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40 DAYS OF GRACE

DISCOVERING GOD'S LIBERATING LOVE

RICH MILLER

MONARCH
BOOKS

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Dedication

I gratefully dedicate this book to my Mom, who was whisked away into the arms of Life Himself while the writing of this book was being finalized. She showed me grace when I needed it the most and appreciated it the least.

I also dedicate this book to my Dad, who is in the Truth, and who, when I was young, was convinced I would be a writer long before I ever held that dream.

You both did a great job of parenting, considering the raw material you had to work with. I'm referring to my older brother, of course...

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The fact that you are reading this means you are alive. Profound, huh? Well, that actually is a meaningful comment in the sense that being alive means you still have time to change. I still have time to change.

Do we *need* to change? That question should be a no-brainer unless you think you are God's gift to the world or something. But if you aren't sure if you are due for some change, just ask your spouse or your kids or your best friend. That should set you straight.

Are we *willing* to change? Ah... that is the tougher question to answer. It reminds me of a story told by eighteenth-century Danish religious philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard:

There was a town where only ducks live. Every Sunday the ducks would waddle out of their houses and waddle down Main Street to their church. They waddled into the sanctuary and squatted in their proper pews. The duck choir waddled in and took its place, then the duck minister would come forward and open the duck Bible. He would read to them, "Ducks! God has given you wings! With wings you can fly! With wings you can mount up and soar like eagles. No walls can confine you! No fence can hold you! You have wings. God has given you wings and you can fly like birds." All the ducks shouted "AMEN!"... and they all waddled home.¹

That story is funny because it is so real, so typical of how we are. Being told what we should do, even by a great preacher, doesn't mean we'll do it. We have to want to and see our need to change. And let's face it. Most of us, if we are honest, don't like to change. Even if what we are doing is flawed, at least it is familiar. It is kind of scary and seems like a lot of work to give

up what we are used to doing, though we may be painfully aware that it is not working very well.

Maybe how you are relating to God isn't working particularly well.

There are two fundamentally different approaches to living life in relation to God... aside, of course, from simply trying to ignore Him and live as if He doesn't exist. That strategy, by the way, is not recommended.

The first approach is to jump up and down, trying to impress God with who you are and what you can do, hoping He will pick you for His team or keep you on the team, so to speak.

The second is to relate to Him on the basis of grace.

Though the first approach makes sense at first glance (since it is the way we get noticed in this world), it comes with a whole load of baggage. If we are going to change from this way of relating to God, we need to face some of the heavier burdens that way of living generates – namely guilt, shame, fear and pride –and discover the way out. We'll do that in the pages ahead.

The way of grace is much more subtle but is the way that God actually has chosen to work. We'll finish off this book looking at how to live in grace rather than in *disgrace*, and you'll have the chance to choose, the chance to change. In other words, you can waddle or you can fly.

One of Jesus' followers, John, wrote:

For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.

John 1:17

Grace and truth – despite what some might think – are not opponents; they are friends. Grace is like the clean, oxygen-

rich atmosphere we breathe. It is necessary for life, for health, for growth. When you are surrounded by grace you flourish; when you're not, you gasp for air. You feel like you are being smothered. Graceless living is like choking pollutants in the air – or worse, like carbon monoxide. You may not even realize it is killing you spiritually until it is too late.

Truth, on the other hand, is the solid ground on which we stand, move and live. It is spiritual terra firma. When truth is not around, you stumble and trip over hidden obstacles. You fall into potholes and pits, turning your ankle, breaking your leg, making it impossible to stand or walk. In the severest absence of truth, your path becomes a trap of spiritual quicksand that will ensnare you and suffocate you unless you find true help.

We need both grace and truth in order to live. In other words, we need Jesus. Are you willing to let Jesus show you how to live rather than muddling along in the way that naturally seems best to you? In other words, are you willing to change?

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll leave the walking to you and let you draw your own conclusions during these *40 Days of Grace*. In these pages I have tried to teach the truth about grace so that this forty-day journey – whichever path you ultimately choose to take – will be a brisk one on a firm path with tons of fresh air to enjoy.

You will find quite a few forks in the road as you travel. The best path to take is not always easy, but it is wise. And I believe it is clear, though it is the road less traveled. It is the path of grace.

Amazing Grace

Day 1: Let Me Introduce You to Grace!

I got married when I was thirty-five years old, back in 1989. My wife's name is Shirley Grace and I'm really glad I married her, because God knew I surely needed a lot of grace!

I remember the first time I met her. It was actually ten years before we got married, in 1979. She was sitting by a swimming pool in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. I was twenty-five years old and a dashing young man. She was (and is!) gorgeous. That was the first thing I noticed about her! Soon after, of course, I came to know and appreciate her cheerful disposition, her gentle, nurturing spirit and her zealous heart for Jesus as well.

Now, you might be wondering, "If she was so amazing, inside and out, why did it take you so long to get around to marrying her?" Great question!

