

# GRACE IS GREATER

God's Plan to Overcome Your Past, Redeem Your Pain,  
and Rewrite Your Story

kyle idleman



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## PROLOGUE

Five years ago I was traveling around the country speaking at different churches and conferences on the subject of following Jesus. I had written a book called *Not a Fan* that challenged those who called themselves Christians to not be fans of Jesus but followers of Jesus. When Jesus invited us to follow him, he was inviting us to deny ourselves and take up a cross. Our tendency, especially in the Western world, is to try to follow Jesus without having to deny ourselves. We want to accept the invitation of Jesus but we are obsessed with being comfortable, which means we try to follow Jesus without carrying a cross.

In other words, we want to follow Jesus close enough to get the benefits but not so close that it requires anything from us. When Jesus offered his invitation, he made people uncomfortable. So uncomfortable, in fact, that it wasn't unusual for large crowds to turn around and go home.

As I preached this message, I usually would get pretty worked up. I wanted Christians to feel convicted and uncomfortable with the idea that it was fine to follow Jesus on their terms rather than his. One night I was in Birmingham, Alabama, preaching

at a men's conference at the University of Alabama. I tend to get especially hard-core when I'm talking to a room filled with thousands of men. After I finished my talk, I walked offstage feeling pretty good about beating up thousands of men at the same time. I stayed for a while afterward and greeted some of the men and signed some books. One of them handed me a piece of paper with a Scripture reference scribbled on it.

### **Hebrews 12:15**

I didn't ask him what it said. I know this sounds a bit pathetic, but if someone brings up a Scripture reference I'm most likely going to act as if I know what it says even if I have no idea. You could totally be making it up and I'll probably still nod my head as if I'm not only familiar with that reference but committed it to memory when I was but a lad. Anyway, I thanked him and jammed the piece of paper into my pocket and forgot about it.

One of two things happens to most anything that has the misfortune of finding itself in my pocket. It either ends up in the trash in a wad of broken toothpicks and gum wrappers or more likely just stays in my jeans pocket until it goes through enough cycles of laundry that it eventually dissolves into lint that ends up on the collecting screen in the dryer.

But as I was heading home that night I stopped at a drive-through for a late-night snack. When I checked my pocket for change I pulled out that piece of paper. While I was waiting on my food I pulled Hebrews 12:15 up on my phone. I was familiar with the verse, but when I read it this time it was different. Have you ever encountered a verse of Scripture where it feels less like you reading it and more like God is reading it to you? It was like that.

See to it that no one misses the grace of God.\*

Since that night at the drive-through God has taken me on a journey toward writing this book. I still like to challenge people with what it means to follow Jesus completely, but in the back of my mind I'm constantly hearing the Holy Spirit whisper to me, *See to it that no one misses the grace of God.*

The word translated “misses” could also be translated “fails to receive” or “fails to obtain” or “fails to experience.” My prayer for you as you read this book is that you would receive, obtain, and experience the grace of God in your life.

\*Hebrews 12:15 NIV 1984.

# INTRODUCTION

## *Grace Is Greater*

At the beginning of every year you can find an article or two that updates readers on new words that have been added to the dictionary. I always find it fascinating to see a word that didn't exist, or at least wasn't officially recognized a year ago, break into our official vocabulary.

Mind you, I don't often use these new words because purposely using words people aren't familiar with seems somewhat puerile, maybe even a bit jejune. But this year as I read these newly recognized words, I decided to entertain myself by trying to guess the meaning of the word before I read its definition. It was more challenging than I anticipated. Let me give you three of my favorite new words, and you try to guess their meaning:

*phonesia*

*disconfect*

*blamestorming*



Got your own definitions? Here come the real ones.

1. *Phonesia*. I thought this word was most likely a noun somehow related to “phone” and “amnesia.” Here was my guess at a definition: “The phenomenon of forgetting where you left your cell phone a few moments after using it.” Here’s the real definition: “The act of dialing a phone number and forgetting who you were calling just as the person answers.”
2. *Disconfect*. I’ll give you a hint: this word may be helpful to use around Halloween time. Here’s an example of the word being used in a sentence: “The boy asked his mother if he could eat the piece of candy since he had disconfected it.” Here’s the definition: “The attempt to sterilize a piece of candy that has been dropped on the ground by blowing on it.”
3. *Blamestorming*. This word might be useful in a corporate setting. Clearly it’s a play on the word *brainstorming*. Here’s the definition: “Sitting in a group and discussing who’s responsible for the company’s problems rather than trying to solve them.”

