

Divine River of Grace

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This imaginary story shows how demons lie to people and make them blind to the flow of God's loving kindness, and how Christ can set them free.

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Chapter 1

How Victor and Lori Discovered the River of Grace

Victor moved from a small town to the city, where he quickly learned to weld. He found employment in a small car repair shop. While seeking new friends, he met Lori who had also recently arrived in the city.

Their friendship developed rapidly and they married. Lori surprised Victor by how cheerful she made their small, inexpensive apartment with flowers and other little things that only women would imagine, especially those who read a lot, as Lori did. Victor told her, “You are not only beautiful, Lori; you are also creative. Every day you give me something wonderfully new to discover about you and about life!” He stroked her long, sleek, straight black hair and added, “I am a lucky man!”

She looked at his strong, determined face and saw a man who would accept tough responsibilities without complaint. “And you are very thoughtful, Victor,” she replied softly. “You are a deep thinker. Life will never be boring for us! You always... How can I say it? You *explore!*”

Creating and exploring in their simple way in a simple world, their life together was a paradise, until one evening when Victor arrived home with a cloudy face. Lori had learned to read his emotions at a glance, even when no one else could. “What is wrong?”

“The repair shop no longer needs a welder. I have to find another employer.”

She sat down suddenly, breathed deeply and clasped her hands in her lap. “I hope you do so soon because our family is going to grow. Today I found out that we are going to have a baby!”

Three weeks later when Victor arrived home she sensed that the clouds in his face had grown much darker. “Now what happened?”

“No one needs a welder now. We cannot pay for another month’s rent. I am worried.”

“I worry, too, about many things,” Lori confessed. “Sometimes I fear that God is punishing me for the bad things that I have done.”

“I often think about that, too,” Victor replied. “My cousin told me today that some friends will meet with a Hindu swami tonight and meditate. Let us try it, too. We have not practiced any religion very well.”

“That sounds nice, Victor. I want to find deeper meaning in my life. In our lives, I mean. I am willing to experiment.”

“Well then, I shall meet you there,” Victor suggested. “I am going to see our landlord first. He lives near there. I shall ask him to wait a while for us to pay our rent. Here is the address where they will meet with the Swami. I might arrive a little late.”

The address that Victor gave Lori was unclear and she went to the wrong house. “Is this the meeting for meditation?” she asked at the door.

“Meditation? Oh! I guess so. You are early.” A lady about Lori’s age welcomed her. “Come in. My name is Julie. My husband, Tino, helps to lead the group. It is his turn to lead the discussion tonight. Please, have some tea.”

Others soon arrived; some carried Bibles. Lori was surprised to hear them pray for each other in the name of Jesus Christ. A middle-aged lady told how she came to know Jesus’ love: “I had so much sin to be forgiven. I did not know that God’s grace could cover all the bad things I have done, but...” She could not finish. She was sobbing for joy.

An older man began shyly, unaccustomed to speak in public, “For weeks you prayed for me. You begged God to heal my emphysema. He has done so. The doctor asked what new medicine I took. I told him it was prayer. Only prayer, in Jesus’ name.’ The doctor said, ‘It must be that. Nothing else I know of can account for such complete healing’.”

“Praise the Lord!” Julie exclaimed so spontaneously that it surprised Lori, who was sitting beside her.

A younger man told his testimonial, “You know how miserable I was, addicted to illegal drugs. But our Lord Jesus Christ has freed me.”

They praised the Lord again. Tino promised the young man, “We shall help you to grow in the grace of God.”

Lori whispered to Julie, “I hope that no one asks me to speak. This is new to me.”

“You should speak only if you want to do so, Lori.”

Julie’s husband, Tino, appeared to be a scholarly type. He wore thick glasses and looked like a young professor. His moustache was neatly trimmed and he spoke confidently in a firm, clear voice. “I think I can trust this man,” Lori thought as she studied his smiling face.

Tino asked the group, “Let us read from our Bibles what God says about grace. Please find Romans chapter 5.” Julie handed Lori a Bible, but she could not find the book of Romans. “Let me help you,” Julie said softly. Lori had noticed how Julie had moved quietly and efficiently from person to person, greeting them, asking about their health and families, and offering tea. She was quick to laugh, a confident person who made the visitors feel at ease.

The young man who had been freed from drug addiction read with intense feeling, “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Tino asked the group, “What does this reveal to us about God?”

They discussed God’s abundant grace for a while, and then began taking turns reading verses about what Tino called ‘The River of Grace.’

An elderly lady began. She wore old clothes and appeared to be very poor. “Isaiah 55:1 promises, ‘Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!’ I love that promise.”

The man who had been healed read slowly from Psalm 36:8-9, ‘They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. For with you is the fountain of life’.”

Lori felt something stir deeply in her heart each time someone read from a different book of the Bible. A child of about ten shyly quoted Revelation 22:1 by memory: “The angel

showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

Suddenly a lady who was wearing an unusually brightly colored dress stood and left quietly. She had not talked during the meeting. Her face had shown no expression. Then the middle-aged lady who had praised God’s forgiveness read John. 7:37-38 with a voice that seemed to ring with joy, “Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him’.”

They then sat in groups of two and three persons and began talking to each other. Some were praying. Julie asked Lori, “Did you understand what the group was talking about?”

“Not very well. I had never heard anything before about such a river of grace. The idea interests me.”

The formal part of the meeting was over, but no one left. Some stood talking while others remained seated in small groups, talking quietly. Julie suggested to her husband, “Tino, can you please explain to us what you meant by a river of grace.”

“With pleasure!” He sat facing Lori and hesitated a moment. He seemed to be deciding how to explain. Suddenly his face broke into a wide smile. “Grace is my favorite subject! God’s grace is His unearned favor, His perfect love and endless kindness. We never deserve it. We receive His grace only by faith when Jesus Christ saves us from our sins, and throughout the rest of our lives on earth, and throughout eternity. I called it a river because the Bible says ‘where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.’ Also, other Bible passages speak figuratively of a great river with healing waters that flows from God’s heavenly throne.”

“Where do we find it?” asked Lori.

“Trust our Savior Jesus Christ to forgive you. The Holy Spirit flows from God the Father, who freely brings abundant life to those who believe. Lori, He promised to give you new, pure, abundant and eternal life. It is free! God’s wonderful gift! The Bible records in John 14:16-17 that the Lord Jesus prayed to His Father in Heaven, the one Almighty God, and requested Him to send His Holy Spirit to us. He is the River that brings to us God’s Grace!”

“I had never heard of that,” Lori confessed. “I only heard that God will judge us according to our sins and good works. I wonder why my parents and teachers never told me about such a wonderful thing as grace.”

“The Bible reveals that Satan, our greatest enemy, blinds people spiritually,” Tino explained. “The devil lures our attention away from the generous flow of grace. God, in His infinite wisdom, that no human can understand, lets Satan do so. He lets the devil lie to us to test our trust. We must resist Satan, and let the grace of God flow into our lives. Some people are willing to believe Satan’s lies, because they want to control their own lives and not let God enter into their hearts. They do not want the Spirit of God to give them faith. I hope that you will let us help you discover God’s love that we receive when we trust our savior Jesus Christ.”

Lori asked Julie, “Is what you did here this evening how you meditate? Is your husband Tino a divine swami?”

“Oh, no! The swami’s group meets across the street. He and his followers are probably high on marijuana or some worse drug by now. We are a Christian home group, a cell, a little church. Did you come here by mistake?”

“It was the luckiest mistake I ever made. I have never seen such joy and love.”

Chapter 2

How Victor and Lori Received Assurance of Eternal Salvation

Back home, Lori tried to explain to Victor about the wonderful river of God's grace. "It is very big! The Swami, I mean the Christian guru or whatever they call him, said that this vast river of grace is wider than the Amazon, the Nile and the Ganges rivers all put together. It flows constantly from God's throne in Heaven."

"What do you mean?" Victor asked. "There is no such river on the earth!"

"Their leader, Tino, said that the River of Grace runs near enough for us to drink from it at any moment; because God's Holy Spirit is as near as the air we breathe."

"Are they Christians?"

"They said that they love Jesus Christ. They talked about Him a lot. Tino, the host, said that when our faith in God weakens, we listen to demons' lies and look away from the water of life. Our souls get thirsty. Our spirits become dry. He also said that when we doubt God's grace, we become legalistic."

"Wait! You left me behind!" Victor exclaimed. "What did you drink at the meeting? Did you use drugs? What did they mean when they said 'legalistic'?"

"So many questions! I think they meant that we try to make ourselves holy by practicing unimportant religious laws. We turn away from the River of Grace and we also keep others from drinking freely. We substitute human rituals and religious works instead of God's work in our hearts."

"Did they burn strong incense? Decorate with wild pictures? Use weird electronic gadgets?"

"Oh, no! It was not like that, Victor. They said that grace brings love, joy and forgiveness. It flows from God, through people, not through electronic equipment, beautiful buildings, fragrant incense or mysterious sounding chants."

Later that week Tino and Julie visited Victor and Lori. Tino asked Victor, "May we tell you the Good News, the true story of Christ's death and resurrection? Jesus promises forgiveness and eternal life to all who trust Him and turn to God."

"Please do. Sit down. Lori, bring tea."

Tino read from Luke 24:46-48 and summarized it. "God forgives people of all nations when they turn to God and receive the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection by which He saved us from our sins and gives us eternal life."

"That sounds too good to be true," Victor reasoned. He asked many questions about it.

Before Tino and Julie left, they invited Victor and Lori to the meeting in Tino's home the next evening. At that meeting Ishmael, an elder who helped to lead Tino's small group, told Tino, "I heard that you are a welder. I own a small metal working shop and need a welder."

Victor began the next day to work in Ishmael's shop. He hugged Lori tightly that night and asked her, "Do you think we could pray like the Christians do, and thank God for my new job?"

"It will be the first time I prayed using my own words the way our new friends do."

Following another meeting Victor and Lori prayed to Jesus, the divine Son of the One All-powerful God, and asked Him to save them from their sins. Several of the believers had stayed to talk. Lori told them, "I feel so relieved!"

"Since you have repented and trust our Lord Jesus Christ," Tino urged, "you should be baptized."

