

The Grace of God and the Wrath of God: Interviews With Steve McVey

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Introduction

This is a transcript of four interviews conducted as part of the *You're Included* series, sponsored by Grace Communion International. We have more than 100 interviews available. You may watch them or download video or audio at www.gci.org/YI.

Please understand that when people speak, thoughts are not always put into well-formed sentences, and sometimes thoughts are not completed. In the following transcripts, we have removed occasional words that did not seem to contribute any meaning to the sentence. In some cases we could not figure out what word was intended. We apologize for any transcription errors, and if you notice any, we welcome your assistance.

Grace Communion International is in broad agreement with the theology of the people we interview, but GCI does not endorse every detail of every interview. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees. We thank them for their time and their willingness to participate.

We incur substantial production costs for these interviews and transcripts. Donations in support of this ministry may be made at www.gci.org/donate.

Our guest in the following interviews is Steve McVey, founder of GraceWalk Ministries. He is the author of

Grace Walk,
Grace Rules,
Grace Amazing,
The Godward Gaze,
A Divine Invitation,
Walking in the Will of God,
The Grace Walk Experience, and
52 Lies Heard in Church Every Sunday.

For his books on Amazon.com, click [here](#).

The interviews were conducted by Michael Morrison, Dean of Faculty and Professor of New Testament Studies at Grace Communion Seminary.

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## The Grace Walk

**MM:** Steve, you've written a book called *Grace Walk*. It's sold quite a number of copies now, and in the book you describe the story of how you came to an understanding of grace, and I wondered if we could start today by rehearsing a little bit of that story as to what it was that motivated you to write this book.

**SM:** Sure. I grew up in a Christian home. My parents were Christians; they're both in heaven now. But I was taught about the Lord from the time I was a small child and was very sincere. I understood the gospel when I was 8 years old, and by the time I was 16 years old, I was preaching. I preached my first sermon at 16 years old and was very sincere....became a senior pastor at 19. Can you believe that? 19 years old and I was a senior pastor of a church with about 100 people — about 80 of them were over 65, which seemed old to me back then. It doesn't seem so old these days.

Anyway, I was very sincere in my Christian walk, but little by little I found happening to me what I think happens to a lot of people, and that is my focus began to be, in small increments, it began to move away from being on Jesus and began to be more directed toward my own performance — how well I was doing and living the Christian life.

The essence of legalism is thinking that somehow we can make spiritual progress or gain God's blessings based on what we do, making sure that we do the right things, making sure that we're keeping all the rules. In the modern church, I think we get grace when it comes to evangelism for unbelievers, but then once people believe, it's like bait and switch — we turn the tables on them, you know what I'm saying? It's like "OK, it was grace for you to understand the gospel, but now that you're a believer, everything's changed. Now it's all about you and what *you* do." I lived that way for the first 29 years of my Christian life. 17 of those years I was a senior pastor.

In my first book, *Grace Walk*, which was published in 1995, I described how the Lord brought me to a place where I realized that although my heart had been in the right place, my head was in the wrong place. That book starts out with me lying on my face in the middle of the night at 2:00 in the morning crying in my office, as a pastor, saying, "If this is the Christian life, it's overrated, and if this is the ministry, I want out." How's that for a sort of tease introduction to a book? A pastor who wanted to quit.

**MM:** It sounds like you'd been a successful pastor, if you had 19 years, and if you then

continued to focus on performance, perhaps that's because you were "performing" well.

**SM:** That's right. It's really interesting. I write about it in the book, that for many years as a pastor I felt successful. I felt that way. I got that from accolades of other people, the affirmation of my ministry and those kinds of things.

But I began to pray a prayer, and I tell you this is a prayer that the Lord takes very seriously. I began to pray a prayer, and I said, "Father, I want to know you more intimately than I've ever known you. I want to be used by you. I want you to work through my life to impact people with your love, your life, more than I could even imagine it." Then I said this: "And whatever it takes, I want you to do it to bring me to that place."

