



# GRACE HAPPENS

WHEN ORDINARY STORIES  
BECOME EXTRAORDINARY

RICK LONG

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BY PASTOR **RICK LONG**



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## Dedication

This book is dedicated to my dear friend and lifelong ministry partner, Pastor Jim Malouff. Brother, you have inspired me more than you'll ever know with your steadfast dedication to the clarity of the gospel, to Grace Church and frankly, to whatever I have set out to do in my life. You have been my Barnabas, bringing me encouragement when I needed it, and also my Paul as a theologian and teacher of the scripture.

Many people battle cancer but few have battled it as long as you or in so many different ways. Yet through all the challenges of life you have selflessly remained a solid rock of grace and faith for me, for this ministry, my family and literally everyone who knows you. Thank you for being such a consistent and remarkable example of God's grace. You are loved beyond words.



## ENDORSEMENTS

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**I** am so excited about Rick's new book, "Grace Happens". Rick is a phenomenal, passionate leader with an incredible gift of communication. He is a living example of the power of God's grace to transform a life that lives on purpose. I highly recommend this book for everyone needing to experience God's grace.

**PASTOR DAVE MINTON** Senior Pastor, Capital Christian Center, Olympia, WA

**T**he first time I met Rick was at a private gathering of seasoned pastors from all over the country. As the pastor of a medium-sized church located in a secluded area of the country and surrounded by pastors of churches much larger, I felt somewhat insecure. Rick immediately engaged me in conversation and took a genuine interest in me and my church. I walked away feeling valued and cared for. Grace happened! Rick Long is a sincere Christ-follower giving who is giving everything he has to love as many as he can and I count it an honor to be among the graced.

**DR. BRIAN MOSS** Lead Pastor, Oak Ridge Baptist Church, Salisbury, Maryland

**W**hen I think of Pastor Rick Long – I cannot help but think of Galatians 6:9 – and not becoming weary in doing good. Pastor Rick is persistent, determined, steadfast, and tenacious in spreading the word and love of God. He is an example to all of what it means to "stay the course" and pursue God in all we do. Under his leadership, I have seen the transformation of not only his Church

through its contagious growth but also the Church body itself in the growth of individual leaders for Christ. When Ephesians talks about that Christ equipping his people for service, I am certain that Pastor Rick got a double dose of God's gifts here! He is so very well equipped ... so knowledgeable ... and so capable of speaking the truth and joining God's children together ... that it is without hesitation I know any book written by Pastor Rick is of God's doing.

**JOSEPH RAMOS, MD, JD**

**R**ick Long is a dear friend and partner in sharing the good news of Jesus' grace and forgiveness for all people. His character, integrity and passion are evident in all he says, does and writes - and, that is evident in every page of "Grace Happens". If you're like me, I find myself in need of a daily reminder of God's mercy and grace as I face the challenges of this life, and as I wrestle through my own past, present and future. "Grace Happens" is a fantastic resource and guide - not just for followers of Jesus - but, for all of us who desire to know and understand God's heart for us, and to have a deeper understanding of His amazing grace for all people.

**RANDY PEARCE** Touring and Recording Artist (Steven Curtis Chapman, Nichole Nordeman Worship Pastor (Willow Creek Community Church, Flatirons Community Church, Real Life Church)

**P**astor Rick Long's leadership and legacy speak for itself! He has an insatiable passion for the

church to discover the fullness of life in Christ and to fully experience what the “grace” of God is all about. As a young leader, he has, in the midst of a full schedule, made time to be a mentor, a friend, and a support for my ministry and my family. Whether your a teacher, preacher, leader, parent, musician, artist, engineer, or entrepreneur Pastor Rick will offer insights into leading, living, and loving well! Grace lived out loud!

**PASTOR BRYAN SEDARWALL** Director of Denver Dream Center

**Rick** is more than a Senior Pastor - he is a tried and true disciple-making mentor to emerging leaders everywhere. His posture invites people to see through the perceived glamor of being a megachurch pastor, as he offers real-life wisdom and leadership principles to both leaders of ministries and everyday people alike. He champions every ministry effort around him as a father would his own children. I've experienced personal shepherding and support from Rick and his family, and believe anything he brings to the table will be a personal benefit and timely encouragement to all who take the time to hear from the decades of ministry experience Rick has to offer.

**MINGO PALACIOS** Pastor of Evangelism & Culture, Purpose Driven Ministries, Saddleback Church

**We** joined Grace we starting attending grace over 18 years ago while Pitching for the Colorado Rockies.What I love most about Rick is his passion to reach the lost with the clear gospel of Grace and his ability to make Gods word easier to apply. I've been lucky over the years to get to know him away from church either fishing or golfing on occasion. He is as genuine a person as any teammate or person I have known. Thankful to have him and grace church in our lives.

**STEVE REED** Former MLB Pitcher Colorado Rockies, Cleveland Indians, San Francisco Giants

**Having** known Rick since middle school I can say without equivocation that he is the real deal! When we planted Grace Church

together almost three decades ago we had no idea how much God would do through this Jesus-loving, Gospel-giving, radically authentic church in the years and decades to follow. When Grace happens lives are changed, souls are saved and communities are transformed. My prayer is that God uses the real stories and Biblical truths in this book to inspire this same caliber of transformation in your life, church, and community.

**GREG STIER** Founder of Dare 2 Share and Author of Gospelize Your Youth Ministry

**Grace Happens** is both practical and powerful. It's filled with stories about everyday people who have been transformed by grace and who are having a significant impact as a result. Rick is one of the most passionate leaders that I know and it shows throughout the pages of this book!

**DAVE RUNYON** Co-author of The Art of Neighboring

**I've** known Pastor Rick for many years since speaking together at Promise Keepers. He has been in my life an encouragement, mentor and risk taker in standing for the Gospel within this post-truth culture, uncompromising and yet demonstrating the love of Christ pragmatically as a pastor and friend. This book will change your life coming from a Christ follower whose life and ministry is played out in real time, not in theory!

**BRAD STINE** “God’sComic”

**Grace** is powerful, a power that is to be lived out in your life. I have watched Rick live and lead in grace. 29 years ago Rick started a new church based on Grace and he still leads with that same passion for today. God's Grace has transformed Rick and will transform you as you read Grace Happens.This book along with the alignment resources will make Grace come alive in you and in the lives of others. We are in need of Grace. God offers it to us in amazing ways. Take advantage of these resources to make Grace Happen in you!

**PASTOR SCOTT WEATHERFORD** First Baptist Wimberley Texas, Author, Sifted Leadership

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## CHAPTER 1: SIMPLE GRACE

*“Get the word out. Teach all these things. And don’t let anyone put you down because you’re young. Teach believers with your life: by word, by demeanor, by love, by faith, by integrity. Stay at your post reading Scripture, giving counsel, teaching. And that special gift of ministry you were given when the leaders of the church laid hands on you and prayed—keep that dusted off and in use.”*

1 TIMOTHY 4:11-14 (MSG)

DAY 1 • SIMPLE GRACE

## A LOT OF GRACE FOR A COUPLE OF GOOFBALLS

**I LOVE** reruns of the old Los Angeles police drama Dragnet. Each week Sgt. Joe Friday would let us in on the behind-the-scenes, real-life circumstances related to real crimes in the Los Angeles area. He’d introduce each episode by saying, “Ladies and gentlemen, the story you’re about to hear is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent.”

As we begin our study of grace, I’m going to give you a behind-the-scenes view of two goofballs that believed they could start a new church at 22 years of age. In our case, the TV introduction might go like this: “Ladies and gentlemen: This story you’re about to hear is true. Only the names have not been changed to protect the innocent, because these two guys are not innocent. How do I know this? Because I’m one of these guys.”

First let me tell you how these two goofballs got together. In 1979, my dad was recovering from – according to the doctors – a terminal diagnosis. He was desperate to help my mom raise my brother and I without him, so he enrolled us in a fairly new five-year-old Christian school in the area, Arvada Christian School. I was not happy about this turn of events. We had already endured one year of misery in another Christian school, and the thought of repeating that same unwelcoming experience made me sick. But for the sake of my dying father, I kept my unhappiness to myself.

There are a lot of memories in my 51 years of life that I’ve

forgotten, however, this first day in the Christian school is etched permanently in my mind. I showed up at this new school as a young man who was repeating the seventh grade while my brother was repeating the fourth. The year before had been our first experience in a Christian school, and due to my dad's illness, as well as the death of my grandfather, we missed almost half the school year.

There is only one thing worse than going to a new school. It's going to a new school a year older than everyone in your class. The very first day of school would consist of abbreviated classes so that we could meet all of our teachers. Things were going very well since no one knew me and could point out the fact that I was supposed to be in the eighth grade. All of that came crashing down in my fourth hour class.

This class was held in the chapel, and there were enough kids to fill up three full rows of chairs. Our ambitious choir teacher, Renée Younger, decided the best approach for welcoming a new student was to have us stand up and introduce ourselves. There could not be a worse tradition in school, or frankly, in a church.

The time for my torment came and I rose to my feet. Before I could get any words out of my mouth, an eighth grade girl by the name of Teresa said, "Ricky Long? Oh my gosh, everybody, that's Ricky Long, he's supposed to be in eighth grade." My worst nightmare had come true.

In hindsight, I think that experience, though extremely humbling, taught me that you can survive even the most embarrassing moments – if you're willing to let it "roll off your back," and that's exactly what I did. My ability to ignore the jeering that day silenced my critics and made me much more confident.

It was at this point that I first met an absolutely crazed maniac named Greg Stier. Though Greg was two grades ahead of me, he was only a year older, and we hit it off right away. Greg Stier is quite possibly one of the most hilarious people I've ever met—and he knows it! From the moment we became friends, our passion to tell people about Jesus Christ was magnified during our time together. In other words, we made each other better.

Growing up in the school, Greg had learned the importance of discipleship, something that today we may call mentorship. When he and I became friends, he also became my mentor. We spent



endless hours discussing the Bible, which is not normal for 13 and 14-year-old teenage boys. We also loved sports, girls, a good prank, girls, fighting our enemies, and girls. But it was our passion to see people come to saving grace that drove everything we did.

Where I loved sharing my faith and dreaming about what God could do in my life, Greg obsessed over these things. Most conversations with Greg always led back to the gospel and leading people to Jesus. Even for a fellow evangelist, this could be exhausting, and sometimes irritating. But it's the way God wired him, and as I realized later, God needed the two of us just the way we were to carry out his work.

That summer, I told Greg of a dream I had always had. I told him about the Dallas Holmes concert where I decided I wanted to be a preacher and musician for Jesus. He told me about his salvation experience when his pastor Claude Pettit shared Jesus with him. Greg told me that every time he led a person to salvation there was an affirmation in his spirit that made it very clear this is what he was supposed to do for the rest of his life.

After sharing these things, we began to write pages and pages about a future ministry. I loved to dream and list the possibilities while Greg enjoyed drawing concentric circles, flowcharts and big picture ideas. Together, during the summer of 1980, we planned our future ministry. Greg and I both dreamed of being traveling preachers like Billy Graham – sharing the gospel all over the world. Greg, at 14 years of age, was passionate about his peers and wanting every teenager to follow Christ. I, on the other hand, always enjoyed being with the older crowd. I had always related well with adults and my parents allowed me the privilege of expressing this passion.

Most Saturday mornings Greg and I would ride our bikes about five miles to a brand-new mall in Westminster, Colorado. Appropriately named Westminster Mall. You could always find hundreds of teenagers there, so that's where we went to share our faith.

