



THE CASE FOR
Grace

*A Journalist Explores the Evidence
of Transformed Lives*

LEE
STROBEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE CASE FOR
Grace

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The Case for Grace

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*For Abigail, Penelope,
Brighton, and Oliver —
God's gifts of grace*

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*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ,
the new creation has come:
The old has gone, the new is here!*

2 Corinthians 5:17

Preface

God's grace is the sole basis for both new life and spiritual vitality.

Stanley Grenz¹

Defining grace can be as simple as one declarative sentence: “Grace is the favor shown by God to sinners.”² From there, it can be expounded upon in volumes of theological treatises, but at its core it is an unmerited and unconditional gift of God’s love that we can never earn or deserve.

Grace enables us to respond to God, enfolds us into his family, and empowers us to change. Theologian Thomas C. Oden said grace is necessary “to know truth, avoid sin, act well, pray fittingly, desire salvation, begin to have faith and persevere in faith.”³ Grace, he said, is nothing less than “the motivating power of the Christian life.”⁴

Definitions are important, but this is not a textbook on grace. Instead, it is a collection of stories that illustrate the power of God to revolutionize human lives — to turn a homeless junkie into a ordained pastor; an adulterer into a marriage counselor; a reckless rebel into a selfless servant of God; and a mass murderer into a pardoned saint.

“Our past sins are not only forgiven (through Christ),” said Charles Colson, “but we are transformed to live a new life with God’s power and grace.”⁵ Said Philip Yancey, “We can never sin so far that God’s grace will not reach us. At the same time, grace does not leave us there. It raises us to new heights.”⁶

This book describes a very personal journey for me, spawned by a crisis with my father, which sent me on a lifelong quest to solve the riddle of grace. Along the way, I found the undeniable evidence of grace in the life of a Korean orphan, shivering under straw in a foxhole; in a teenage addict in Amarillo, who didn’t care whether his next injection would kill him; in a homeless felon in Las Vegas, scouring dumpsters for scraps of pizza crust; in a humiliated pastor in South Carolina unmasked for his blatant hypocrisy; in the famous preacher’s son who was living a wasted and vaporous life in Boston; and in a Cambodian man who fled the Khmer Rouge, only to find his life intertwined with a notorious war criminal.

Each story contributes a piece to the grace puzzle, showing how grace goes beyond forgiveness and acceptance and even adoption by God; how it restores hope when none is left; how it extends to the most heinous circumstances; and how it allows us to forgive those who caused our most intimate wounds — and even to forgive ourselves. In other words, insights that all of us need.

As Christianity is unique among world religions, so is the grace Christ offers. Sometimes to understand grace we need to see it described rather than merely defined. After all, the Bible is our grand narrative about grace; when Jesus wanted his followers to fully feel the emotional impact of grace, he spun a parable about a Prodigal Son. “Jesus talked a lot about grace, but mainly through stories,” said Yancey.⁷

So here are stories for you — true accounts of people whose transformation and renewal are so radical that they seem to be best explained as the work of a gracious God. Through them, I trust you will see your story playing out as well.

The Search for Grace

[God] waits to be wanted. Too bad that with many of us He waits so long, so very long, in vain.

A. W. Tozer¹

He was leaning back in his leather recliner in the wood-paneled den, his eyes darting back and forth between the television set and me, as if he didn't deign to devote his full attention to our confrontation. In staccato bursts, he would lecture and scold and shout, but his eyes never met mine.

It was the evening before my high school graduation, and my dad had caught me lying to him — big-time.

Finally, he snapped his chair forward and shifted to look fully into my face, his eyes angry slits behind his glasses. He held up his left hand, waving his pinky like a taunt as he pounded each and every word: *“I don't have enough love for you to fill my little finger.”*

He paused as the words smoldered. He was probably expecting me to fight back, to defend myself, to blubber or apologize or give in — at least to react in some way. But all I could do was to glare at him, my face flushed. Then after a few tense moments he sighed deeply, reclined again in his chair, and resumed watching TV.

That's when I turned my back on my father and strode toward the door.

I didn't need him. I was brash, I was driven and ambitious — I would slice my way through the world without his help. After all, I was about to make almost a hundred dollars a week at a summer job as a reporter for a rural newspaper in Woodstock, Illinois, and live on my own at a boarding house.

A plan formulated in my mind as I slammed the back door and began the trek toward the train station, lugging the duffel bag I had hurriedly packed. I would ask the newspaper to keep me on after the summer. Lots of reporters have succeeded without college, so why not me? Soon I'd make a name for myself. I'd impress the editors at the Chicago papers and eventually break into the big city. I'd ask my girlfriend to move in with me. I was determined to make it on my own — and never to go back home.

Someday, there would be payback. The day would come when my father would unfold the *Chicago Tribune* and his eye would catch my byline on a front-page exclusive. That would show him.