"Wait, Tino!" Ishmael the shop owner argued. "To confirm their conversion they have to straighten out their lives first. Everything! Victor welds for me and when the equipment fails, he sometimes uses obscene language. Lori, you also must learn to dress like a Christian. You use too much cosmetic. Victor, you must stop smoking. You both must wait at least a year and learn all of our doctrines. Then, if you have not fallen into sin in the meantime, we might baptize you." Lori wanted to tell him that he was being unfair, but she was afraid to confront such a strong-minded man. Ishmael had a broad chest, muscular arms and large, powerful hands. His face reflected determination. He never smiled.

"Ishmael!" Tino objected, "That is not the way the apostles confirmed the faith of new believers!"

Ishmael paid no attention. He handed Victor a sheet of paper. "Here are some rules I listed for new believers to obey, in order to become official members of our group. All new members must first leave drugs, liquor, fornication, cards, all forms of dancing, smoking, bad language and worldly music, and all these other things on the list. You must fast weekly and spend at least two hours a day in prayer. You must prove to us that you live absolutely holy lives!"

Julie whispered in Lori's ear. "I am afraid that Ishmael has gotten his attitude from the wrong source. His unreasonable rules are the result of one of Satan's weapons to keep people from appreciating God's grace. A flaming arrow labeled 'legalism'!"

Ishmael noticed Julie whispering and his voice grew louder and angrier. "We must be careful with God's grace! We cannot move as fast as Tino would like us to do. When a sinner becomes a Christian, he must earn our approval by acting religious and avoiding all the sins on this list."

Lori started to read the list that Ishmael had handed Victor. Ishmael told her, "You must also learn all the doctrines of our faith. I have another list of seventy-nine doctrines that you must learn before becoming official members."

Lori handed the list to Victor and told him quietly, "I could never remember all the details on this list."

Victor handed the list back to Ishmael. "This leaves us out of this group! It is too much for us. I'm sorry."

Tino had heard what Victor said and politely rebuked Ishmael, "You are overwhelming these new believers! In God's sight, they are newborn, spiritual babies, and you are

demanding of them to do what very few mature Christians can attain. We would discourage them if we delayed accepting them, until they learn all the doctrines and prove that they are perfect in every detail. Your list of prohibitions comes from your personal opinions, not from Scripture. Victor and Lori need assurance of God's grace." Tino read to them from the book of Acts how new, repentant believers were baptized without delay to confirm their salvation.

Ishmael listened for a while, and then grumbled, "Things were different in those ancient times."

"Ishmael," Tino begged. "Have you forgotten that Victor and Lori are 'baby' believers in Christ? They are spiritual infants! Newly born! When you were born your mother did not leave you outside the door in the cold and rain until you stopped fouling your nappies. Likewise, we should bring newborn converts into the warmth of the church body at once, just as the apostles always did. The apostles never made them wait. The apostles accepted bad people who trusted Jesus, and they baptized them without delay. Both Jews, who already knew about God, and Gentiles, who were learning about Him for the first time, received baptism at once. Getting baptized was the first thing they did as new believers."

Later that week Paul baptized the young couple and they felt quite happy, but they also felt confused by the things that Ishmael had said. At the next meeting, before the worship started, Paul started to present Victor and Lori to the group as new members, but Ishmael interrupted "Listen to me!" He spoke firmly. "We cannot receive people officially as members of our group while they still have sin in their lives!"

"The apostles received them, Ishmael," Tino corrected, keeping his voice calm and pleasant. "The apostles showed us how to correct the new believers' sin without condemning them. The apostle Paul corrected the worst of sins in 1 Corinthians without condemning the believers' souls. He graciously reminded erring believers of their position as adopted sons of God by God's grace; then he urged them, because of who they were as sons of God and heirs together with Christ, to stop living like the ungodly do. So..."

"You make entrance into God's kingdom too easy!" Ishmael interrupted. "Becoming a Christian is a serious matter. For example, the Old Testament ruled that we are to stone people to death who work on the Sabbath day."

"Ishmael, please let me finish explaining," Tino requested. "New Christians have faults; some faults are more obvious and public than others. That is why God gave shepherds to His congregations to lead the lambs gently. In the New Testament, baptism was for bad people. Victor and Lori qualify, because they have confessed their sin to God with repentant hearts."

"You degrade the church!" Ishmael complained harshly.

"You degrade God's grace," Tino replied firmly. "When religious people asked John the Baptist to baptize them, because they thought they were good, he called them 'snakes' and refused to do so. But he baptized at once those who confessed their evil ways. The apostles baptized all who expressed repentance and faith and then taught them. They dealt with their bad habits, afterwards, within the body of Christ where the Holy Spirit is active, and they gave to them loving, pastoral care. We must not invent legalistic requirements for baptism."

"But things have changed since then!" Ishmael repeated.

"Of course," Tino clarified. "Society has changed. Technology has developed, but it deals with only material things. The spiritual realities related to baptism are changeless. Sin is always sin. Grace has always been grace. Jesus is the same always. The church's responsibility to bring grace freely to God's newborn lambs has never changed. Victor and Lori need grace today as much as Saul did on the way to Damascus."

Ishmael looked at the young couple. “I do not care what Tino says. You work for me, Victor. You will do as I say!”

“They will obey Jesus!” Tino asserted. “Please, Ishmael. We ask new believers simply to do what Jesus said to do. They will obey Jesus out of love, not because we threaten them. We have no authority to force them to do things in a way different from what the apostles asked of new believers. Ishmael, do you prefer that they obey you instead of Christ? Do you want them to follow you instead of Jesus and to obey your rules instead of the commands of Jesus and His apostles?”

Ishmael said, “I would like to introduce a visitor. A man had entered the room a moment after the discussion started; Victor and Lori had not seen him before.” Ishmael announced, “Arthur is a man of unusually passionate spirituality. He drives a taxi during the late night hours while the rest of us are sleeping. During the day he serves the Lord. So I don’t know when he sleeps!”

The others welcomed Arthur, then Ishmael asked him, “What do you think about what we have been discussing, Arthur?”

“I like what you said about fasting once a week. I have more things that I would like to add to your list. The group that follows stricter rules is more spiritual! Yes! Make sure that new members are sincere!”

Tino pleaded, “Ishmael and Arthur, your desire for so many rules returns us to the Old Testament law.” He saw the worried faces of Victor and Lori and added, “We should not discuss these things now.”

Arthur paid no attention and told Victor more things that he believed a ‘true’ Christian had to do. Then Arthur asked Tino, “What is wrong with observing some of the Old Testament laws?”

“What is wrong is that you have an Old Testament attitude. Under its law, men tried to earn God’s approval by their own works. The New Covenant that Christ sealed with His blood offers grace through faith. God keeps us in His hands by His grace, by means of the risen Christ, not by our own efforts. Ephesians chapter 1 assures new believers, like Victor and Lori, that they can enjoy an abundance of mercy, love and peace.”

“Yes, of course. I require all my members to give more than a tenth of their income. They have to support to God’s work. Look at what we can do with their money! My group bought a beautiful, expensive pulpit. Yes! We can afford such things now. I made all the believers give more. Yes! Yes! Make them prove that they have God!”

Lori whispered softly to Victor, “Arthur’s eyes remind me of an owl’s eyes.”

The taxi driver was speaking rapidly, stopping only to lick his lips between sentences. His words came like bursts from a machine gun. He glanced rapidly from side to side, as if he were trying to see everywhere at once, or trying to escape from some pursuer. However, when he spoke to one person he leaned forward as steady as a statue and glared without blinking into their eyes, like a tiger about to pounce.

After the discussion in the whole group, they formed smaller groups to talk about what they had learned, plan activities and pray for one another. Tino sat with Victor and Lori. Victor asked him, “Did you mean that we do not have to do all the things that Ishmael and Arthur said, to win God’s approval?”

“God is always pleased when we do good works, Victor. He will reward you in heaven for the good things you do, now. But our good works do not save us. Only Christ can save us,

which he does by letting us participate by faith in His death and resurrection. Good works are necessary to please God, but only as the result of God's salvation and His transforming power at work in us."

The next day Tino visited Victor and Lori and told them, "I am sorry that you had to listen to us argue yesterday about God's grace. God's Word assures you that the One Supreme and perfectly Holy God has forgiven you. You believed Him, and He has started His transforming work in you. He is keeping you securely in His hands. And He will do so for all eternity. Jesus said so, in John chapter 10."

Victor remarked, "Ishmael is not convinced that Lori and I have received God's grace. If mature believers and elders such as Ishmael and Arthur doubt it, then how can Lori and I be sure of it?"

"That is why I came to see you. I talked with the other elders of our regional congregations yesterday. They agreed that it is wrong to require you to follow a lot of human requirements in order to receive baptism and acceptance by the local body of Christ. Let us read together Romans chapter 8 to find assurances of God's grace. Would you like to read it?"

Victor read Romans chapter 8 aloud. Lori wept when he read that it is impossible for believers in Christ to be separated from God's eternal love.

"That is reassuring!" Victor exclaimed when he finished. "We have both felt discouraged by what Ishmael and Arthur said. It was like being hit in the stomach. How did we let ourselves doubt so soon?"

"You were hit with one of Satan's flaming arrows," Tino said.

Lori recalled, "Julie said that the arrow was labeled 'legalism.' It was painful! Is there no protection, Tino?"

"The Almighty provides protection. We must hold up firmly the shield of faith to stop all the flaming arrows of the evil one, as God's Word instructs us."

"Can we read that?" Victor begged.

"Yes. Ephesians 6:10-18 tells about the armor of God that we use against the devil."

After reading these verses, Victor exclaimed, "Now I understand why we felt so bad. Our spirits were wounded by Satan's flaming arrows!"

"Not only you two. Our brothers Ishmael and Arthur have been poisoned by the arrow of legalism for a long time."

Lori closed her eyes for a moment, then exclaimed, "Just think about it! 'If we could have seen with angel's eyes yesterday, we would have seen Satan with his bow and arrows. We would have seen him shooting the arrow of legalism at us.'"

"Jesus warned us to beware of legalism," Tino replied. "It is the virus of the Pharisees," "They were religious people who opposed Jesus when He offered God's free grace to sinners. Like our ill-advised friend Ishmael, the Pharisees demanded perfection. Let us use our shields of faith!"