For more than five years, Greg and I led hundreds of people to Christ. We invited most of them to our youth group, affectionately called Youth Ranch, where 800 teenagers converged on our church property for the most exciting experience of the week. Frankly, there was no other youth group like it, and in the last 32 years I've yet to experience one that even came close.

Greg graduated high school and went off to Liberty University. During that year and the next two summers, Greg and I would try to keep in touch, and stay connected. But by the time I was 18, another classmate, Shelley Bartholomew, became my latest obsession. I graduated high school and asked this freshman in college to marry me. And as often happens, marriage changes your friendships, and Greg and I gradually lost contact.

By 1987, life had become a struggle. I had become extremely disillusioned with the church. Though I'd realized my dreams to be in ministry during my freshman-sophomore year of college, the church we had grown up in closed its doors after the departure of the pastor. As pastor of the youth ministry I was frustrated and angry because I couldn't change the situation.

Shelley and I were also struggling in our marriage, and after about six months, I decided to start a business and work on Sundays. This was the first time since I was 8½ years old, that church was no longer important to me. I was making money, and pursuing my degree online.

My wife tried relentlessly to get me to go to church. There was a church in the community called Community Baptist Church where many of our former friends went, and coincidentally where Greg was the junior high youth intern. After about six months, Shelley again went to church by herself one Sunday, and brought Greg with her back to our apartment. We picked up right where we left off, remembering all our dreams about ministry and my passion to be a pastor was reignited.

My friend Greg put in a good word for me with the youth pastor, and after meeting with three other pastors, I was asked to start a youth outreach. I accepted, and became the youth pastor for Surfside, our Sunday night youth outreach. I warned all of them that reaching the lost teenagers of our community would be messy, which might be quite a shock for this very put-together Baptist Church. And that's precisely what happened. We grew rapidly, even logging 130 in attendance for our "50-foot banana split event" only three months after we started.

During the two years I worked as a youth intern, my passion for starting a church became so strong it nearly suffocated me. Around this time Community Baptist lost their pastor, and brought in a new

pastor, who had a much different perspective on reaching the lost.

Greg and I put together an eight-page plan to reach our city with the gospel, and called it Operation Arvada. It had many of the same programs and practices we had employed in our old ministry. When we finally were able to have a conversation with the new pastor about our plan, he lovingly, but firmly said, “Boys, I don’t think our vision for evangelism lines up with yours.” Though Greg and I were able to share our plan, we went home discouraged by the inability to implement it.

Two weekends later (after watching the Super Bowl – Bengals versus the 49ers, January 22, 1989), Greg and I had a conversation that would alter the course of our lives forever. I said, “Greg. Remember the church we always wanted to start? I think it’s time.”

Greg looked at me like I was losing my mind. He said, “Rick, we haven’t even gone to seminary yet. Maybe in five years.” I responded, “No! We need to start this church right now!” That’s when Greg said, “Let’s pray.”

I don’t want to sound like I’m over spiritualizing this moment, but we literally got on our knees and started praying sometime around 10:30 PM that night. There were lots of words shared, and lots of quiet moments listening to the Spirit of God move in our hearts. Around 1:00 AM we finally went to bed – Greg stayed on the couch at my house. At 3:15 AM, I woke Greg up and together we went to the local Denny’s. This would become our practice for the next three months – every single day at 3:15 AM – and we would plan Grace Church.

I am a doer. While I can dream, cast vision, plan and prepare with the best of them, my greater skill is getting things done. While Greg was writing charts and doctrinal statements to build out the plan, I was recruiting volunteers.

One of those recruitment trips took place at Casa Bonita when I took my good friend Brad Holder, his wife Theresa, and their four kids to dinner. My wife Shelley had just given birth to our second child, Brittany, while Theresa had delivered their fourth child, Kaeleen, just a week after Shelley.

I told Brad my plan to start a church, and instead of laughing, he got really excited. I told him that what we really needed was a place to start the church, and he said, “I have an extra living room.”

It all started in that living room.

On March 12, 1989, we opened Grace Evangelical Church of Westminster with 23 people. Most of them were family members and close friends. We treated that living room like it was a 500-seat auditorium. My wife and I would lead worship and then Greg and I would preach a dual sermon.

The following Thursday we had our first youth meeting with nine kids, and two of them came to know Jesus as their Savior. What an exciting night! They were the first two converts in our brand-new church. That first Sunday would be the last time in the history of our church we didn't see at least one person come to Christ. For the past 23 years we have seen an average of 20 new converts every weekend. Simply put, this is what happens when you share the clear gospel of grace every time the doors are open.

Greg and I would spend the next decade launching our childhood dreams. The church was the first, and though that had always been my dream, it was not Greg's number one goal for ministry. Greg's desire was to launch an evangelism training ministry that would equip teenagers to share their faith all over the world. It began as Warriors for Christ, but eventually became Dare 2 Share Ministries, that over the last 25 years has used super conferences to train over a million teenagers to share their faith. It has been among the most successful youth evangelism ministries in history.

All of this was happening simultaneous to the explosive growth of Grace Church. In addition to his work with teenagers, Greg also did a good chunk of the preaching. I was the only full-time pastor and staff member at the church, so my load was also enormous. But to really understand our relationship you also need to hear about the two goofy guys I introduced at the beginning of this chapter. We love life as much as we love the people that God brings across our paths. We laughed a lot over those years. Let me share one example with you.

In 1996, we left Atlanta headed for South Carolina to train a youth pastor in the evangelistic techniques Greg had developed for Dare 2 Share.

The training went well, but we were exhausted. We had been gone from home for nearly two weeks and it was time to have some fun.



I'm a golfer and, let's just say Greg is not. I convinced him to play a round of golf in South Carolina, where the temperatures in February were nearly 60°, and his friend was able to get us on a private course. When we arrived at this country club, we purchased our rounds of golf, a few extra golf balls, a couple of gloves and rental clubs, and were then escorted to a waiting area. We were told that the next golf cart to pull up would be ours. An older, nicely-dressed gentleman pulled the golf cart to the front and Greg and I walked out and loaded up.

When we got to the first tee box, I commented on how nice our golf cart was. My friends, it had a refrigerator in it, a very nice windshield, and even a canopy to roll down on the sides if it got too cold. However, I was most impressed by the expensive golf clubs they rented to us. We had the latest TaylorMades right next to the most expensive Callaways on the market. We were in heaven.

As we arrived at the fifth hole, Greg had actually been hitting the ball pretty well. I was also playing above my skill level. My next drive went a long way, right out into the fairway. Greg's was a good shot, but went over to the right-side rough. He drove me out to my ball and dropped me off, then went in search of his latest victim. I was standing in an elevated position and could see his ball just about 30 feet behind where he was looking. I shouted, "Greg! The ball is right behind you about 30 feet!" Greg grabbed his club, ran back to his ball and proceeded to hit it as hard as he could.

I watched the scene unfold before my eyes. Greg in his baseball stance, intently staring at the ball. He then pulls the club back and let's it rip. The ball elevates off the grass, nice and slow, then crashes right through the windshield of the cart – which he had parked directly in the path his ball would take. There was a loud crash, a large hole and the sinking feeling that we were going to be paying for an expensive windshield.

We continued to play while Greg continued to lose golf balls. Before we reached the ninth green, which on most golf courses takes you back to the clubhouse, Greg was out of the balls I purchased. I told him I had one more sleeve, but to look inside his golf bag. He unzipped a pocket and found a number of good balls. He was excited. Unlimited sacrificial lambs ready for slaughter. Let the beating commence.

When we arrived back at the clubhouse, Greg went on to the 10th tee and I ran inside to inform the starter about the unfortunate accident. “Sir,” I said, “My friend accidentally hit his ball through the windshield of our golf cart.” The starter looked at me very inquisitively and said, “So what?” I replied, “I just wondered if we needed to pay for that.” He replied, “It doesn’t matter to me.” Wow! This place was awesome.

I arrived breathless at the 10th tee and informed Greg that the starter wasn’t going to charge us for the broken window. That made the day even more perfect. Two hours later, as we drove our golf cart down the fairway of the 18th hole, Greg commented that he was again out of balls, so I started to search my golf bag. I unzipped the top pocket to find golf balls, gloves, a wallet and a pair of car keys. When I looked up from my bag, Greg saw my bewilderment and asked, “What’s the matter?” I said, “Greg, we have been golfing with somebody else’s golf clubs.” His face turned three shades of white and he said, “So that’s why this golf cart doesn’t look like any of the other golf carts on the course. What are we going to do?” I said, “We’re going to drive up to the front doors like men. Get out of the golf cart. And then run like the wind for the car.” And that’s exactly what these two mature godly preachers did on that February afternoon.

I always promised that we would send a letter apologizing for the fact that we were using somebody’s private golf cart, drinking their sodas, hitting all their balls into the woods (or the pond, or wherever else Greg hit them), but I never could muster up the courage to search for the person who probably had called the police – thinking that no idiot would steal a golf cart and golf clubs, then go play 18 holes on the same course.

Thank God, he uses goofballs like us. Today Greg Stier has been married to his beautiful wife Debbie for nearly 28 years and is the father of two amazing teenagers, Kailey and Jeremy.

He speaks routinely to stadiums filled with people. His ministry has not only trained over a million teenagers to share their faith, but some tens of thousands have come to Christ at their super conferences, held in arenas around the nation. Greg’s character is such that he remains a humble, godly man still today.

There are not enough pages in this book to thank the many

elders who have served Grace Church over the past 29 years. There would be no way to list all of those who've walked through our doors for a season and changed the face of our ministry, while God was changing their lives at the same time. There is no other accomplishment, other than my family, that is more important to me than Grace Church. It is my opus. As a musician, you always hope to write that one song that touches the world; but for me, that song is this church and God has written his unique composition on the hearts of every person who has passed through our doors – including mine.

There are definitely not enough words to thank my wife for everything she has done. Her support, and all that God has done through me, along with her incredible skills and gifts, were the only reason I was able to succeed – PERIOD.

God gets all the glory, and I want to make it perfectly clear that, as I tell these stories, I can only share transparently, because that's the way God has wired me; but, if at any moment it sounds like I'm taking credit, please forgive me. That is never my intent. It is God and God alone that chooses to use a goofball like me. If he can use a goofball like me, then I know he can use you.

*“I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience his resurrection power, be a partner in his suffering, and go all the way with him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it.”*

PHILIPPIANS 3:10-11 (MSG)

*“I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.”*

ROMANS 1:11-12 (NIV)



**Now What?** Years ago I read an article that laid out the steps necessary to achieve a “big vision.” Since that time, I’ve developed my own, and would like to share it with you in closing this chapter.

**BIG VISIONS ARE ACHIEVED WHEN WE:**

**V***isualize the vision constantly.* Jesus constantly uses the words “What if, imagine... suppose”... and others just like these. When I have a dream, it never leaves my mind. That was the case 39 years ago, and it’s still the case today.

**I***dentify people who want to participate in your vision.* This may not be the case all the time in the corporate world, but it’s mandatory in the body of Christ. We are absolutely better together. We need each other. A body needs every part (1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12).

**S***uspend pragmatic thinking.* You must believe anything is possible when you are in the “vision” stage. Resist negative thinking. Trust God and dream big.

**I***invest all available time to get a grasp on the vision.* Early on in the development of your vision, most all of your extra time must be filled with making your dream happen. Don’t destroy your family, marriage or health, but apart from that, allow your vision plenty of time to develop.

**O***rganize your priorities around your vision statement.* I assume that by now most of you who are visionaries understand the importance of having a vision-mission statement. You should be able to sum up everything that your business, career or ministry is about in just a few sentences.

