazine

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