Exercises

Which is the better way to assure believers that God loves them, accepts them and forgives them?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Teach them to trust God's Word and His love.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Give them many strict rules to follow.

[Find the answer in Colossians 2:20 through 3:1.]

Which is the better motive for a believer to obey Jesus?

<input type="checkbox"/>	Love
<input type="checkbox"/>	Fear

[Find the answer in John 14:15.]

Please explain your plan to help the believers in your congregation to appreciate God's grace:

Chapter 3

How Victor and Lori Resisted the Old Serpent (the Dragon, Satan)

Twang!

Unseen by Victor and Lori, the enemy of humans shot at them with another flaming arrow labeled 'Fear.'

Twang!

A second missile flew, called 'Distrust.'

The adversary aimed again, toward Ishmael and Arthur. Twang! Twang! Two flaming arrows of 'Materialism' and 'Rationalism' flew toward earth.

The head of all evil spirits roared with evil laughter, then commanded his demon helpers, "Bring the missile that burns hotter than all the rest. We will launch it now!"

A demon lit the arrow and Satan aimed. Twang! 'Hunger for Power' flew on its way, toward Tino's group.

"God's grace will soon stop flowing!" the demons' master boasted.

At the next meeting, while they were waiting for the time of praise to start, Ishmael made an announcement. "I have good news. Arthur has decided to leave the group he has been leading to join our group. He is experienced and knows how to maintain strict discipline."

Victor whispered quietly to Lori, "He's your owl!" She started to laugh and then covered her mouth.

Tino asked Arthur, "Why did you leave your group?"

"They are not spiritual. They were not willing to do the things that I required of them as their leader. It was my duty to withdraw my fellowship from them. Yes! They are not true Christians." He turned away abruptly and talked with Tino.

"The tiger has pounced!" Lori whispered to Victor and then giggled softly.

During the meeting Ishmael and Arthur talked whenever they could. Tino seemed to be losing control. When the group prepared to celebrate the Lord's Supper, Ishmael advised the new believers, "You cannot participate if you have committed any sin this past week."

Arthur also emphasized, "You new believers have to understand something. God does nothing special during the Lord's Supper. There is no mystery. It is only a visual aid to help us remember that Jesus died. The Holy Spirit does nothing supernatural. The bread only represents Jesus' Body. Yes. It is a visual aid to our memory and nothing more. I do not want to hear you say that it 'is' Jesus' body. It only 'represents' Jesus' body."

Tino responded, "What Arthur just said about the Lord's Supper is his opinion. I want you all to know that I believe that there is a very real mystery in this sacrament." Arthur started to

argue, but Tino told him, “We will not argue about this now. We are here to worship. If you want to talk about it, we shall do so afterwards.”

A few days later, Tino and Julie again visited Victor and Lori, who had been baptized and had been growing rapidly in their new faith in Christ. While the men talked, the two women went into the kitchen. Julie remarked, “You look troubled this evening, Lori.”

“I feel troubled, Julie. I do not feel the same joy as I did when I first received Jesus. The river of grace seems to have dried up for me. I have done some bad things. I argued with Victor when I should have been submissive. I was shamefully stubborn. I cannot act nice all the time like you do, Julie! I am a worthless failure!”

“No, Lori! You are a new believer, a spiritual child in Christ. We all have experienced such failures.”

“Has God really saved us? Both Victor and I felt discouraged after we listened to Ishmael and Arthur. They make so many demands! Now Victor wonders if we are worthy to receive God’s grace.”

“None of us is worthy of grace, Lori!” Julie reminded her. “The Holy Spirit lives in you, bringing to you all of God’s grace. Grace is always there for you. We simply have to embrace the things that God gives us to assure us of His presence and His grace.”

“What things, Julie? How can we be sure of God’s grace when we feel so ashamed?”

“Let us ask Tino to explain this. He enjoys encouraging people with God’s Word.”

They rejoined the men and Julie suggested, “Tino, please explain why we can be sure that we have received God’s grace.”

“God gives His children joy, peace and other Christian virtues,” Tino replied. “This grace comes from Him in several ways. It comes through his Word and through His work in our hearts as we serve one another with the power of God’s Holy Spirit. It also comes through baptism, prayer and the Lord’s Supper.”

“Victor and I study God’s Word and pray,” Lori said. “We also have been baptized and participate in the Lord’s Supper, and we certainly want to serve others. But I still feel ashamed and fearful because of the many bad things that I have done.”

“Satan is shooting his fiery arrows at you again, Lori. He tries to poison your mind with doubt. This happens to many new believers after their first joy grows weak. We must not trust our feelings.”

Victor said, “I cannot stop feeling doubts after I listen to Arthur. I do not know why.”

“Arthur means well, but he is a rationalist,” Tino tried to explain.

“What is a rationalist?”

“Christian rationalists analyze God’s Word with their human reason. They think that they have to understand something fully, before they can believe it. But no human is able to understand God’s grace through human reasoning. Grace is illogical. Justice, on the other hand, is logical. Even mercy can be understood logically. But grace defies all human reason, for it is always undeserved. When men spat upon our Lord Jesus Christ, and insulted, slapped and crucified Him, He responded to His tormentors only with loving forgiveness. That was pure grace, Victor, beyond our human understanding.”

“Is that why Arthur said that there is no mystery in the Lord’s Supper?” Victor asked. “That bothered me. We read in 1 Corinthians 10:16 that we participate in Jesus’ body. That seems like a real mystery to me.”

“It is precious!” Lori exclaimed.

“It certainly is a divine mystery,” Tino affirmed. “God takes it very seriously. 1 Corinthians 11 states that He punished believers who failed to discern Christ’s body when taking the sacrament. However, Arthur defines it in purely rationalistic terms. He denies any supernatural work. He thinks that the Holy Spirit takes a vacation when we break bread together! I, too, once thought that way, but I asked God to forgive my doubts. He did, Lori. I have learned to doubt my own skepticism.”

“What do you mean by a mystery?” Victor asked.

“Jesus and the apostle Paul both said that the bread ‘is’ Christ’s body. They did not say that it ‘represents’ His body. The bread remains bread, but in a very real spiritual way it also is Christ’s body. It may be a symbol, but the symbol takes on the power of the reality that it symbolizes, if we receive it with faith.”

“I sensed that God was working during the Lord’s Supper,” Victor recalled. “I felt that Christ was really present. Now I understand why. But I have another question. Ishmael’s friend Arthur pushes people to give money, to add funds to the congregation’s treasury. And he says other things that make me feel guilty. You and Arthur both use the Bible, but you do not leave us feeling guilty. Why is there such a difference?”

“I think that Arthur is a materialist, Tino. He measures God’s grace in people’s lives by the material things that they own. He also thinks that a church is successful if it owns valuable property. I belonged to his group once. He stifled new ideas suggested by other members about how to serve the Lord. He said that such projects would drain the church’s finances, even though the projects would not cost anything that I could foresee. We should pray for him and Ishmael. I think that they mean well, but they let the world influence them with its ideas. Even good Christians sometimes get ideas that originate from men and demons rather than from God.”

A month later Tino met with the shepherding elders of several small groups. He asked Victor to go along, to observe their proceedings. During the meeting Tino suggested, “The group that I help lead is growing too big to take care of all of its members. I want to form at least two new groups. I think one of them might meet in the home of Victor and Lori. They are growing rapidly in Christ, and they will soon be able to lead a group. Julie and I mentor them.”

“That would cause division, Tino!” Ishmael was shaking with emotion. “We will surely have division in the church body, if we let new believers lead home groups.”

Arthur added, “I do not trust creative thinkers like you, Tino. They always want to start new things. We should keep tight control over the home groups. We need strict rules. Yes! We cannot let the home groups act as though they were all small churches. They would have too much freedom. They should all use those study materials that Ishmael has provided. They must remain simply as Bible study groups. Yes!”

“Please, Arthur!” Tino groaned. “To put such restrictions on our groups would destroy what God is doing in them. God requires much more than studying the Bible. My group practices all the activities for serving the Lord and each other that the New Testament requires for a group of believers. If we all followed the same teaching schedule like you said, then we could not select studies that fit the current needs of the believers in our groups.”

During a pause in the discussion Victor asked Tino, “Why did you say that we use the New Testament to find our guidelines? Do we not also use the Old Testament?”

“We use the Old Testament for other purposes, but not to define the activities of a New Testament church. Otherwise, we would have to stone to death people who gathered firewood on Saturday. We must do all of the activities that Christ and His apostles required for us.”

Arthur heard what Tino said and stated, “We will certainly do all of the activities! Yes! We will assign people to do the ministries that meet different needs. One group will practice each ministry. Each group will have one ministry and stick to it! Yes! All the groups will teach the Word. However, only one group will oversee evangelism. Another group will control the worship. Another will manage finances and promote giving. We will keep a tight control over all of the groups in this way. We will know what everyone is doing.” Arthur had raised his voice and all the other elders were listening to him and Tino.

“That kind of specialized organization opposes what Scripture requires!” Tino cautioned. “You would lock people into little compartments! You would isolate the different spiritual gifts that God gives to the church body! You would gather those with the same spiritual gift into one group, rather than making their abilities available to other believers. Your method of organizing does not harmonize the believers’ different ways of serving each other in small groups. God’s Word requires that each group have people with different gifts for different kinds of ministries, so that they can serve one another.”

“I disagree!” Arthur shot back. “By organizing separate programs we can control the groups. Yes! It is the only way.” Two of the other elders murmured their agreement with Arthur.

Tino’s face reflected discouragement. He begged, “Please consider a more biblical way. To organize the body of Christ, God requires us to bring people with different spiritual gifts together to harmonize their work, not to separate them. Read 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12 and Ephesians 4:11-16. We are to serve one another in love with our different ministries in the same body. Our small home groups do so very well. There is no need to abandon our biblical procedure.”

“You want to make each group into a small church!” Arthur complained loudly. “Such groups would be hard for us to control. Yes! We need the kind of organization that gives strong power to leaders like us.”

“You worry too much about your power, Arthur. We should rather trust the power of the Holy Spirit to be in control of each group, and let each group develop its ministries as God leads it. 2 Corinthians 3:17 promises us this kind of freedom in the Spirit.”