Those are some new words with new meanings. They are interesting and capture our attention for this reason: they are new and yet they define something familiar.

*Grace* is not a new word to us. It’s familiar—and that can be a problem. When you’re using a word that has been around a long time and has been talked about frequently, people tend to yawn. The word *grace* is so common it doesn’t feel very amazing.

I remember a Kellogg’s Corn Flakes commercial that came out when I was a kid. Apparently the people at Kellogg’s did some

research and found out that a lot of their potential consumers had grown up eating Kellogg's Corn Flakes but had not purchased a box in recent years. So they came up with a campaign slogan that went like this: "Kellogg's Corn Flakes—Taste them again for the first time." They wanted to reintroduce people to their product, so they invited them to try Kellogg's Corn Flakes as if they never had before.

I know that many of you have heard countless sermons about grace. You may have even read a number of books about grace. But my prayer is that you would see this word again for the first time.

### **Root of Bitterness**

Hebrews 12:15 says, "See to it that no one misses the grace of God" (NIV 1984). This command is followed by a warning of what happens when someone does miss it:

And that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. (v. 15 NIV 1984)

When we miss grace, a bitter root begins to grow. In Hebrew culture any poisonous plant would be called a "bitter" plant. The author of Hebrews uses "bitter root" as a metaphor to make it clear that when we miss grace things become toxic. Religion without grace is poisonous. A relationship without grace is poisonous. A church without grace is poisonous. A heart without grace is poisonous. The bitter root may be small and slow in its growth, but eventually the poison takes effect.

*When we miss  
grace, things  
become toxic.*

In this book we will be looking at the greatness of grace and the effect it has on our lives, but let's be clear: there is also a non-grace effect. When we miss grace, the poison of bitterness and anger will eventually become too much to keep buried. The poison of guilt and shame will eventually destroy a soul.

### **Experiencing Grace**

Numerous theological books teach the doctrine of grace, and some of them have helped me enormously. To be clear, though, this is not one of those. You're still welcome to write a blog post or send me an email pointing this out, but it won't be much fun because I'll be quick to agree with you. I'm less interested, and for that matter less qualified, to teach you about the doctrine of grace. I am much more interested in helping you *experience* grace. I tend to think grace is best and most fully understood not by way of explanation alone but through experience.

Think of it like romantic love. If you want to understand romantic love, you can open a scientific textbook and have romantic love explained in terms of neural and chemical reactions. And that might be helpful, but there's really only one way to understand romantic love. It must be experienced.

And when something is best understood through experience, it's best taught through stories. Stories bring you into an experience. The Bible is full of narratives that teach us about grace. When Jesus wanted to help people understand the grace of God, he didn't give a lengthy and detailed explanation. Instead he told the story of the prodigal son.

Compare what we learn about grace from Paul with what we learn about grace from Jesus. Paul uses the word *grace*

more than a hundred times in his letters as he helps the church understand grace. Jesus, on the other hand, never used the word *grace*. Instead he showed us what it looked like. Both approaches are helpful and needed, and certainly Paul's explanations were motivated by his own experience of grace and his desire for others to experience it. But if grace is explained without being experienced, it really doesn't have much effect. To repurpose E. B. White's famous quip about humor, "Grace can be dissected like a frog, but the thing dies in the process."

I've sat through several seminary classes taking detailed notes on the subject of grace. I've memorized countless Bible verses that describe grace. I've read numerous books about grace. But do you know what has taught me the most about grace? My own story and the stories of others who have experienced grace.

*God's grace is compelling when explained but irresistible when experienced.*

God's grace is compelling when explained but irresistible when experienced.

It's my prayer that you won't miss grace but rather will powerfully experience the grace effect in your life—and no matter what you have done, no matter what has been done to you, you will personally experience the truth that grace is *greater*.

Grace is powerful enough to erase your guilt.

Grace is big enough to cover your shame.

Grace is real enough to heal your relationships.

Grace is strong enough to hold you up when you're weak.

Grace is sweet enough to cure your bitterness.

Grace is satisfying enough to deal with your disappointment.

Grace is beautiful enough to redeem your brokenness.

Grace explained is necessary, but grace experienced is essential.



# PART 1

## Grace Is Greater . . . Than Your Mistakes

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# 1

## More Forgiving Than Your Guilt

My son has always taken Halloween trick-or-treating very seriously.\* He literally maps out the neighborhood, carefully routing his course so he doesn't miss a single house. This is not about having fun collecting candy. This is a competition to be won, a mission to complete. He chooses his costumes for mobility purposes. At the end of each competition, he brings his bag of candy in and weighs it. Then he organizes it. He gets that impulse from his momma. He separates all the chocolates and freezes them. He organizes the rest by kind and color.