**N***urture the vision constantly, or it will die.* Your vision is like a newborn baby. If you are not constantly caring for it, feeding it, cleaning up its messes, and helping it grow... it will die.



**SIMPLE • CONSTANT • COMFORTING • FEARLESS • SELFLESS • DARING**

These are the steps that have served our ministry well. Thousands of people have followed these steps in their own lives; and whether it was a vision for their family, business, education or something else dear to them, by following these steps their vision became reality.

**But it was our  
passion to see  
people come to  
saving grace that  
drove everything  
we did.**

## GRACE Church Mission Statement and Purposes

“Working together to reach everyone with the love of Christ and equip them with the truth.”

The purposes of our church –

**G**lorify God,  
**R**elate to everyone,  
**A**ct like Jesus,  
**C**are for others,  
**E**xpress God’s love.

### PRAYER DAY 1 • **SIMPLE** GRACE

*Father God, give me vision so I can accomplish this mission. Today, Lord, I surrender the frivolous, wasteful, and frankly, meaningless things I’m doing, so that I can do what you created me to do. I know this is not going to be easy, so I ask for your strength in advance. Lord God, if this vision I am passionate about is not your plan for my life, please change it so that I can dream your dreams and follow your path. I believe by doing this I will accomplish everything I ever hope for or imagine possible. Thank you Lord. In Jesus’ name, amen.*

*“News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.”*

ACTS 11:22-24 (NIV)

## DAY 2 • SIMPLE GRACE

# GRACE GROWS UP

**IT'S HARD** to believe that I started my church 28½ years ago, along with my wife, a good friend from junior high and high school, and a few wonderful family members and close friends. What makes it even more amazing is that people continued to come week-in and week-out.

It's also hard to believe you can start a church with your best friend and see it succeed when you are 22½ years old, as I was. I had been a youth pastor, worship director and served in many capacities within the church – from janitorial work to evangelism outreach. I believe God used all of these situations to equip me, but when I was thrust into a position of leadership as a founding pastor, the “rubber met the road” as they say.

But the beauty of simple grace is that it carries you as you go about fulfilling your God-given purpose.

We started our church in a buddy's living room and had 23 curious people the first week. The second week of Grace Church we had nearly 40 people show up in the living room, along with a wonderful older man from our past ministry who came to encourage us; but I will never forget what he said when he stepped inside the doors and saw myself and my friend Greg greeting everyone who walked through. He looked us in the face, placed a hand on each of our shoulders and said, “I just came to see the boys play church.” I can hardly blame him for that comment. Today I look back at that 22-year-old, only a year younger than my youngest daughter, and

think to myself, God your grace has been so abundant in blessing this church.

In the last three decades our church has baptized over 7,000 people. Our membership is somewhere in excess of 5,000. In 2017, we received an award from Outreach magazine as one of the top 100 fastest-growing churches in America. On top of this, in 2016 we saw over 1,500 people profess faith in Jesus Christ alone and baptized more than 500 of those new believers over the next two years.

I want to make sure you understand this is not a “bragimony” (you know – a testimony and a brag session combined), unless you understand that I’m bragging about Jesus. There is absolutely no reason our ministry should be one of the fastest-growing churches in America, other than what God has done.

There were so many ways we could and should have failed. In fact, the first decade was a learning process in which we tried and failed in a million different ways. We moved seven times and became known by the phrase, “If you can find us you can come.” At one point, we completely lost our identity by sharing a building with a Seventh-day Adventist Church that allowed us to put only a sandwich board sign out front on Sunday morning. That was truly the low point of the ministry, and yet God continued to work.

In 1994, the church was finally able to bring me on as the only full-time pastor, which was an incredible blessing, even though it would be a \$1,000 a month pay cut from the job I held at the time. I remember when the elders decided on an amount, my good friend and co-partner in ministry for the past 27 years, Pastor Jim Malouff came to break the news. He could see the shock on my face as I wondered how I would take care of my family with such an enormous pay cut. He looked me in the eye and said, “Rick! Do you believe God gave you the vision of this church?” I answered, “Yes.” Then he asked, “Do you believe that this is your calling in life?” Again I replied, “Yes.” Jim smiled and said, “Then trust God to take care of your finances and do what you are called to do.”

No truer words have ever been spoken, and God has never once let me down. He has never left my family wanting, and he has never failed to provide for this ministry. The beauty of simple grace is sometimes easier to see in the rearview mirror as we grow and mature.

Pastor Jim and I would begin to experience a number of adventures together, and in the past nearly three decades, we have walked this road as brothers. Jim is 20 years older than me, and I like to remind him of that often. He is a beloved pastor and foundational leader in our ministry. We have spent lots of time together both inside and outside the church. We have traveled from Arvada, Colorado, to the Amazon rainforest in Peru in South America. We have literally seen tens of thousands of people reached with the gospel and experienced many of the aches and pains that come along with being elder-pastors in a church. All of the struggles have knit our hearts together, and I would not trade my time serving with Pastor Jim for anything in the world.

I also love to tease Pastor Jim. I recall many years ago when he owned a ski boat and had an exclusive membership to a private lake north of Denver. We would travel out there during summers and enjoy water sports galore. Pastor Jim loved to drive his boat and I loved to be behind it on anything and everything the water had to offer.

I was trying to master the skill of slalom skiing, which requires pretty high speed in order to cut across the water, so when you wipe out – you really feel it. I had been skiing for quite a while, and having gone around the lake one time, I was starting to tire, so I thought I would pull a little prank on Pastor Jim.

After making a hard cut on the water, I intentionally made myself fall as I skimmed across the water, landing face down. I could hear the boat about 100 yards away turning slowly in order not to disturb the surface of the water. I barely turned my head to the side to take in some air then put it back in the water. I was floating with my hands out, my legs out and my head down. I still remember Jim saying, “Rick! Rick! Oh my goodness...” At that point I heard Jim get up from his seat, and as he was about to jump off the boat to rescue me, I turned over on my back and screamed, “I’m fine!” A line from the original *Jurassic Park* movie – words that have resonated from his lips on many occasions – came flying out. “I really hate that man.” No matter how many times I tease or scare Pastor Jim, I get great joy and laughter from it.

Jim has been the overseer of our budget here at Grace Church for over 20 years, and has done an extraordinary job balancing our spending with our vision. It’s an incredibly difficult job in ministry

because you never know how much people will give in a year, and you really can't even make an educated guess. In a ministry like ours, where 70% of our church has either come to know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior here at Grace or re-engaged in their walk with God here, the last area that comes into obedience is the grace of giving financially.

I have always said, "The last thing to get saved in a person's life is their wallet." It's also true that, whenever God puts something before us as a church and finances are the obstacle, we must overcome. I tell people this, "The good news is that all the money necessary to achieve this vision is here. The bad news is that it's still in your wallet."

Today Pastor Jim is still an elder of Grace Church, plus we also have 40 staff members – ranging from our local staff to our global staff in Peru. None of what we do would be possible if it had not been for Jim's faithfulness, along with the vision and faithfulness of each of our elders. Even with all of the major struggles, challenges and victories that accompany a ministry of our size, there has always been a lot of laughter and love. That is also a measure of simple grace.

When Barnabas arrived in Antioch he saw something very evident. He recognized God's grace and all it had done. This is all I've ever hoped for this ministry, that when people see what is happening in the lives of the people of this church – and my own – they will say, "Look at what the grace of God has done."

*"News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord."*

ACTS 11:22-24 (NIV)



**Now what?** It's very easy to identify yourself by your accomplishments, education, experiences, intelligence, finances or family, but who we belong to matters far more than who we are. It is true that I'm a pastor, church planter, husband, father and grandfather, as well as many other labels that could be attached to my name; however, the one that matters most is, "child of God."

You probably have many titles as well, but don't let them define you. This year my church was included in the list of the Top 100 Fastest Growing Churches in America by *Outreach Magazine*. This wonderful recognition was actually quite humbling, and I believe it was really a reflection of the inspirational people in my church and their great hearts for evangelism. I mention this only because God has chosen to use me to fulfill his perfect will in leading this church. I believe he wants to do the same for you. Whether you are a pastor, a truck driver, a stay at home parent, teacher, surgeon or student struggling to discover who you are in life, God has a plan for you. Just like Paul and Barnabas, every single person has God-given potential and purpose. When you discover these purposes for your life, grace grows up to become something you never imagined could be so fulfilling and meaningful.

### How to find and fulfill the Lord's purpose for your life:

- G**lorify God – We were created for God's pleasure (Revelation 4:11).
- R**elate to everyone – We are here to relate with others inside God's family (Ephesians 1:5).
- A**ct like Jesus – We were designed to act like Jesus in all we do (Romans 8:29).
- C**are for others - We have been shaped to care for others (Ephesians 2:10).
- E**xpress God's love (by explaining the gospel) – We have been given a mission in the world and we live it out when we express God's love and explain the good news of Jesus (John 17:18; Acts 20:24).

This is the simplest acrostic I've ever written to describe not only what God provides, but why he provides his GRACE. We see the purposes of God but also the application of these purposes. His purposes for you are not intended to be listed in a journal, hang on a refrigerator or written inside your Bible. To know and fulfill God's purposes in our lives is why he fills our lungs with air and keeps our hearts beating. No matter what you do today, make God's purposes the focus of your actions.

**PRAYER DAY 2 • SIMPLE GRACE**

*Daddy, now that I understand my purpose for living, help me put them into practice today. I know this is going to be a constant struggle between your purposes and my own, but I surrender my life now and commit every day to you. Lord, I'm being honest and know I will probably have to surrender many times a day in order to achieve the life you've always wanted me to live; so I ask in advance for the deepest resolve and commitment, combined with your strength and grace to make this prayer a reality. In Jesus' name, amen.*

*“While Jesus was having dinner at Levi’s house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’”*

MARK 2:15-17 (NIV)

DAY 3 • SIMPLE GRACE

## GRACE SAYS “AMEN OR DAMN STRAIGHT”

**IT’S NO** secret that Jesus hung out with sinners! It is also no secret that every one of us is a sinner. The Bible makes it very clear that *all have sinned and fall very short of God’s glory*.

I never needed anyone to convince me I was a sinner. I came to know Jesus Christ as my Savior when I was 8 ½ years old. It was at an evangelistic conference, and the preacher was a “hell fire and brimstone preacher” who convinced me, in no uncertain terms, that I was a total and utterly depraved sinner. I’m not sure what horrific sin I could’ve committed at 8 ½ ... if you ask my mother, she would tell you I was an angel, of course! In all seriousness, it wasn’t the sins I had committed that convinced me I needed a Savior, but the description of God’s perfect holiness. As limited as my understanding was at that young age, I knew I fell far short of that description.

From the moment I believed in Jesus, I wanted everybody I knew, and everyone I crossed paths with, to know him as well. I was never sheltered from the world – especially growing up with foster sisters. Apart from my mother and father, the rest of my family were all non-believers who I loved very much. I accepted that it was my responsibility to share Jesus with all of them. In my youthful zeal I’m sure I did it wrong, but from the moment I led my first person



to Christ, I was hooked on evangelism. I worked hard to refine and hone the skill of communicating the gospel, and prayed relentlessly for those who needed a Savior.

Living in a neighborhood with eight other boys all around the same age gave me a perfect mission field; and together with my brother, we were successful in leading all of them to Christ. One of them is even a pastor in our church today.

Growing up around normal, average, non-Christian people gave me a passion to start a church for sinners who were tired of the condemnation of religious institutions, and were looking for a place that would demonstrate loving acceptance; so when I was 12 years old, I began dreaming about starting a church.