Well, he heard that prayer. I'm making a long story short...I wrote a whole book about it. Shortly after that, I made a move from a church where I served as senior pastor in the state of Alabama to Atlanta, Georgia. I moved to Atlanta anticipating that I was going there to build a megachurch, and that I would see unprecedented success in my ministry. The church I was going to had been dying in every measurable way for five years before I got there, but I thought when I got there, things would turn around.

But to my surprise, things didn't turn around. The church kept dying and it just kept dying, right out from under me. After I had been there a year, that's when, as I mentioned a moment ago, I was approaching the first anniversary date of my tenure as pastor, and I found myself lying on my face, and I said, "If this is the ministry, I want out. If this is Christian living, it's overrated."

But the ironic thing is that what the Lord used in my life (as he does in, I think, all of our lives when he wants to bring us up to a deeper or higher understanding of grace), is he had to bring me to the place where I had discovered my need for grace. You see?

We "get" grace [i.e., understand it] for unbelievers. But sometimes as pastors, especially, we don't get it. We think, "I'm preaching the Bible, I'm counseling, I'm doing all the things a pastor should be doing. I'm having success with it." The Lord has to work in our lives to bring us to the place where we say, "I can't do what I thought I could do," so that we'll be open to what he wants to teach us.

**MM:** So in some ways, failure was good.

**SM:** Failure is always good, because failure is not the end. Suffering and pain and what we interpret as failure is sometimes not failure at all. It's the principle in the Bible about dying to

live. Jesus said unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies it abides alone; you've got to die to live. The Bible is full of paradoxical statements like that. We have to think about that the Bible says we die to live. We have to be weak in order to be strong. We go down so we can go up. It has to get dark before the light comes.

But we're wired in this world. Our flesh is programmed this way. Especially those of us who live in the Western culture, we're wired to think that we have to succeed, and we have to make our mark, and there has to be this continuous upward trajectory toward success and what we're doing. But we don't get strong enough for God to use us. We have to get *weak* enough for God to use us. The best way to learn that is in the midst of our failures.

**MM:** That kind of thing kind of hurts, though, doesn't it?

**SM:** It does. Just like when my children were small and I took them to the doctor for their vaccinations, it always hurt. When I took them for their booster shots, it hurt, and it was for their own good. It was a good thing, though in their little minds it didn't seem like it. In our own minds, as human beings, sometimes when we're in painful circumstances, we think, "If God cares, why is he letting this happen?" If we could hear him answer, we would hear him say, "It's precisely because I do care, that I'm letting this happen."

In my situation I came into that church and it kept dying out from under me (numerically, I mean), and I had always been used to growing churches. So I prayed, "Lord, what's going on?" I began to feel weakened. I began to feel discouraged, despondent, finally despair. I kept praying, "Lord, make me stronger, make me stronger."

I realize now what he was saying is, "Steve, I've got a better idea. I'll make you weaker." I'm going to say it again. We don't get strong enough for God to use us, so we might as well stop praying "make me stronger," because grace isn't afforded to the strong, you know what I'm saying? It's not the strong people who tap into grace. It's weak people who understand our need for grace, so we've got to become weak, so that we'll reach a point where we can become recipients of grace in an experiential way.

**MM:** So when we have strengths, we tend to rely on our strengths.

**SM:** Absolutely.

**MM:** For some people, it's physical strength, others it's intellectual, some social.

**SM:** That's right. That reliance upon our own abilities and our own strengths as we're describing it — the biblical word for that is the "flesh." When the Bible talks about walking after

the flesh, it's not talking about the skin, these physical bodies. It's can't mean that. Paul said to one group, "You're no longer in the flesh, but in the Spirit." He didn't mean they were ghosts. What he meant is "You get it. You finally get it."

"The flesh" is you or I trying to live for Christ instead of understanding that we can't live for him. We weren't called to live for him. Grace is the enablement by virtue of his indwelling life for us to live his life because he's expressing it through us, not because we're doing it for him, and there's a big difference between the two. To experience that kind of outflow of grace from our lives, we've got to come to the point where we realize, "I can't live the Christian life no matter how hard I try."