There were a lot of reasons: the busyness of life, not living anywhere near each other, my need to grow up in some ways... that sort of thing. But the main reason was that I was used to living on my own and the idea of being married was kind of scary. Decades later, I can't imagine living without her, but back then I had no idea how good it would be.

God offers us a new life of grace and yet so many of God's people still seem to live life as independent, "single" people. Why is that? If God's grace is so amazing, inside and out, why does it take so many of us so long to get around to living by and in grace? Great question!

DAY 1: LET ME INTRODUCE YOU TO GRACE!

This might be a really good time to let me introduce you to grace! Maybe you have “met” before, but through the busyness of life, not hanging around much together, and your need to grow up in some ways, you and grace have kind of fallen on hard times. Maybe the thought of living by God’s grace rather than independently, by your own resources, seems... well... kind of scary.

Romans 5:1–2 says:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

We’ll talk more next week about being justified (made not guilty) by faith, so hang in there on that part. But just as we are introduced to and enter into a life of freedom from guilt by faith, so we also obtain our introduction into God’s grace by faith.

You might be familiar with Ephesians 2:8–9:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

It might be helpful to translate this verse into a mathematical-type equation. All right, I admit to being left-brained, so all you right-brainers just humor me for a moment, OK?

God’s grace + Our faith in Jesus = Being saved or rescued from sin and its penalty

The idea in Ephesians 2 of our rescue from sin being a gift of

God is very important. That's really what grace is: a free gift that we don't deserve. Some define it as "unmerited favor." In short, grace is God freely giving us what we don't deserve and can't come up with on our own, but what we desperately need.

Pretty amazing, isn't it?

We obtain our introduction into God's grace when we, by faith, receive God's free gift of forgiveness in Christ. We turn away from our self-centered, independent lifestyle (the Bible calls this sin), and realize His death on the cross was full payment for our sins. In response, we open our hearts to Jesus to forgive us and take charge of our lives, believing that He rose from the dead and is now very much alive!

Like any gift, however, God's grace must be received, but unlike a Christmas present or birthday gift, which we can see, God's gift of forgiveness (His grace) is not visible. Therefore it must be received, not by sight, but by faith. By "faith" I mean that we believe God is telling us the truth and that He is who He says He is and will do what He says He'll do, and we say "yes" to Him. We believe. That's faith.

Have you ever received this free gift from God? If so, you have already been introduced to grace! If you haven't, we encourage you to do so as soon as your heart is open.

For those who have already been introduced to grace, how is your "relationship" with grace going? It's remarkable to me that many who started out so well, being so excited about and grateful for God's saving, rescuing grace, somehow take a wrong turn away from grace at some point. Most probably they don't even realize they've gotten off track.

It's kind of like we gradually get tricked into believing that somewhere along the race of life God changed the rules. We start off well, trusting in God alone to supply what we need and to enable us to live life, but then down the road we come to believe it is "up to us" to make the Christian life work.

The apostle Paul couldn't figure out how and why some of his friends had made that wrong turn away from grace and faith. He wrote:

This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh [your own human effort]?

Galatians 3:2

The way it works is simple. You come to Jesus and receive His free gift (grace) of rescue from sin's penalty by faith. And God gives you the Holy Spirit at that moment... by faith. Then you grow in Christ the same way. God gives you all you need in love, power and wisdom as a gift of grace, and you walk (live) in His provision... by faith. Paul writes elsewhere:

Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him...

Colossians 2:6

How did you receive Christ Jesus the Lord? By grace through faith. So how do you walk (live life) in Christ? By grace through faith. God provides what we need (which includes a community of faith, called the Church), and we live our lives fully dependent on His provision. Like I said, it's simple. Why do we so often make it complex?

Maybe this really is your introduction to grace. Or maybe you are just beginning to get reacquainted, rekindling an old flame, so to speak. Either way, welcome.

I've been married for a couple decades. I've been in Christ, living by faith in His grace, much longer. In both cases, I can't imagine living any other way.

A THOUGHT TO CHEW ON

Living by grace doesn't end when you come to Christ; that's just the beginning!

A TRUTH TO REMEMBER

"Through [Christ] we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand..." (Romans 5:2).

A QUESTION TO MULL OVER

How would you describe your relationship with grace? Strangers? Polite acquaintances? Close friends? Falling in love? What relationship? Something else?

TALKING IT OVER WITH GOD

Father, it's really easy to fall back into thinking that this life is pretty much up to me. After all, almost from the time I was born, the whole world system is designed for me to learn to live life on my own... to not be dependent on anyone... to be "grown up," which translates into becoming increasingly self-reliant and self-sufficient. I know that there's no way I can save myself and so in that way it's kind of easy to see how much I need You. But isn't it a sign of weakness to have to live by faith in Your grace every moment of every day? I guess I have to admit that my relationship with grace needs some work.

I really hope You can be patient with me as I learn to walk by this grace in which I now stand. Are you gracious enough to not get mad at me even though I start out at a crawl? The Bible says You are kind and patient and all that, but sometimes I doubt. Thanks for listening. Amen.