

## Experiencing the Grace of Jesus

### John 8:1-11

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On January 14, 1988, Journalist and TV Host Larry King conducted an interview with Karla Faye Tucker at a Federal Prison in Texas. At the time, Tucker was on death row for participating in the brutal murder of two people 14 ½ years earlier. She was scheduled to be executed in three weeks and her case was catching worldwide attention because she would be the first woman to be executed in Texas since the late 1800s. She also became a Christian while in prison, and claimed that she had become a different person. She therefore petitioned that her death sentence be changed to a life sentence.

Larry King first asked her what had led her, and her boyfriend, to commit such a heinous crime.

Tucker answered, “I was high . . . I didn’t care about anybody, I didn’t care about myself. I didn’t place value on myself or anybody else. I made bad choices. I took drugs.”

King: What led to your conversion?

Tucker: I went to a puppet show organized by a church group at the prison. Bibles were free—but I didn’t know that—so I took one, thinking I had stolen it. I went back to my cell, hid in a corner where no one could see me, and began to read it. I didn’t know what I was reading, but before I knew it, I was in the middle of the floor on my knees and I was asking God to forgive me.

King asked, “How do we know that this isn’t a jail house conversion? Something to just make you look good?”

Tucker: I don’t try and convince people of that. For me, if you can’t look at me and see it, then nothing I can say to you is going to convince you. I just live it every day and I reach out to people and it’s up to them to receive from the Lord the same way I did when somebody came to me. And then there are fruits in people’s lives. There is evidence, consistence evidence in a person’s life.

King: How do you deal with this brutal murder you committed 14 ½ years ago?

Tucker: It’s very hard, except to know that the things that were in me when I did that 14 ½ years ago, I guess I would say it this way—that God reached down inside of me and just literally uprooted all of that stuff and took it out, and poured himself in.

The interview continues with Tucker sharing how she lives out this change each day at the prison, ministering to her fellow inmates. There is also discussion about the political nature of her case. But even in her response to those questions, much to Larry King’s discomfort, she weaves in the story of her faith.

At the conclusion of the interview, King said, “Despite everything, even the fact that you might be executed next month, you remain positive.”

Tucker: Yes.

King: It can’t just be God.

Tucker: Yes, it can. It’s called the joy of the Lord. When you have done something that I have done, like what I have done, and you’ve been forgiven for it, and you’re loved, that has a way of so changing you. I mean, I have experienced real love. I know what real love is. I know what forgiveness is, even when I did something so horrible. I know that because God forgave me and I accepted what Jesus did on the cross, that when I leave here, I am going to be with him.

Karla Faye Tucker has a powerful conversion story. It hits us in the gut because the power of her Christian life was so directly tied to the power of her sin. She did not live a day without reflecting on her sin and on God’s forgiveness. She knew what it meant to experience the grace of Jesus. It literally changed her . . . from a drug-addicted murderer who had no sense of remorse . . . to a woman who valued life, who wept over the lives she had taken, and thus each day attempted to live out the fruits of the Spirit so that others would come to know Jesus as she did.

Unfortunately, human beings were not able to offer the mercy and grace so freely given to her by God. On February 5, 1998, Karla Faye Tucker was executed by the State of Texas to meet her God face-to-face.

Grace.

What does God’s grace mean to you?

Has it changed you from the inside out like it did Karla Faye Tucker?

Or do you back off from grace. I’m not that bad, really. I’m not a murderer, like her. I’m a decent person. I hardly lie. I give food to the poor. Hey, I helped my neighbor clean up from the hurricane!

Have we cleaned ourselves up so much externally that we don’t remember what it’s like to be down and dirty?

Have we forgotten what it’s like to immerse ourselves so deep in God’s grace that our sins are truly washed away?

A friend of mine recently told me about a dream she’d had. She saw a potter’s wheel, and on the base was this mass of runny, icky, slimy ooze. “Lord,” she asked, “What’s that?” “That’s you,” God answered. “At the moment your attitude is so self-righteous and full of condemnation that I can’t shape you into anything.” The image drove her to her knees. All day she wept, read her

Bible, and prayed. She asked God to cleanse her of all unrighteousness. And the next day she awoke to incredible peace and joy.