It's a great day for any of us when we discover that the Christian life is not hard for us to live, it's *impossible* for us to live. There's only one who can live the Christ-life, and that's the Christ himself. And he will live it, if we come to the end of ourselves and abandon ourselves in total surrender to him. The gospel is not just the gospel for unbelievers, it's the gospel for believers, too. We need his grace just like unbelievers need his grace.

**MM:** People tend to rely on their strengths — sometimes they call those spiritual gifts. How do we tell the difference between our fleshly strength and a spiritual gift?

**SM:** That's a good point you make, and there's a fine line sometimes, because the abilities that we have come from our Father. He's given us those abilities. The key distinguishing factor revolves around one question—what animates those abilities? What is it that I'm relying on to give expression to those abilities? Is it me? Is it my own know-how? Is it my own determination? My own willpower? My own intentionality? Or is it an attitude that says, Apart from him I can do nothing, so I rely upon him and by faith I trust him to be the one to animate those abilities.

For those first 17 years as a senior pastor, I tried to do things for the Lord. My heart was in the right place, it was my head that was messed up, not my heart. My heart was toward him. But when the Lord brought me to brokenness in 1990 and began to teach me this grace walk and what it means to let him live through me, I'll never forget the changes I began to see, because the most evident change is I began to see I didn't have to struggle anymore. I could simply rest in him knowing that he is in control of my life. It's not even my ministry. It's his ministry, and if I just yield myself to him, he will do through me what he wants to do.

He's done that in ways that exceeded anything I could have done or imagined. It's not just like God has a favorite and he'll do for me what he won't do for somebody else. He doesn't pick

folks like you and me and say, “I’m going to do something with their lives, but you guys on the margin, on the periphery, I won’t use your life or I won’t work for you.” No, no, no. He wants to use all of us. Paul told the Corinthians that “You see your calling, that it’s not many that are noble and mighty and strong...” You know the passage...but he goes on and says, “God chooses the weak.”

So I would say to those who watch us that if they feel like, “I’m just not strong like that guy. I’m weak. I’ve never written books. I don’t have the education or the abilities, or...” No, no, no. You’re perfect. I’d say to them, “You’re the *perfect* candidate for God to use you, because you know it has to be him that does it, and that’s the kind of person he will use and takes delight in, in fact.”

**MM:** But he doesn’t necessarily use us in the way that we associate with success.

**SM:** Absolutely not. God’s definition of success and ours, in the religious world at least, is very different. It’s not possible for you and I not to be successful as we depend on Jesus as our life source, because *he* is our success. Christ is our life. In him we live and move and exist, Paul said on Mars Hill, and he was speaking even then to unbelievers. He said, “In him we live and move and exist.”

Christ is our life, so success is our union with him. We just can relax. It’s not about striving for success anymore. It’s about just resting in Jesus and letting Jesus be who he is in us and through us. There’s success right there, whatever it might look like.

**MM:** So, I can be a success even without doing anything, achieving anything.

**SM:** Absolutely. In fact, we don’t achieve anything. We’re not called to achieve anything. We are receivers, not achievers. The great Achiever lives inside us, and he will accomplish through us whatever he wants to do as we depend upon him. We don’t have to make something happen — as I said, we don’t live for him, we don’t have to do anything for him.

Now, for people who have been groomed in the legalistic mindset, they’re thinking, “That guy’s talking passivity.” No, I’m not talking passivity. I can only speak for myself...well, I can speak for more than that. I can speak for all the people I have seen who have embraced grace in saying this: He will do more through us in a day than we can do for him in 25 lifetimes. We just need to stop the struggle.

Jesus said, “Come to me...” (I’m quoting the King James—it’s the one I grew up on—so this is the way I have memorized it.) “Come to me all ye who labor and are heavy-laden, and I’ll

give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Learn from me, for I am meek and lowly in heart and you shall find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Religion beats the daylights out of us. (Sound of whip cracking) “More, more, more!” That’s what legalistic religion does. But grace is the voice of Jesus saying, “Come to me and I’ll give you rest.” Yet it’s not passivity, because it’s a life of active rest, where he lives his life through us and does more through us than we could ever do for him.