“You like to introduce new things, Tino,” Arthur whined. “You let everyone in your group do something different. Yes! No one knows what will happen from one week to the next. Allowing so much freedom causes confusion. It destroys our unity. We need one standard practice for all the groups. And for everyone in each group! Yes! That is how to maintain unity!”

“Let us not confuse unity with uniformity,” Tino begged. “True unity in Christ does not mean that everyone practices the same activities. It means quite the opposite! The apostles taught about unity in the body when they dealt with spiritual gifts. They revealed that unity in Christ meant that we all have different gifts, and that the Holy Spirit harmonizes our different ministries in love.”

An elder who had agreed earlier with Arthur spoke. “That is an interesting truth, Brother Tino. I had not noticed that before. Yes! 1 Corinthians 12 does teach that very clearly. The

Holy Spirit of God harmonizes the different ministries in the same way that the different parts of our bodies work together. Thank you, Tino. I am going to begin to teach and equip the believers in my group for different ways of serving, to build up the entire body.”

“Good!” Tino responded. “You will also find that the needs and opportunities for serving one another change constantly, just like they did in the New Testament.”

The other shepherding elders, except for Ishmael and Arthur, agreed with Tino. Ishmael continued to argue, “You emphasize grace too much, Tino. You seem to say that believers can do whatever they want. Because of your teaching, we will lose discipline in our congregations!”

“We cannot emphasize grace too much, if we define it correctly,” Tino explained to Ishmael. “Some teach, as you claimed that I do, that grace gives us the right to do any sin that we want. You have not heard me teach such harmful error! Your fear is groundless. Those who receive God’s grace ‘die to sin,’ as the apostle Paul said. Let us define grace the way that God defines it.”

“So, how does the Bible define it, Tino?” Ishmael asked.

“Grace is God’s unmerited favor. Repentant believers receive it freely through Christ when they die to sin and are raised with Christ to new life, being reborn into God’s family. They become God’s adopted children, and heirs together with Christ of God’s unlimited riches.”

“Where does the Bible teach such things?”

Tino opened his Bible. “Give me a moment to find some good references.” Victor noticed that Ishmael wrote down the verses as Tino mentioned them, “Romans 5:12 through 6:18, Romans chapter 8, and Ephesians 2:4-7.” Victor also wrote them in his notebook.

“Unfortunately, some Christian teachers define grace incorrectly,” Tino clarified. “They think that it means that we must never offend anyone, that we must maintain loving relationships at all costs. That opinion twists God’s Word dangerously! Shepherds in the Kingdom of God must confront those who err by correcting them firmly, even though it causes temporary sadness, just as Christ and the apostle Paul did. The most loving thing we can do for a mistaken or sinning brother in Christ is to correct him, even though it is painful, when he needs it! If he is God’s true child, he will bounce back. He will thank us for it! We are to withdraw our fellowship from believers who err and refuse to repent. Thus, Christ and the apostle Paul both said that we are to shun unrepentant Christians, and not to take the Lord’s Supper with them.”

Ishmael questioned Tino, “Which Bible verses teach about such discipline?”

Tino again looked them up in his Bible and said, “Matthew 18:15-20, 1 Corinthians 5 and Titus 3:10-11.” Both Ishmael and Victor wrote them down.

Tino continued, “Another harmful misunderstanding of grace is to say that God will not hold believers accountable for their sins. He certainly will! His forgiveness assures us that we will not be among those whom Christ will raise from death and send to eternal punishment, as He warned in John 5:24-29. However, even though He raises us to be with Him forever, Christ will sit on His judgment seat and test our works at the entry gate into His glorious Kingdom. He will burn up our bad works, just like Moses burned the illegal contraband that some of his soldiers tried to smuggle into God’s holy camp, in Numbers chapter 31. Then, Christ will reward us for our good works that withstand his judgment.”

Again, Ishmael and Victor wrote the references when Tino found them: “1 Corinthians 3:11-15 and 2 Corinthians 5:10.”

Then Ishmael murmured, “I still think that you emphasize grace too much, Tino.”

“I emphasize it as I do in order to correct your legalism, Ishmael.”

Ishmael challenged, “I will read these verses and find out who is right, you or I!”

Later that week, Tino and Julie visited Victor and Lori, again. Tino asked, “Why were you absent from our last meeting, Victor?”

“Because I am tired of fearing that I will offend Ishmael and Arthur. We find ourselves doing what they want us to do, not because we love Jesus, but because they force us to do what they want. At work during the day, Ishmael often tells me what I must do to be a Christian. He makes me feel guilty if I do not agree.”

Lori added, “Arthur makes me feel afraid that people in the group will reject us, or that God will reject us. We cannot enjoy the fellowship when we feel such fear.”

Tino thought a moment and then commented, “If Ishmael or Arthur drive new believers away or cause division, and then we will discipline and correct them as God requires.”

“How will you punish them?” Victor asked.

“I do not mean to punish! We leave punishment to God! God disciplines His children, sometimes painfully, because He loves them. We correct offending believers only in order to restore them, not to punish them. When believers err seriously we must correct them gently but firmly, as Galatians 6:1 requires. Only if they rebel against correction and keep sinning, are we to exclude them from the Lord’s Supper until they repent, as 1 Corinthians 5 requires.”

They prayed and Tino again assured the young couple of God’s love. They gained courage over the next two weeks and worked hard for the Lord. Tino witnessed to his friends about what Jesus had done for him and Lori. He told them about eternal salvation and God’s free grace in Christ. Lori also told her women neighbors about Jesus’ grace.

After a group worship time, Tino told Victor and Lori, “Some of your friends have received Christ. I think that you, Victor, should lead a new group in your home.”

“Do you think I could do that? Ishmael would not like it if I led a group. I might make mistakes.”

“We all make mistakes, so please do not fear that. Julie and I will continue to mentor you and Lori, to help you do the right things. You do not need to fear Ishmael or Arthur. The shepherding elders no longer back them. We agreed that we will build our groups upon loving relationships.”

Lori confided, “I am glad to know that. Ishmael and Arthur keep trying to make us feel guilty.”

“Then do not pay them attention, Lori,” Tino advised. “They are not your leaders now.”

“They are so stingy with God’s grace!”

“But they have no power to stop its flow as long as we stand firm in our faith.”

After praying and talking about starting a new group, Victor agreed to lead it. After their first two meetings, he told Lori, “It was easy to start the group. All we had to do was simply to repeat the same things that Tino and Julie did for us.”

“I read this morning what the apostle Paul instructed in 1 Corinthians 11:1, ‘Be imitators of me as I imitate Christ.’ We are doing that, Victor. We imitate our mentor Tino, and he imitates Jesus.”

“Yes, and look at the result!” Victor rejoiced, “Some of our friends, and their friends, and the friends of their friends, are coming to Christ! The River of Grace flows much swifter than I had imagined!”

Tino met weekly with Victor to listen to how his new group was progressing, and to help him plan for their next meetings. As they grew in Christ and in their understanding of how to apply God’s Word to their new group, Victor met less often with Tino.

During one of these mentoring sessions, Tino told him, “I am going to visit the missionaries that our group sent to another part of the country. I will be gone for several weeks. While I am gone, I hope that you and Lori will help each person in your group to serve the others with their different spiritual gifts. It is not necessary that everybody knows all their gifts. But it is important that they practice the New Testament ‘one-another’ commands.”

“What are the ‘one-another’ commands?” Victor asked.

“They include ‘Serve one another,’ ‘bear one another’s burdens,’ ‘confess your faults to one another,’ ‘correct one another,’ ‘love one another fervently,’ ‘forgive one another,’ and many more. Some of them are repeated many times. They require loving interaction within, and between, our groups.”

They found in the New Testament the ‘one-another’ commands of Jesus and His apostles, and other similar commands that require interaction between believers. Victor wrote them down carefully and grouped them under their different applications, as follows:

‘One-another’ Commands for Interaction

Develop *fellowship* within and among groups

Love:

Love one another: John 13:34-35; 5:12, 17; Romans 12: 10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 John 3:11, 14, 23; 4:7, 11, 12; 2 John 1:5; 1 Peter 1:22

Love one another to fulfill the law: Romans 13:8

Increase our love one for another: 2 Thessalonians 1:3

Abound in love for another: 1 Thessalonians 3:12

Love each other deeply, to cover a multitude of sins: 1 Peter 4:8

Interact with care:

Have fellowship one with another: 1 John 1:7

Forgive one another: Ephesians 3:13; 4:32; Colossians. 3:13

Greet one another with a holy kiss (embrace, in some cultures):

Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Peter 5:14

Wait for one another to break bread: 1 Corinthians 11:33

Bear one another’s sufferings: 1 Corinthians 12:26

Serve one another (Apply to individuals and to groups; groups serve other groups)

Serve:

Serve one another with the gifts each person has received: 1 Peter 4:10

Serve one another in love: Galatians 5:13

Be kind to each other: 1 Thessalonians 5:15

Care for one another: 1 Corinthians 12:25

Bear the burdens one for another: Galatians 6:2

Wash one another’s feet (sign of humble service to others): John 13:14

Work with one another: 1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 6:1

Teach:

Teach one another: Colossians 3:16
Instruct one another: Romans 5:14

Encourage:

Encourage one another: Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 10:25
Exhort one another: Hebrews 3:13
Speak the truth to one another: Ephesians 4:25
Lay down our lives one for another: 1 John 3:16
Spur one another to love and good deeds: Hebrews 10:24

Edify:

Edify (strengthen, build up) one another: 1 Thessalonians 4:18 & 5:1, 11
Edify one another gathering together each one with a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or its interpretation: 1 Corinthians 14:26

Give spiritual care:

Confess our sins one to another: James 5:16
Pray for one another: James 5:16
Cultivate *unity* in and between groups

Act with humility:

Honor one another: Romans 12:10
Agree one with another: 2 Corinthians 13:11; Romans 12:16; 15:5
Do not criticize one another: Romans 14:13
Do not speak bad one of another: James 4:11; 5:9
Submit to one another: Ephesians 5:21
Be clothed with humility toward one another: 1 Peter 5:5

Live in harmony:

Have patience one with another: Ephesians 4:2
Live in peace one with another: Matthew 9:50
Receive one another with hospitality: Romans 15:7; 1 Peter. 4:9
Glorify God together: Romans 15:6

“I think we can help the new believers in our group to practice these ‘one-another’ commands,” Victor said. “But I have a concern. The last time we met, some of them argued with each other.”

