

## CHAPTER 12

# DO YOU KNOW THIS GRACE?

**M**y to-do list for my first day in heaven reads as follows:

- Worship Jesus.
- Hug my dad, mom, brother, and sisters.
- Thank every person who prayed for me when I was a prodigal.
- Ask a few questions of the apostle Paul like, “What was that ‘baptism for the dead’ comment all about?”

And then I’d like to have a long conversation with Jacob. I’ll make the quick walk to the Pearly Gate Sidewalk Café where he likes to spend his mornings. I’ll introduce myself.

“Hello, Mr. Israel, I’m Max.”

He’ll look up from his latte and squint his eyes. He’ll stroke his beard and tilt his head and—at least in my imagination—nod at the sound of my name.



“You’re the guy who wrote the book about me, the grace book.”

I’ll blush, flattered that he would know about it.

“Yes.”

“What was it? *God Never Gave Up on Jacob?*”

“*God Never Gives Up on You,*” I’ll say in perfect Hebrew.

“According to you, I was a train wreck of a patriarch.”

“Well, you tricked your brother, lied to your father, tried to negotiate a deal with God, and that incident with Dinah at Shechem . . .”

“Okay, no need to rehash each event.”

He will sigh and smile and ask me to sit with him. A crowd will gather at the sight of the woolly-haired man who still carries the staff that once served as a branch on a tree near the Jabbok River.

“What’s on your mind, son?” he’ll ask.

“Was I right to write what I wrote?”

“About me?”

“Yes.”

“That God used me in spite of me and not because of me?”

“Yes.”

“That I’m the poster child for the flawed and frauds?”

“How did you know the phrase ‘poster child’?”

“Never mind that. You want to know if my story exists to billboard the grace of God?”

“I’d like to know your thoughts, yes.”

“Well, here is my answer to your question . . .”

And then from a distance this husky voice, “Jacob! Jacob!”

He will look over my shoulder and say, “Esau! I forgot about our game. Excuse me, Max. But Esau and I have a tee time. We play Abraham and Isaac once a week. Let’s finish this chat tomorrow.”

And off he’ll go. And I’ll have to wait a day to hear his answer. And I’ll have to wait to tell him



what I'd like to say. Since I can't tell him, may I tell you?

"Jacob, your story is my story. Your life speaks to those of us who flounder and fail and flop. You invite us to believe in a grace that is so stunning, compelling, and convicting that we'd be fools to refuse it."

As I read and reread about Jacob, I continue to bump up against this certainty that God will bench him. Chalk it up to my Protestant, conservative upbringing. But each review of Jacob's story leaves me amazed at his seeming inability to shape up, clean up, and stand up for everything decent and moral.

He serpentined his way in and out of God's will. From Beersheba to Bethel. From heaven's ladder to Laban's clan. He tricked and was tricked. He twice saw angels and thrice heard the voice of God (Gen. 28:15; 32:28; 35:10). His name was changed, but his heart seemed less so. Why didn't

God dismiss him? Replace him with someone more polished, more refined?

Yet, on the other hand I'm so grateful God didn't. I, too, game the system. I, too, am prone to pitch my tent in the shadow of Shechem. I've wrestled with God, daring to think my might and muscles would impress him. I can be smarmy, wormy, and less than straightforward.

I identify with Jacob. I limp.

I find great inspiration in the stories of other Bible heroes. Joseph and Daniel are wunderkinds and overachievers. The apostle John and Mary are the stuff of sages and mystics. The apostle Paul is the patron saint of the theologian and philosopher. But Jacob? He had a bit of Charlie Brown in him. Remember how Lucy assessed her friend?

"You, Charlie Brown, are a foul ball in the line drive of life! You're in the shadow of your own goal posts! You are a miscue! You are three putts on the



eighteenth green! You are a seven-ten split in the tenth frame! You are a dropped rod and reel in the lake of life! You are a missed free throw, a shanked nine iron, and a called third strike!"<sup>1</sup>

We can only wonder how Lucy would have assessed Jacob.

His story exists for the times that the Jacob within us wonders, "Can God use a person like me?"

The answer, the reassuring and resounding answer, is "Yes."

Pure grace.

Grace is God's greatest idea. That he would treat us according to his heart and not ours. That he would see us and see his Son. That he would relentlessly attach himself to us in a love that no sin can sever. That he would swing the doors of heaven open to anyone who would trust, not impress, but trust him.

