



EXTRAORDINARY
WOMEN
BY
GRACE



MARY WHELCHER

CHRISTIAN FOCUS





You hold in your hands a book that can transform the life of anyone--no matter how serious their failures or how stubborn their sins! I was intrigued by these stories because I know that they describe real women who encountered real grace, forgiveness and transformation. If anyone doubts that God can redeem our failures, they should read this book, then pass it along to a friend!

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ISBN 1-84550-176-4
ISBN 978-1-84550-176-1

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Published in 2006
by
Christian Focus Publications Ltd.,
Geanies House, Fearn, Tain,
Ross-shire, IV20 1TW, Scotland
www.christianfocus.com

Cover design by Moose77.com

Printed and bound by J. H. Haynes, Sparkford

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WOMEN OF GRACE

I have always wanted to be a graceful girl – lady – woman. It was not to be. I am closer to the klutz category: I can stumble over nothing; my hand-to-eye coordination is poor; I knock things over easily, run into doors frequently, lose my balance standing still. Grace is not my forte.

During my freshman year of college, my parents sent me to a woman who was going to teach me to be graceful. It was a good idea; they recognized my shortcomings and tried to help. She showed me how to sit, how to walk, how to take bows on stage, and such like. I enjoyed the lessons, but I could see in the instructor's eyes the 'hopeless case' look.

Once, as an adult, I enrolled for ballet lessons at a local community college. Another good idea, but my plies left much to be desired. I admit it, I'm not graceful, but I can tell you that I am a woman full of grace; God's incredible grace, which has been showered upon me with never-ending abundance. So are you. So are we all. What does that mean? Simply that the Almighty God, Creator of heaven and earth, Ruler of the universe has shown me favor beyond belief, heaped on me kindnesses and benefits that I have not earned and do not deserve.

MERCY AND GRACE

My Webster's dictionary says that a synonym for 'grace' is 'mercy', but I beg to differ. Grace is even more than mercy. Mercy is God letting me off the hook. I deserve punishment for my sins because





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I am guilty; I deserve the penalty imposed by God's law for sinners, which is death, but in great mercy, God has let me off the hook.

Because Jesus paid the price I owed for my sins through His death on Calvary, God is free to be merciful to me and not demand of me what I owe. His holiness would be violated if He simply overlooked my sins; atonement is essential. So Jesus paid the price, and now God can and does show mercy to me. God says, 'You're guilty, Mary; you deserve the full penalty of sin, but I will be merciful to you because you have accepted my Son as your Savior. Therefore, you do not have to pay the debt of your sin.'

That is mercy – and is it ever wonderful! Without mercy none of us could have a relationship with the Holy God. Without mercy none of us could avoid the debt we owe. Without mercy we are all doomed. Mercy would have been enough.

But God goes beyond mercy and gives me grace – His favor in abundance. It is as though the judge, who found me guilty and forgave my debt and showed me mercy, now comes out from behind his judge's desk, puts his arm around me, the guilty sinner, and says, 'Now that you are free from the guilt and debt of your sin, let me take you into my home, rehabilitate you, clothe you, feed you, take care of you, and make you into something worthwhile.'

Why would God (the Judge) do that? Mercy is enough. Why would God stoop to my level and show me such favor? There is only one answer: God is gracious. 'The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love' (Ps. 145:8).

GRACEFUL VERSUS GRACE-FULL

So, while I may not naturally be very graceful, I am miraculously grace-full – full of God's grace. And while it would be nice to be both graceful and grace-full, the latter is far more important than the former. I choose grace-full, hands down. The Apostle Paul expressed his appreciation for God's grace so well:

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that He considered me faithful, appointing me to His service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 1:12-14).





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His testimony could be mine with slight changes of words, for the grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, in spite of my failures, my past, my long side-trip while 'doing my own thing'. Because God is gracious, I am allowed to be His servant and to know His love and peace, contentment and joy. Grace – marvelous, incredible grace.

That is what this book is about – God's grace. Now, what could I possibly add to this subject that hasn't already been said much better by others more qualified and articulate? Nothing new, I'm sure. But the purpose of this book is to remind us all of grace and the role it plays in our everyday lives.

REMEMBER GRACE

You see, we are prone to forget; we are prone to take credit where none is due to us; we are prone to take for granted the grace of God. We need reminders in many forms to bring us back to the grace of God.

Christians who are focused on God's grace are compassionate, tender, thankful people, with servant attitudes. The more we think about God's grace, the less pride we have in our lives. The more we remind ourselves over and over again of what God's grace has done for us, the less we struggle with self-esteem, self-confidence, self-image.