“You will need God’s help, because Satan opposes such loving interaction. His demons try to keep us from serving one another the way that God requires. Satan hates it when believers use their spiritual gifts to serve one another. He and his evil spirits who help him never stop struggling to stifle the free flow of God’s grace. But Jesus, by His death and resurrection, destroyed forever the demons’ power over us, as Colossians 2:13-15 affirms.”

“Please explain a bit more about spiritual gifts,” Victor requested.

“The original word for ‘gifts’ in the Bible was ‘charismas’, which can be translated as ‘graces’ or ‘gifts.’ God gives these special abilities to serve other people. They are a product of His grace. We let His grace flow through us to other people when we use our gifts to serve one another. All believers have gifts and are to use them in some kind of ministry, as Ephesians 4:11-12 reveals.”

“Arthur told me yesterday that ministry was mainly preaching. Is that true?”

“Ministry is much more than preaching!” Tino emphasized. “God gives to all believers special graces for different ministries, so that we can bless others.” They discussed different

ways to serve, that the New Testament requires of Christian congregations. Victor wrote these ways to serve others in his notebook:

- Doing pastoral counseling, correcting and consoling those who grieve,
- Healing, helping and showing mercy,
- Speaking words of exhortation, prophecy and encouragement,
- Practicing stewardship (giving),
- Interceding in prayer and having family devotions,
- Strengthening marriage, family and child care,
- Worshipping and planning special events for fellowship,
- Evangelizing, discipling and shepherding,
- Starting new churches or cell groups, and sending missionaries,
- Applying the Word of God to people's needs, and training leaders."

Victor commented. "Now that I see so many things that we are to teach our group to do, I wonder if we are able to do it all."

"You could not without God's help, but He has promised to help you."

Early next morning, Victor was awakened by a noise at the door. He looked out the window. "Ishmael is outside! Something is wrong!"

He rushed to let Ishmael in while Lori put on a robe. Ishmael gasped, "Victor! Victor, you will not need to go to work this morning!"

"Why not?" Tino asked, alarmed.

"The shop burned down!"

"What?"

"It burned down. All the equipment is ruined. I have nothing left." Ishmael wept. Lori came and held his hand while Victor prayed for him.

Later, Victor helped Ishmael to clean up the mess, but they found nothing among the ashes except a few wrenches and other small tools that were worth saving. The next day Ishmael came again to see Victor. He sat in silence for a long time. Lori brought tea and asked, "What can we do to help you, Ishmael?"

He did not answer. They sat through another long moment of silence. Finally Ishmael cried, "God did it to me!"

"No!" Lori emphasized. "Satan did it."

"Then God let Satan do it!"

Victor tried to talk with Ishmael, but he remained silent for another long while. Finally Ishmael spoke in a soft voice. "Please bring some matches."

"Matches?" Victor asked. "Why? Do you want to burn something else up?"

"Yes." He reached into his pocket. "This list of things that I said that you and Lori had to do." Lori brought some matches. Ishmael carefully burned the entire piece of paper.

He explained, "I once attended my uncle's church. Like my father, he rejected Islam and became a zealous Christian, but an excessively strict one. He taught me those things that I told you to do. I was afraid that if I did not do them, then God would punish me. I lived in fear. Since I was your employer, I thought that God wanted me to care for you in the same way. I assumed that it was my duty to make you do those things, too, so that God would not

punish you. Since the fire, I have been reading in the Bible about what our shepherd Tino taught us. I found that I had been very wrong. I was fighting against the grace of God and against His Holy Spirit.”

Victor was too surprised to speak. After another long silence Lori spoke softly. “I do not know whether I should weep or shout for joy!” She did both.

Victor returned home the next day and told Lori, “I found another job! To test me, they told me to weld some things that only an experienced welder could do well. The manager said that I had a steady, quick hand and will double what I was earning before!”

“All our problems are going away!” she exclaimed.

“Not entirely. Arthur received money from Christians in a large church somewhere, to develop his ministry. I did not know that he had a ministry, but he convinced them that he does. He uses that money to hire men in our congregation to teach those legalistic things that Ishmael taught before the fire. Arthur is taking advantage of Tino’s absence and has convinced two families to leave Tino’s group and follow him. They are starting a congregation that they call the One True Way. On the way home I saw Arthur enter the house of the family that joined our group last week. The poison from the devil’s arrow is spreading!”

Lori sat down and groaned quietly.

Exercises

God promises to bless us in this life with:

<input type="checkbox"/>	material blessings
<input type="checkbox"/>	spiritual blessings

[Ephesians 1:3 promises spiritual blessings. Otherwise, we could not account for so many millions of Christians in the world who are quite poor materially. However, poor believers are heirs of riches in glory and will reign with Christ.]

Which of these three is the better way to assure people of their position in Christ?

[If you have not yet read what God's Word teaches about grace, then, please, read carefully Romans chapters 1 through 8 and Ephesians chapters 1 and 2.]

Rationalistic thinkers often deny that God brings to us His supernatural grace through a sacrament. What danger lies in defining, by human reasoning alone, how we receive God's grace?

[Grace goes far beyond human reason. No religious leader or philosopher ever conceived of grace without being informed by biblical revelation.]

Materialists define grace in terms of earthly wealth. Give a better biblical definition:

What are your plans to organize your congregation or cell group, so that believers will serve one another in love, as God requires in the 'one-another' commands?

What are your plans to organize your group in a way that allows the believers to use their spiritual gifts and practice all of the ministries that the New Testament requires?

What are your plans to avoid abusive control by yourself and by the new leaders that you mentor?

Chapter 4

How Victor and Lori Discovered Joyful, Spiritual Freedom

Victor, Lori and Julie went with Tino to the train station. He was going again to visit the missionaries that their congregation had sent where the churches were not yet reproducing. On the way, Tino requested, "Please attend my group meetings again while I am gone. Help lead them. Watch out for wolves that might take advantage of my absence."

"Wolves?" Victor asked. "What do you mean?"

"Big, hungry dogs, like tigers, search for weak sheep. Jesus and the apostle Paul called false shepherds 'wolves' because they rob sheep from other shepherds."

"I am glad that you alerted us," Tino said. "I think that a wolf is already sniffing around our flock. Arthur's cousin, Shaji, tries to make the new believers think that he is the only person in our group who is truly spiritual."

"Then watch out! Satan's lies are like yeast that spreads throughout a mass of bread dough. These lies often sound spiritual and spread among unsuspecting believers like the measles. God helps us to detect and resist them. He gives to us the shield of faith to stop the flaming arrows of the evil one, as Ephesians 6:16 explains. These arrows include Materialism, Rationalism, Individualism, Proud Dogmatism, Idolatry, Lust and Lasciviousness. We are bombarded from every side almost daily by doctrines that originate with demons."

"You mentioned individualism," Victor said. "How does that stifle the flow of grace?"

"You will find out when you help the believers to practice seriously the 'one-another' commands. Satan will try to inject individualism, to cancel out the interaction. Individualists want a private faith. They serve God in their own way. They often sit during a worship service and absorb what they hear like a sponge, without taking an active part in other vital activities. They avoid closely-knit, loving groups. Such isolation neglects love. Congregations that embrace Satan's individualism seldom organize well to practice the New Testament 'one-another' commands.

"How does 'proud dogmatism' cancel grace?"

"Proud dogmatism tries to build faith on knowledge alone," Tino answered. "Knowledge puffs us up with pride, as 1 Corinthians 8:1 warns. Our one foundation is Jesus, the Rock upon which the wise man built his house. Both the wise man and the foolish man, who built his house on sand, listened to Jesus' words. They both had knowledge. But only the wise man loved Jesus enough to obey Him as well. A proud dogmatist is satisfied merely with teaching good doctrine. He trusts too much in his superior knowledge and neglects the other activities that Jesus requires."

Julie added, "Some proud teachers merely drill a hole in your head, insert a funnel and pour their opinions into your brain! Fortunately, many of the younger believers do not want

to be such passive 'hearers only.' James 1:22 warns against it. They want to interact when they learn, with active discussion. They want freedom to think about what the Bible says and to let the Holy Spirit guide them into all truth, rather than blindly accepting the opinions of dogmatic men. They want not only to learn, but also to do what God says."

"Is dogmatism always wrong?" Victor asked. "Is it not dangerous for shepherds to let their sheep wander wherever they want?"

"Of course. All believers need shepherding," Tino replied. "But we shepherds must care for them the way the Bible says."

"How is that?"

"A good shepherd helps believers to mature, by learning to think for themselves about how to apply God's liberating Word. Otherwise, the idolaters of our world would capture their minds with useless philosophies and false gods that enslave people. Proud sometimes dogmatists assume that God's grace will come simply through much study. Then, what they tell others to believe is from their narrow viewpoint."

"I am of the younger generation," Lori replied. "I want to enjoy a dynamic relationship with other Christians, and I hope that our shepherds will let it happen."

"But how do we make it happen?" Victor asked. "How can we help others to participate together more actively as they learn and obey God's Word?"

"You might ask them to read or tell Bible stories," Tino suggested. "Then discuss what the story teaches about God, and what we should do about it. Use role-plays and briefly dramatize the stories. Make clear what you want them to learn. Ask questions that help them to meditate on God and His work. Let them write poems or songs of encouragement and praise. Let people prepare together to teach rather than just one person all the time."

"Oh!" Lori exclaimed. "I would love to help others prepare short dramas that teach God's Word! Can we act out the scene in the Garden of Eden? Or Ruth?"

"I would enjoy watching you play the part of Queen Esther," Victor told Lori. "I could easily play the part of the wasteful son that spent the inheritance that his father gave him. I had much experience with such wasteful activities before I knew Christ!"

"I could play the part of the fattened calf," Tino laughed. "The father of the wasteful son killed it for a feast to celebrate his son's return. The older brother was the better man but, as Jesus explained, he resented the grace that his father showed to his bad but repentant younger brother. He was like the diligent workers in the vineyard who resented the owner paying the same wages to those who worked only part of the day. Good people often oppose God's grace, when they see worse sinners be freely forgiven."