I was on a mission — and it was fueled by rage. But what I didn't realize as I marched down the gravel shoulder of the highway on that sultry June evening was that I was actually launching a far different quest than what I had supposed. It was a journey that I couldn't understand back then — a journey which would one day reshape my life in ways I never could have imagined.

That day I embarked on a lifelong pursuit of grace.

THE CASE FOR

Grace

The Mistake

Someday You'll Understand

Psychoanalysis . . . daily demonstrates to us how youthful persons lose their religious belief as soon as the authority of the father breaks down.

Sigmund Freud¹

It wasn't until my mother was on her deathbed that she confirmed what years of therapy had only suggested to me: I was a mistake, at least in the eyes of my father.

My parents started with three children — first a girl, then two boys — and my dad threw himself into fatherhood. He coached his sons in Little League, led a Cub Scout troop, headed the high school boosters club, went on family vacations, and attended gymnastics meets and graduations.

Then after a lengthy time gap came the unexpected news that my mother was pregnant with me.

"Your dad was . . . well, let's just say he was surprised," my mom told me in the waning weeks of her life, when we would chat for hours as she was bedridden with cancer. We had never broached this topic before, but we were in the midst of wonderfully candid conversations about our family's history, and I wanted to seize the opportunity to get some answers.

"Surprised how?"

She paused. "Not in a good way," she said, her eyes empathic.

"He was — what? Angry?"

"I don't want to say *angry*. Frustrated, yes. Upset by the circumstances. This just wasn't in his plans. And then I talked him into having another baby so you'd have a playmate." That was my younger sister.

This made sense to me. Years earlier, when I told my therapist about my relationship with my father — the emotional distance, the lack of engagement, the ongoing strife and flares of anger — he speculated that my inconvenient arrival in the family had interrupted my dad's plans for his future.

I could imagine my dad feeling that he had earned a respite after raising three kids. He was doing well financially, and I'm sure he wanted to travel and enjoy more freedom. Now at last with confirmation from my mother.

Our family lived in an upper-middle-class neighborhood northwest of Chicago. My dad worked hard to build his business, and he provided everything we needed — and more — materially. He was a faithful husband, well regarded in the community, and a committed friend to others.

Still, my relationship with him was always frosty. Maybe I needed more affirmation than the other kids, I don't know. But by the time I came along, there would be no Cub Scouts, no cheering at my Little League games, no watching my speech tournaments or attending my graduations. I can't think of a single in-depth conversation we ever had. I never heard the words I needed most.

Over time, I learned that the only way to gain his attention was through achievement. So I strived

for good grades, was elected president of my junior high school, served as editor of the high school newspaper, and even wrote a column for the community paper. Still, none of the accolades satisfied. I don't remember any words of affection coming from my dad. Not one.

My parents were members of a Lutheran church; as a lawyer, my dad sat on the board of directors to offer free legal advice, although he was generally on the golf course on Sunday mornings.

I remember once when I was a youngster the entire family went to church together. After the service, my dad drove everyone home — but he forgot to bring me. I can still remember my panic as I searched frantically around the church, looking in vain for my father, my heart pounding.

It was an inadvertent mistake on his part, of course — but it was difficult for me not to see it as symbolic of how our relationship was developing.

Fathers and Faith

One evening when I was about twelve, my father and I clashed over something. I walked away feeling shame and guilt, and I went to bed vowing to try to behave better, to be more obedient, to somehow make myself more acceptable to my dad. I can't recall the details of what caused our conflict that evening, but what happened next is still vivid in my mind fifty years later.

I dreamed I was making myself a sandwich in the kitchen when a luminous angel suddenly appeared and started telling me about how wonderful and glorious heaven is. I listened for a while, then said matter-of-factly, "I'm going there" — meaning, of course, at the end of my life.

The angel's reply stunned me. "How do you know?"

How do I know? What kind of question is that? "Well, uh, I've tried to be a good kid," I stammered. "I've tried to do what my parents say. I've tried to behave. I've been to church."

Said the angel, "That doesn't matter."

Now I was staggered. How could it *not* matter — all my efforts to be compliant, to be dutiful, to live up to the demands of my parents and teachers. Panic rose in me. Words wouldn't come out of my mouth.

The angel let me stew for a few moments. Then he said, "Someday you'll understand." Instantly he was gone — and I woke up in a sweat. It's the only dream I remember from my childhood. Periodically through the years it would come to mind, and yet I would always shake it off. It was just a dream.

As I got older, I found myself getting more confused about spiritual matters. When I became a teenager, my parents insisted that I attend confirmation classes at the church. "But I'm not sure I even believe that stuff," I told my dad. His response was stern: "Go. You can ask questions there."