Today Grace Church is far from perfect; as a matter of fact, we look a lot less “put-together” than most churches, and that’s just the way we like it.

Walking through our doors, you would see people dressed in shorts and T-shirts standing next to someone in slacks and a dress shirt. You’ll see tattoos of every kind, as well as some of the most extraordinary piercings and gauges alike; but one thing you will experience, from the very moment you step foot in our church, is a warm and genuine welcome from quite literally everyone. Over the years I have had some of my more “churchy” acquaintances from other ministries walk through the doors and their comments range from, “Wow! Grace is... Interesting,” to “It was nice seeing a church for ‘those people.’”

Once I was standing with a group of pastors and one of them said, “Yeah man, I had this group of bikers come to my church – pretty foul-mouthed and smoking out in the parking lot. I had to tell them to stop.” The other pastor looked at him and jokingly said, “Send them to Rick’s church, they’ll take anyone.” Well, I couldn’t agree more with that backhanded compliment. Send your sinners to Grace Church of Arvada, where they will be welcomed – not only through the doors of the church, but to the foot of the cross of Christ.

In 1991, while pastoring the church and working to start a brand-new youth evangelism ministry, I was also the front man for my band *Kenaniah*, based on Kenaniah of the Levites, who led David’s armies into battle. Marching in the front lines, the musicians would often be the first to go, and I don’t mean go to *Dairy Queen*,

I mean go to Heaven. The band had started with Shelley and me and some other musicians a few years earlier. We began singing our own original style of pop Christian music, until we added one of the best guitarists in Colorado – Adam Rey. We hired him sight unseen based on the recommendations of my vocal coach. Adam and I began discussing some of my songs on the phone. He agreed to swing by my wife’s ceramic shop to pick up the cassette tape of my original compositions, which was really nothing more than me, my guitar and lyrics and the cassette recorder. (Besides “cassette recorder,” there will be lots of things in this chapter you younger readers may have to ask someone over 50 about.)

Anyway, I’ll never forget the phone call I received just seconds after Adam left my wife’s ceramic store. I answered my phone and my wife says, “Honey. Have you ever seen Adam?” “No, why?”

“Well I didn’t know whether to grab the cassette or my can of Mace.”

I paused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that he has hair down to the middle of his back and it’s permed. I mean that he had on leather pants and silver-pointed cowboy boots.”

I said, “Cool!”

She said, “Okay.”

When Adam and I finally met in the studio, the chemistry began, and we had some incredible years together. He and my wife forged a phenomenal friendship to go along with their incredible harmonies. After about three weeks in the studio producing our first original album, I asked Adam a question. “Hey bro, do you know for sure if you were to die, whether or not you would go to Heaven?” He looked me in the face and with complete sincerity said, “Yes.” I asked, “Why?” And he replied, “Because I’m an American.” As God as my witness, that is the absolute truth. It made me realize how many people actually have this view. They believe they’ve lived in a Christian country, been directed by Christian morals, and blessed by some sort of Christian covering.

This would be an ongoing conversation between Adam and myself for weeks until the day Adam came to church, and during the gospel presentation, put his faith and trust in Jesus Christ. He happened to make his decision on the very same day another

friend, John Putzstuck, also came to faith in Christ. I mention John because he was a new friend who I helped purchase a home and then invited to church. John was 6'5" tall and about 330 pounds – a former offensive lineman for Notre Dame and an absolute gentle giant. Both of these two men continue to be a faithful part of God's work at Grace Church, 27 years later.

John represents a host of people who have walked through the doors of Grace with a lot of education, a lot of questions, and an enormous amount of skepticism. But through the power of the gospel, they have been transformed through the new birth afforded by faith alone in Christ alone.

Remarkably, Adam and John actually share the same passion. Adam is one of the finest guitarists I've ever known, and John is a connoisseur of great music. During a long stretch in our ministry, Adam was our worship pastor and John was one of many men who worked at the sound board. I can still remember weekends, before I would go up to preach in all five services, watching Adam shred on the guitar while John sat in the back with his arms raised behind the soundboard loving every second of it. Both men are deeply and passionately in love with our Savior.

One weekend, as I came out to preach, I saw the regular eclectic crowds ranging from all walks of life, socioeconomic backgrounds, ages and races, but one guy sitting to my right stood out – a cowboy with a nice white hat, pressed blue jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt. This guy was rippling with muscles I only wished I had – not just now, but ever. As I delivered my message with passion, humor and transparency, I continued to notice the cowboy was very unimpressed, or so his body language seemed to communicate. When I asked everyone to bow their heads and close their eyes, he folded his arms and stared me down.

I said what I would say every week. "My friend, if you are here, and you cannot say beyond a shadow of a doubt that you know for sure, if you were to die you would go to Heaven – then today is the day. Jesus died to pay for your sins, and if you believe that he did that for you, you will go to heaven." Then came the moment I look forward to every weekend. "If you put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ I would like to pray for you. With heads bowed and eyes closed, just slip your hand up and then you can put it right back

down.” As my eyes panned the room, suddenly another unexplainable miracle happened, the cowboy raised his right hand as high as he could. Tears began streaming down his face. He never closed his eyes, which, by the way, isn’t a prerequisite for salvation, but he did come to know Jesus as his personal Savior that day.

Back in the old days, I used to have a chance to talk to everyone after every service. I miss those days, and though I still try, it’s pretty impossible. That afternoon I stood in the foyer and here came the cowboy. About 6’3” and, my guess would be, 230 pounds. He wrapped his long arms around me and thanked me. I asked him where he was from and he literally said, “Well partner, I’m passing through, probably only be here a few months; but I’ll be in church every week.”

The cowboy kept his word, and each week I’d see him there with the Bible we gave him. After only two weeks, I could tell he was getting more and more excited about his faith. He would sometimes answer my rhetorical questions out loud in the middle of the service with “yes,” or “no,” and it was absolutely spectacular. At Grace nobody thinks twice about people’s responses because it’s a pretty laid-back church. However, on this given Sunday, the cowboy made us all proud to be part of our church.

I remember one particular service when I was delivering part of my message with intense passion. Words were coming easily from the Holy Spirit, which some preachers refer to as an anointed moment. I said, “Do you realize how much God loves you? Do you realize how much he’s given up for you? Do you know that you matter to him more than anything in the entire universe? Do you get it?” The cowboy responded at the top of his voice, “Damn straight!”

I’m usually not one to stop for any reason whatsoever, but that moment was priceless. The cowboy’s intensity was infectious, and every single person laughed, but not the kind of laugh when you’re mocking somebody – more like the kind of laugh a parent has joyfully watching every little thing their child does.

My next comments brought the house down. “Well, my friends, in some churches when they agree, they say ‘Amen.’ But at Grace we say, “Damn straight!”

From Adam to John to The Cowboy, Grace Church has been a place that welcomes every single sinner in need of a Savior. God is not a respecter of a person’s race, gender, status, fame or popularity,

and so neither are we. Acceptance is a simple grace that packs a lot of power.

Over the years, I have had some offers to move on from Grace. I've had opportunities to work in some of the biggest churches in America, and for about a millisecond the idea of accepting such a flattering invitation would cross my mind. Thoughts like, "How nice would it be to be part of a 500-member staff and one of several pastors, not the *only* pastor?" But those thoughts are pushed from my mind by the overwhelming love I have for the ministry I started and the ministry I plan to die serving – unless God completely redirects my life.

Why? It's not just because I'm a loyal person, and it's definitely not because there aren't people who could do a better job; it's because I truly love the place called Grace – where everyone is valued, accepted and redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. The moment we stop seeing people come to Christ is the moment I'll leave, because it will mean I have failed to communicate the gospel of grace.

*"But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."*

ROMANS 5:8 (ESV)

*"While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him. When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?' On hearing this, Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"*

MARK 2:15-17 (NIV)



**Now What?** I'm so thankful that God doesn't require a behavioral change in order for us to be born again. When we become a Christian, we bring absolutely nothing to the table. Jesus does it all. Everything we've ever done and everything we will ever do is just filthy rags in light of God's righteousness. There is no place this is more evident, on any given Sunday, than at my church. People from every walk of life and every type of sin you could imagine, and every possible background all converge in the multiple weekend services at Grace Church of Arvada.

**When we become a Christian, we bring absolutely nothing to the table.**

Why is it important to tell you this? It's important because too many churches are focused on the external appearance of people rather than their life-changing internal decision to trust in Jesus as their Savior. In other words, "They're getting them all cleaned up for hell."

**What should our churches, small groups and Christian circles look like?**

*"We should appear as normal as possible"*  
– John 17:14, Romans 12:1, 2.

#### SUGGESTIONS FOR OUR CHURCH GATHERINGS:

- Relaxed and casual clothing
- Warm and welcoming – especially to guests
- Relatable music and practical teaching
- Friendly "goodbyes", and at least one reason to come back
- We should be genuine and transparent.

#### SUGGESTIONS AND WARNINGS:

- Share stories of brokenness, life's challenges and struggles with sin, which can disarm even the hardest heart.
- Share your struggles, but don't bear your soul. (Unbelievers want to see that we are human, but they may not be ready to hear every hidden sin. Save that for believers you can trust.)

- Listen more than we talk. Friends, we don't have to have all the answers.
- Always communicate God's grace. You never know when someone is ready to accept salvation by faith.

This list is far from exhaustive. However, these are some of the most practical and powerful principles we have utilized over the past 29 years – to see over 27,000 people come to Christ in our weekend services.

**PRAYER DAY 3 • SIMPLE GRACE**

*Father God, help me refuse to be a hypocrite any longer. I admit Lord, there are times I put on a show at work, at home, at church, at my small group, and with my friends. Today I want to strip off that mask and let people see your child for who I am. You died for me just as I am, so let me be who I am, for your glory and for the sake of influencing others to receive the gift of salvation and walk in a personal relationship with you. Thank you Jesus, amen.*

*“Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”*

COLOSSIANS 4:6 (NIV)

DAY 4 • SIMPLE GRACE

## PUT A LITTLE GRACE ON THAT

**I DON'T** know about you, but I like salt and pepper. There's just something about the right seasoning on your steak or your chicken, right? You know what I'm talking about. So you'll also understand what Paul was talking about in Colossians 4:6 (NIV).

This verse is about having grace in our conversations and seasoning our words with salt. What does that mean? We obviously know that seasoning meat with salt and pepper makes it much more tasty and edible. The same is true of our words. God wants us to make sure we present the message of the gospel in a way that's "edible" to those who don't know Jesus Christ as their Savior. I'm not talking about watering down the gospel to make it more acceptable. I'm saying we lose our effectiveness when we lose our sense of humility and common courtesy in speaking to others, and this goes for every conversation. If you want people to listen, remember this: You're never persuasive when you're abrasive. We are never going to make a difference in this world by attempting to argue people out of hell. It doesn't work that way. The tenderness of a steak is made possible in part by having the right amount of salt cooked into it. In the same way, the tenderness of the heart of a human in need of Jesus is only going to come with the right amount of kindness and a gentle spirit of love. The old adage rings true, *"People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care."*

I think it would be safe to say that years ago my communication needed some tenderizing. As a young preacher I often confused boldness with abrasiveness, and success with winning the debate. Neither are true.



I remember I had a preacher friend who thought he was being extremely successful when he caused people in his congregation to get angry about what he was saying. However, they got angry not because he was preaching truth, but because of how he preached the truth. There's a huge difference between "speaking the truth in love and speaking about love only for the sake of truth." I said that quote to myself out loud one day when I was dictating a message, and it stuck. I want people to know I love them, rather than let me tell them I love them as I drive home the truth regardless of the relationship.