"Will the elders let us teach in such a creative way?" Lori asked.

"Lori is enjoyably creative!" Victor explained. "She also reads a lot and remembers the gems that she finds."

"We have freedom now to teach God's Word creatively," Tino assured them. "We have fought the spiritual war against proud dogmatism and won. Our elders no longer discourage new believers like you from discussing God's Word freely and teaching it in any way that brings results."

"Wonderful!" Lori exclaimed.

"You told us that dogmatism is not always wrong," Victor recalled. "When is the proper occasion for it?"

Tino clarified. “We always need strong convictions, based on God’s Word. We study the Word, not to argue proudly or to earn God’s grace, but because we appreciate the grace that we already receive. We need to exercise dogmatism to stand against bad teaching and bad preaching.”

“When is preaching bad?” Victor asked.

Tino explained, “Some bad teachers and preachers see their hearers as though they were all donkeys with big ears! They want people only to sit and listen passively to their dogmatic oratory. They do not see the believers as a living body, serving one another, warring against Satan in the surrounding community, feeding the starving and healing the sick.”

“Oh, dear God, deliver us!” Lori groaned.

“He has,” Julie stated.

Victor looked at his notebook in which he had been writing Tino’s explanations. He sighed. “Will I ever learn all these things?”

Tino assured him, “You and Lori already understand more about God and His grace than some people do who have been believers for forty years. Victor, you certainly have an explorer’s mind! You ask more questions than anyone else I know!”

“Too many?”

“Oh, no! Your curiosity and discernment are also gifts of God’s grace, the work of the Holy Spirit.”

“How does the Holy Spirit give us discernment?”

“He illuminates our minds,” Tino explained, “so that we can apply God’s Word to our lives, to our friends and to our enemies. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says that Satan, the god of this world, blinds unbelievers’ minds. By the miracle of grace we can discern God’s truth when we believe in Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us an inner witness; He guides us in a mystical way, as we see in Romans 8. He assures us that we are sons of God.”

“What a blessing!” Lori exclaimed.

Victor asked, “Does the Holy Spirit only use Scripture to illuminate our minds? Does He not use other things?”

“Scripture is our final authority,” Tino replied, “but Psalm 19 and Romans 1 reveal that God also uses other means to instruct us. These include nature, history, friends, conscience, focused, purposeful meditation, prayer, experiences and, sometimes, dreams.”

“I read in Jeremiah 29 that false prophets preached their dreams,” Victor recalled. “. How can we discern true from false teaching?”

“False teaching always contradicts Scripture or misapplies it,” Tino explained. “Also it does not glorify our Lord Jesus Christ. It more often glorifies a human or an organization, or in some way keeps power-hungry religious tyrants in a position of power.”

“I see!” Victor said. “They use God’s Word but not in the power of the Holy Spirit. How can we know when they teach that way, in their own human strength?”

“Another kind of false teaching causes even worse deception, because it is not the content but the intent that is false. Watch out for proud dogmatists who use the Word of God only as content for their preaching or teaching. We who teach must also use the Word to guide our group’s activities. Let it guide the way we witness, worship, confirm new believers, organize for ministry, train pastors and send missionaries. False teachers often use the Bible accurately

as the content of their teaching, but they do these other activities in ways that are contrary to the New Testament way.”

“Your train will leave soon,” Victor said. “I appreciate this time we had together to talk. Before you have to board the train, I have another question about how the Holy Spirit guides us. How we can discern God’s will for what we do?”

“Some Christians are guided only by their feelings and exciting experiences. Others seek guidance only from Scripture and analytical teaching about it. Others are guided only by other people in their congregation and embrace only those truths that make their leaders happy. We need to balance all these ways. The Holy Spirit helps us to integrate these learning experiences, so that He can use all three of them to guide us. He uses our experiences and feelings, reason and knowledge, and a loving community of believers. Without this balance, a congregation emphasizes one aspect of its ministry to excess. Satan always tries to destroy good balance in the body of Christ. Almost always, a congregation’s greatest weakness is its greatest strength taken to excess.”

Victor remarked, “My greatest struggle is still with Arthur and his followers. They bother the consciences of the new believers to make them feel guilty. Then the new believers doubt that God is with them to help them to overcome sin and to love others. The owl... I mean, Arthur, often quotes Old Testament prophets about how God punishes. His ‘flute’ has only one note!”

“Arthur and his followers make very little distinction between the Old and New Testaments,” Tino cautioned. “That confuses people. We must discern between law and grace. Watch out for teachers who fail to see the vast difference between the Old and New Covenants. The death and resurrection of Jesus changed forever God’s way of dealing with mankind. God’s people have passed from law to grace, as Romans 6:14 clearly confirms. Legalists cling to the Old Testament’s laws. Bad teachers multiply rules. They not only use the Old Testament rules that applied to ancient Israel; they also invent and follow man-made rules.”

“You said that the Old Testament laws applied only to ancient Israel,” Victor remarked. “Do none of the old laws apply today?”

“Jesus and His apostles repeated some of the laws of the Old Testament as guidelines for the church in the New Testament. For example, they reaffirmed all of the Ten Commandments that formed the basis of the Old Covenant, except the command to keep the Sabbath. We follow the New Testament guidelines, because we would confuse God’s people if we chose among the Old Testament laws to obey some and neglect others.”

“What are some of the old laws that would we not obey today?”

“There were many. The train would leave before I could mention them all. Let me recall some of them. We do none of the following things that the old law required:

- Forbid uncircumcised people to enter our sacred sanctuaries.
- Stab to death children who curse their parents.
- Stone adulterers.
- Kill people who worship to idols.
- Kill people who work on the seventh day of the week.
- Slay people who made prophecies that fail to come true.
- Force people to attend festivals in Jerusalem.
- Force a married man to marry also his childless brother’s widow.

- Force farmers do not let their fields lie idle every seventh year without cultivating or planting.
- Slay a male sheep for our weekly worship
- Travel only to Jerusalem to worship.”

“How severe the old law was!” Lori commented.

“It was very harsh,” Tino agreed. “The letter of the ancient law condemned people and led to death, as 2 Corinthians 3:6 affirms.

“Why?” Victor asked, with his pen ready to write. “What was the purpose of the law that God gave to Moses?”

“The ancient law had three main purposes:

First, Romans 3:20 clarifies that the most holy God gave the old law, so that people would come to know that they are sinners. It exposed sin and thus prepared mankind for Christ, as Romans chapter 3 and Galatians chapter 3 reveal.

Second, according to Galatians 3:24 the old law was a tutor to prepare God’s people for the coming of Christ.

Third, the old law gave government, stability, hope and joy to the ancient nation of Israel. In Psalm 119:127, David affirmed his love for the law.”

Victor wrote down these purposes of the law, so that he could explore them later. Tino assured the young couple, “God made the sin of mankind evident by the old law, and by His grace He forgives our sin and gives us eternal life. We participate now in a New Covenant of grace that Jeremiah 31:31 foretold hundreds of years before Jesus was born. God revealed through Jeremiah that the old, temporary covenant would be replaced by a New Covenant in which God’s laws would be written in our hearts instead of on stone.”

Victor asked, “Where in the New Testament do Jesus and His apostles say that the old law no longer applies to us?”

Tino found the Bible passages that show that the old law is no longer in force. Victor wrote:

Now the entire Old Testament law is fulfilled in the law of love, which is a fruit of the Spirit that God Gives to all believers, Matthew 22:38-40; Galatians 5:22-23.

We are no longer under law but under grace, Romans 6:8-18,

We are not justified by the works of the law, but by grace through faith, Galatians 2:16 through 3:24.

Jesus, by His death and resurrection, triumphed over all demonic spirits and canceled our sentence of death due to the decrees against us, Colossians 2:13-17.

The glory of the New Covenant that is eternal far surpasses the glory of the Old Covenant that God intended to be temporary and to fade away, 2 Corinthians 3:7-13.

“What a relief!” Lori exclaimed. “Now I understand that Arthur has no basis for forcing us to follow his many rules.”

“My train will soon leave. Before I go, listen to what 2 Corinthians 3:6-10 reveals about the new covenant of grace.” He read:

“God has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant — not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry that brought death, which was engraved in letters on stone, came with glory, so that the Israelites could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of its glory, fading though it was, will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious? If the ministry that condemns men is glorious, how much more glorious is the ministry that brings righteousness! For what was glorious has no glory now in comparison with the surpassing glory.”

After Victor and Lori returned home, they studied a graphic chart that Tino had prepared for them. It showed many basic differences between the Old Testament’s requirements, and the New Testament’s corresponding but very different provisions.

Old and New Covenants (Testaments) Compared

<p>The cross divides all history. Since the Messiah died and rose, God no longer wants us even to try to live up to the laws that He gave to ancient Israel, but to live by the power of His Holy Spirit. This graph shows some of the differences between the Old Covenant that focused on the law, and the New Covenant that focuses more on grace. John 1:17 states, “For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.”</p>		
<p>OLD COVENANT (law)</p>	<p>“ ✝ ”</p>	<p>NEW COVENANT (grace)</p>
<p>Temporary, Jeremiah 31:31-32; Hebrews 8:13</p>	<p>“duration”</p>	<p>Eternal, Hebrews 9:15; 10:10-14</p>
<p>Animal sacrifices of temporary value, Hebrews 9:6-10; 10:1-4, 8</p>	<p>“means of forgiveness”</p>	<p>Jesus’ one sacrifice, forever, Hebrews 9:10-11; 10:9-10</p>
<p>Material, earthly, temporary, Deuteronomy 30:15-20</p>	<p>“Rewards, punishments”</p>	<p>Spiritual, heavenly, eternal, Ephesians 1:3; John 3:16; Revelation 20:13-15</p>
<p>God’s people escaped slavery through the sea, Exodus 14</p>	<p>“Greatest miracle”</p>	<p>Jesus’ resurrection; we escape death by being raised in Him, Luke 24; Romans 6:1-14; 1 Corinthians 15</p>
<p>Circumcision of the flesh, Genesis 17:10; Deuteronomy 10:16</p>	<p>“Initiation ceremony”</p>	<p>Baptism (‘circumcision of the heart’), Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 2:29</p>
<p>The Passover lamb, Exodus 12:1-15</p>	<p>“Memorial meal”</p>	<p>Jesus’ body and blood, Luke 22:19-20; John 6:25-68</p>
<p>The old law exposed sin and condemned, Romans 3:19-20</p>	<p>“Purpose”</p>	<p>In the New Covenant God forgives sin and frees us, Colossians 2:11-17</p>
<p>Behind the veil in a temporary temple, Exodus 25:8-9, 26; 40:35; Leviticus 16.2</p>	<p>“Gods presence”</p>	<p>The Holy Spirit dwells in us forever, John 14:16-17; 1 Corinthians 3:16</p>