The classes were built around rote memorization of the catechism; questions were only reluctantly tolerated and dealt with in a perfunctory way. I actually emerged with more doubts than when I started. I endured the process because when I was finally confirmed, the decision about whether to continue going to church would be mine — and I knew what the answer would be.

At the time I was oblivious to the fact that a young person's relationship with his father can greatly color his attitude toward God. I wasn't aware that many well-known atheists through history — including Friedrich Nietzsche, David Hume, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Arthur Schopenhauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, Baron d'Holbach, Voltaire, H. G. Wells, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, and others — had felt abandoned or deeply disappointed with their fathers, making it le

likely they would want to know a heavenly Father.²

I saw this illustrated later in life when I became friends with Josh McDowell, whose father was violent alcoholic. “I grew up believing fathers hurt,” Josh said. “People would tell me there’s a heavenly Father who loves you. That didn’t bring joy. It brought pain because I could not discern the difference between a heavenly Father and an earthly father.” Josh became a self-described “ornamental agnostic” until his investigation of Christianity convinced him it was true.³

Growing up, I just knew that as doubts festered inside and as my teachers insisted that science had eclipsed the need for God, I was being increasingly pulled toward skepticism. Something was missing — in my family and in my soul — that created a gnawing need I couldn’t even describe at the time.

Years later I was driving down Northwest Highway in Palatine, Illinois — I can still recall the exact location, the time of day, the sunny weather — when I flipped the radio dial and heard something that flooded my eyes with tears.

I didn’t catch it all, but it was about fathers and faith and God and hope. The voice belonged to someone who was born about the same time I was and yet whose life, in its astonishing horror and brutality, was the polar opposite of my own. Still, there was an instant connection, a bridge between us.

I had to track her down. I had to sit down and hear her story, one on one. I had to ask her many questions. Somehow I knew she held a piece to the puzzle of grace.

The Orphan

God's Grace Goes Far beyond Forgiveness

Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption. . . . Of all the gifts of grace, adoption is the highest.

J. I. Packer¹

Stephanie Fast has never known her father. She suspects he was an American soldier — possibly an officer — who fought in the Korean conflict that started in 1950. There's even a chance he's still alive somewhere. There's no way to tell.

I managed to track down Stephanie, that fleeting voice from the radio, and flew from Denver to meet her in her tidy townhouse in a wooded neighborhood in the Pacific Northwest. She's petite, five-foot-three, her black hair falling in soft waves past her shoulders, her almond eyes animated. Her husband, Darryl, a good-natured former missionary, brought us some coffee but left us alone to chat in the living room.

Stephanie is thoughtful as she begins to answer my questions, a gentle Asian cadence in her voice. At times she looks off to the side, as if reliving the experience she's struggling to describe. Other times she leans forward to gesture with her hands, as if soliciting understanding.²

I settled into a chair opposite her. Looking for a place to start, I said, "We were both born around the same time."

"I don't know exactly when or where I was born," she replied with a shrug. "Possibly, it was Pusan, since I was told I had an accent from that region. But when? I don't know, although it was definitely in the same era as you."

"My earliest memory," I said, "was my third birthday. My grandparents in Florida gave me a wooden sailboat as a gift. But when we went back to Chicago, I accidentally left it there. I was crushed. I chuckled at the thought. "Such are the traumas of a middle-class white kid growing up in suburban America in the fifties. I'm sure your earliest memory is much different. What's the first thing you recall?"

She thought for a moment and smiled. "I was about the same age — three or four," she replied. "It was the harvest festival in Korea, when family members come to the ancestral home. I remember all the fun — the sweets and games and wearing a beautiful dress — but I vividly recall my mom being so sad and sorrowful."

"Do you know why?"

"Well, that night I heard arguing between family members about the choice that she had to make for her future."

"What kind of choice?"

"After the Korean War there wasn't a place for biracial children in that country. That night, my mom was being given the option of a marriage — and I was not part of that option. Family members

were saying that they had found a man who was willing to take her, but she couldn't bring me along. For her, the choice was, 'Do I want a future? If I do, then I can't have this child with me.' There was a lot of arguing and shame and guilt. I remember my mom crying and holding me all night."

"Was this because of discrimination against children born out of wedlock?"

"Yes, especially biracial ones. We were a reminder of an ugly war. I don't know the English word, but Koreans have a strong conviction of purity, and when I was younger I looked different from the other children. My hair and skin color were lighter, I had a crease in my eyes that most Koreans don't have, and I had wild, curly hair, which was quite unusual for Koreans. So people knew I was a half-breed."

"How did the family drama end?"

"At some point my mother reached her decision — she would entrust me to someone else. She told me I was going to my uncle's home. Within a few days, I remember walking down a dirt road to the city with her. It was the first time I ever heard a train. I asked her about it, and she said to me, 'That's where we're going.'