I mentioned that there have been many moments in my professional career where I have said or done things that were abrasive, and these were often highly embarrassing. I have had the right motivation and I checked my heart before every opportunity to speak or sing, but there are just times my humanity, combined with my anxiety, mixed with my depravity, comes out and I just can't help it. Can you relate? Or are you one of those people who rarely struggle with the wrong words? Even as a person who writes songs, sermons, books, blog posts and everything in between, I still have a long way to go to master my craft.

In the mid-80s through the early 2000's I was the songwriter, vocalist and guitarist, along with my wife, for our band *Audience of One*, originally *Kenaniah* as I mentioned earlier. (We had to change that name when people started thinking I was *Ken* and my wife was *Iah*, and together we were *Ken and Iah*, instead of knowing it was the musical leader of David's army. Funny, but true.) Anyway, we performed many concerts and even appeared on television multiple times.

One of those events was with the largest local television station in the state, going out to over a million homes in the four corners region. It was an exciting opportunity, and my wife and I were both in a state of great anticipation but with a little trepidation also. The night finally came and it was our job to speak and share in a multi-camera studio. They graciously allowed my wife and I to sing two songs, preaching in between. This was a conservative Christian station, and that meant they saw things a little bit differently than other brothers and sisters in say...the Pentecostal faith. The night started off great. Shelley and I sang one of our favorite songs and

then it was time for me to preach.

This was the moment I'd been waiting for, but there was also something else on my mind. Just a few days before our performance my wife had slipped in the restroom at church and broken her left wrist. She asked only one thing of me – stand still (which is hard for me) and let me hide my left arm cast behind your big backside.

I had this overwhelming anxiety that I was going to inadvertently expose my wife's broken arm to the world, so I was thinking about her directive more than I was my message. It was intense. Each camera light flashed to show me where to look and my hands flailed in a preacher-like manner. The veins in my neck popped out as I challenged every viewer with these words: "My friends, we are living in a world desperately in need of Jesus. We need men and women of God who will rise up and, not only live what they believe, but fearlessly proclaim salvation is a free gift of God's grace." A few more words continued rolling off my eloquent tongue when I said something that got everyone's attention and caused my wife to completely forget her cast.

I had just quoted Romans 1:20 where God says, "*For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*"

I could see people getting fired up in a good way. One cameraman gave me a fist pump straight in the air.

Then it happened. Another verse from the book of Romans got twisted in my mind and I said, "My friends, what we need today are for men to stand up and be men of God, men doing unnatural things together."

What? What did I just say? In that moment everyone in the studio started looking at each other. What I had meant to say was, men doing *supernatural* things. This was live television, so there was no chance to fix it now. I felt the cast hit me in the middle of the back as if to jar something loose in my brain or maybe to put it back in place. Of course I thought ... "My brain's not down there... Wait, maybe it is."

I managed to finish my message, and then began to promote my latest song – one that was already a bit of a risk to sing to the conservative viewers of this television station. The song was based

on Hebrews 11, what we often refer to as God's Hall of Faith, and it was titled "Faith Heroes." However, close on the heels of my tongue-tied disaster and my "unnatural" comment, I then said... "What the song is trying to say is that we need faith healers." I meant faith heroes. Another slam from the cast to my back and I'm pretty sure two of the 80-year-old cameraman almost died right there on the spot. Rick! Season your conversation with grace... How about season your conversation with restraint? Something no one has ever accused me of.

I was sure my career was finished. Finished before it started, I thought. I'm exaggerating a little, but I must say at the time it felt like it was over. Even in our rather silly or even unfortunate mistakes, the blessing of simple grace allows us to laugh, brush ourselves off, and continue forward. God continued to demonstrate grace and allow us a long and healthy music career, as well as countless decades using our spiritual gifts for God's glory.

*"With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be."*

JAMES 3:9-10 (NIV)

*"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."*

COLOSSIANS 4:6 (NIV)



**Now What?** Most of us never fully realize the impact of our words until we say something that hurts someone's feelings – something that may prevent them from hearing the wonderful message of the gospel. One of the greatest lessons we can ever learn is to **THINK** before we speak. Many years ago I

shared a simple acrostic with my ministry that has become a popular tool for those who are willing to be trained by it.

In order to **THINK** before I speak, there are five questions I must ask myself:

- Is it **T**RUE?
- Is it **H**ELPFUL?
- Is it **I**NSPIRING?
- Is it **N**CESSARY?
- Is it **K**IND?

These questions will almost surely guarantee that every word you speak has maximum positive impact upon the listener. The truth is, strong communicators are not people who just “say it like it is,” they are people who thoughtfully season every single word with grace and love. Asking every single question in the **THINK** acrostic before speaking is always a good place to start. Remember, it's not enough just to ask, “Is it true?” Speaking the truth without the other four answers being “yes”, can be just as painful as slander, gossip or angry words.

#### PRAYER DAY 4 • SIMPLE GRACE

*Father help me demonstrate the discipline necessary to think before I speak. God, I confess that there have been times my words were not true, helpful, inspiring, necessary, or kind. I want to be more like Jesus today, especially with my words. Teach me to make every word count so that I am an inspiration to everyone who crosses my path starting with the ones I love the most. Thank you Jesus. In your name I pray, amen.*

*“These are the evil things in the world: wanting things to please our sinful selves, wanting the sinful things we see, being too proud of the things we have. But none of those things comes from the father. All of them come from the world. The world is passing away. And everything that people want in the world is passing away. But the person who does what God wants lives forever.”*

I JOHN 2:16-17 (ICB)

DAY 5 • SIMPLE GRACE

## GRACE AND THE BUTLER BOYS

**IT'S OBVIOUS** from these opening verses that the world presents a massive magnetic attraction that's almost too great to resist, regardless of who we are, or how we've been raised. Our only hope is to be rescued by the simple, saving grace of the gospel of Jesus Christ, so we are able, through the power of his spirit and in obedience to his word, to break free from whatever bondage holds us in its grasp.

The world had a firm grasp on James Butler and his dad Bruce, two people with similar stories that played out across separate journeys. I was introduced to James during the winter of 2016. His uncle had been a member of Grace Church for some time when he first brought James with him. James had recently moved here from Alaska after visiting for a few times over the years.

I learned very quickly that something unexplainable was drawing James back to Colorado, but it sure wasn't a career move. In fact, James had left a lucrative career in the oil fields of Alaska to move here – without even the hope of a job. It didn't take long to realize that he was intensely focused on discovering his purpose in life.

The first time I ever heard James share his incredible story was February 7, 2016. I remember it not only because it was Super Bowl Sunday (and our beloved Denver Broncos were playing), but more significantly, it was a baptism weekend at Grace Church. While we celebrate changed lives every weekend at Grace, baptism weekends take it to a whole other level. People arrive early and decorate posters

and bring noisemakers to cheer on every participant. That weekend nearly 100 people were baptized – and among them was the little-known newcomer, James Butler.

Let me take a minute to describe our baptism process. During our baptisms we have different pastors in the tubs, as well as family members, friends, husbands and wives, and anyone who has been involved in bringing someone to Christ. There is nothing in Scripture that mandates that those baptizing have to be ordained clergy. We believe that if you can do the greater work, which is to share the gospel, pray for people, invite them to church or any number of actions that are instrumental in someone's transformation, then you should also participate in their baptism. While baptism has nothing to do with salvation, it is an outward expression of an inward change that took place the moment the individual was born again. Our pastors take turns baptizing people in two tubs while the music plays. Both tubs are being projected on our three auditorium screens so that everyone can clearly see and experience the celebration of dedication.

While each person is being baptized, I usually read a short testimony identifying the person in the tub to my right or my left. In addition to the multiple short stories I read, there are usually 4-8 people selected who share their story live.

On this Sunday, it happened that James Butler had been selected to walk out on the stage and share his remarkable, life-changing and miraculous story. It was the first time I heard of this young man's impossible journey to not only receive Christ as his Savior, but also escape the clutches of drug addiction, a criminal past, jail time, and a lifetime of devastating emotional pain.

James shared that his parents had struggled with drugs throughout his life, but explained that what actually made that so difficult was the good times in between. Life was fairly normal, and the family enjoyed good times together, but all that changed when the addictions took over. He described how his parent's relationship was off and on for the first few years of his life, and he mainly lived with his mom until he turned seven. At about that time, his mom's addiction got the best of her and James moved in with his father, Bruce. The next eight years were all that he could have hoped for. When James was 15, Bruce decided to move to Alaska for a work opportunity. Unfortunately, his dad left at a time when James felt he needed him

most. He felt lost and his life began to spiral out of control in the only way he knew possible; the streets, drugs and crime.

James is a good-looking young man, strong in stature and intensely serious about what he says. Standing behind him, my eyes filled with tears as I listened to him share about the pain that eventually brought him to Grace Church. I began to wonder what this bright young man, with so much going for him, could have accomplished if he had just had a chance. That's when God reminded me that James' chance was starting this very day.

James continued his story, sharing with his new church family about the death of his best friend Michael, who had overdosed. He choked back the tears as the emotions of losing his best friend overwhelmed him, and I could tell that this type of strong emotion was foreign territory to a man who had disconnected from pain in order to survive. It was clear that God's simple grace was chipping away at the ice around his heart and allowing him to feel again.

We were all humbled and honored to witness his brave act of courage, as he said in closing, "Today, I want to be baptized in front of all of you to acknowledge that my new life has begun. Thank you all for welcoming me into this church. I can't wait to see what God has in store for my future."

There was someone else in the crowd who heard the powerful words and saw the changed heart of this transformed young man – my youngest daughter Brooklyn.

Shelley and I raised our children to love and accept everyone. We made it perfectly clear that in our home every individual, regardless of what they've done in life, deserves to know about the grace of God and become a part of his family. We also stressed that our family is no better than the prostitutes, criminals, drug addicts, or outcasts of society that we care for. We've simply been blessed to raise them in a family of individuals rescued by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

It's easy to teach your children about love and acceptance, diversity and tolerance within the body of Christ, but you really have to "put your money where your mouth is" when a man with a complicated past (whom you accepted with arms wide open) is now dating your daughter. Shortly after James shared his heart and story on that stage, he and my daughter Brooklyn became very good friends, and have now been dating for almost two years.

Now don't get me wrong, but any father who looks into the eyes of his daughter the moment she's born into this world, becomes extremely protective. Every day of her life is spent with you risking everything to provide for her and protect her. While mom often dreams of a fairytale relationship for her daughter, a dad's perspective is that no guy is good enough. So when James started hanging around – I'll be honest – I was prayerful and cautiously optimistic. However, I also have the deepest respect for my girls and their wisdom. Shelley and I raised them as Scripture guides, to seek the Lord with all their hearts, trust in him and not lean on their own understanding, acknowledge him and be sure he will direct your paths. That means I must trust God working through them.

When James and Brooklyn began dating, I opened my arms and heart to this man. I recognized very quickly what an intensely hard worker he was. I also have great respect for James, not only because he has overcome so much in his life, but also because he refuses to take a handout. Even to the point where we had to convince him that one of the ways God provides is through his people.

Shortly after James and Brooklyn started hanging out, his car broke down at my house, and I watched this young man work very hard to fix it himself. When it became apparent he would not be able to afford a necessary part for his car, I had to work to convince him to let us help. I promised him that God would provide, and that the perfect job would come along soon. James started doing odd jobs for me around the house. We put in a playground for the grandkids about 1,000 square feet, and then he raised dozens of feet of split rail fence on my two acres. The work he did was excellent, and needless to say, he not only stole the heart of my daughter – but earned my respect and love as well.

Today James is a youth leader in our ministry, a small group leader along with my daughter Brooklyn, and a welcome part of our family.

But James's story doesn't end there.

As long as we've known him, he has shared his deep love for his mom and dad. He desires to see both of them rescued from drug addiction and come to a deeper understanding of faith in Jesus. He is also deeply committed to his twin sister Jenna and his little sister, who still lives with his mom (who continues to fight the demons



of addiction). James also has an older sister, Vanessa, as well as a niece and nephew whom he loves with all his heart. James and his family are natives of Phoenix, Arizona, while his father has spent the last 10 years in Alaska.

Shortly before I started this book, James made an emergency trip to Alaska because his father Bruce, after finishing a stint on the oilrigs, went on a drug binge. At first, James wasn't sure if his father would survive. Bruce did in fact pull through, and after James returned home, he expressed his deep concern for the future of his father, who had been battling drug and alcohol addiction, on and off, for over 25 years.

A few months passed before James received a desperate phone call from his father and his sisters. This time it actually looked as if Bruce was in a hopeless situation and was nearing the end. I promised James that, if his father would agree, Shelley and I would fly him to Colorado and figure out a way to help him find both hope in Christ and sobriety.

James knew that, in order to get his dad here and able to face the massive withdrawals, Bruce would have to get high one more time before getting on the plane. So that's what he did. When Bruce arrived in Colorado, we put him up in a hotel near the church, and for the first week he struggled through the severe symptoms of physical withdrawal – overwhelming anxiety, terrible stomach issues, and wrenching pain. James, Brooklyn and our family did everything we could to encourage and support Bruce through this traumatic time.

Four days before Thanksgiving 2017, Shelley and I agreed that Bruce needed a better place to stay than the small local hotel on this side of town. Together we decided to bring this man, a stranger to us, but the father of our daughter's boyfriend, into our home. It

**Don't be the  
perpetual victim  
of your own sin.  
Once you're  
forgiven, forgive  
yourself.**

was a difficult transition for all of us as Bruce continued to face what seemed to be hopeless symptoms. He dropped deeper into depression and became paralyzed with anxiety. Shelley and I spent many hours listening, praying and talking with Bruce and gradually we got to know him and have become close friends. He has a heart of gold combined with a sweet and sensitive spirit. Bruce had become a believer in Jesus Christ years ago,

but lost his way during many years of drug addiction. Like many others who struggle with these “demons”, Bruce had lived with abuse, as well as abandonment and neglect in his past, and, though he had tried to be the best husband, father and person he could be, life felt unmanageable and, oftentimes, hopeless.

Bruce lived in our home for 42 days. Together we celebrated Thanksgiving, Christmas, and a few of our grandchildren’s birthday parties, and we enjoyed every moment with him. As he continued to improve daily, he wanted to find a job. It happened that we had a recently-vacated position open at Grace, and the Elders and I agreed he would make a great maintenance man and assistant to our facility superintendent. We brought him in on a contract basis, and to this day, he is doing an exceptional job.

At the writing of this book, Bruce is over 60 days clean, and by his own admission, his life has never been better. His future is bright, and he is now living with his son. James and Bruce Butler are a picture of the transforming power of God’s simple grace for salvation. The challenges that lie ahead will still be difficult, but they have each other, and most importantly, they have God at the center of it all.

*“The Spirit of GOD, THE MASTER, is on me because God anointed me. He sent me to preach good news to the poor, heal the heartbroken, announce freedom to all captives, pardon all prisoners. GOD SENT ME TO ANNOUNCE THE YEAR OF HIS GRACE — A CELEBRATION OF GOD’S DESTRUCTION OF OUR ENEMIES — AND TO COMFORT ALL WHO MOURN...”*

ISAIAH 6:1-2 (MSG)

*“These are the evil things in the world: wanting things to please our sinful selves, wanting the sinful things we see, being too proud of the things we have. But none of those things comes from the father. All of them come from the world. The world is passing away. And everything that people want in the world is passing away. But the person who does what God wants lives forever.”*

I JOHN 2:16-17 (ICB)



**Now what?** If you live long enough, you will have relationships that fall on hard times, struggle to survive, and sadly, eventually end. It is for this very reason that God has demonstrated his grace to us as not only a gift, but an example. I can give you one key reason you should extend grace to the people in your life: Because one day you will need grace extended to you.

## Extending Grace and Accepting Grace

### EXTEND GRACE BY FORGIVING:

- Forgiveness is not about subjecting yourself to the same abuse, betrayal, abandonment, or hurt, caused by an individual. It is about giving them over to the Lord through prayer so they don't control you any longer.
- Only God can forgive and forget.

### WE WILL FORGIVE AS WE:

- Commit never to bring the offense up to that person, once we have forgiven them.
- Refuse to bring the offense up to anyone else ever again.
- Give it to the Lord every time the emotions sneak back into your mind. Prayer is the key!
- God separates our sins as far as the east is from the west; but we are human beings and, once we've been hurt, it's almost impossible to forget the pain. But it is possible to move beyond it, heal completely, grow from the experience, and even in some situations, laugh about it later.

### ACCEPT FORGIVENESS WHEN GRACIOUSLY OFFERED:

- Pride often refuses forgiveness more than it refuses to grant forgiveness. Thank them for their forgiveness and covenant to never commit that wrong again.
- Don't be the perpetual victim of your own sin. Once you're forgiven, forgive yourself.

In the story of James and Bruce Butler, there were decades of chemical dependence, alcohol abuse, abandonment, betrayal and a variety of failures that were caused by more than just depravity. Once we recognize that a person has been controlled by an addiction, obsession, lifestyle, or circumstance, then we can begin to let go of whatever hurt has been caused.

PRAYER DAY 5 • SIMPLE GRACE

*Father God, thank you for saving all of us by the death of your son on the cross. I am so grateful that he is risen and has offered everlasting life to all who believe in him. Thank you Father that my sins are not only forgiven, but the guilt of my sins is also forgiven. Because of this reality, I can extend the same forgiveness you demonstrated to me, to others, regardless of how miserably short I may fall. My desire is to live hate free, and through you, I know it's possible. Thank you for your simple grace that cost me nothing and cost you everything. In Jesus' name, amen.*

*“... This stops all excuses and brings the whole world under God’s judgment, because no one can be made right with God by following the law. The law only shows us our sin. But God has a way to make people right with him without the law. And God has now shown us that way which the law and the prophets told us about. God makes people right with himself through their faith in Jesus Christ. ...”*

ROMANS 3:19-24 (ICB)

DAY 6 • **SIMPLE** GRACE

## GOTCHA GRACE

**THIS IS** an incredible passage. Not only because it gives us the hope that God loves sinners like you and me, but it also demonstrates how God is always being gracious, demonstrating his undeserved favor by refusing to punish us because of his great patience, mercy, and grace. It’s for this very reason that we should brag about God constantly.

I am so thankful for the extent of God’s grace. It knows no limits. It reaches beyond the heavens and beyond my faults – to my needs.

In 1996, my friend Greg Stier, the founder and president of Dare 2 Share Ministries and I embarked on another trip to continue to sharpen our skill for evangelism. Back during its humble beginnings, Greg and I would travel all over the country training and equipping youth pastors and laying the foundation for what would become youth super conferences. On one of those trips, we found ourselves in Atlanta, Georgia, for both the Youth Specialties conference, as well as a pastors’ Promise Keepers clergy event. Dare 2 Share Ministries to date has trained over a million teenagers to share the clear gospel of grace and has equipped and encouraged countless youth pastors and youth workers around the world.

During the first three days of the Youth Specialties conference, we manned a booth promoting Dare 2 Share, which allowed us to meet a number of youth pastors, one of which was a young man who was a youth pastor from our very own home state of Colorado. Larry introduced himself and the three of us spent some time talking and sharing about our ministries.

Near the end of the conference, we packed up and prepared to move to the next event, the clergy-only pastor's conference hosted by *Promise Keepers*. As we were leaving the arena to head back to our hotel room, Larry asked us a favor. "Gentlemen, I know this is a bit presumptuous since I don't know you guys, but I have a ticket for the *Promise Keepers* event, and I don't have anywhere to stay as I'm sending my entire youth team back on a plane today. I was wondering where you guys were staying?" I knew exactly what he was really asking, so I simply blurted out, "Hey brother, we have lots of room. You can stay with us." He was so excited about the opportunity and very grateful.

What Larry did not know is that Greg and I have been pulling pranks on people together since we were 12 years old, and he had just presented us with another opportunity. We devised a meticulous plan that would go into effect the following morning, when Larry would arrive to drop off his bags at 7:00 AM.

That next morning when Larry showed up, we threw his bags on the bed and started out the door, when Greg suddenly said, "Rick! Don't forget your medication."

I stopped and said, "Oh man, thanks brother, I'll grab it right now." I walked back into the room and pretended to take some pills while Larry talked with Greg in the doorway. He didn't mention a word about it, but we knew he noticed.

After an incredible and inspirational afternoon listening to speakers like Chuck Swindoll and Jack Hayford, we went back to the hotel room to grab a quick lunch. We hung out in the room discussing highlights of the speakers we'd heard then got up to head back to the afternoon session. This time we were halfway down the hallway when Greg said, "Rick, what is wrong with you? You forgot your medication again. You've been forgetting it this entire trip."

I looked him in the face and said, "You know, that stuff just bothers me. It gives me cottonmouth and makes me anxious, so I'm not going to take it."

Greg replied, "You're not going to take it? You know that's not safe." I looked at him and said, "I know, but it's my choice, it's my life."

At this point Larry was feeling a bit awkward, unsure of the social boundaries and trying not to get personal, but he couldn't help himself. He asked, "What's the matter Rick?"

“I have really bad seizures, so I take medication,” I replied.

He looked at me sympathetically and said, “Oh, I’m so sorry.”

At this point, the trap was set and the bait had been taken. As we headed down the hotel hallway, Greg and I gave each other the thumbs-up behind Larry’s back.

Now I want to make something perfectly clear. While you can probably guess where this is going, in no way am I making light of a very serious condition that causes people to suffer from seizures. However, this would be part of the plan we devised.

When we arrived back at the hotel that night, Larry came in, sat down in a chair and kicked his feet up. I looked at him and said, “Hey, no need for you to sleep in a chair, we’ve got two king size beds. You can sleep with me – there’s room for both of us.” It was a little awkward, but Larry didn’t want to offend me, so he prepared for bed.

As Larry stepped around the double vanity, Greg said he needed to brush his teeth too. He got up, unplugged the phone, then gave me the thumbs-up as he walked around the corner. This was the moment we had been planning since the night before and preparing for all day. I filled my mouth with a glass of water and started convulsing on the bed.

Greg came yelling around the corner and told Larry to get on top of me and hold me down. (This is not recommended for those who are actually having a seizure, but it is for those you’re pranking). Now all 250 pounds of this 5’9” youth pastor are sitting firmly on my stomach while both his hands are holding my arms down. I rolled my eyes into the back of my head and I’m spitting water, which he thinks is saliva, into his face and up as high as the ceiling. I can’t see his face, but I can feel his fear.

During this Academy Award level drama, Greg dialed 911. He pulled off his part by shouting, “Please! Hurry! My best friend is having a seizure!” I think he even managed to muster up a tear in his eye. At that moment, with all the strength in my body, I arched my back toward the ceiling lifting Larry completely off the bed, and with one last gasp expelled all my air, and then collapsed and held my breath.

Greg reached his arm across and put his hand on my chest, then said, “He’s gone. He’s really gone.” Dropping his head, he began to weep.