I knew all that. What I *didn't* know is that he also creates a spreadsheet to track how many pieces of candy he has collected, how many he has eaten, and how many he has left.

When he was nine years old, his bag weighed in at 5.8 pounds. He went to bed that Halloween night and I did what I normally

\*If you're already upset because I let my son trick-or-treat, please remember that you're reading about grace.

do—stole a young child’s treasure while he slept. I decided he’d never notice if a few pieces of Laffy Taffy went missing, so I took three pieces and destroyed the evidence. The next day I came home from work, opened the front door, and found he was waiting for me. He said, “Dad, we need to talk.” He sat me down and asked, “Is there anything you’d like to tell me?” I was now feeling a little nervous and wondered if my wife sold me out.\* Then he pulled out a piece of paper with numbers and symbols I couldn’t decode, looked me in the eye, and told me he knew I’d eaten three pieces of taffy.

I never thought I’d get caught, but it turns out he was keeping track of his candy. I would have denied it to my son, but his evidence was strong and this was not my first offense. Instead of telling him I was sorry, I took the opportunity to point out some details to my son that he may have overlooked. For example, that I made his existence possible.

Obviously a few pieces of candy aren’t that big of a deal, but here’s what I discovered about myself in that moment: when I’m guilty of something, even if it’s not a big deal, I have a tendency to be defensive. I do not like to admit guilt. I will passionately defend myself, irrationally justify myself, and almost always minimize the seriousness of what I’ve done.

If that’s how I respond to being accused of stealing three pieces of Laffy Taffy, chances are I’m not going to respond with much honesty or humility when it comes to the sin in my life. Everything in me wants to deny, compare, minimize, and justify. But as long as I approach my sin with that kind of spirit, I won’t be able to experience the power and greatness of God’s grace.

\*He probably paid her off with Junior Mints.



## The Ugly Truth

Our ability to appreciate grace is in direct correlation to the degree to which we acknowledge our need for it. The more I recognize the ugliness of my sin, the more I can appreciate the beauty of God's grace. The Bible holds up a mirror and confronts us with the reality of our sin.

Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard.  
(Rom. 3:23 NLT)

So who does "everyone" include? Well, everyone includes you and everyone includes me. We have all sinned. I'm sure you've heard that before. I doubt it's new information. My question is, how do you respond to that information? For a long time I would read verses like that and think to myself, *Well, yeah. I mean, technically, I've sinned. But I haven't sinned.*

*The more I recognize  
the ugliness of my  
sin, the more I can  
appreciate the beauty  
of God's grace.*

Here's the way it usually gets worded to me: "I'm not *that* bad."



My wife and I were eating dinner together at a restaurant when a woman, probably in her late fifties, came over and introduced herself. She began to tell her story of how she had recently become a Christian. Except she didn't say "Christian," she said "follower of Jesus." She pointed out her husband seated at a table across the restaurant. I think she felt like she needed to address why he didn't come with her to say hello. She explained he wasn't upset about her decision but seemed annoyed by it

and didn't understand. I smiled and waved at him. He waved but didn't smile. His wave was like the wave you give the other driver at a four-way stop when you tell them to go ahead even though you think you have the right-of-way. That kind of wave. I went over and introduced myself, and we chatted for a minute or two.

The next day I followed up with an email to both of them saying it was good to meet them and to let me know if either of them had any questions I could help with. I didn't hear anything back for a couple of months. And then one day I was sitting at my desk when I got an email from the husband. He told me about the changes he had seen in his wife. She was kinder and more patient. She seemed more joyful. But instead of being excited about these changes, he was skeptical. Here's a line from his email: "She seems much happier now, but I think she's just trying to get me to drink the Kool Aid."

I knew that this wasn't a rhetorical email. He was reaching out but didn't want to say it. I emailed him back and asked if he would come to church with his wife and visit with me for a few minutes after a service.

We sat in a small room, and I began to tell him the Good News of the gospel. I began with Romans 3:23 and made the point that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's standard. Immediately he became defensive and said, "I'm not that bad. Most people would consider me a good man." He thought it unfair to be called a sinner and be judged by "God's standard."

"How fair is it to set a standard that no one can meet and then say everyone is a sinner?" he continued. "It's like setting up a target that's out of range and then blaming the shooter for not being able to hit it."