"When the train came, she got on board with me. Asians didn't have paper bags back then, so they would take a cloth about the size of a scarf and tie it together as a satchel. Inside I had a lunch and a couple of extra sets of clothing. She put it on a shelf above the seat, got on her knees, and told me, 'Don't be afraid.' She said I should get off the train with the other people, and my uncle would meet me. Then she left."

"What happened when you eventually got off the train?"

For a moment she didn't answer. She slowly shook her head.

"No one came for me."

"Garbage, Dust, Bastard, Alien Devil"

Here was a child not much older than a toddler, cast adrift in a frightening and dangerous place that was predisposed to reject her — a world without grace. "You must have been panic-stricken," I said.

"Not at first. I thought, *I'll stand here on the platform, and my uncle will come for me.* But when evening came, the trains stopped. The trainmaster came out and asked me what I was doing there. I told him I was waiting for my uncle — and that was the first time someone called me a *toogee*," she said, almost spitting out the epithet.

"What does that mean?"

"It's a very nasty word, like using the n-word today. It basically means half-breed or child of two bloods, and yet it's more than that. It sort of means garbage, dust, bastard, alien devil — it has all those connotations. It's odd — I'm sure my mom must have given me a name, but I can't remember it."

"And so that became your name, in a sense."

"Yes, it was like my identity began that day with *toogee* — garbage, bastard. That was what people called me."

"What happened next?"

"The trainmaster shooed me away, so I left and found an ox cart that was leaning up against a wall. I crawled in there the first night. I gathered some straw around me and opened the parcel and ate some

food my mom had given me. I tried to sleep, but I remember hearing the dogs, the strange noises, the rustling sounds. I was scared, and yet I wasn't overly panicked."

"Even at that young age?"

"I trusted my mom, and somewhere in my mind I thought my uncle would come."

I hesitated before broaching the next question. Finally, I said, "Today, as you look back, do you think there ever really was an uncle?"

She didn't flinch. "Honestly I have no idea. It could be that she really was entrusting me to someone and I simply made a mistake by getting off at the wrong station. But in those days in Korea it wasn't uncommon for mothers to abandon their children, especially if they were biracial. Sometimes they couldn't take the harassment, the social stigma, and being cruelly ostracized by others. They often left the children in train stations or other public areas."

"So to this day you don't really know your mother's intentions?"

Her eyes were downcast. "No, I don't," she said. Her eyes met mine again. "But I want to think the best of her. I have to, don't you see? I guess all orphans think of their mother as a princess. Still, she was under a lot of pressure, there's no question about that. Her whole future depended on it."

"I understand," I said. All of us, it seems, want to believe our parents have the best intentions. "That day at the train station started an odyssey for you. How long did it last?"

"I was basically on my own for at least two to three years. If I had stayed in the city, organizations were starting to rescue biracial children, but I was always in the mountainsides and villages."

A small child wandering aimlessly for years — what had she faced? My thoughts went to little Penelope, my cute granddaughter with the quick smile and spontaneous love for life. She's so protected, so innocent, so tenderhearted — and so dependent on her family for everything.

"I've got a granddaughter who's four years old —," I began.

"Oh, I do too!" she exclaimed.

"Then you know what I'm going to ask. You probably look at her and think, *How in the world did she survive at age four? How did you manage to survive?*"

"Only the Lord, I think. One thing about Third World children is that they don't have the pampering that our grandchildren do. Sometimes they don't have the degree of nurturing that our children do. Often, from the time they're little, they're sort of raising themselves. My mother has been busy in the rice fields, so she wasn't there to take care of me all the time. So that in itself was a blessing. I was already a bit self-sufficient."

Locusts and Field Mice

I imagined the bounty of food that's put before Penelope three times a day — and which, like most preschoolers, she routinely picks at with casual disinterest. "How did you manage to eat?" I asked Stephanie.

"Actually, food was plentiful in the country, except in the winter," she said. "I could steal whatever I wanted. There were fruit fields, vegetable fields, and rice fields. As long as I didn't get caught, I could eat."

"I remember following a group of homeless children. At night they would crawl on their bellies into the fields and get some of what we called sweet melons. I thought, *I could do that*. So there was

season where every night I would wait for the watchman of the field to fall asleep, and I would crawl on my belly and get what I wanted.

“Plus, the rice fields were full of grasshoppers and locusts. I would catch them and poke a rice straw through their head until I had a whole string of them, which I’d tie to my belt. By the end of the day they were pretty much dried and I’d eat them. And I killed field mice. They would come out of the same hole at the same time every day. I learned to be really, really patient. When they stuck out their head, I would grab them quicker than they could go back down the hole. I pretty much ate everything — the skin, the ears, the tail.”

I asked, “What about the winters? They must have been unbearable for you.”

“Yes, they were very cold, and I had nowhere to go and no food. Really, I should have died the first winter. I don’t know how I survived, except I remember I found a foxhole to live in. I gathered whatever straw I could find from the rice fields and brought it in to make a little den. I’d go down to the village when everybody was sleeping and steal what I could from the villagers.