**MM:** What’s the role of our decisions in that? How do we let Jesus live through us without us taking the credit for the results?

**SM:** It’s a mindset. Once we’ve failed enough to realize “I will mess it up every time I try,” that’s a good teacher. When we see God doing something through us, we begin to realize “This is not me. I couldn’t have done this.”

Can I give you one example? First time I saw this after I began to understand... (to *begin* to understand, notice, because we’re still growing in grace, all of us are). When I began to understand this, the first example that I saw in my own life... here I had been trying to make my mark for Jesus. I was senior pastor at the time. My secretary comes in and she says, “Pastor, there’s a guy here that would like to talk to you.” I said, “What about?” She said, “About attending church.” I said, “Okay.”

The guy comes in; he was from Africa, from Cameroon. He begins to talk to me about the church, and I quickly realized that he doesn’t understand the gospel or anything about our faith. So I share the gospel with him and the guy believes. He trusts in Christ that very day. Every week he began coming for me to disciple him on Tuesday. I did that every week.

One week he comes in and he says, “Pastor, have you noticed that every week when I come, I take notes of what you’re saying? I said, “Yeah.” He took copious notes every single week when I was discipling him. He said, “Do you know why I do it?” I said, “I guess you take them back and study.” He said, “No. I go over here to the shipping place and I mail these notes to the chief in my village in Africa. Every week the chief is getting these notes, and he goes out and he calls the village together. He’s sharing with them what you’re teaching me.”

He said, “A lot of people in my village are trusting Christ, and they’re asking the chief questions that he doesn’t know how to answer, and he’s asking me, and I don’t know how to answer, so I’m supposed to ask you. If I translate, will you answer the questions of the new Christians in my village?” All of sudden, it just washed over me. I thought, “Here I am sitting in

Atlanta, Georgia, with one man across the desk from me, and I'm evangelizing and discipling a whole village of people in Africa."

**MM:** How strange is that? Pastoring them, too.

**SM:** Exactly. I couldn't make that happen in a million years. That's the point I make. When we strive to do things for God, all it is, all it results in, is what the Bible calls "dead works." It's just religious works. But if we give up on our struggle, and as the writer of Hebrews says, "enter into his rest." (I used to think that meant dying and going to heaven — that's how anemic my Christian life was. No...enter into his rest.) That is, I stopped struggling and striving, and I'm just going to trust that God is my life and that he'll live through me.

If we'll do that, the kind of thing I just described, that one anecdote, that's just the tip of the iceberg. I've been on six continents sharing this message and seeing God do things that there's no way I could take credit for. How do I know it's him and not me? Because I'm not smart enough to do the things he's done through me. As you started out by saying, people might see his life expressed in different ways. It might not be something that they would consider on a grand scale, but it doesn't matter, because when Christ does something through us, we recognize, "That happened from a source beyond my own abilities. That was *him* through me." We see it, and that encourages us and motivates us to want to trust him more.

**MM:** That reminds me of Susanna Wesley, who had no idea that her role as a mother would turn out to be so influential. Just an ordinary station in life, she thought, and yet the Lord was able to use what she had done.

**SM:** Perfect example. I wrote about her. I wrote a book called *Walking in the Will of God*, and I make the point toward the end of the book, that very point. I said, fulfilling God's will in your life doesn't mean that you have to see your name in lights or anything. And I gave the example of Susanna Wesley. What greater contribution could somebody make than Susannah Wesley made by being a godly mother? Look at what Charles and John Wesley gave us – and continues till today, in fact.

**MM:** You said your heart was in the right place, but your head was not. *What* about our head knowledge is going to make a difference, the kind of difference that you describe?

**SM:** Here's the big thing that I see in the modern church. The big idea is that we think God has called us to himself because he needs us to do something for him. I've got good news and bad news. I'll start with the bad news. The bad news is: God doesn't need us. If we think God

needs us, then we greatly underestimate him or we overestimate ourselves. I often say you can take a blank sheet of paper and write down a list of everything you think you have to offer God on that paper, and stand up to the edge of eternity and hold that list up to the God who stood on the edge of nothingness and said “let there be” and there *was*, and tell him what it is you think you’ve got that he needs. No, He doesn’t need us.