Amazing grace!

God does not stand on a ladder and tell us to climb it and find him. He lowers a ladder in the wilderness of our lives and finds us. He does not offer to use us if we behave. He pledges to use us, knowing all the while we will misbehave. Grace is not a gift for those who avoid the shadows of Shechem. Grace exists because none of us succeed in doing so.

God loving. God stooping. God offering. God caring and God carrying.

Do you know this grace?

Grace does for us what I did for my grandson. Denalyn and I were enjoying an afternoon chat when, from outside our back door, I heard these words: "Help! It's an emergency!"

I knew the voice because I know the girl. Rosie, our granddaughter. She was one month shy of six years, redheaded, blue-eyed, and in that moment sounded very urgent.



Rosie and her three-year-old brother, Max Wesley, were engaged in their favorite pastime, rock collecting. No need to spend money on toys for this duo. Just turn them loose in the open field behind our house so they can search for glittering, sparkly stones.

As we hurried out the back door, Jenna asked Rosie, "What happened?"

"Max can't stand up!"

I assumed the worst. Rattlesnake bite. A tumble into the ravine.

"Why can't he stand up?"

"He loaded rocks in his pockets. His pants fell down to his ankles. He's stuck and can't stand up."

We stopped, looked at each other, and smiled.

"Looks like a sermon illustration in the making," Denalyn told me.

She was right. It was an illustration deluxe. Little Max could not stand up. He was plopped on the path. His knees were drawn to his chest. His

jeans were down to his ankles. The only thing separating his rear from the asphalt was Spiderman underwear.

"Can you get up?" I asked.

His voice was small and forlorn. "No."

"Can you try?"

When he did, the problem was all too clear. Each pocket was laden with rocks. Side pockets, rear pockets, all four pockets made heavy with stones.

"Do you need help?" I asked.

He said, "Yes." He let me help him remove the unnecessary loads one by one, rock by rock, weight by weight. Next thing you know he hitched up his jeans and began to play again.

(I told you it was a great illustration.)

What keeps you from rising up? What entangles your feet? What prevents you from moving forward? What load pilfers your peace?

Would you follow Max's example?



Max trusted us.

Won't you trust the grace of God?

Like Jacob, you struggle. Yet like Jacob, you are never disqualified by your struggles. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7).

Your treasure? A birthright. A spiritual heritage and destiny.

Yet these earthen vessels don't match our treasure. We have minds that wander. Bodies that age. Hearts that doubt. Eyes that lust. Convictions that crumble. We crack under pressure. Our porcelain has fissures. Who wants to use a broken vessel? God does. God does great things through brokenness. Broken soil gives crops. Broken eggs give life. Broken skies give rain. Broken crayons still color. Broken cocoons give flight. Broken alabaster jars give fragrance. The broken bread of the Eucharist gives hope. The broken body of Christ

on the cross is the light of the world.

Which is precisely the point. God does great things through the greatly broken. It's not the strength of the vessel that matters; it's the strength of the One who can use it.

You are not the sum of your sins. You are the sum of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. You are as righteous as Jesus (2 Cor. 5:21). You "give off a sweet scent rising to God, which is recognized by those on the way of salvation—an aroma redolent with life" (2 Cor. 2:15 THE MESSAGE).

The ancient Japanese art of kintsugi is believed to have developed in the fifteenth century as a unique way to repair broken pottery. Sometimes translated as "golden journey," kintsugi repairs shattered pottery not by hiding the cracks but by highlighting them. The artist uses a lacquer of sorts to mend the fractures and then covers the adhesive with a fine gold or silver powder. The result? Something beautiful and unimaginable with



lines of gold and silver winding their way across the pottery. The piece then tells the story of its past with every crack and cranny, once hopelessly broken now gloriously redeemed by the artist.<sup>2</sup>

By the time we reach the end of Jacob's story, the old earthen vessel is held together by Elmer's glue and duct tape. Not much to look at, but he made it. "By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff" (Heb. 11:21).

Jacob died worshipping. May the same be said about us.

We don't have to be strong to be saved. We don't have to be perfect to be redeemed. We don't have to score straight A's. We simply need to trust the God of Jacob, believe in a God who sticks with the unworthy and underachievers until we are safely home. He is the God of second chances and new beginnings. The God of grace.

And he never gives up on you.