

Prologue: Grace Within Grace



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This Prologue to GrieveWithGrace has been added well after Eric and the Grace Team completed their first edition, launched the Grieve-WithGrace.Life website, and began developing a plan—a strategy really—to release the Grace Initiative to the world. I met the team at Grace Church in Desert Hot Springs, CA. We all became instant friends. Initially, I was merely curious.

After reading this book and discussing the concept with the team, I instinctively knew I needed to be involved, even in some small way. Yes, as a retired minister of 35 years in youth ministry, campus ministry, and pulpit ministry, I have heard every story of death and loss you can think of: cancer, car accidents, plane crashes, tornado damage and loss, homelessness, drug loss, loss of jobs, failed business and the list is endless.

I have experienced tragedy personally and felt the 5 stages of grief, especially anger, denial, and depression up close and personal to the point of counseling and medication. Grief depletes us and I felt that I was lost, depressed and without hope, and the life I had hoped for was over. Yes, like all who read these pages, I have been nearly drowned in my own river of tears.

This is why I became interested in the Grace Initiative and how it can help millions of people facing incredible heartache and despair.

When Eric gave me a copy to review, I immediately saw my life and the lives of so many others before my eyes. It was so obvious. We all need some help and a way forward.

When Eric and I discussed God's grace and the concept of Grieve With Grace, Eric just wanted to better understand the connection between God's Grace and Living Grace as a "process of getting beyond grief" - to more rapidly rise above the chasm of grief following a serious loss.

My response? In the end, it takes both, God's Grace, and as this book informs, "a way to constantly raise your personal State of Grace." Both are consonant and conjoined. Intertwined and interconnected, actually. Both are required to move from the pain of loss to the hope and joy of a new life high above your own river of tears.

Sometimes theology and good old-fashioned common sense provide a teaching moment. I sincerely hope that I, the preacher, can help you understand the connection between God's Grace and the practical notion of using GRACE as a strategy for living your best life following your loss and the natural mourning process we must all experience.

So let's get started. Every time I preach, I offer a prayer, so bow and read this prayer for wisdom, "*God of our lives we come to You now asking for insight into new life, the possibility of wholeness and help me to hear You as I read these words. Amen*"

Let's start With God's Grace: an unmerited gift.

Biblical grace is God's gift to our lives. Grace is how God offers, gives, and provides for our world. An unmerited love where the sun and rain fall on the righteous and the sinner alike (Matthew 5:45). Grace is the legitimacy of knowing that God does love you and because God's character is love (1 John 4:8, John 3:16), grace is experienced when and with joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22) are in our lives. Thus, this grace, this love described in 1 Corinthians 13 is how God implores, persuades, and leads us to have a life abundant, full, and significant living in God's grace.

The ultimate gift of God's grace was Jesus' giving his life for you and me. Thus, grace isn't anything to take lightly, nor with a sense of entitlement. Grace is a gift, life is a gift, and while our lives will never be trouble-free, grace is what helps us through the rivers of tears and troubles. The question is: Will I apply grace's resources and strengths to my life?

The Bible tells us that it is by grace we have received salvation. Salvation means that we are rescued, redeemed, and given a new heart, mind, and direction from what kept, held, and bound us. This grace is highlighted through the cross of Jesus Christ. His sacrificial giving of himself for our new life. Grace is defined then as God's unmerited love given to all human beings no matter where they live, no matter their experiences, what words they have used, what crimes they have committed, or what has happened in their life.

Grace then is what enables us to see the beauty of life and live, to flourish, relish and create. Grace gives us the consent to see the potential of our lives.

God's grace is that unmerited love that provides the courage, peace, conviction to move forward and be whom God intended for you to be. (Romans 5:8)

Biblical grace empowers us with the freedom even in the most painful times to recognize the next move we need to take to better ourselves, become the person we know we should be, and even go through grief.

Plenty of examples in the Bible of grace-filled encounters between Jesus and others exist. Some of us will remember the story of Nicodemus in John 3 who has a very ordered life. But something about Jesus bothers him. He knows Jesus is teaching and performing miracles that only can point to God being with him. This doesn't fit in Nicodemus' world. Jesus tells him (John 3:3) he must be born again to experience God's kingdom. Nicodemus doesn't see his need as Jesus does, but Nicodemus knows in his heart there must be something more, better than what he knows today. Nicodemus is experiencing grace.

In the next chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus is in a hostile region and is speaking to a Samaritan woman about her life. She knows she has had a series of bad marriages, but she is blind to the deep impact these relationships wrought on her health and self-esteem. She is blind to how her past (religion, philosophy, education, opinions, life) has kept her from "*pressing on to that which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me.*" (Philippians 3:13) She too is experiencing grace.

With each of these people, Jesus offered a new life.

One very religious, the other of another view, Jesus showed God's grace and love, this unmerited love and concern for wholeness, new life, to know the truth, and, if you will, to experience salvation. A new life. Nicodemus later becomes one of the men who secured the tomb for Jesus' body to be laid in Friday late afternoon. And the woman at the well, the Samaritan woman, was so joyful that she brought her village to hear Jesus. They both found new life by the grace of God.

We all want life. Jesus has promised life. In the Gospel of John, chapter 10, verse 10 Jesus says, "*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.*"

What kind of life do you want? Real life is filled with the presence of the grace of God's love and the desire to live the best life possible with all your remaining days.

| As we go about our days, things happen to us and to those we love.