I started my attempt at a theological explanation of why we were sinners. I was going to begin with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden and talk about how sin entered the world. I think he would have been impressed with some of the terms I was going to use to explain how we have rebelled against God. But before I had a chance to talk about imputation or ancestral sin, his wife interrupted me and asked if she could say something.

She didn't wait for my permission. She turned toward her husband and said, "Do you think it's OK to get drunk and yell at your spouse? Do you think it's OK to lie about your sales numbers? Do you think it's OK to tell your grandson you'll be at his game and then not show up?" And she asked three or four more personal questions that were clearly indicting. His answers to these questions were obvious. Then she said, "You say it's not fair to be held to God's standard, but you fall short of your own standards."

*As long as we think  
I'm not that bad,  
grace will never  
seem that good.*

I had never thought of it that way. We may get defensive when a preacher calls us a sinner—but forget about God's standard, we can't even meet our own standard.

We work hard at convincing ourselves and others we're not that bad, but the truth is we are worse than we ever imagined. The more you push back on that, the more you push back on experiencing God's grace. If we miss the reality and the depth of our sin, we miss out on the grace of God.

As long as we think *I'm not that bad*, grace will never seem that good. We usually come to the conclusion that we are not that bad a couple of different ways.

1. *We compare ourselves to others.*

It's not that we claim to be perfect, but when we compare ourselves with others, what we have done doesn't seem to be that big of a deal. And of course, when we are judging ourselves we usually give ourselves a big break. Compared to what a lot of people are doing, our sins amount to little more than jaywalking or loitering.

We dismiss our sin and our need for grace by comparing ourselves to others, but do you know what you're doing when you compare yourself to other people and feel superior to them? Yep, you're sinning. And it's likely that from where God sits, your pride and self-righteousness are uglier than the sins of the person you just compared yourself to.

2. *We weigh the bad against the good.*

Last year I read a *New York Times* interview with New York City's former mayor Michael Bloomberg. At the time Bloomberg was seventy-two years old. He was being interviewed just before his fiftieth college reunion. Bloomberg talked about how sobering it was to realize how many of his classmates had passed away. But the journalist, Jeremy Peters, observed that Bloomberg didn't seem too worried about what waited for him on the other side. Peters wrote:

But if [Bloomberg] senses that he may not have as much time left as he would like, he has little doubt about what would await him at a Judgment Day. Pointing to his work on gun safety, obesity and smoking cessation, he said with a grin: "I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close."<sup>1</sup>

From his perspective grace isn't needed or wanted. He puts the good he has done on one side of the scale and decides he's not going to need any help.

We can all find ways to reach the conclusion that *I'm not that bad*, but in doing so we miss out on God's great gift of grace. Until we recognize our need for grace, we won't care about receiving it.

Our default is to cover up our sin or at the very least minimize it. But in covering up our sin we are covering up grace. In minimizing sin we are diminishing the joy that comes with forgiveness. Jesus didn't try to make people feel better about themselves by diminishing the seriousness of their sin and falsely reassuring them that they were not that bad. Jesus explained that the one who is forgiven much loves much (see Luke 7:47). He paralleled our love for God with the degree of forgiveness we have received.

### **The Biggest Sinner I Know**

I read a quote on Twitter the other day from a pastor named Jean Larroux. I inwardly protested as soon as I read it, but ironically my protest likely only did more to prove the truth of what he said. Here's the quote: "If the biggest sinner you know isn't you, then you don't know yourself very well."

My immediate and instinctual response to that quote was, *Well, look, I'm a sinner. In fact, I'm a big sinner. But I'm not the biggest sinner I know.* But the more I think about that quote, and the more I'm honest with myself and my motives, the more difficulty I have denying it.

There was something about that quote that seemed familiar to me. I couldn't quite put my finger on it until I was rereading

the familiar passage of Scripture where Paul identifies himself to Timothy as the chief of sinners:

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. (1 Tim. 1:15)

I remembered writing a paper about this passage when I was in seminary. My paper focused on Paul's past before he became a Christian. I made the case that Paul describes himself as the worst of sinners because he had been a persecutor of Christians and did everything he could to destroy the church and the cause of Christ. When my professor returned the paper to me, there was no grade at the top of the page. Instead, in red ink, he had written "Rewrite."

I wasn't sure what the problem was. He hadn't made any notes in the margin to help me understand why I needed to start over on the entire paper. After class I went up to his desk, hoping to get a little feedback. Then he took out his red pen and he circled one word from 1 Timothy 1:15.

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I **am** the worst.