Moses was the law giver; the other ancient prophets applied Moses' laws, John 1:17; Numbers 12:6-8	"Most important prophet"	Jesus brought grace and truth, John 1:1, 14-17; Acts 3:22-26; Col. 1:15; Hebrews 1:1-4
Aaron the High Priest, who served in the earthly Most Holy Place, Leviticus 16:1-27	"Most important priest"	Jesus, who intercedes for us in glory Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:4-10; 9:1-14; John 14:2-3
David conquered nations, Leviticus 20:23; 1 Sam.18:7; 2 Sam.7:8-16; Deuteronomy 20:16-18	"Most important king"	Jesus heads the chosen of all nations, Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8; Ephesians 5:23; Revelation 19:15-16
Separation, violent conquest, Exodus 6:6-7; 19:1-6; Deuteronomy 2:31; 4:1-9	"Dealing with other nations»	Reconciliation, all are to be disciplined, Ephesians 1:4; 2:12-22; 3:1-6; Colossians 1:19-22; Revelation 7:9
Seeing or nearing God meant death, Judges 3:22; Exodus 19:12; Leviticus 10:1-2; Is. 6:1-7	"Access to God's holiness»	
Obey detailed laws out of fear of harsh punishment, Deuteronomy 6:1-3; 28:15-26; Exodus 20:18-20	"Basis of conduct"	Live in the Spirit, obey out of love, John 14:15; Romans 13:8-10; 2 Corinthians 3:3-11; Galatians 5:5-6; Matthew 22:37-40
7th day of the week recalled the old creation, Exodus 20:8-11; Revelation 21:1; Leviticus 25:1-7	"Normal day of worship"	Churches in Acts met on the 1st day; it recalls the new creation that began with Jesus' resurrection. But God now gives us freedom to gather any day. Luke 24:1-7; Acts 20:7; Ephesians 2:6; Hebrews 4:4-11; Revelation 21:1-4
Animal sacrifices and feasts, Leviticus Chapters 1-7 and 23	"Means of worship"	We worship in spirit and in truth, and break bread with believers, John 4:24; Acts 2:42
Self-effort and specific laws Leviticus 11; Isaiah 55:7	"Sanctification"	By our spiritual rebirth and transformation we enjoy the Fruit of Spirit, Romans 14:1-9,17; 1 Peter 1:3; 1 Timothy 4:3-5
Ten Commandments, Exodus 20:1-17	"Basic requirement"	Repentant sinner's faith in Jesus, John 3:16; Luke 24:44-49
Specific laws dictated all aspects of life Exodus 18:20; 24:3	"Guidance"	God's Holy Spirit illuminates us, Ephesians 1:17-20; John 14:26; Romans 8:1-27
Laws and visions mediated by angels, Numbers 12:6; Deuteronomy 31:9	"Main revelation"	God became flesh, the Living Word, John 1:1-3; Hebrews 1:1-3; 2:2-4

Prepare for Christ, Galatians 3:23-26	“Purpose of teaching”	Transform, edify the church body and equip believers for ministries, Romans 8:23,28-30; Ephesians 4:11-12
Ruled sternly as judges, Exodus 18:24-26; Mark 15:1; Acts 15:10	“Elders’ governing”	Serve humbly as shepherds, Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Matthew 20:25-28
Tithed (1/10 of income), Deuteronomy 12:11	“Standard for giving”	Give as one’s heart intends, cheerfully, 2 Corinthians 9:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2
Land, protected by human kinsmen, temporary, Genesis 12:1-2; 17:1-8; Deuteronomy 6:1-3; Ruth 4:13-17	“Inheritance”	Eternal riches, guaranteed by the all powerful Holy Spirit, Genesis 12:3; Ephesians 1:3-14; Hebrews 2:14-15; 1 Peter 1:3-5

At the first meeting after Tino had left, Victor was surprised to see some former members of both his and Tino’s groups arrive with other friends. They had joined Arthur’s group. Some of them had not attended Tino’s group for several weeks.

“We are going to have a business meeting,” Arthur announced. “We will now elect a new leader for this group. Yes. We have had too much confusion under Tino’s leadership. That is why I had to start a new group. I am merging it with this one now.”

One of the men who had come with Arthur spoke. “My name is Shaji. I belong to this group now. I have heard how Tino led this group without discipline. He let new believers like Victor do whatever they wanted. We have come to restore God’s true way of doing things. I nominate Arthur to be our new leader.”

Lori whispered to Victor, “He reminds me of a frog!”

Victor smiled. He noticed that Shaji’s mouth was unusually wide. His voice also sounded a bit like a frog.

“Sir!” Ishmael spoke firmly. “We do not know you. Also, I refuse to participate in an election while our leader Tino is absent.”

Arthur’s eyes grew larger than ever. He licked his lips and then snapped, “I assumed that I had your support, Ishmael. Yes!”

“I know what you want to do, Arthur,” Ishmael replied. “You and I made those plans. I agreed with you then. You want to control all of our groups. You make believers feel guilty if they do not do the religious things that you demand. You make them fear that God will punish them, if they do not yield to your will. You make them give money out of guilt. You use fear to manipulate people into doing what you want. You learned to do so from me.” He paused and wiped a tear from his eye. “I am very ashamed of that now.”

“What... What has happened to you?” Arthur stammered, opening and closing his mouth.

“I drank from God’s River of Grace,” Ishmael answered. “The Almighty renewed by spirit. I no longer share your ambitions, Arthur. God by His grace destroyed my business with

fire. He forced me to stop thinking only about money and controlling people. I thank God for that fire! Now I can serve our Lord Jesus Christ. I love Him with all my heart and soul!”

“There are demons in this room!” Shaji murmured.

Ishmael continued, “I know why you came here, Arthur. Nearly all of the believers who joined your new group have returned to their original groups. They discovered that you are a wolf. They saw you divide God’s people and spread criticisms to gain control over their minds. You lost control of your flock, so now you try to control ours. The sheep saw that you did not love them. You only used them to support your plan to control all of our groups.”

“Blasphemy!” Arthur interrupted. “Yes! Blasphemy! You must not speak such wickedness! Ishmael, the shock that you received from your fire has left you emotionally unstable! Yes!”

“Demons!” Shaji shouted, jolting upwards. “The Holy Spirit opened my eyes to see demons! Ishmael and Victor brought them. Out, Satan! Away! Leave in the name of God! I rebuke you! Go at once!” He waved his arms, jumping up and down. His face twisted with fury.

“Please, calm yourself, Shaji.” Victor begged.

Suddenly Shaji began to speak in a strange voice, which sounded even more like a frog, “I dreamed it last night! Listen to the dream of an apostle and a prophet! Hear my transcendental revelation! I meditated all night without sleep. Seven demons threw fuel on the fire that burned Ishmael’s shop! Tino, Ishmael and Victor ran to those demons. They bowed before them. They worshipped them while the fire blazed! Then the demons grabbed those three traitors and threw them into the flames!”

“Enough!” Victor said firmly. “We do not preach our dreams here, Shaji, unless a dream agrees with the Word of God and edifies the church body. What you said is destructive and hateful. And, please, stop jumping around like a frog. It distracts everyone.”

Several people laughed, which seemed to jolt Shaji back to reality. He calmed down and Victor continued, “We will have order. We are here to worship and learn God’s Word.” Several believers responded, “Amen!”

“Thank you, Victor, for maintaining order,” Arthur responded calmly. “I prefer order. Yes. Oh, yes! I have something important to say. We need better rules for our group here. I propose that we elect only two elders to serve as the leaders of these groups, for a term of four years. Yes. They will replace Tino and the other elders who have been helping him. They failed to keep order.”

“I second the motion!” Shaji shouted.

“That may be democratic,” Victor protested. “However, such rules destroy our freedom in the Spirit. Let me explain. What if the Holy Spirit gives more than three people the pastoral gift for shepherding? Your rule would limit it to two. Does God’s spiritual gift for shepherding other believers last for only two years? Does he take it away then? Such man-made rules can place people in positions of leadership who will take away our freedom in Christ. We are free to let any persons serve as shepherding elders, if they meet the requirements of God’s Word. We will not cancel out God’s requirements by replacing them with human rules. We have the freedom in our groups to allow flexibility to adapt our procedures to current needs and opportunities. 2 Corinthians 3:17 assures us that ‘where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom’.”

“You sound like Tino!” Arthur exclaimed bitterly.

“I hope so! He asked me to help lead this group in his absence, and I will do so. We are going to talk about something else now. We will plan to practice the ‘one-another’ commands in a more effective way, to serve and bless one another.”

Julie exclaimed, “Oh, thank God!”

Beads of sweat appeared on Arthur’s forehead. He stood looking at the group. He licked his lips. His big owl eyes looked quickly around the room, at each person. They he suddenly left the room without a word, followed by Shaji and a few of the other visitors that had come with Arthur. However, most of the visitors stayed and Victor led the group in a discussion about a Bible story that some of them acted out. One of the visitors was a lady wearing bright-colored clothes.

After the meeting ended, Lori quietly told Victor, “I recognize her. She was at the first meeting that I attended. She left when the group began praising Christ for His wonderful grace.

The lady lingered until the others left, except Victor and Lori. “My name is Judy,” she informed them. “I liked what you said about having freedom, Victor. I myself have arrived at an advanced level of faith. I now see what few people ever come to know, that God is bigger than any one religion. We can believe whatever we want as long as we are sincere. Your truth is true for you; my truth is true for me. This is so liberating! All those details in the Bible are too confining! And the Bible has violence in it! It says that we are washed in Jesus’ blood! How primitive!”