“In Third World countries, street children grow up really fast. I learned to adapt quickly. In my wanderings, everything was a treasure. A tin can thrown by a soldier from a truck became my drinking can and boiling pot. We would find nails and put them on the railroad tracks to be run over and flattened — they became utensils. I would use one to gut the mice I would catch.”

“Did the villagers know you were there?”

“Oh, yes. Every once in a while a kind woman would leave her kitchen door open for me, and I would curl up on the dirt floor by the stove and stay warm. Those were answers to prayers, because in my dens I would be shivering all night.”

“You mentioned earlier that you were taunted.”

“It was constant. The children taunted me because I was biracial, and the farmers would yell at me because I was stealing from them. To everyone, I was a dirty *toogee*. And when you’re a little child and hear people call you that day after day, you begin to believe it about yourself. I believed anyone could do whatever they wanted to me physically because I wasn’t a person. I was worthless. I was dirty. I was unclean. I had no name. I had no identity. I had no family. I had no future and no hope. Over time, I began to hate myself.

“There were times when I would follow a group of homeless children. Sometimes they would let me mingle with them, and other times they would do bad things to me, you just never knew. So I became hypervigilant. Very cautious. And yet the child in me would always want to be with people. I was always looking for someone to say, ‘Oh, be my friend. You can belong to us.’ ”

“What was it like for you emotionally?”

“I was in survival mode. I did cry when I was abused, I did beg for mercy, I would get angry, I would kick and scream, I learned cuss words really quickly. The first few days or weeks, I cried for my mommy. I was always trying to find my way back to her. Maybe she would be over the next hill, maybe she would be around the next corner. If I saw a village from the distance I would think, *Oh, that’s my village*, and I would run into it.

“But it was never my village.”

The Well and the Water Wheel

“You mentioned abuse,” I said. “Were you victimized by people?”

“One time the farmers caught me stealing, and they threw me into some sort of abandoned cisterne like a well, hoping I would die,” she replied. “I panicked, because I didn’t know how to swim. There was water in the bottom, but in my thrashing I found a rock that was sticking out of the wall and climbed up on it, though I was still sitting in some water. I remember screaming and hearing my voice echo back to me, but nobody was coming to rescue me. I honestly thought, ‘Okay, I’m going to die.’ And in a sense, that was okay. I thought, ‘Yeah, if I just let go, I can die.’”

“Finally, at dusk I heard a voice from an old woman, calling, ‘Little girl, little girl, are you down there?’ I hollered, ‘Yes, I am.’ She lowered a bucket — it was dark in there and hard to see, but I could hear the metal hitting the rocks. When it hit me, I climbed in as best as I could. She pulled me up — *clang, clang, clang, clang*, I can still hear that — and she grabbed me under my arms and dragged me to an ox stall. She covered me up with straw to get me warm, and then she brought me some food.

“Even though I had been taunted before, this was the first time it dawned on me that people might actually murder me. I thought, *Why am I so bad that people want to kill me? Why can’t I be like other children who have a mommy and daddy?*”

“What did the woman say to you?”

“She told me, ‘These people — they will hurt you. But it’s very, very important that you must live.’ As an adult looking back, I now believe those words were prophetic. But as a little girl I remember thinking that she must be telling me this because she knows my mommy. I thought she was suggesting that if I get up in the morning and I leave the village and go over the next mountaintop, my mommy will be there.

“Another time, I was also caught stealing food. I remember a farmer grabbing me by the back of my neck, calling me *toogee* and saying, ‘We’ve got to get rid of her,’ and the other farmers saying, ‘Yeah, she’s nothing but a menace. Let’s tie her to the water wheel.’”

“They grabbed me by my feet and shoulders, took me to the water wheel on the canal, and tied me face up — if I close my eyes, I can still tell you the cloud formations that I saw. I remember hearing myself scream; I remember my feet and my legs being stretched; I remember going under the water; I remember the pebbles and sand going into my mouth and nose. I remember coming up, spitting it all out, screaming, cursing. I could taste blood, my eyes got swollen — and then, all of a sudden the water wheel stopped.

“I felt a hand, and I heard a man’s voice saying, ‘Everything’s okay. I’m going to take you off the water wheel, don’t fight me.’ He took me off the water wheel and placed me on the ground. My eyes were so swollen I couldn’t hardly see him, but I do remember that he was wearing white. A lot of grandfathers in Korea wore white outfits back then. He took a handkerchief and cleaned me up as best as he could and gave me a drink of water.

“Then he said the same words as the woman who rescued me from the well — ‘These people, they want to hurt you. You need to leave, but you must live, little girl. It’s very important. Listen to me — you must live.’ ”

From Garbage Heap to Hope

Stephanie did continue to struggle and survive, finally wandering into Daejeon, one of the large cities in South Korea. “This young man came toward me, called me *toogee* and said, ‘You’re new here

in this town?' I said, 'Yes, I am.' He said, 'Do you need a place to stay?' No one had ever asked me to stay with them. I said, 'Yes, I do.' He said, 'Follow me.'

"There was a river that ran through the city, and the embankment had become a children's village. There were hundreds of orphans on both sides. He was a leader of a little gang that oversaw everything, and he let me be a part of that gang. The first few days were wonderful. When they got food, they shared with me. They had blankets that they shared with me. They built bonfires and told folk stories, and when they went to sleep I got to sleep next to this boy and other children.

"But after a few days, it became really bad. I just sort of became their plaything. I was only seven. I knew it was wrong. It wasn't just one person, it was multiple people. But in my little mind I reasoned that must happen to everybody. That's what you do to belong to a family. I just didn't realize the horror of it.

"I don't know how long I was with them, but a cholera epidemic swept through South Korea, and I became very, very sick. When you get cholera, you lose weight, you have a high fever, you become delirious. I thought, *I've got to leave here. I'll go back into the country, where the air is better and I can get fresh food. Everything will be okay.*

"I was walking through a dark alley, and I saw another child, who most likely had cholera, in an open sewage way. I went down to get her — she was screaming. I didn't know how sick we were, but I was thinking, *She's hungry, I'm hungry, so I'll go steal some food.*

"But we were caught by the farmers again. They took us to a building that had been bombed during the war. Now, the street family had told us about this building. Where we lived along the embankments there were lots of gutter rats. They came down to the river in packs, and we were afraid of them, but as long as we were together they didn't bother us. But that building was their territory and we were to never go in there. And the farmers — there were four or five of them — threw us there. I can recall picking that little girl up, I remember screaming — but that's the last thing I remember."

"What's your next memory?"

"Opening my eyes and staring into blue eyes."

"Blue eyes? Whose were they?"

"I later learned her name — Iris Eriksson, a World Vision nurse from Sweden. Her job was to rescue babies from the street, because at that time children were being abandoned left and right, mainly because Korea was still trying to survive after the war, and if you had more babies than you could feed, you just abandoned them. She was told to bring back the babies — not older kids like me — because they were more likely to survive, more likely to get adopted, and less likely to have behavioral issues."

"You must have been about seven years old," I said. "So what happened to you?"

"Here's the story I was told later. She found me on a garbage heap and realized I was more sick than alive. Of course, she felt pity for me, but I was much too old for her clinic. She actually got up and was going to leave me there, but she said two things happened that changed her mind. And you need to understand Miss Eriksson was a very quiet Lutheran woman, very reserved in her faith, so this was certainly not typical for her."

"What happened?"

"As she got up and was walking away, she said her legs felt really, really heavy. She didn't know why. As she was trying to figure it out, she heard an audible voice."

I must have looked startled, because Stephanie let out a laugh. “You had to be there when she was telling it, you know? Miss Eriksson said, ‘I heard a voice in my native tongue, and it only said two words: *She’s mine.*’ She was stunned, to say the least!”

“There was nobody around?”

“No, not a soul. She said, ‘I knew it was God — and I knew I had to answer him.’ So she did. She scooped me up and brought me to her clinic. She let me stay for a few weeks, and then, when I was healthy enough, she transferred me to the World Vision orphanage in the city.

“Miss Eriksson — well, how can I put this? In a way, she was my savior before Jesus.”

A Man Like Goliath

The orphanage became a house, but hardly a home. The conditions were primitive — outdoor plumbing, mats for beds, and hundreds of children needing attention. “I was one of the oldest ones,” Stephanie said. “My job became caring for the babies — washing the diapers, hanging up the diapers, folding the diapers, changing the children, putting them on my back while I was working. I loved the babies.”

Love — that was a word I hadn’t heard during the story of Stephanie’s journey. “Was this a new emotion for you — building relationships with them?”

“Oh, yes. When I went into the baby section, they all had their arms out, wanting me to hold them. I felt loved. The workers didn’t have enough time for all of them, so I would sing to them and hug them and carry them around. Then, every once in a while, a baby would disappear.”

“Disappear?”

“Yes, and when I would ask where the baby went, they would say, ‘He went to America.’ ”

“Oh, so they were adopted.”

“Well, that’s the thing — I didn’t know what adoption meant. I just knew that when they said a baby went to America, it was a good thing. So one day the director said an American couple was coming to pick out a baby boy. I immediately started working to get them ready — brushing their hair, giving them a bath, pinching their cheeks, putting them in the best rags we had available.