All that poor unsuspecting youth pastor could do at that moment was barely speak my name. First, it sounded something like, “WWWHICCK”... “RRRIII...” His voice was trembling and cracking, and he was trying to shake me back from the dead.

Greg said I held my breath for at least 30 seconds, but it felt more like an hour. As Larry continued sitting there in stunned horror, I suddenly gasped, pulled free and screamed, “Gotcha!”

You’ve never seen a man that big jump so high. He went flying backwards off the bed and looked at me as if Lazarus had just walked out of the tomb. Greg and I were laughing and pointing our fingers – much like we used to as kids. Larry was trying to conjure up even a smile, but all he could say was, “Yeah, you definitely got me.”

Can you imagine? This guy who thought from appearances that we were two very professional and serious evangelists, had just been the victim of one of our infamous but funny pranks.

That’s the interesting thing about “Gotcha” grace. You never know when God is going to sneak up and surprise you. Nearly a year to the date of my would-be seizure we hired Larry as our third youth pastor at Grace Church. We laugh about this often, although Larry never seems to think it was as funny as we do.

If you’re reading this, I hope you have a pretty good sense of humor. But I also know there are people who don’t really think practical jokes are all that funny – especially ones that are so real. You just have to roll with it, and lighten up a little. Because you know what? God still considers me a “work in progress”. I continue to be so thankful for his great patience and mercy in my life.

Besides – that prank was over 20 years ago, so it’s safe to say I’m much more serious now than I used to be. Well, mostly.

*“The law commands many things. We know that those commands are for those who are under the law. This stops all excuses and brings the whole world under God’s judgment, because no one can be made right with God by following the law. The law only shows us our sin. But God has a way to make people right with him without the law. And God has now shown us that way which the law and the prophets told us about. God makes people right with himself through their faith in Jesus Christ. This is true for all who believe in Christ, because all are the same. All people have*



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*sinned and are not good enough for God's glory. People are made right with God by his grace, which is a free gift. They are made right with God by being made free from sin through Jesus Christ."*

ROMANS 3:19-24 (ICB)



**Now what?** My friend, it takes a great sense of humor to survive in ministry. You have to develop thick skin and a humble attitude. Greg and I found that pranks and a sense of humor were a great way to connect teenagers with the gospel of Christ. That is always our highest goal.

The greatest single equalizer among people is the depravity of man. Every person is a sinner in need of a Savior. But the amazing thing is that God's grace can sneak up on you no matter where you are or what you've done, and say "Gotcha!" His whole purpose in coming to earth and dying on the cross was to exchange our sin for his love. If you're a believer in Jesus Christ, you may have forgotten the depths Jesus was willing to travel to rescue you and me from sin and death. If you haven't trusted in Jesus, here is what you need to know about Gotcha grace:

- **G**od's law was simply a spiritual mirror to reveal our sin.
- **O**ur sins separate us from God.
- **T**urning from all of my sin is impossible.
- **C**hrist fulfilled the law completely.
- **H**e conquered death and hell when he rose from the dead.
- **A**nyone who believes receives the gift of salvation...now that's Gotcha grace.

Galatians 2:21 says,

*"I do not set aside the grace of God. If righteousness could be attained by obedience to the law, Christ died in vain."*

Don't let his death be in vain. Believe in him today.

## PRAYER DAY 6 • SIMPLE GRACE

*Father God, thank you for giving me the assurance that you never abandon me. I cannot tell you how much it means to know that my salvation does not depend on my obedience to the law, or some manifestation of righteousness; but is wholly and solely because of your love by offering your son Jesus on the cross that I have assurance of my salvation. Thank you that today, tomorrow, and forever, I can boast about your greatness and count on your “Gotcha” grace, when it feels as if the world is imploding. You are here with me and that’s all I need. Thank you Jesus. Amen.*

*“Let us think about each other and help each other to show love and do good deeds. You should not stay away from the church meetings, as some are doing. But you should meet together and encourage each other. Do this even more as you see the Day coming.”*

HEBREWS 10:24-25 (ICB)

DAY 7 • SIMPLE GRACE

## GRACE IS THE PLACE FOR EVERYONE

**DO YOU** remember the old Beach Boys song, Be True to Your School? That teen anthem was all about loyalty. Today being loyal to your school is about as foreign as being loyal to your church. After all, the Beach Boys haven't released a new album since 1996, which I believe was the same year loyalty became a distant memory.

I remember once hearing a highly respected pastor preach, “Too many pastors care about loyalty when God never tells us to be loyal to our church.” His words didn't surprise me, considering his ministry has campuses in all 50 states and 48,000 members in his local congregation. With numbers that large, you'd be hard pressed to know if somebody left your church. Yet most pastors are fiercely loyal to their congregations and expect just a little in return. I'm not inferring that people should be loyal to a particular preacher, but they should absolutely become loyal to the vision and direction God has laid on the leadership of their church.

It's true that there's no verse in Scripture that says, “Thou shalt be loyal to thy church.” However, loyalty means that we are committed to those whom God has brought into our lives and called us to serve – even when times get tough. Loyalty is about developing allegiance to and respect for one another. When we are loyal to Christ, then we are loyal to one another. Loyalty is like faith; it means the assurance of another. Two thousand years ago the word faith and the word loyalty were synonymous.

What part does loyalty play in your relationship with your

church? I think the greatest example of loyalty is our God. The Bible tells us that even when we are faithless, he remains faithful. Even if we turn our back on God, he never turns his back on us. He tells us that no one can snatch us from his hands. That my friend, is loyalty and security.

*“I give them eternal life, and they will never die. And no person can steal them out of my hand. My Father gave my sheep to me. He is greater than all, and no person can steal my sheep out of my Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.” John 10:28-30 (ICB)*

I am a fiercely loyal person and though I have many faults – more than I can list – I am loyal to my church, my family, my friends and my Savior.

Did you know the average pastor lasts five years in a single church and less than 10 years in ministry altogether? When I started my church with my wife Shelley and my best friend Greg Stier, I committed my total loyalty to our vision, and 29 years later, I can honestly say this loyalty has never wavered.

My church has been far from perfect, and on many occasions my loyalty to others was nothing more than an opportunity for them to take advantage of me. I’m sure you have probably felt the same way at some point in your life. You don’t have to be a pastor to experience disloyalty. For this reason our church elders and I are incredibly cautious about the staff we hire. Over the years we have made many good decisions in hiring staff, but there have been times when our discernment apparently failed us and we found ourselves in very difficult situations.

About a year ago, I was walking on the beach with a new friend who happens to be a fellow Purpose Driven regional coach. There are 18 of us who represent the Purpose Driven Church model, and assist pastors all over the country as they plant a Purpose Driven church or transition their already existing church. My friend Kurt began to tell me a story about how his youth pastor and dear friend

had turned against him and literally broken his heart. As he told me his story, every detail was eerily similar to a situation I had endured before, I actually started to think I was being “punk’d.” After nearly half an hour of listening, I had to say, “Brother, have you heard my story?” It was then that I realized that every pastor faces these same issues. Not only do pastors face this disloyalty, but so do most Christians. I think our faith, combined with our desire to follow Christ, leaves us extremely vulnerable to this specific kind of attack.

**We are not in  
competition  
with other  
churches.**

Let me clarify that I have no desire to “cry over spilled milk.” I refuse to let circumstances from the past destroy the blessings of the present and the bright future my family and ministry are poised to experience. But we all must find a way to learn from these situations, or we are destined to repeat them again and again.

Whether you’re a business owner, manager, employee or a stay-at-home parent, I would venture to say you desire at least a little loyalty from the people for whom you’re pouring out your life, as rightly you should. So how can you ensure a little loyalty is in your immediate future? Let me illustrate this by telling you a little about my incredible staff.

In 1994, I was finally a full-time pastor in the ministry I had planted five years before. This was not my first rodeo. I had spent 1980-1989 volunteering in the largest youth gathering in the state of Colorado, had been preaching since I was a freshman in high school, and was ordained as a pastor in 1985. I was a youth pastor and worship leader in two different churches before finally planting Grace Church of Arvada. I learned early on that we were never supposed to do ministry as the Lone Ranger.

If you don’t know who the Lone Ranger is, you may have to ask your parents. The Lone Ranger was an old TV show about a masked man who fought injustice and crime in the old West. But as much as the show led you to believe that the Lone Ranger was alone, he really wasn’t. He had a faithful sidekick, an American Indian named Tonto.

None of us are called to be Lone Ranger Christians. God makes it very clear that we are better together. Just like the verses at the

beginning of this chapter, we were placed in ministry as shepherds to guide the members of our church as they faithfully live out their ministry in the church and in the world. Because I was passionate about my gift of leadership, and extremely excited to share the workload, I began searching out staff almost immediately after I was hired. We didn't have the budget to hire another person, but every day I would pray for God to raise up qualified and humble servants who would do the work for free, with a goal to eventually become part of the staff. This became the formula by which nearly every single one of the 80 people who have been employed at Grace Church, were discovered over our nearly 30-year history.

I realize that most pastors and ministry workers prefer to recruit from a seminary or look for the most educated person to fill a staff position, but not me. I was so convinced we should do it a different way that my passion to raise up staff members from within the church became the accepted practice of our elders.

My friend, I don't care what business, organization or ministry you are involved in, if a person is willing and able to do the job with excellence, without receiving a paycheck, then you have found the best person for the job. Over 90% of the people who are on staff at our church today have come through this exact paradigm.

Now that doesn't mean we settled on a brilliant plan 29 years ago, and never looked back. Where we are today has been a continual evolution and education in the "school of hard knocks." It's critical to realize that every business, organization and ministry changes paradigms about once every 5-7 years, and if you fail or refuse to change with the times, your business, organization, or ministry will cease to exist.

Most pastors and business owners fail for one simple reason; they refuse to change. I'm not talking about changing your mission statement, your vision or even the things you do really well. The change I'm addressing has to do with methodology.

Let me use music as an example. If you are one of those Christians who actually believes that God prefers one style of music, then you are never going to be effective in an ever-changing musical culture. As a musician, I spent decades writing and recording music. My band Audience of One didn't specialize in only one genre of music, we aimed to be versatile in order to perform in just about

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any setting. Music is amoral – neither right nor wrong. God does not have a favorite style of music. If it follows a melodic line and delivers a message, then it's music. From rap to rock, and from country to jazz, God loves it all.

For this reason, our ministry continuously looks for the right staff person at the right time. As a matter of fact, one of the biggest changes we made happened just six years ago. In 2011, we opened our thousand-seat auditorium. Today we have four services and a membership of over 5,000 people. About 3,000 attend on any given weekend, and thousands more watch via livestream around the world. My wife, who had used her extraordinary administrative skills to reinforce the infrastructure that would support our rapidly growing church, decided it was time to stay at home and reinforce another infrastructure – one that would support our youngest two children until they would graduate high school and college.

It was during this time that I began to toy with a new approach to administration. Because we had 50 employees and 15 pastors at the time, it was time to share the load in a much more intentional way. I'll briefly share here our approach today.