On the days I keep in my mind my position in Christ and the blessings that are mine because of God's grace, I am a positive, productive, energetic woman. Think of what the following passage means:

And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:6-7).

I have to admit that my mind blows a circuit when I try to imagine what it means to be 'seated with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.' God has already seated me there. It is a done deal. That is where I am now, because God wants to show me, and the world around me, how incomparably rich His grace is in my life.





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Of course, people don't look at me on a daily basis and remark, 'Look, there's Mary seated in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus.' The world around me can't see the invisible things of God, because 'the God of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God' (2 Cor. 4:4). Frankly, there are times and days when I can't see those heavenly realms very well, and I sometimes find them hard to believe myself.

So, how do I know that I am already 'seated in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus'? It is because that is what the Word of God teaches me, and I can see the results of God's grace in my life. When I choose to, I can clearly see how rich I am because God has poured His grace on me. Not just His mercy, but also His incomparable grace.

While those around me may be blinded to the light of the Gospel, they can still see that an unworthy, unqualified, unlikely woman has found contentment, meaning, purpose and joy in a world that is restless, joyless, peace-less and seemingly meaningless. They can see how rich I am because of God's grace, even though they may not understand the full implications. Because God has chosen to shower on me the incomparable riches of His grace, I am no longer who I used to be. I am no longer chained to my poor self-image; I am no longer a prisoner of what others think or say about me; I am not limited by my past, my failures or my inadequacies, nor by my lack of education or experience. I can tell you what grace has done for me and for others. I can demonstrate the effects of being seated with Him in the heavenly realms, and I can testify that His grace is available to do for you what it has done for so many others:

God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work (2 Cor. 9:8).

I believe a right understanding of God's grace can deliver us from the self-focus that is so prevalent and so damaging. We are told that women's greatest common struggle is low self-esteem. I wonder if we've heard it so often that we've talked ourselves into believing it, so that it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Well, if it is true that our gender has a case of low self-esteem, what is the answer? Getting





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better jobs? Earning more money? Holding higher positions? Keeping cleaner houses? Raising perfect children? We've tried all that and it has not seemed to improve our lot.

The answer to low self-esteem is to understand what God's grace has done for us: it has seated us beside Jesus Christ in heavenly realms. That is how God sees us, and when we see ourselves that way, we become God-focused, not self-focused, rejoicing daily in His grace that truly enables us to be 'somebody'. The more we remember who we are because of grace, the less we will struggle with what we call 'low self-esteem'.

THE POWER OF GRACE

I truly believe this grace-mindedness can cure and heal, but also elevate, motivate and empower us. The Bible tells us that as we think in our hearts, so are we (Prov. 23:7, KJV), and if we think grace in our hearts, we will be grace-full. And when we are grace-full, we are joy-full and peace-full. Joy and peace and contentment are inevitable fruits of being aware of God's grace.

You see, even though many, if not most of you reading this, have received God's grace and been made new through His mercy, you may not be living grace-full lives. If not, that is because you aren't aware enough of God's grace in your life. So, instead of being grace-full, you are too often stress-full and worry-full, depressed and discouraged.

All you need to do is ask God to teach you how to be grace-full, and on a daily basis pray for grace-fullness. Sound too simple? Believe me, it is not complicated; it is simple. You and I must choose to make the focus of our thoughts and lives the grace that God has extended toward us in boundless measure.

DEMONSTRATIONS OF GRACE

How do we do that? By filling up our minds with stories of grace, with Scriptures of grace, with songs of grace, and with the truth of grace, so that we are more easily reminded of God's grace. That is why I have written this book. It is designed to help you see the reality of God's grace as it has been demonstrated in the lives of thirteen women. I'm going to tell you the stories of six women in Scripture and seven contemporary women who have been transformed by God's grace. You will see as you read these stories that these women





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were not and are not perfect. The seven contemporary women are still in the process of 'growing in grace'. In the process of reading these relevant stories, my prayer is that you will catch a new glimpse of grace and what it means in your life.

I know you'll remember a story better than anything else, and I want you to remember one of these stories when your days are long, your heart heavy, your body weary or you are ready to quit. I believe God will bring these stories to your mind again and again, to remind you of what God's grace has done for others and, thereby, what it has done and can do for you.

WHY THESE GRACE-FULL WOMEN?

You may wonder how I chose these particular women. Well, one day I was reading again the first chapter of Matthew. If you recall, the first sixteen verses of that chapter contain a record of the genealogy of Jesus, starting with Abraham. Genealogies were very important documents back then, particularly in the Jewish tradition. Even more than today, people's pedigrees were critical to their acceptance, their opportunities, their designated roles in life. Jewish genealogies followed very traditional guidelines – namely, a genealogy was tracked through the male family members. Usually, women's names were not included. That seems strange to my female mind. I always want to say, 'You guys couldn't have done this by yourselves!' But that is just the way it was done.

In light of that, these first sixteen verses of Matthew 1 become very interesting indeed, because they contain references to five women. When I realized that, it immediately raised some questions in my mind. As I thought about the twenty-eight generations from Abraham to Jesus, I wondered:

- Why are only five women mentioned, out of all the dozens of women who had to be involved?
- Why are any women mentioned at all? Matthew was a Jew, so he knew how genealogies were traditionally recorded.
- Why these five women?

That last question really began to intrigue me as I looked at those five women, knowing something of their stories. First, in verse three we have Tamar, the mother of Perez, one of the twin boys she gave





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birth to through a deceptive, incestuous relationship with her father-in-law, Judah. Why Tamar?

Then, in verse five we find Rahab referenced as the mother of Boaz. Rahab the Harlot is her familiar, infamous name. That is right, she was a harlot, and besides that, she was not even a Jew. Why Rahab?

Then in that same verse five we find Ruth, who was Rahab's daughter-in-law. Ruth married Boaz. You remember that wonderful love story of how Boaz took Ruth for his bride when she and her first mother-in-law, Naomi, were about to starve. I like Ruth a lot, but Ruth was a Moabite woman in the midst of a Jewish genealogy. Why Ruth?

In verse six another woman is mentioned: '...whose mother had been Uriah's wife.' This one really puzzled me. Why did not Matthew call Bathsheba by name? Anyone knowing anything about David knows how he killed Uriah after committing adultery with his wife, Bathsheba. It is no secret who Uriah's wife was. We all know her sad story; it is not exactly the story of a virtuous woman. Why Bathsheba?

Finally, in verse sixteen, Matthew ends his genealogy with Joseph, 'the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.' Here's one man who is known by the woman he married, rather than the other way around. This was certainly one female name that could not be ignored in the genealogy of Jesus. Mary was the most blessed woman who ever lived, because she was given the privilege of bringing to birth the Son of Man, God made flesh. If you're going to list any women's names in the genealogy of Jesus, Mary's has to be there. But the question I asked was: why was she chosen for this honor? She did not have the education, wealth or credentials you would expect for such a calling. Why Mary?

These questions drove me to do some research and meditation about these five women. From that came a series of messages on these five women – women of grace – and I saw how encouraging it was to women today to learn about these grace-full women. Eventually, we dramatized this message of hope, and that drama has been used across the country and internationally by many groups to encourage even more women through the stories of these women of grace.

Now I have the opportunity to tell their stories in book format, and I have added one other biblical woman, the Samaritan woman,





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or the 'Woman at the Well'. She is one of the nameless women in Scripture whose story has impacted the world. As I retell the circumstances of each of their lives here, it is with the prayer that we will all learn some important principles from each of them – principles that we can apply in our daily living.

TODAY'S GRACE-FULL WOMEN

One of the greatest blessings of my ministry to women is the opportunity I have to get to know many women of grace today. I have for a long time wanted to share some of these stories with others, because they have encouraged me so much. So I have chosen six very different women, each of whom, like the six biblical women, has been miraculously lifted and changed by God's grace. Some of their stories are dramatic; some are still very much 'in-progress'; some may reflect experiences you have had. But in each case they are grace-full women whom I know personally to be transformed by the power of God's grace. I have only used the first names of these women, and sometimes a fictitious name, in order to protect family members and others, but I can assure you that each of these is flesh and blood, a real woman who has been forever transformed by God's astonishing grace. They have agreed to share their sometimes private and painful stories so that others can be reminded of how deep and wide and marvelous God's grace is.

I have also included my own testimony of God's grace in my life. I never tire of telling it, because it reminds me again of where I was before Jesus took over and where I would be without Him. David, as he so often does, expresses God's grace in my life so well in Psalm 40:2-3:

He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth; a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD.

If you feel like you are still in the mud and mire of that slimy pit, my prayer is that this book will give you a new or renewed glimpse of grace which will put a new song in your mouth that many will see and hear.