When we lose touch with the depth of our own sinfulness, the affect of Christ's forgiveness in our lives diminishes.

For example, when someone says to you "Jesus died for you", do you weep? Do you stop dead in your tracks, stunned again by what God did on your behalf? Do you whisper in awe "Thank you God!"

Many of us know the word Grace . . . but have we experienced it. Do we know grace personally, internally, experientially?

In John 8 there is a story of a woman who experienced the grace of Jesus in a dramatic and powerful way. Turn with me to that text.

*But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.*

*But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.*

*At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"*

*"No one, sir," she said.*

*"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."*

Here we have a woman caught in the act of adultery. And we quickly learn that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees wish to use the situation to trap Jesus. They are not concerned about the woman. They are not concerned about the Law. They are focused on trying to bring Jesus down.

How do we know this? Mosaic Law in Leviticus 20:10 and Deuteronomy 22:22-24, which deal with such a case, state that both the woman and the man who have offended by committing adultery are to be put to death. But the Pharisees don't seem worried about the man or his whereabouts in this particular situation. They have the woman, the object, a man's property under the law. They can name the sin and the law broken. Someone has to pay. And actually, they don't care about the woman's life, they hope it's Jesus who pays.

For if he says, “Yes, go ahead, stone her” then they’ll attack him on his message of love and forgiveness. But if he says, “Let her go,” then they’ll say he’s not one of them because he doesn’t follow the law.

And what does Jesus do? He bends down and begins to write in the dirt. They keep badgering him until he says, “If any one of you is without sin, let him cast the first stone at her.” Jesus catches them at their own game. He reminds them that sin is not just attached to women, but also to men. Fine, they want to let the male adulterer off the hook, then they can take his place. What about their sins? Are they really so righteous that they can toss stones at another sinner? Then he stoops down and writes in the dirt some more.

What was he writing? We don’t know. Some scholars have speculated that he began writing the various sins of the men gathered around him. So that as each one came forward to cast his stone, he saw his own sin staring back at him, written in the dirt, so that he dropped his stone and walked away.

After all the men have gone, he turns to the woman. He addresses her as “woman.” It was a sign of respect. He was saying, “You are not an object. You are not defined by your sins. You are a human being of worth.” And he says to her, “Has no one condemned you?” “No sir, not one.” “Then neither do I. Go now and leave your life of sin.”

Jesus challenges her, as he did the men, to change her life, to work against the sin in her life, to be different.

He offered her grace. A second chance. A free gift. An opportunity at redemption.

And you can bet, that in those moments, this woman truly experienced Grace. It was no longer a mere word. Moments earlier she had been staring death in the face. And now she is invited to participate in God’s kingdom as a changed person.

What does grace mean to you?

Pastor Robert Brouwer is the senior minister at the First Baptist Church of Scottsdale, Arizona. And he came up with an acrostic to help us remember what Grace means. For those of you who’ve forgotten what an acrostic is . . . that’s when each letter of a word can spell out a message to better define the word.

G: a **gift** offered to me by God.

“And if he chose them by grace, it is not for the things they have done. If they could be made God’s people by what they did, God’s gift of grace would not really be a gift.” Romans 11:6

Grace is a gift offered to me by God. I don’t earn it. I don’t win it. I don’t find it. It’s given to me, freely, no strings attached.

**R: radical**

“For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him: as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our sins from us.” (Psalm 103:11-12)

Grace is not only a gift, it’s a radical gift! God not only forgives my sins, he removes them so that they are no longer memorable. Knowing this then, doesn’t it beg the question: Why do we emphasize sin over grace? Why are we so much better at listing our sins, beating ourselves up, not letting ourselves move forward than we are at embracing our new life in God’s grace? If God doesn’t get stuck in our sin, then neither should we.

