

# TESTIMONY OF GRACE

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## ***Beginnings***

I grew up in a home where both parents were believers. Unless we were out of town, we regularly attended church services and youth group meetings. I was saved through the ministry of my mother in the spring of 1965, when I was 8 years old. She used an occasion that warranted disciplinary action for an opportunity to tell me that Christ died for my sins. It was an emotional time, and I was quick to tell my third-grade teacher and some of my friends about my salvation. I distinctly remember what little interest they paid to my testimony of faith.

At the time of my salvation, my family was attending a Dutch Reform church in Indiana. As we moved around the country to follow my dad's teaching opportunities, we attended churches that my parents thought were the best available in each locality. We attended Southern Baptist, American Baptist, Conservative Baptist, and Evangelical Free churches.

As a youth, most of my spiritual training came from church. My parents tried conducting family Bible studies at various times, but I'm afraid my siblings and I probably didn't express too much interest in it. As for me, I was satisfied with what I was learning in church and, generally, felt comfortable with my salvation. I probably was considered one of the good kids at church, and was elected or appointed as youth group leader on a couple of occasions.

For the most part, I thought I was living what would be considered a proper Christian life. I tried to do the right thing at home and at school, and took it very hard when I failed my, or my parents', expectations, or when caught doing something I knew to be wrong. During the most difficult times, I begged God for help but, looking back, I don't recall going to Scripture for guidance. If things didn't work out as hoped, I chalked it up to lack of faith on my part or some unconfessed sin that must be keeping God from answering my prayers; after all, this is what I had been taught in church.

## ***Putting God to the Test***

When my family moved to Colorado, my parents' love for the outdoors was greeted with an incredible mountain playground. Every summer we took as many camping trips as possible in the mountains to hike, fish, and explore mining ghost towns and abandoned narrow gauge railroads. During my teen years, I discovered that I loved to go exploring on my own. I must have felt invincible, because I often found myself in places and situations that, as an adult, I would consider dangerous or foolish.

As a fairly independently minded 18-year-old at the end of the summer of 1974, I decided to take one more 4-day mountain trip on my own before starting college. Using my parents' VW bug, I traveled from my home in Fort Collins through the mountains to south-central Colorado. The

Cumbres & Toltec Scenic Railroad, a steam-operated narrow gauge railroad, was running a special train and I wanted to do some train chasing and get some unique pictures from unusual perspectives. I was in my element and was having the time of my life. Even getting little sleep due to an owl hooting all night from the tree over my tent didn't dampen my spirits. After getting the pictures I wanted, I traveled on to Silverton, Colorado, and set up camp for the next night. I was already very tired, but in those days there seemed to be plenty of reserve energy to do the things I really wanted to do.

The next morning I quickly packed up my tent, had some breakfast, and drove just past Red Mountain Pass to start my next scheduled adventure. My plan was to find a way across the valley from the highway, hike a couple of miles along an old abandoned narrow gauge railroad bed that wound along the side of Red Mountain through abandoned silver mines and forests of aspen and evergreens, and then climb to the top of Red Mountain No. 2. From the highway, the climb looked to be no more than a strenuous hike. At the end of the day, I would camp near Ouray, and spend the rest of the next day driving home.

Everything went according to plan until I was about 50 feet from the top of the mountain. I was very tired and was at the point where my movements were mechanical; I was not keeping track of where I was, nor planning my path or even my next step. Suddenly, fear came over me. I found myself in the middle of an outcrop of sharp, jagged rock that tended to pull away from the mountain when I grabbed hold of it. Backing down was out of the question because I was very tired and it was too steep to see where I was stepping. Going to either side looked impossible and would not get me out of the crumbly rock. My only option was up, and I was literally scared to death. It occurred to me that I might not make it and that, foolishly, I had not left a note in my car as to my whereabouts, and my parents only had a general idea of my schedule. I prayed like never before, asking God for mercy and to forgive my foolishness. I then proceeded to inch my way to the top, but don't remember much of that last stretch of mountain.

When I reached the top, I fell on my knees in exhaustion and thanksgiving. I knew I was alive only by the grace of God and decided that I needed to drive home that day and tell my parents of my experience. I found an easy route down the mountain, drove into Ouray for a quick dinner, and then drove 8 hours home to Fort Collins. Although I arrived home sometime after midnight, I remember telling my parents of the day's experiences.