But the good news is, he *wants* us. He’s not looking for a maid, he’s looking for a bride. This is biblical, Acts 17. The Bible says, “Neither is he served by human hands as though he needed anything.” I like the passage in the Old Testament where God told Isaiah, he said, “If I were hungry, I wouldn’t tell you.” You know why? Because there’s nothing we could do about it. God doesn’t need us.

But the religious culture of the world today, even in the Christian world, somehow communicates, “God has shown you his grace by bringing salvation to you, and now you understand that he’s forgiven your sin, you’re one with him now, so now it’s up to *you*...now you’ve signed up for something and now it’s up to you to accomplish something, to achieve something, to do something for him.”

It’s a misguided, albeit sincere, intention, because it suggests the very contrary of what I’ve just shared from the Bible. God doesn’t need us. We have been called to live in this union, this, as you guys here know very well, this *perichoresis*, this inner penetration of inner love and harmony. We’ve been called to live in that group hug and then to live out of that group hug expressing the life of the Father, Son, and Spirit in our day-to-day activities.

That’s a far cry from religion. Religion demands that we *do* things, but when we live out of the circle of the Father, Son, and Spirit, we find it’s not demand, it’s desire. It’s not law, it’s love. It’s not responsibility, it’s relationship, it’s privilege that motivates us to want to express the divine life of the Father, Son, and Spirit to the world around us. And that’s a country mile, as we say down south, away from religious obligation.

**MM:** A lot of people have a picture of God that’s a bit austere, and not very inviting. But you’re describing a more attractive God. Is that part of the head knowledge that makes a difference in our relationship?

**SM:** How we see God, our theology, is everything. That’s the foundation. Sometimes people say to me, “What difference does theology make?” The answer is: it makes all the difference in the world, because our view of who God is, our understanding, our concept of who he is, will

affect the way we see and do everything else in life. It will affect how we see ourselves, it will affect how we see others, it will affect how we see situations that we face.

Many of us have grown up... if we grew up in the evangelical world it was almost inevitable that we would come to the conclusion that we serve a God whose primary interest is in matters of right and wrong, and that his primary focus is that once he's forgiven us of our sins, now he's going to teach us how to do the right thing.

**MM:** Well sure. In the Bible we see all sorts of commands – do this, do that.

**SM:** Right. But we don't see those commands through an unfiltered lens. We read the Bible just like we look at our God, and that is through the skewed, tainted, blurred lens of our own making. All the way back in the garden, when Adam and Eve sinned and they...immediately they had this skewed sense of who God is, and they began to see him through the distorted lens of their own guilt and shame. Ever since then, we've done that.

Don't think just because a person trusts Christ and says, "Thank you, Lord, for forgiving my sin, I'm a believer," don't think that that lens just instantly goes away. It doesn't. There's this renewal of the mind that has to take place.

I've had two monumental paradigm shifts, radical changes in my life since the time I trusted Christ as a child. One was what I wrote about in this book, *Grace Walk*, when I began to understand my identity in Christ...that I don't have to try to live for him, but that I died *with* him and now he is my life.

The other was just less than six years ago when I began to understand the Trinitarian viewpoint. That is this idea of who the Father, Son, and Spirit are, and that our God is not a punitive, judgmental, harsh, demanding, exacting God who's looking down on us saying, "When are you going to ever learn to quit doing the wrong and start doing right?"

Why, for God to do that would be a violation of what he had told Adam and Eve in the Garden when he said, "Don't eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." But they did, and suddenly everything became about morality, and it became about issues of right and wrong. We lifted up that filtered clouded lens and we looked at the face of our God through that.

But sin didn't change God, it only changed Adam and Eve. Our God never was, never has been, never will be, a God who's preoccupied with issues of right and wrong. Our God is preoccupied with *us*. It's about relationship, not rules.

