

## Chapter 4

# Grace Happens in Real Life

**T**HERE ARE SOME dramatic conversion stories out there, and they tend to captivate our imaginations. When we listen to the story of the drug dealer or the prostitute who found salvation in Jesus Christ, we are rightly in awe of the grace of God. We love the stories of some notable or notorious figure who was born again and has committed to serving the Lord. These personal testimonies are great because they show us that there is no one so lost that the grace of God cannot find him. They serve as a reminder that God's grace is capable of radically changing anyone's life.

There is nothing wrong with these stories, but if we are not cautious, we can start to believe that God's grace is a plot element in these dramatic stories, but not something that exists in the real lives of regular people. For years, I felt a little bit ashamed because my conversion was not as "dramatic" as others' and my testimony was not as "exciting." It took a long time for me to realize that grace was just as much involved in my story as anyone else's.

I was raised in a Christian home. My parents were very loving, but they were also very clear

with boundaries and consistent with consequences. As a result, I did not get into much trouble growing up. I got into *some* trouble, but not much. They were also faithful in church and taught my sister and me to be faithful as well. Early on, my mother was the church secretary and my father taught Sunday school. Consequently, we were in church every time the doors were open, and sometimes when they were not.

My parents made sure I was taught the Bible from an early age, and one day the teaching on salvation suddenly made sense to me. I was five years old, sitting in children's church on a Sunday morning. The speaker was talking about sin and how everyone who sinned would die and go to Hell. It was not the first time I had heard that, but it was the first time I realized they were speaking about me. As well behaved as I was and tried to be, I was still a sinner.

I was terrified. I knew that, as a sinner, I would go to Hell if I died that day. I also knew that I loved God and did not want to be separated from Him forever. What was I to do? There had to be a way out! Then the speaker explained that Jesus died to pay for our sins and that we could be saved if we believed in Him. I had heard that part before as well, but once again, it sank in for the first time that

day.

The truth that had been shared from the Bible that morning bothered me, but I did not know what to do with it. For five days, I pondered on what I had heard until it overwhelmed me and I had to ask someone some questions. My mother sat with me at our kitchen table and explained it to me. Sitting there, I believed that I was a sinner and that Jesus died to pay for my sins. I believed that He was the only One Who could save me, and I asked His forgiveness. I know that He saved me that day. There was a lot I did not understand (and there still is), but I understood enough and accepted it with childlike faith.

There you have it. Mine is not the most dramatic conversion story ever, but I have come to realize that drama does not matter. All those who turn to Christ for their salvation are offered by God the same incredible gift: grace. It would take nothing more or less than God's grace to save a mass murderer. As a five-year-old, my greatest infraction was disobeying my parents, and it took the same grace to save me.

Grace is not just an abstract concept that shows up in dramatic Hollywood-worthy stories of criminals-turned-choirboys. Grace happens in real life. God saves real people, whether or not their stories

are dramatic or exciting, and He saves real people, whether or not they will ever achieve notoriety in this life.

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ONE OF MY favorite stories from the Bible records how grace was extended to someone who clearly did not earn it and did not even have any time left to change course and serve God because of it. When Jesus was dying on the cross, two thieves were crucified there too: one on either side of Him. One of the thieves was rebellious and defiant to the end; he continued to mock Jesus instead of crying out to Him for forgiveness. As far as we know, he died in his sin and received the punishment that we all deserve. But the other thief reacted differently. In his desperation, he turned to Jesus with a humble but audacious request: *Remember me!*

This man had lived the life of a common criminal. He was no one, nothing. He thus found himself caught, condemned, and despised by society. This pitiful creature was facing the end of his earthly life, and he knew it. He had only one hope. He saw Jesus Christ about to suffer in the same manner as him. But he knew that Jesus was innocent and

believed that He really was the Son of God.

With that, he cried out to the Savior. He had no good deeds upon which to bargain with the Almighty. He had with him no incentive with which to earn God's favor. And he had no time left to reform his life, to serve God, and to do great things for His Kingdom. Empty handed, and with no other hope, he simply placed all of his trust in Jesus Christ. He called out to Him, in great faith—the faith of one who saw the gravity of his situation and clung to Jesus as his only resort for rescue—and asked, with no right to do so, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.”<sup>28</sup>

*Master, don't forget me,* was his presumptuous request.

To this Jesus replied, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”<sup>29</sup>

He trusted Christ to save him, and he was saved. That is all. He had faith, and God saved the undeserving man on the basis of His own great kindness. This story illustrates the reality of grace so well because any one of us could be that thief. If we are honest with ourselves, we all know deep down that we are sinners who stand before God

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<sup>28</sup> Luke 23:42.

<sup>29</sup> Luke 23:43.

empty-handed and unworthy. But we are not saved because we have great things to offer God before or after salvation. We are saved because Jesus died to pay for our sins.

Grace happens in real life, to real people, who really do not deserve it.