The next day, I woke up with a painful side ache—one that wouldn't go away and one that would have had disastrous consequences had it occurred a day earlier. Perhaps the next day I went to a doctor who could not determine the cause after running several tests. My dad thought the pain might have something to do with one of my kidneys, because he had experienced serious kidney problems for many years. Follow-up tests proved that my right kidney no longer was functioning properly, and that it was quickly filling up and expanding with fluids. Surgery was required almost immediately, and the doctor said he would try to repair the kidney but might have to remove it entirely. I woke up still having two kidneys, but over the next few days experienced pain like never before. Morphine shots could be given no more frequently than every 4 hours, but it seemed like they wore off in only two or three hours.

After a week of recovery at the hospital, I went home to heal and regain sufficient strength in time to start my freshman year of college. God had other plans, however. After only a couple of days at home, it was apparent that something was wrong. Tests indicated that the surgery had failed, and additional surgery was scheduled later that week. I couldn't believe it. More importantly, I didn't think I could handle the pain of another surgery, considering I was still in a lot of pain from the first one.

It was at this time that I decided to put into practice what was preached. Practically speaking, I was putting God to the test, which is something that no one should do. To be specific, I decided to claim the prayer promises I had been taught for so many years:

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened (Matthew 7:7-8).

Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them (Matthew 18:19-20).

Jesus answered and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, if ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done. And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive (Matthew 21:21-22).

And whatsoever ye shall ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in My name, I will do it (John 14:13-14).

If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you (John 15:7).

I don't remember ever trying to claim these prayer promises prior to this time but, if I had, and my prayers weren't answered as expected, then there must have been a reason. I had been taught in church that prayers weren't answered if there was lack of faith, unconfessed sin, or weren't according to the will of God. This time I was going to go by the Book! I confessed, with total repentance, every possible sin I could think of, I prayed that God would heal me without surgery, truly believing that a miracle would happen, and even prayed with my pastor to satisfy Matthew 18. I believed! I expected to stand up in front of church the next Sunday and tell everyone the great miracle God had performed. Even as I was undergoing my last test before the scheduled surgery, watching a screen as the radioactive dye tracked through me, I was slightly amused that things were going down to the wire and supposed that God was going to heal my kidney as my doctor and I watched the screen.

## ***New Beginnings***

The miracle I expected didn't occur, and the doctor told me what he was going to do in surgery. However, a miracle did occur. Instead of being confused, or frustrated, or even mad at

God, a wave of peace overcame me. I would have surgery in a couple of hours, but I wasn't scared or even concerned. I woke up to great pain, but it was bearable. I also woke up with a sincere desire to understand why my days of devoted and scriptural prayer had failed to gain the result I expected, a result I felt certainly would bring glory to God. I had experienced the new birth when I was saved over 9 years before, but now I was about to enter an entirely new stage of life, like a second new birth.

It was during my recovery in the hospital that my concerned parents gave me two things to read—the booklet *Unanswered Prayer* and the book *Things that Differ*, both written by Cornelius Stam. I had never heard of Mr. Stam, but my parents had become acquainted with his writings several years before, only they did not understand the full significance of what he was teaching. I don't remember the impression *Unanswered Prayer* made on me, for there are many details of that time that were erased from my memory by three doses of general anesthesia within a 2 1/2-week period of time. However, I vividly remember the impact of *Things that Differ*. In this Bible study book, Mr. Stam uses abundant Scripture references to demonstrate that the ministry and message of the Apostle Paul differed significantly from the ministry and message of John the Baptist, Christ while He was on earth, and His Twelve Apostles. I knew for a fact that God used my experiences on Red Mountain and the two surgeries, and the ministries of my parents and Mr. Stam, to prepare me to start learning and understanding the Scriptures for the first time in my life. As I look back at the wonder and amazement I felt as I read verses and passages that I had never really thought about before, it must have been like the moment Christ opened His disciples' minds to understand the Scriptures following His resurrection (Luke 24:44-45).

The second surgery postponed my entry into college, and a minor complication a few weeks later further prolonged my recovery. The extended recovery period turned out to be a blessing, as had the previous series of events. I had time to study the Word, and enjoyed every minute of it. I learned that the gospel and message preached by John the Baptist, Christ (while on earth), and His Twelve Apostles concerned the imminent establishment of the heaven-like kingdom on earth that is promised to Israel and spoken of throughout the Old Testament. I learned that the promises and commandments in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and early Acts applied to Israel and its kingdom. I learned that Gentiles throughout most of Scripture had no hope of approaching God except by becoming Jews and submitting to the Law of Moses. I learned that if Joel's prophecy (and a host of associated prophecies in the Old Testament) referred to by Peter at Pentecost had been completely fulfilled, that God would have cleansed Israel through righteous judgment, would have judged the nations, and would have established the kingdom on earth sometime after Pentecost.