Lori replied, “Judy, we believe firmly that Jesus’ blood paid the penalty for our sins.”

“What have Jesus’ red corpuscles got to do with me?”

Victor asked, “Are you carving your own god, then? That is idolatry!”

“I do not believe in idols, young man, much less make them!”

“You are not making them with chisel and stone, but you are molding your god just as well with words. You invent your own beliefs about the spiritual world and about God. Pagan idolaters have always done that. You need to receive God’s grace and...”

“You tell me about grace?” she interrupted. “I will tell you! I know more about grace than you do, young man. I reject your primitive doctrine about God’s judgment. A loving God will not punish people that way! Salvation is universal.”

Lori answered, “Ephesians 1:7 says that we have redemption through Jesus’ blood. I could not understand God’s judgment either, Judy, until we studied His infinite holiness. God is perfect love and goodness. That is why He must punish sin. He wants His people to live forever with Him, but He is perfectly holy and cannot allow sin to enter into His presence. Heaven would become hell if he did.”

“Hell? You speak of hell? Young lady, if God punishes in such anger, then He is not a God of grace!”

Lori looked at Victor, pleading with her eyes for him to answer. He recalled what Tino had taught him about God’s judgment. “We cannot appreciate God’s grace until we see it against the painful background of sin, punishment, blood sacrifice and perfect judgment. Hell is the place of perfect justice. God’s judgment will be absolutely fair, or He would cease to be God. Heaven will be a place of grace and mercy. If we do not appreciate Jesus’ painful sacrifice and death, then we cannot appreciate God’s grace.”

Judy looked like her mind was far away. She was not listening, but she was polite and did not interrupt. Victor continued, "Please listen, Judy. Think how Jesus Christ suffered for you on the cross, so that your sins would be forgiven. Then you will love Him so passionately that you would never think of reducing him to a little god that men can mold according to their imaginations."

Lori begged, "Please, let us visit you and help you to learn these things. Will you?"

"I think not! I see they have brain-washed you both! I thank God that I have worked my way free from all that dogma. Good night. Thank you for the tea."

She left and Lori fell into a chair. After a long moment of silence, she sighed. "I smelled marijuana when I stood by her."

"I also saw needle punctures on her arm," Victor added. "She uses drugs. Those who refuse to build their beliefs on solid truth soon become victims of false religions. Judy is a prisoner of her own unbelief."

"She said that people can believe whatever they want!"

"People who think as she does protect themselves from facts and the truths of Scripture. They build a shell around themselves. Judy's shell is more confining than any Christian dogma. She locks herself in her own little dream world. She said that she was free, but people are not free unless they love with the kind of love that only God's grace brings."

They prayed for Judy. Then, walking home, Lori told Victor, "You are sounding more like Tino all the time! What did you mean when you said that people are not free unless they love?"

"Tino explained it to me. Sinful persons cannot do everything they want because they want to do bad things. Police, society, conscience and God will restrain them. Only loving persons can be allowed to be free to do they he want, because what they want is always good. Jesus said that to love one's neighbor fulfills the whole law."

"I understand now, Victor. People who love are free to do what they want, because what they want to do is good for others. Oh, I can see how it will be! In the resurrection, throughout eternity, we will have no sin. We will love God and each other so much, that we will finally be perfectly free to do whatever we want. Glory to God!"

When Tino returned from his trip he congratulated Victor, "Ishmael told me how you restored order when Arthur and his helpers tried to seize control of the group. Thank you! Others also told me that you and Lori have been a blessing to them. Your new group has started two newer groups, and you are mentoring their new leaders. May our Lord Jesus be praised!"

"I am simply doing what you did for us. I am imitating you, Tino. It is easy this way. Very easy!"

Lori exclaimed, "Oh! How God's grace is flowing! From family to family and friend to friend! Oh, let us praise Him!"

"God's grace is flowing in many places," Tino reported. "Our missionaries started groups that are also reproducing rapidly now. They are boldly invading Satan's territory! They have the same struggles with legalism that we have here. However, everywhere that believers in Christ call upon His name for grace and power, the Holy Spirit shows that the Almighty is more powerful than Satan and his evil spirits."

Lori wept.

“What is wrong?” Victor asked.

“So many people do not know this great blessing! I want to write a poem about God’s wonderful grace so others can read it and rejoice with us. But I am not skilled at writing poetry. I find it hard to make words rhyme.”

“Lori,” Tino spoke gently. “Write the poem, please! The words do not need to rhyme. There is no law that prohibits you to let your thoughts flow freely. Do not worry about the restraints of classical poetry. Simply write what the Lord gives you.”

“Should I? Really?” She looked at Victor. Will you help me keep the theology right?”

A few days later Victor and Lori met with Tino, Julie and Ishmael. “Lori wants to read something,” Victor announced. She began shyly. Her soft voice trembled with nervousness:

The Old Serpent Wars Against the New Creation

God’s liberating grace flows from a land far higher than the Himalayas,
Far greater than the Ganges, Amazon, Yangtze and Nile combined.
It breaks through all restraining walls and streams to every land!
Oh, let me taste its healing, life-producing, all-forgiving flood!

At first the earth’s weak crust could not support its weight.
Its purity would cease if stained by touching sinful human hearts
Where evil spirits spread their putrid, soul-destroying slime.
When Adam fell, hell’s legions sang an obscene song of triumph!

Then, louder, sounded God’s firm pledge, “The serpent spoiled both earth and men.
His victim, man, of woman born, will crush that dragon’s head!”
The demons jeered, “Sin soiled all men, so none can ever escape God’s curse!
Accuse them of one sin, and every man on earth will soon return to dust!”

In awe the angels heard the one Most High, the Father God, bid God the Son,
“Go. Build a channel. Let grace flow from our high throne to all mankind.”
The devils scoffed, “The earth’s thin crust is far too weak and never can support
Foundations strong enough; the waters of that river weigh too much!”

God told His Son, “Go walk on earth in human flesh, though soiled it be.
Take part in mankind’s plagues and pain! Go taste sin’s bitter curse!
Unblock the path with blood that melts all walls to let the waters flow
To free each soul who lives, have lived and shall live down on earth!”

The demons jeered with twisted grins, defying God’s decree.
Archangels watched, amazed, and asked, “How can this really be?
How can the Holy One go near and touch the shame and filth
That Satan, man’s cruel enemy, has sown throughout the earth?”

The rebel spirits boasted, “Let a human savior try! God’s holiness forbids!
By sinning, men gave up to us their souls’ eternal fate.
So let the vermin try to build the river’s deep foundation. Try!
Then gladly we will spoil with ease such hopeless, wishful plans!”

Archangels cried, “The chains of time and space do not restrain God’s hand.
No darkness blinds Him, boundless distance He can span.
For He alone is everywhere and every**when!** He dwells outside of time.

The great **I AM** can enter into any point in time or space.”

Thus He who built all worlds, both seen and veiled, reached down
To penetrate creation, sparking life inside compliant Mary’s womb
And, guarding her virginity, conceived the Son of God and man.
Then demon legions waged cruel war and killed that weak but holy man.

The fiends of hell cried, “Beat Him! Pierce His side and watch him bleed!”
He died. Earth shook and thunder roared. Rain spread His blood afar.
The dragon’s greedy claws reached out to seize the prize so foully gained.
Like Jonah’s hungry fish, he swallowed Jesus’ raw, bruised flesh!

With swollen pride the serpent bragged, “I won! My comrades, celebrate!
Let heaven’s angels watch my treasure grow each time a human dies!
Now deep within our realm of death the Christ lies helpless in my hands.
God cast us down from heaven, but we now have full revenge!”

Cheers echoed through the halls of hell, “God had to keep His word!”
“He had to let His Jesus die. That ‘savior’ proved to be a fool!
He failed! The law of God Himself demands that sinful men must die.
Our accusations seal their tombs; as Heaven’s law requires!”

Our dead Lord lay in perfect rest throughout that Sabbath day,
The only man that kept God’s law in every perfect way.
The dragon, blinded by sheer hate, could not foresee such work of love;
The **Final Adam’s** blood would cleanse the sins of all mankind!

The first day came, of God’s new week, and Jesus broke the dragon’s grasp.
Hell’s demons gasped. Defeat! Dismay! But angels shouted in surprise,
“What Joy! Although foretold by Ishmael, Prophets and the Psalms,
We did not see what now is clear! Let heaven’s host praise God!”

“He had to rise,” the Highest Judge explained, “He is the Holy One!
The same decree that orders death for sin requires that good men live.
No righteous man will die, but live enjoying God forever!
The serpent’s sharp, accusing teeth could not retain the sinless one.”

The angels cheered as Jesus shattered deaths’ locked door and rose,
And raised in Him, like Noah’s boat that held man’s salvaged race,
Above earth’s time and space all captives who have died with faith
And also those who yet will die, because Christ works outside of time.

The demons have no power now, except the power of deceit.
Let those who choose to trust their lies drink all that deadly slime!
To all the rest, God’s river flows! Drink, freely all who thirst!
Oh! Taste the love of Christ! Embrace His grace forever!

Exercises

Your Plans:

Mark things that Satan uses to block the flow of God's grace:

<input type="checkbox"/>	Individualism that seeks a private faith.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Proud dogmatism that refuses to listen to others' views or limits Christian ministry to teaching.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Following traditions of men instead of Scripture.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Teaching in a way that lets people only be passive hearers.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Idolatry, including the kind that lets one believe whatever he wants as long as he is sincere.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Power-hungry leaders who only enforce rules and do not help others to share leadership responsibilities.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Organizing in a way that fails to help believers to serve one another with their different spiritual gifts.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Demanding obedience to God for other motives besides love, such as fear or the threat of rejection.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Materialism that measures God's grace by how much wealth one owns.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Rationalism that denies that God's grace comes to us now in a supernatural way.

[The demons of hell use all of the weapons above to weaken people's trust in God's grace.]

Why do we not follow the laws of the Old Covenant (Old Testament) now, except those that are reaffirmed in the New Testament?

What New Testament passages might you use to help believers to understand that God, through Christ, has instituted an entirely new covenant of grace that replaced the covenant of law?

Describe any new plans that you have to help people embrace the light and freedom that flow to us as God's River of Grace:

