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A GRACE DISGUISED – (1)

In 1996 Gerald Sittser published a book, A Grace Disguised, How the Soul Grows Through Loss, about the unimaginable loss he suffered. Bill Hybels said about this book: “This is the single most reflective and redemptive book on sorrow and loss that I have ever read.” I agree, and I suggest that you might give a copy to any of your friends and loved ones who need the light of grace in the darkness of loss and pain. I am going to excerpt a part of what Mr. Sittser wrote in this and coming Newsletters.

The End and the Beginning

“Lynda, my wife of nearly twenty years, loved to be around her children. Each one of them was a gift to her because, after eleven years of infertility, she never thought she would have any of her own. Though she earned a master’s degree in music from U.S.C., became a professional singer, choir director, and voice coach, and served church and community, she could never entirely let go of her longing for children. When she delivered four healthy children in six years, she was overjoyed.

In the fall of 1991 Lynda was teaching a unit of home school to our two oldest children, Catherine and David, on Native American culture. She decided to complete the unit by attending a powwow at a Native American reservation in rural Idaho. So we piled our four children into the minivan on a Friday afternoon to drive to the reservation, where we planned to have dinner with the tribe and witness our first powwow. My mother, Grace, who had come to visit us for the weekend, decided to join us on the excursion. At dinner we talked with tribal leaders about their projects and problems – especially the abuse of alcohol, which undermined so much of what they were trying to accomplish.

After dinner we sat with tribal leaders in a small gymnasium, and they explained the dances that tribal members were performing and the dress they were wearing.

By 8:15 PM, the children had had enough. So we returned to our van, loaded and buckled up, and left for home. By then it was dark. Ten minutes into our trip home I noticed an oncoming car on a lonely stretch of highway driving extremely fast. I slowed down at a curve, but the other car did not. It jumped its lane and smashed head-on into our minivan. I learned later that the alleged driver was Native American, drunk, driving 85 miles per hour. He was accompanied by his pregnant wife, also drunk, who was killed in the accident.

I remember those first moments after the accident as if everything was happening in slow motion. They are frozen into my memory with terrible vividness. After recovering my breath, I turned around to survey the damage. The scene was chaotic. I remember the look of terror on the faces of my children. And the feeling of horror that swept over me when I saw the unconscious and broken bodies of Lynda, my four-year-old daughter, Diana Jane, and my mother. I remember getting Catherine (then eight), and John (two) out of the van through my door, the only one that would open. I remember taking pulses, doing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, trying to save the dying and calm the living. I remember the feeling of panic that struck my soul as I watched Lynda, my mother, and Diana Jane all die before my eyes. I remember the pandemonium that followed – people gawking, lights flashing from emergency vehicles, a helicopter whirring overhead, cars lining up, medical experts doing what they could to help. And I remember the realization sweeping over me that I would soon plunge into a darkness from which I might never again emerge as a sane, normal, believing man.

In the hours following the accident, the initial shock gave way to an unspeakable agony. I felt dizzy with grief’s vertigo, cut off from family and friends, tormented by the loss, nauseous from the pain. After arriving at the hospital, I paced the floor like a caged animal. I was so bewildered that I was unable to voice questions or think rationally. I felt wild with fear and agitation, as if I was being stalked by some deranged killer from whom I could not escape. I could not stop crying. I could not silence the deafening noise of crunching metal, screaming sirens, and wailing children. I could not hide my eyes from the vision of violence, of shattering glass and shattered bodies. All I wanted was to be dead. Only the sense of

responsibility for my three surviving children and the habit of living for forty years kept me alive.

In one moment my family as I had known and cherished it was obliterated. My beloved wife; our beloved third born, Diana Jane; my mother, who had given birth to me and lovingly raised me, all dead in an instant! That initial deluge of loss slowly gave way over the next months to the steady seepage of pain that comes when grief, like floodwater refusing to subside, finds every crack and crevice of the human spirit to enter and erode. I thought I was going to lose my mind. I was overwhelmed with depression. The foundation of my life was close to caving in.

Life was chaotic. My children too experienced intense grief and fear. John was seriously injured; he broke his femur in the accident, which required him to be in traction for three weeks and in a body cast for another eight weeks. People from everywhere called on the telephone, sent letters, and reached out to help and mourn. Responsibilities at home and work accumulated like trash on a vacant lot, threatening to push me toward collapse. I remember sinking into my favorite chair night after night, feeling so exhausted and anguished that I wondered whether I could survive another day, whether I wanted to survive another day. I felt punished by simply being alive and thought death would bring welcomed relief.

I remember counting the consecutive days in which I cried. Tears came for forty days, and then they stopped, at least for a few days. I marveled at the genius of the ancient Hebrews, who set aside forty days for mourning. I learned later how foolish I was. It was only after those forty days that my mourning became too deep for tears. So my tears turned to brine, to a bitter and burning sensation of loss that tears could no longer express. In the months that followed I actually longed for the time when the sorrow had been fresh and tears came easily. That emotional release would have lifted the burden, if only for a while.

I had no way of anticipating the adjustments I would have to make and the suffering I would have to endure in the months and years ahead.....I was lifted momentarily out of space and time as I knew it and suspended somehow between two worlds. One was the world of my past, so wonderful to me, which was now lying in a tangle of metal on the side of the road; another was the world of my future...I realized there was no way out but ahead, into the abyss. I was assigned both a tremendous burden and a terrible challenge. I faced the test of my life. One phase of my life had ended; another, the most difficult, was about to begin. When the emergency vehicle arrived at the hospital, I stepped out into a whole new world.”

CAPTIVES AND PRISONERS

When Jesus went to the synagogue in His hometown, Nazareth (reported in Luke 4), He stood up on the Sabbath and read from the scroll of Isaiah a quotation that was written about Him some 700 years before. Wow! He read a part of what we now identify as Isaiah 61:1-2, as follows: *The Spirit of the Lord is on me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

He then declared to the congregation that those Scriptures were now fulfilled, that they were written about the very One who was standing before them. If in the long course of history good news has ever been proclaimed to suffering mankind, that was surely the high point. The people were so delighted that they rushed upon Him in rage and tried to kill him by throwing Him off the high bluff on which Nazareth is built. (A portent of things to come.)

This Scripture is quoted in Luke in the Greek translation which condenses the words somewhat. The actual quote from Isaiah 61:1 reads (NIV) in part: *He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners...* The point I am emphasizing is the apparent distinction between captives and prisoners.

The SOZO ministry adopted by Bethel Church in Redding, Ca., which is now being used across the world with great benefit (and which our church is also using) teaches about the difference between captives and prisoners. They believe that prisoners are those people described in Matthew 18 who have refused to forgive and therefore have been sentenced to prison where they will be tortured until they repent and forgive.

They teach that forgiveness is not just one part among many of the ministry of liberation, but that it is a commandment of God that is central not only to our healing but to our very salvation. (See Matthew 6:14-15) They teach that captives can be freed by breaking off the chains and speaking the opposite to the victim. We must, of course, listen to the Lord for specifics. But that prisoners can be freed only if they obey the Lord and choose to forgive the ones that wounded them.

A footnote to this teaching: They have had some amazing successes in ministering to VietNam vets and to their children. They believe that God revealed that our troops in VietNam were cursed with three specific curses: (1) That they would never find rest (2) That they would have a wandering spirit attached to them (3) That they would be angry for the rest of

their lives. These curses were reinforced by the wholesale rejection that these vets encountered when they returned to the States. The SOZO ministers from Bethel tell some wonderful stories about ministering to vets and their children and spiritually breaking off the curses and the rejection that have held them captive. They have seen people healed spiritually, emotionally, and physically.

MEET YOU AT THE TABERNACLE

Several times recently I have heard preachers referring to the “tabernacle,” and I’ll bet 50% of the Christians who heard that word didn’t have a clue what it meant. I knew it referred to the portable tent (the place where God’s presence would dwell) that God had Moses build for the Israelites to carry with them in their wilderness journey, but when I studied it I learned a lot more details. From Mounce’s Bible Dictionary: “Hebrew: *ohel*, and *miskan*. *Miskan* refers to the central sanctuary of the Lord, described in Exodus 25-40. It is also called the “Tent of Meeting” where God met with the people. It was constructed while Israel encamped at Mount Sinai, after which the Lord took up residence within it.” (So when you hear “tabernacle,” think “tent” or “tent of meeting.”)

The Israelites were kept away from the *miskan* so as not to defile it, and only priests were allowed to enter in order to offer sacrifices. The purpose seemed to be to teach the Israelites that God was with them, but He needed to be treated with great reverence. The tent was not a place of worship, it was only 45 feet long by 15 feet wide and high - - for two or three million people. The “furniture” inside and just outside the tent were the same things that would eventually be placed in the temple, and each item taught something about approaching God:

Outside:

- (a) The bronze altar - - God can only be approached by sacrifice. The flesh - - must die. The Lamb died in our place.
- (b) The wash basin - - Cleansing of sin.

Inside: Divided between the Holy Place and Most Holy Place with a curtain between.

In the Holy Place was:

- (c) The Table with fresh bread - - Manna (I am your provider); Jesus, the Bread that came down from heaven to give life to the world.
- (d) The Golden Lampstand - - I am the Light of the world.

The altar of incense - - prayer going up constantly to God.

Behind the curtain in the Most Holy Place:

- (f) The Ark of the Covenant (like a little cedar chest) containing the ten commandments, the pot of manna and (later) the rod that budded. The gold lid of the ark was called “the mercy seat,” and God’s presence dwelled there between two carved angels or cherubim. Note: God’s presence dwelled above the gold-covered “mercy seat,” on which the blood of a Lamb was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement. That is, God’s law is separated from His presence by mercy and the blood of the Lamb!

DANGEROUS CALLING – Part 1

Dangerous Calling is a book written by pastor and former seminary professor Paul David Tripp about the danger of being a pastor. The first chapter, “Headed for Disaster,” is the beginning of his personal testimony . . . and it sounds depressingly like my story as well. I share it because I believe it has application for all of us. (I have compacted and paraphrased Pastor Tripp’s presentation.):

“Headed for Disaster”

“I was a very angry man, but I didn’t know that I was angry. Luella, my dear wife, was faithful over a long period of time in firmly and gracefully confronting me with my anger. She never yelled at me, called me names, or called me out in front of our children. Again and again she let me know that my anger was neither justified nor acceptable. I found out later that she was putting together her escape plan. She wasn’t planning to divorce me; but she knew that the cycle of anger needed to be broken so we could be reconciled and have a real marriage.

When Luella would approach me with yet another instance of this anger, I would activate my inner lawyer and remind her once again of what a great husband she had. I told her I would pray for her and tried to convince her that she was the one who was wrong. She wasn't convinced. I was a man headed for disaster. I was in the middle of destroying my marriage and my ministry, and I didn't have a clue. The irritable and impatient man at home was a very different guy from the gracious and patient pastor our congregation saw in our public ministry settings. One time when Luella was confronting me with yet another instance of my anger, I got on a roll and said, "Ninety-five percent of the women in our church would love to be married to a man like me!" How's that for humility? Luella quickly informed me that she was in the 5 percent!

My brother Tedd and I had been on a ministry training weekend and were on our way home. Tedd suggested that we try to make what we had learned over the weekend practical to our own lives, and then proceeded to ask me a series of questions. It was as though God was ripping down curtains and I was seeing and hearing myself with accuracy for the first time. As God opened my eyes in that moment, I was immediately broken and grieved. As Tedd's questions opened my eyes, it was almost impossible to believe that the man I was now looking at and hearing was actually me. It was a moment of powerful divine rescue, a bigger moment than I was able to grasp in the shock and emotion of that moment.

I couldn't wait to get home and talk with Luella. I think she knew right away that something was up by the way I looked. I told her that God had been speaking to me and for the first time I was ready to listen to her. She began to cry. She told me she loved me, and then she talked for two hours. In those two hours God began the process of the radical tearing down and rebuilding of my heart. I didn't instantly become an unangry man. But now I was a man with eyes, ears, and heart open. The next few months were incredibly painful. That pain was the pain of grace. God was making the anger that I had denied and protected to be like vomit in my mouth. I was in the middle of spiritual surgery. You see, the pain wasn't an indication that God had withdrawn his love and grace from me. No, the opposite was true. I was getting what I had so often prayed for - the salvation (sanctification) of my soul.

I will never forget one particular moment that took place months after that night of conviction and rescue. I was coming down the stairs into our living room and saw Luella sitting with her back to me. As I looked at her, it hit me that I couldn't remember the last time I had felt that old ugly anger toward her. I want to be candid here. I'm not saying that I had risen to a point where I found it impossible to experience a flash of impatience or irritation; but that the old life-dominating anger was gone. Praise God! I walked up behind Luella and put my hands on her shoulders, and I said, "You know, I'm not angry at you anymore." Together we laughed and cried at the same time at the beauty of what God had done.

NOT ALONE

I wish I could say that my pastoral experience is unique, but I have learned in my ministry travels to hundreds of churches around the world that, sadly, it is not. The same disconnect between the public persona and the private man is there in many, many pastors' lives. I have heard so many confessions that I carry with me grief and concern about the state of the pastorate in our generation. There are three underlying themes that operated in my life, which I have encountered operating in the lives of many pastors to whom I have talked:

(1) MY MINISTRY DEFINES MY IDENTITY

(If you substitute the word "job" or "career" for "Ministry," it covers most everyone.) All of us are constantly talking to ourselves about our identity, our spirituality, our emotional and mental life, our personality, our relationships, etc. You are constantly preaching to yourself some kind of gospel. You either preach an anti-gospel of your own righteousness, power and wisdom, or you preach to yourself the true gospel of deep spiritual need and of God's sufficient grace. You preach to yourself the anti-gospel of aloneness and inability, or you preach to yourself the true gospel of the presence, provision, and power of an ever-present Christ.

In the middle of your internal conversation is what you tell yourself about your identity. We are always assigning to ourselves some kind of identity. There are only two places to look. Either you will be getting your identity vertically, from who you are in Christ, or you will be shopping for it horizontally in the experiences and relationships of your daily life. This is true of everyone, and I believe it is a particular temptation for those in ministry. This is why I was so blind to the disconnect between what was going on in my public ministry life and my private family life – this issue of identity.

Ministry had become my identity. I didn't think of myself as a child of God, in daily need of grace, still in a battle with sin, still in need of the body of Christ (humble enough to recognize my need of my brothers and sisters to speak correction into my life). No, I thought of myself as a *pastor*. My faith had become a professional calling. It had become my job. It shaped the way I related to God and to people. I was in trouble. I was set up for disaster, and if it

hadn't been anger it would have been something else. It is no surprise to me that there are many bitter pastors out there, many who are socially uncomfortable, many who have messy or dysfunctional relationships at home, many who have tense relationships with staff members or lay leaders, and many who struggle with secret, unconfessed sin. We are no longer needy, we are on a higher level than the folks sitting in the pews. The false identity we have assigned to ourselves structures how we see and respond to others.

I can now see that I was proud, unapproachable, defensive, and all too comfortable. I was a pastor; I didn't need what other people need.

(2) BIBLICAL LITERACY AND THEOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE DEFINE MY MATURITY

Since seminary tends to academize the faith, making it a world of ideas to be mastered, it is easy for students to buy into the belief that biblical maturity is about theological knowledge. So many seminary graduates tend to think of themselves as being mature. But maturity is not merely something you do with your mind, it is about how you live your life. You see, sin is not first an intellectual problem, although it does affect our intellect. Sin is first a moral problem. It is about my rebellion against God and my quest to have for myself the glory that is due to him. It's not just my mind that needs to be renewed by the Bible but my heart. The reclamation of the heart is both an event and a process (justification and sanctification). Knowledge is an exercise of your brain. Wisdom is the commitment of your heart that leads to transformation of your life.

I was an honors graduate of seminary, and I viewed myself as being way more mature than I actually was. When Luella would lovingly confront me about the way I was acting, I was certain that she had a problem.

(3) CONFUSED MINISTRY SUCCESS WITH GOD'S ENDORSEMENT OF MY LIFESTYLE

The church was growing numerically. We founded a Christian school, which was growing and expanding its reputation. I was leading a community of faith, and God was blessing our efforts. But I interpreted all of this success as an endorsement of me. I did not realize that the success of a ministry is always more a picture of who God is than a statement about who the people are that he is using for his purpose. I had it all wrong. I made it about me, so I didn't see that I was a man headed for disaster and in deep need of the rescue of God's grace.

Pastor, you don't have to be afraid of what is in your heart, and you don't have to fear being known, because there is nothing in you that could ever be exposed that hasn't already been covered by the precious blood of your Savior king, Jesus.

God Bless
Glenn

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I would like to thank each of you for your support of this ministry.

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