Most importantly, I learned that God had a secret plan, a plan the Apostle Paul refers to as "the mystery" throughout his epistles. To and through Paul, God chose to reveal His manifold wisdom and the purpose of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection; information that He had hidden in Himself since the world began (He didn't even leave a clue of it in the Old Testament prophecies or in the "Gospel" accounts). This message, revealed to Paul over a period of time by our risen and glorified Lord from heaven, as testified in Scripture, is called the gospel of grace of God. Paul was chosen by God as the dispenser and steward of this gospel, just as Moses was chosen as the dispenser and steward of the Law. In this message, we find that Jews and Gentiles are equally guilty and, therefore, have equal access to God by the shed blood of Christ. We find that all who believe that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again are equal members of the body of

Christ; there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile, male and female, or slave and free. We find that God has temporarily blinded Israel, setting Israel and its kingdom promises aside until after the fulfillment of this dispensation of grace (by doing so, God postponed judgment of Israel and the nations until after this dispensation). We find that we are blessed with all spiritual blessings and have a heavenly hope (Israel's hope was, and will be, a kingdom on earth). In Paul's epistles, we find letters addressed directly to us, the members of the body of Christ, and find all the instructions we need to correctly worship God and live as He expects us to live (there is much to learn from the remainder of Scripture, but to be useful it must be interpreted and applied in accordance with what God revealed to us through Paul's letters).

Of particular interest to me at that time, I learned that we no longer could claim the promise of getting what we prayed for, because the promise applied to people under a different program, or dispensation, that God had superseded with the current dispensation of grace. Instead, I learned that we should take everything to God in prayer, with thanksgiving, and that we could expect something far greater in return—to know the peace of God.

Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7).

## ***Suffering and Joy***

When my strength permitted, I began attending my church again. I was excited to share what I had been learning, hopeful that people would be willing to hear. Unfortunately, I soon found that they weren't. I learned that most of the people were satisfied with what they thought to be true, and were very defensive and, in some cases, abusive towards those who tried to tell them anything different. One of the first episodes occurred as a result of our pastor's Wednesday night series of lessons on prayer. He was explaining how we can and should depend on the prayer promises in the "Gospel" accounts. After one of the meetings I reminded the pastor of his involvement with my prayer requests, and tried to explain that no such promises exist in Paul's epistles. He was perturbed at me for my questions and the direction they were leading, and asked that I not interfere with his teaching.

Not too long afterwards, I was in a Sunday morning adult class that was studying the book of Romans. I was looking forward to this study, especially since it was being taught by an older friend of mine. The study got off to a bad start, with the basic premises for studying and interpreting Romans being that the church started at Pentecost, and that Romans simply was an extension of what had begun at Pentecost. When I suggested, with Scriptural explanation, that the body of Christ had nothing to do with the church at Pentecost, I was impolitely told by my teacher friend to keep my opinions to myself and to never disrupt his class again.

The final straw at this church came the following summer when the Campus Crusaders descended on Fort Collins, many of whom used our church as a base. They led many of the Sunday school classes, and in my college-age class the crusaders taught us from the "Gospels" how to become good disciples and how we should fulfill the "Great Commission." In one class I seem to remember reading one or more "Great Commission" passages aloud and asked the teachers how we

were supposed to obey something that they weren't obeying and that God no longer intended for us to obey. I touched a nerve, because soon I had my back literally against a wall with two or three crusaders and a couple of classmates whom I had known for several years accusing me of heresy and other such things. I finally realized that the gospel of grace of God was unwelcome in that church—a church full of believers claiming to stand for the truth.

Through adversity, my faith became more established. I also became more and more convinced that the main line conservative Christian churches did not know what they should be teaching, and did not want anyone to tell them anything that might "rock the boat." However, I began to wonder if there were any churches that understood and faithfully taught the gospel of grace of God. Once more, my parents came to the rescue. They had attended a church in Denver a couple of times that appeared to handle Scripture correctly. It was the Berean Church, led by Pastor Win Johnson, and it took a powerful stand on the gospel of grace. I moved with my family to the Denver area while my dad had a year-long assignment there. We attended the Berean Church regularly and, even after returning to Fort Collins, commuted to Denver on most Sundays for another year. It was under the sound teaching of Pastor Johnson over those two years that I was firmly grounded in the gospel of grace, and I am eternally thankful for that opportunity.

In the time since then, I was blessed with marriage to my wife, Linda, who began to see, live, and stand for the gospel of grace prior to our engagement. She has blessed me with her love and support, and three incredibly wonderful daughters. We have had the privilege of leading, or help lead, home Bible studies in Fort Collins and Grand Junction, Colorado, and in Laramie, Wyoming. Our hope is one day to have our own church, patterned after the ones referred to by Paul, proclaiming with boldness the gospel of grace of God.