We have seven Department Heads. Each of the seven Department Heads oversees multiple staff members. Here's how we are staffed:

Lead Pastor/Elder, Department Head over Pulpit, Guest Services, Media, and Facilities, Visionary, and founder of Grace

Executive Assistant to the Lead Pastor and Elders, Co-leader for Media, Guest Services, Bookstore, Facilities, Communications and Marketing Departments

Assistant to Elders and Executive Assistant

Director of Guest Services

Bookstore Manager and Front Office Assistant

Facilities Pastor/Director

Facilities and Maintenance Assistant

Director of Communications and Creative Design

Director of Marketing  
Video Production Assistant  
Family Ministries Pastor/Director  
Campus Pastor of Family Support, including Weddings  
and Memorials  
Campus Pastor of Family Care  
Campus Pastor of Family Connect (emphasis on  
partnering with families)  
Campus Pastor of Student Ministries – 7th-12th grade  
Family Ministries Small Groups Pastor/Director –  
Children’s Ministry (1st-6th grade), Trek (6th grade),  
Altitude (7th-12th grade), Elevate (College age-18-25  
years of age)  
Children’s Ministry Pastor/Director – infants-6th grade  
Family Ministries Coordinator  
Family Ministries Assistant  
Family Ministries Events Coordinator/Administrative  
Assistant  
Pastor of Finances and Missions/Elder  
Financial Assistant  
Director of Missions  
2 full-time missionaries-Peruvian indigenous missions to  
the Shawi (nine years in the field)  
2 full-time missionaries-Peruvian indigenous missions to  
the Shawi (two years in the field)  
*(Our missionaries do not need to raise support because they  
are considered full-time staff of the church)*  
Worship Pastor/Elder  
Music Pastor/Director  
Associate Music Pastor/Director  
Administrative Assistant – Creative Arts  
Ministry Services Pastor/Director  
Campus Pastor of Spiritual Development  
Ministry Services Office Assistant  
Small Group Pastor/Director  
Pastor/Director of IT and Media  
Online Community Administrator



In many churches you may see each staff member defined by their college degree or resume. Don't get me wrong, I believe in education and we have people on our staff with Bachelor's degrees and higher, it's just that those are not what we value most in our ministry. What matters more to me are the deepest hurts in the lives of my staff, from which they draw their strength and ability to empathize with others.

Here are those qualifications in our current staff positions:

**LEAD PASTOR/ELDER, DEPARTMENT HEAD OVER PULPIT, GUEST SERVICES, MEDIA, AND FACILITIES, VISIONARY, AND FOUNDER OF GRACE CHURCH** – a nearly failed-marriage that left a seven-year wake of disaster. The loss of countless loved ones, including the suicide of a 34-year-old cousin/sister.

**EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT TO THE LEAD PASTOR AND ELDERS** – the divorce of her parents, tragic car accident at age 17 resulting in the death of a teenage boy.

**ASSISTANT TO ELDERS AND EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT** – the divorce from her husband who would eventually commit suicide, as well as the suicide of her 20-year-old son Josh.

**DIRECTOR OF GUEST SERVICES** – when she was 6 years old, mom was diagnosed with breast cancer.

**BOOKSTORE MANAGER AND FRONT OFFICE ASSISTANT** - devastating financial collapse as a family.

**FACILITIES PASTOR/DIRECTOR** – the unfaithfulness of his wife and complete restoration of his marriage.

**FACILITIES AND MAINTENANCE ASSISTANT** – 25-year battle with addiction, hopelessness and being estranged from his four children for long periods of time.

**DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS AND CREATIVE DESIGN** – battles with depression and the challenge of in vitro fertilization.

**DIRECTOR OF MARKETING** – four-year battle with eating disorders and self-image.

**VIDEO PRODUCTION ASSISTANT** – his mother's 2011 brain

cancer diagnosis. The loss of a 45-year-old friend to cervical cancer and the murder of his young cousin.

**FAMILY MINISTRIES PASTOR/DIRECTOR**

– devastating divorce of a 20-year marriage, left to pick up the pieces of her life with four children.

**CAMPUS PASTOR OF FAMILY SUPPORT, INCLUDING WEDDINGS AND MEMORIALS**

– left the pastorate at Grace in 2014 with no steady income. Trusted God and was rehired one year later for the perfect fit.

**CAMPUS PASTOR OF FAMILY CARE** – the ongoing divorces of his mom, moving from house-to-house and school-to-school three times a year until he was 16. Sexual assault as a child and never knowing who his father was until he was 71 years old.

**CAMPUS PASTOR OF FAMILY CONNECT** – the recent journey through his wife's breast cancer and potential loss of the love of his life.

**CAMPUS PASTOR OF STUDENT MINISTRIES** – overwhelming fear of rejection and failure combined with a failed first marriage.

**FAMILY MINISTRIES SMALL GROUPS PASTOR/DIRECTOR** – the death of her best friend when they were 19, seven concussions causing her to forego her college basketball dreams and the physical challenges today from severe head trauma.

**CHILDREN'S MINISTRY PASTOR/DIRECTOR** – the divorce of her parents at a young age, dysfunctional family and the devastating loss of her six-month-old baby boy Kaden to SIDS.

**FAMILY MINISTRIES COORDINATOR** – the miscarriage of her child, going through relationship hurts and comprehending the depth of God's grace.

**FAMILY MINISTRIES ASSISTANT** – the divorce of her parents when she was 10.

... the church would not be healthy without every member serving, giving, sharing, and participating in the mission and vision of the ministry.

**FAMILY MINISTRIES EVENTS COORDINATOR/ADMINISTRATIVE**

**ASSISTANT** – the divorce of her parents at a young age, resulting in abandonment and self-worth issues and a perfectionist expectation of herself.

**PASTOR OF FINANCES AND MISSIONS/ELDER** – 18-year battle with five types of cancer. The loss of his brother, sister and parents. The birth of his grandson with Downs Syndrome.

**FINANCIAL ASSISTANT** – she never felt accepted or like she belonged until she became a Christian.

**DIRECTOR OF MISSIONS** – failed marriage at 18 and forced abortion.

**2 FULL-TIME MISSIONARIES** (9 years) – a failed marriage and a strained relationship with his daughter, and being alone into middle age, the HIV diagnosis of a sister and multiple physical struggles and surgeries while serving in the Amazon.

**2 FULL-TIME MISSIONARIES** (2 years) – a failed marriage and three children to raise on his own, divorce and single parenthood.

**WORSHIP PASTOR/ELDER** – the death of his father at 19 years of age, and a lifelong battle with the fear of disappointing others.

**MUSIC PASTOR/DIRECTOR** – two-year-old daughter born with hypoplastic left heart syndrome (HLHS).

**ASSOCIATE MUSIC PASTOR/DIRECTOR** – on his own since he was 12 years old, left by his first wife, and a heart attack that nearly killed him.

**ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT – CREATIVE ARTS** – constantly told by her older siblings she was incapable and too young to accomplish anything.

**MINISTRY SERVICES PASTOR/DIRECTOR** – completely rejected by his wife's parents early in the marriage, the loss of their first child due to miscarriage and losing four students and one father in his first six years of teaching high school.

**CAMPUS PASTOR OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT** – grew up in a very dysfunctional family.

**MINISTRY SERVICES OFFICE ASSISTANT** – the long painful death of her father when she was in middle school. The recent loss of her mom.

**SMALL GROUP PASTOR/DIRECTOR** – her constant struggle with insecurity and self-worth. Never feeling good enough, pretty enough or enough in any way.

**PASTOR/DIRECTOR OF IT AND MEDIA** – the divorce of his parents when he was young and the challenges of being a foster parent today.

**ONLINE COMMUNITY ADMINISTRATOR** – deeply insecure, the loss of her father and the continued failing health of her precious mother.

If you ask me, those are some impressive qualifications for ministry. It might be why I am convinced my staff is the best staff in the entire world. And honestly, this is just a glimpse into what makes these people so passionate about loving the broken, downcast, and those with hurts, habits and hang-ups, even those who may look like they have everything together. Grace really is a place for everyone.

You can spend your entire life earning degrees, amassing great fortunes, power, titles, and anything else you think may cover up your deepest hurts. But until you come to terms with the most earth-shattering challenges in your life, I believe you will never be effective in ministry. I am more convinced of this reality now than I have ever been.

People don't really want to hear all about your victories, your good looks, your successes, your fortunes, or your popularity. When we hear this from others, we just simply think, "Wow, I'm a loser. I'll never measure up." However, when someone is honest about their hurts, habits and hang-ups, they draw people to themselves in an empathetic and magnetic way.

*"Let us think about each other and help each other to show love and do good deeds. You should not stay away from the church meetings, as some are doing. But you should meet together and encourage each other. Do this even more as you see the Day coming."*

HEBREWS 10:24-25 (ICB)

*“And Christ gave gifts to men ... some to go and tell the Good News, and some to have the work of caring for and teaching God's people. Christ gave those gifts to prepare God's holy people for the work of serving. He gave those gifts to make the body of Christ stronger. This work must continue until we are all joined together. This work must continue until we are all joined together in the same faith and in the same knowledge about the son of God. We must become like a mature person—we must grow until we become like Christ and have all his maturity.... The whole body depends on Christ. And all the parts of the body are joined and held together. Each part of the body does its own work. And this makes the whole body grow and become strong with love.”*

EPHESIANS 4:11<sup>b</sup>-16 (ICB)

*“A person who tries to live right and be loyal finds life, success and honor.”*

PROVERBS 21:21 (ICB)



**Now what?** “Can a church truly be a place for anyone and everyone?” In the early years of our ministry, when people who would come, get frustrated and leave, I would say things like, “Grace may not be the place for you, but we want you to find a church that fits.” Or, “If Grace isn’t meeting your needs, then find a place that will.”

My friends, that was an immature pastor. In hindsight, I can see that I was catering to the culture of Christians I had been around my whole life. Then, as I started to go deeper into the church and its purpose, I found that you really can have a church for everyone. Your local congregation can be the place where any person, from any background, and any culture, can find purpose and fulfillment.

Here’s how your church can become a church for everyone:

- **Every church should have the exact same purpose.** The church’s purpose is not to cater to the needs of every individual member. Our purpose is to turn every member into a minister whose desire is to serve, not be served. Revelation 4:11 – *everything was created for your purpose.*
- **Every Christian in the church should be a participant, not a spectator only.** We are not part of the entertainment industry – though much of what happens in the church could be classified as “spiritual entertainment.” If your church doesn’t do every program with excellence, every performance with professionalism, and every sermon with practical application: your church will cease to exist. However, our primary purpose as members of the church, is to serve one another. Until we are doing the work of God, rather than just hearing about it, we are not obediently following God’s plan. Ephesians 4:11-16 (ICB)
- **Every member of the church should be loyal to the mission and direction of that ministry, because they are an important part of the body.** Just like every human

being's body depends on every single part working in a healthy manner, the church would not be healthy without every member serving, giving, sharing, and participating in the mission and vision of the ministry. 1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12; Proverbs 21:21.

- **God's plan is that every local body of believers serves the mission and vision of their church, while partnering with every other church of Jesus around the world to accomplish God's global plan.** Sadly, this vision often gets lost in the pride of competition. We are not in competition with other churches.

The best way to end this perceived competition actually lies in the hands of the members and not the pastors. I used to say that, "Competitive pastors are the problem." However, after all these years in ministry, I think it's casual Christians that are the problem. Christians, stop casually dating the bride of Christ. Get committed to your church, get married to the mission, and get busy doing the work.

#### PRAYER DAY 7 • SIMPLE GRACE

*Father God, today I pray for my local church and I ask you to forgive me for how casually I have treated my commitment and membership. Today, Lord, I'm going to send an email, text, or make a phone call to my pastor and let them know that it's time for me to get off the bench and into the game. I'm going to move from immaturity to maturity by serving instead of just being a spectator. Father God, thank you for this reminder – as difficult as it is to hear, it's exactly what I needed. I am part of your bride on earth Jesus, so today I commit my faithfulness to my church for your glory. In Jesus' name, amen.*