**A: accessible** by faith

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” Ephesians 2:8-9

Grace is a radical gift accessible by faith. You can do all the good things you want, but it doesn’t mean you’ll garner God’s grace. That was the Pharisees’ problem. They knew all the laws, all the right things to do, but their hearts were cold as stone. Grace requires a leap of faith in a God of love and forgiveness.

**C: a second chance**

“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.” Ephesians 5:8

Grace is all about second chances, and third chances, fourth chances, forgiveness that is 70 x 7 as Jesus said to Peter. Grace is for murderers, adulterers, for you, for me.

**E: experienced** in community

“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” I Peter 2:9-10

Grace is experienced in community. Being a follower of Jesus is never about being a lone ranger. It’s about inviting others to join the party. It’s helping others find hope, and light. It’s about using your second chance to help someone else find his or hers.

**GRACE**

G: a gift

R: radical

A: accessible by faith

C: second chances

E: experienced in community

Last week Pastor David challenged us to think about thirst. For what are we thirsty?

I think a majority of the world is thirsty for grace.

Bill Moyers' documentary film on the hymn "Amazing Grace" includes a scene in Wembley Stadium in London. Various musical groups, mostly rock bands, had gathered together in celebration of the changes in South Africa, and for some reason the promoters scheduled an opera singer, Jessye Norman, as the closing act.

The film cuts back and forth between scenes of the unruly crowd in the stadium and Jessye Norman being interviewed. For 12 hours groups like Guns 'n' Roses have blasted the crowd through banks of speakers, riling up fans already high on booze and dope. The crowd yells for more curtain calls, and the rock groups oblige. Meanwhile, Jessye Norman sits in her dressing room discussing "Amazing Grace" with Moyers.

The hymn was written, of course, by John Newton, a coarse, cruel slave trader. He first called out to God in the midst of a storm that nearly threw him overboard. Newton came to see the light only gradually, continuing to ply his trade even after his conversion. He wrote the song "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" while waiting in an African harbor for a shipment of slaves.

Later though, he renounced his profession, became a minister, and joined William Wilberforce in the fight against slavery. John Newton never lost sight of the depths from which he had been lifted. He never lost sight of grace. When he wrote . . . "that saved a wretch like me," he meant those words with all his heart.

In the film, Jessye Norman tells Bill Moyers that Newton may have borrowed an old tune sung by the slaves themselves, redeeming the song, just as he had been redeemed.

Finally, the time comes for her to sing. A single circle of light follows Norman, a majestic African-American woman wearing a flowing African dashiki, as she strolls onstage. No backup band, no musical instruments, just Jessye. The crowd stirs, restless. Few recognize the opera diva. A voice yells for more Guns 'n' Roses. Others take up the cry. The scene is getting ugly.

Alone, a capella, Jessye Norman begins to sing, very slowly:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me  
I once was lost but now am found  
Was blind but now I see.

A remarkable thing happens in Wembley Stadium that night. Seventy thousand raucous fans fall silent before her aria of grace.

By the time Norman reaches the second verse, "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved . . ." the soprano has the crowd in her hands.

By the time she reaches the third verse, “Tis grace has brought me safe this far, And grace will lead me home,” several thousands fans are singing along, digging far back in nearly lost memories for words they heard long ago.

When we’ve been there ten thousand years  
Bright shining as the sun  
We’ve no less days to sing God’s praise  
Than when we first begun.

Jessye Norman later confessed she had no idea what power descended on Wembley Stadium that night. I think I know. The world thirsts for grace. When grace descends, the world falls silent before it. (What’s So Amazing About Grace? By Philip Yancey, pages 281-282)

Let us pray . . .

**Sources:**

From the internet, the text of the CNN interview with Larry King and Karla Faye Tucker on January 14, 1988.

The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible: New Testament Women, Volume 13, pages 114-119.

Sermon Outline of “Experiencing the Grace of Jesus” by Pastor Robert Brouwer of First Baptist Church, Scottsdale, AZ preached on November 2, 2003.