I waited for a moment, expecting him to expound, but he had already moved on to the next student. I stood there staring at that one word *am*. Suddenly I realized what I had missed. The verb *am* is present tense. And that changed everything. Paul didn't say, "I *was* the worst of sinners." He said, "I *am* the worst of sinners."

If you were to hook me up to a lie detector test and ask me, "Do you think you're the worst sinner?" I would probably say

yes because I'm so sinful that I'll try to make myself seem more spiritual by sounding as humble as possible.\* But I'm fairly certain the polygraph machine would reveal the truth. If I'm honest, deep down, probably not even that deep, I don't consider myself the worst of sinners. But I can tell you, the more I learn about the righteousness of God and the more I examine my own life and motives—the closer I'm getting to the inescapable conclusion that I am the worst sinner I know.

### **The Sickness of Sin**

Romans 3:23 says that everyone has sinned. Romans 6:23 says the penalty for our sin is death. We can minimize what we have done, but the Bible says we have been declared guilty and sentenced to death.

As I am writing this chapter, I have been quarantined to the guest room. I have supposedly been sick for the last few days, and I'm supposed to be resting and getting better. On the nightstand next to me is some medicine my wife brought in to me a few hours ago. But she knows I won't take it. See, despite evidence to the contrary, I'm not convinced I'm actually sick. My wife would tell you I have a problem admitting when I'm not feeling well. For as long as possible I will refuse to concede that I'm sick. . . . Hold on a sec, she's coming in to check on me.

OK, I'm back.

Here's what just happened. She came in and told me to take the medicine she had brought earlier. I asked her, "Why would

\*Don't judge; you're the one going around hooking people up to lie detector tests.

I take medicine if I'm not sick?" She walked over and put her hand on my forehead and said, "You feel a little warm to me. I think you have a fever." I felt my own forehead and assured her I was fine. She suggested I let her take my temperature. So I cracked a joke about how it wouldn't be accurate, because when she walks in the room my temperature goes up several degrees. She rolled her eyes, and as she left the room she said, "Well, just remember I'm not going to be kissing you until you get better."

I took the medicine.

I refuse to acknowledge I'm sick, because if I'm sick it means I have to do some things differently. If I admit to myself I'm sick, I have to take medicine and lie in bed, and I don't like taking medicine and staying in bed. And so my strategy is to deny the reality of my condition as long as possible. But it turns out pretending I'm not sick is not a very effective way to get better. The sooner I admit my illness, the sooner I will take medicine and start feeling better. The sooner I start feeling better, the sooner I will be kissing my wife. But the longer I refuse to acknowledge my sickness and the longer I refuse to take the medicine, the longer I put off feeling better.

Around 1,600 years ago, Augustine wrote in his *Confessions*, "My sin was all the more incurable because I did not think myself a sinner."<sup>2</sup> Until we come face-to-face with our terminal diagnosis, we will refuse the cure.

The Bible gives us our diagnosis—we all have a sickness called *sin*. It's a virus that has infected the whole world. Romans 5:12 explains it this way:

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. (NLT)



We've all been diagnosed with sin and our condition is terminal—*the wages of sin is death*. But then Paul introduces us to an antidote called *grace*.

For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God. . . . For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.

Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. (vv. 15–18 NLT)

Paul sets up an equation. On one side of the equation is your sin, and your sin is worse than you can imagine. You can minimize it, rationalize it, and try to dismiss it, but you are terminally ill. On the other side of the equation is God's grace. When Jesus died on the cross his blood wasn't infected by sin, and he became the antidote that cures us. After putting your sin on one side and God's grace on the other, Paul solves the equation.

*Grace is always  
greater—no  
matter what.*

Even greater is God's wonderful grace. (v. 15 NLT)

I can tell you confidently that you've done nothing so horrible that grace can't cover it. Grace is always greater—no matter what.

### **Making It Personal**

One weekend in church I gave everyone a piece of paper with this equation:

Grace > \_\_\_\_\_

And I asked them to fill in the blank with their worst sin.

I'd like to ask you to take a turn at this. The only way for grace to be experienced is for you to personalize your need for it. Take a minute and fill in the blank of the equation below, and after you fill in the blank go ahead and solve the equation by circling either the "greater than" or "less than" sign.

Grace >/< \_\_\_\_\_

Paul's explanation in Romans 5 about the greatness of God's grace is really helpful. But an explanation of grace without experiencing grace is like being terminally ill and a doctor gives you lifesaving medicine but you refuse to take it.

The greatness of God's grace means I don't have to keep trying to convince myself I am "not that bad."

The truth is I am worse than I ever wanted to admit, but God's grace is greater than I ever could have imagined.