“The next day, the bell rang in the compound. A worker opened the door, and it was like Mr. Goliath was coming in. Not only was he tall, he was massive. Back then in Korea the only people with extra weight were rich, so I thought he must be the wealthiest person on the face of the earth. He stepped aside and Mrs. Goliath came in. She wasn’t much smaller.

“They were speaking English and had an interpreter with them. The bassinets were lined up along the hallway, and I watched as the man would pick up a baby and tuck it under his neck.” Her face lit up at the memory.

“I was just overwhelmed by him; I don’t think I had ever seen a man hold a baby like that. He brought the baby right up to his cheek, and he was kissing him and talking to him, and it was just . . . well, an emotion began to rise in me. I saw him put that baby down and pick up another baby, and what I didn’t realize was that I was inching closer to him. I was very curious.

“He put the second baby under his chin, and then I looked into his eyes — and he was crying. And my heart was starting to *pump pump pump pump pump*, because I knew: This is good. Something in me said, *This is good.* He put that baby down and did the same thing with a third one — and with the third one, he saw me out of the corner of his eye. He did the same, kissing and putting the baby down, and

he turned around to look toward me — and I started backing up, backpedaling.”

“When he looked at you, what was he seeing at that time?”

“Although I was almost nine years old and had been in the orphanage for about two years, I still had dirt on my body, especially my elbows and knees — it was ground into my skin. I had lice so bad that my head was actually white. I had worms so bad in my stomach that when they got hungry they would crawl out of my throat. I had a lazy eye that sort of flopped around in its socket. I couldn’t see very well at all, probably from malnutrition. My face was devoid of expression. I weighed a little less than thirty pounds. I was a scrawny thing. I had boils all over me and scars on my face.

“And yet still, he came over to where I was. He got down as low as he could, right down on his haunches, and looked straight into my eyes. He stretched out his enormous hand, and he laid it on my face, just like this,” she said, closing her eyes as she tenderly demonstrated with her own hand. “His hand covered my head; it felt so good and so right. And then he started stroking my face.”

I sat spellbound. Here it was — the image of grace I had been seeking: an aspiring father bringing unconditional acceptance to a child who had absolutely nothing to offer, no accolades or accomplishments, just herself in all of her vulnerability and scars and weaknesses.

My eyes moistened. *This* is the love of a dad. Maybe — *just maybe* — this is the love of a Father.

Slamming the Window Shut

Then something incredible happened. “The hand on my face felt so good,” Stephanie was telling me “and inside I was saying, *Oh, keep that up! Don’t let your hand go!* But nobody had ever reached out to me that way before, and I didn’t know how to respond.”

“What did you do?”

Her eyes widened as if she were still astonished by her own actions. “I yanked his hand off my face,” she said, “and I looked him in the eye — and I spit on him! Twice, I spit on him! And then I ran away and hid in a closet.”

Spit on him? My mind was reeling. Grace was throwing open a window of opportunity for her — a chance for hope, security, and a future — and she deliberately slammed it shut.

“How?” I asked. “How could you possibly do that?”

Yet as she searched for a fuller explanation, my mind flooded with all the ways I had yanked God’s hand off my face the many times he had reached out to me in my days of rebellion and skepticism.

There was the time as a child when a Sunday school teacher spoke glowingly about the love of God. I felt drawn toward faith — but uncomfortable with the emotions, I pulled away. Or the time at a friend’s wedding when the pastor spoke powerfully about building a marriage around Christ. I was intrigued, but quickly the busyness of my career doused my budding spiritual curiosity.

Or the time I cried out to the God I didn’t believe in, desperate for him to heal our newborn daughter of the mysterious illness that was threatening her life. Suddenly — somehow, inexplicably — she recovered fully, but I promptly forgot about the prayer, chalking up the healing to a miracle of modern medicine, even though the doctors had no explanation for what happened. More than once, I had to admit, I had allowed the window of spiritual opportunity to slowly . . . slide . . . *shut*.

For Stephanie, in many ways this could have been the end of her story. Still, incredibly, the man and woman at the orphanage were persistent. They continued to pursue her, despite her initial

rejection. The next day, they came back.

“I was called into the director’s office, and there was the foreign couple,” Stephanie was telling me. “I was thinking, *I’m in real trouble now! I’m going to get punished for what I did to him. They’re going to beat the tar out of me.* But the interpreter pointed to this man and this woman — the strangers, these foreigners, this enormous man with the huge heart who wept over children — and she said, ‘They want to take you to their house.’ ”

What struck me was that this couple could easily have chosen a more compliant child — perhaps the baby boy they had originally envisioned adopting, a child without the emotional baggage and physical ailments of this recalcitrant street girl, someone who was not suffering from the effects of years of deprivation and abuse, someone who wouldn’t require as much of a sacrifice to parent. Nobody would have blamed them. Nobody would have given it a second thought. Nevertheless, David and Judy Merwin, newly arrived missionaries from the United States, unexpectedly declared on that day: *This is the child we want.*

“At the time, I didn’t realize that I was being adopted,” Stephanie said. “I thought I was going to become their servant. That’s basically what happened in Korea: when a child got a certain age, he or she was sold as a bond servant to rich people.”