Whether from a natural disaster, a loss of a job/career, a move that is both joyous and stressful, a speech that went sideways, a health issue, an accident, or the loss of a loved one, and on and on, that "thief," the antithesis of life, seeks to bring a theft of vitality and hope, seeks to kill our peace and destroy life. We aren't experiencing grace's resources, instead we're experiencing quite the opposite.

We all know that we can expect a loss sometime in our lives that will come as a shock or from a long-expected outcome. We'll come to a time of grief over our loss that can shake us to our foundation. We may

try to ignore it but like our friends above we are troubled and want to have a new life without guilt, confusion, without the past dictating to us our pathway forward. We want a chance to remember but we want to have a life of significance, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22)

The experience of loss is real, it is troubling, and emotional. Our equilibrium is thrown off, our thinking can be jumbled, and decisions hard. Grief with its documented stages is how we will cope: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. It can be a long and necessary process that ought to be taken on with others alongside us.

But by now you may be ready. Perhaps today you feel a prompt, a hunger, an inspiration around your life whether it's to better yourself, to improve a relationship, to seek some significance in your life, to make amends, or to be able to walk through your grief. Nicodemus did, the Samaritan woman serendipitously discovered a grace-filled moment.

This is your grace-filled moment. Where God has come to you with this grace that convinces and compels you to be different, better, more whole, and alive.

Like Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, we need to know that God has a way for us to grieve with grace. We need to know that there is more than acceptance of our loss, there is a new life of grace ahead!

You have in your hands a book with the subtitle, "Beyond Acceptance." This book offers you a graceful pathway to discover the new life God's grace has for you. Through Eric's story of the loss of his beautiful wife, Janice Mary, you will discover Grace's resources as five stones that will help you build a bridge from the acceptance of your loss (which is good) to a life that is held up by grace (which is better).

Through the stones of **Gratitude**: the thankfulness of a loved one's life; **Resilience**: learning to press on; **Authenticity**: whom will you become; **Creativity**: the art of finding the way; and **Empathy**: learning to listen and care.

What if you could move from being legitimately unhappy, fearful, and maybe lost to legitimately engaged in life? Would you?

I believe you can and will. One day at a time. I've seen it in Eric's life. I've experienced it myself in my grief and healing.

This might be a good time to cover one more base: The nature of our loss is not the issue, it's that we have lost someone or something dear to us.

Eric's story is a heart-compelled love story between a man and woman deeply in love—his story is legion. But no less real, no less visceral, no less traumatic are the stories from other losses—losses that tear at our very soul—losses that will never seemingly be restored.

This book and The Grace Initiative offers hope and guidance to all who suffer from...

1. Natural disasters such as wildfires, earthquakes, floods, tornados, hurricanes, etc. Many lose everything, including the lives of their loved ones.

2. Mass killings, murder, drive-by shootings, school massacres, and the perpetration of pure evil. Entire communities are scared for decades.

3. Traffic accidents, workplace fires, and other "accidental" deaths that leave us wanting to blame anyone and everyone.

4. Business loss, career disruption, loss of your profession, loss of skills and your ability to carry out your duties. Many suffer in grief for the rest of their lives after losing a business or their career.

5. Drug-related deaths from fentanyl, heroin, cocaine, prescription drug abuse. Many now consider these deaths senseless murders by poisoning and are difficult to understand, let alone move beyond the pain of loss.

6. And finally, slow-motion deaths from long-term disease such as dementia, Alzheimer's, ALS, Parkinson, a class defined by the experts as "pre-grief". The outcome may be known, but the time isn't—so we expend our own life in the care of another and the 5 dark stages of grief slowly settle in... without our even noticing it.



Regardless of our loss, we all need a plan, a way forward, a bridge across the river of tears that brings with it healing and hope.

Needless to say, we don't suffer just one loss in our lifetime.

Therefore, this book is something you will need and will want to share for the rest of your life, regardless of your loss.

You want life and while your loss is real you know in your heart of hearts that you cannot remain in this state of grief forever as many suggest.

Grief may be natural but grief that remains and sucks life out of us is that "thief" that Jesus was talking about.

Is this your time to move beyond acceptance of your loss to your new life? A better life than you are experiencing right now? Perhaps back on track to living all your hopes and dreams?

Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman had to ask themselves, "Do I want to remain here, in this spot, the way I feel or is there a new life for me?" I hope you answer in faith and the confidence of God's marvelous grace.

Let me offer a prayer for you and any others you know that are going through grief today. *“In my heart of hearts, I come to you Father because I know in your arms I will find solace and hope.*

I grieve my loss daily and I’m not the person I used to be. No one escapes grief, I know that. But I don’t want to stay here, I want to be the person You know I can become, a person with grace to overcome all things as You enable me and I press on.

As I step towards my river of tears, help me build this bridge with all the stones that make me a better person: Gratitude, Resilience, Authenticity, Creativity and Empathy. Help me pick them up, use them and come to the other side having a new life.

Because I’m loved by You and because of the Lord Jesus’ cross and resurrection I know I will cross the river. Amen.”

Let’s not wait, move on to... healing, wholeness and life with grace. Pick up this book, read it and go to the website, sign up and start building a bridge in grace.

God’s Grace is freely given. You need do nothing but accept Him as your Savior.

To Grieve With Grace means you take an active role to move beyond just accepting your lot in life. It means you engage fully in your own healing and the healing of others who depend on you. It means building your personal archway high above the chasm of despair.

Pray, Hope, Act...

The preacher in me always wants to end on a hopeful note so here we go!

Prayer opens your heart to hope...

Hope opens your mind to action...

Action produces the results you desire in life.

God Bless,

Pastor Lee Strawhun