A servant — yes, she could envision that. She could pay off their kindness, she could work her way out of her indebtedness, she could repay them for taking a risk on her, she could earn her room and board. Becoming a servant was the only way she could make any sense of her situation. A very understandable reaction.

“There Are No Words”

The Merwins had expected to adopt a boy and name him Stephen, so they gave their new little girl the name Stephanie. Their house in Korea, modest by Western standards, seemed huge to her.

“I had never seen a refrigerator, a flush toilet, or a bed before. I thought, *Wow, this will be a fun place to work!* They even had eggs, which only affluent Koreans could afford. They cleaned me up and gave me antibiotics, and got me healthy. They kept feeding me, tucking me into bed, buying me new clothes, but never putting me to work.”

“Did that confuse you?”

“Yes, I wondered why for several months, but I was afraid to bring it up to them. We’d go into the village, and everybody would treat me like I was something wonderful. I couldn’t understand — I had been a *toogee*, but now I was being treated like a princess.

“Then one day a girl said to me, ‘You smell American.’ I said, ‘What do you mean?’ She said, ‘You smell like cheese.’ Korean children always said foreigners smelled like cheese. I said, ‘No, I’m not an American, but those Americans are really funny. They haven’t put me to work yet. They’re really treating me nice.’

“She looked at me with a surprised expression and said, ‘Stephanie, don’t you realize that you’re their daughter?’ That idea had never occurred to me. I said, ‘No, I’m not their daughter!’ And she said, ‘Yes, you are! *You . . . are . . . their . . . daughter.*’

“I was astonished! I turned and ran out of the room and up the hill toward my house, thinking to myself, *I’m their daughter, I’m their daughter, I’m their daughter! Oh, that’s why I’ve been treated this way. That’s why no one’s beating me. That’s why nobody’s calling me a toogee. I’m the*

daughter!

“I ran into the house to my mom, who was sitting in a chair, and I declared in Korean, ‘I’m your daughter!’ She didn’t speak Korean yet, but a worker said to my mom, ‘She’s saying she’s your daughter.’ With that, big tears began to run down my mommy’s face. She nodded and said to me, ‘Yes, Stephanie, you’re my daughter!’ ”

“How did that make you feel?”

Stephanie had been speaking so candidly about her life, including unthinkable mistreatment and suffering, abandonment and rejection, humiliation and pain. But now she was flustered. This time words failed her.

“It was —,” she began, then threw up her hands. “There are no words, Lee. There are simply no words.”

Sometimes language cannot contain grace.

And Then, Jesus

“Your adoptive parents showed you so much love,” I said. “Did that point you toward Jesus? How did you end up becoming a Christian?”

“We were at a beach in Korea, and my daddy asked me if I wanted to be baptized, and I said, ‘Sure, let’s just do it in the ocean.’ So my daddy baptized me.”

“Did you really have faith at that point, or were you trying to please your parents?”

“I loved the Lord as much as I knew how, but I just had so much hurt inside. My problem was that I was scared to show people my pain. If my mommy and daddy saw my pain, I thought they would bring me back to the orphanage. If my teachers saw my pain, they would tell my parents. If my friends saw my pain, they’d tell my parents. I never wanted them to find out about my life as a street kid. I was afraid they’d reject me. That went on until I was about seventeen.”

“What happened then?”

“We had moved to a small town in Indiana, where my father was a pastor, and I was doing everything to deny my Korean heritage. I was the only Asian in high school, and I wanted to be the perfect American girl. I was the homecoming queen and won the citizenship award, yet every night I go to bed scared to death I’d be discovered and lose my parents’ love.

“Then the summer before my seventeenth birthday, I was sullen and irritable and withdrawn, and my mom gently confronted me. I stalked off to my bedroom, shut the door, and looked in the mirror. I felt like I was still nothing but a *toogee*, a piece of trash. I crawled under the covers of my bed.

“A little while later, my dad opened the door, and I heard him call softly, ‘Stephanie?’ He came in and sat next to my bed and said, ‘Your mother and I want you to know that we love you very much, but you seem to have a hard time accepting that love. The time has come for us to release you to God.’

“Now, I was a pastor’s daughter, so I knew the Bible, right? But my dad knew better. He said, ‘Stephanie, can I share with you about Jesus?’ I sort of rolled my eyes and said, ‘Sure.’ He told me to think about Jesus — he knows how I feel, and he is the only one who can help me. And then my dad left me by myself.

“Until that moment, I only saw Jesus as the Son of God. I knew he had come down to earth, but that night for the first time it dawned on me: *He understands me*. He walked in my shoes! As a matter

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