When we read the Bible, if we read the Bible through a particular lens, we're going to see a

lot of demanding things in Scripture. But let me give an example, if I could, and excuse this kind of familiar example, a personal example. When I go home from California, back to my wife, if my wife says, “Get over here and kiss me now,” if she *commands* me to come kiss her, okay, her commandments are not burdensome, to quote Scripture (laughing.)

You see what I’m saying? The commands of the Bible, when we understand the New Testament...first, we’re free from the Old Testament law. Paul said in Romans 7, “We are made to die to the law so that we might be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead.” We’re out from under the law — we don’t even live in that world anymore.

But the commands in the New Testament, that’s like my wife saying, “Get over here and kiss me.” John said, “His commandments are not burdensome” (King James, “His commandments are not grievous.”). We *want* to do those things. God gives us a new motivation, and the motivation is desire. It’s not duty, it’s desire. For anybody who’s watching who reads their New Testament and thinks it’s filled with commands that they have to struggle to try to keep, I think it does come back to their concept of who their Father is. Because once we know that we’re totally accepted, listen, that changes everything.

Life is not a test. Life is a *rest*. Jesus said, “Come to me and I’ll give you rest.” He didn’t say I’ll give you a test. There is no test. It’s a rest.

**MM:** There’s not a final exam.

**SM:** There’s no final exam. We’ve passed, we’ve scored a perfect score with flying colors because the grade that we have is the grade of Jesus, because he is our life, we’re one with him. Paul said, “He who joins himself together to the Lord is one spirit with him.” It’s so simple. No wonder Jesus said, you have to become like a little child. Because our religious minds and our adult minds, and our Western-world minds, we tend to miss it. It’s so simple. If I could just say it as simply as the Bible says it, just believe! Just believe it.

It’s called the gospel because it’s good news—if we could just believe it. God in Christ, Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, has made everything right. We’re restored, we’re reconciled, it’s all good now. So all we can do, all we need to do, is just live out of the overflow, the celebration, of that *perichoresis*, the *koinonia*, that fellowship that we have with the Father, Son, and Spirit because of the cross. Sounds too good to be true, and when it does, it’s probably the gospel, it’s grace.

**MM:** Many people think that that’s not very workable. They just don’t...

**SM:** It's *not* (laughing). It's not workable, you can only *trust* it. That's a good point, I like it. That was a little slip there, I like it. It's not *workable*. It's not of works, it's of faith. Sorry to interrupt, but I couldn't resist that.

**MM:** That's good.

**SM:** But you make a good point. A lot of us think that that we're forgiven our sin and now we're in Christ, but now we've got this *manual* here [the Bible], we've got this...

**MM:** Yeah... isn't right and wrong found in there?

**SM:** Yeah, it is. And we're told to avoid it. We're told... see, here's the key. Whatsoever is not of faith is sin. You can do the right thing and it still be a sin.

It's not about right and wrong, it's about trusting Christ in us to live his life through us. We're capable... and this is where the modern church misses it, in my mind. We're capable of more than right. You don't even have to believe in Christ to do the right thing. I know many people that renounce the gospel who don't commit adultery and don't steal or kill, or we could go down the list. But we're capable of more than right, we're capable of living righteously.

We're capable of more than morality. Morality is that system of right and wrong based on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the one God said stay away from. We're capable of more than moral living, we're capable of *miraculous* living. By that I mean that the deity, Father, Son, and Spirit, flows through us, out into this world like a river of living water from our innermost being.

**MM:** Right. But we're not doing it.

**SM:** You mean the modern church is not experiencing that?

**MM:** You say that we're capable of this, but yet in a way *we're* not doing it — it's Jesus working in us.

**SM:** That's right. We're capable because he has enabled us.

**MM:** Our role is to get out of the way?

**SM:** That's right. We are capable because he's made us capable. We are responsible, response-able, we're responsible, we're now able to respond to him and say, "OK, I get it, I don't have to struggle."

I wrote in *Grace Walk* an experience I've seen, I've witnessed many times. When I was a pastor of churches I'd visit hospitals. A guy might have had heart surgery, and he's on a breathing machine. Have you ever been in the room with somebody when they wake up on a

breathing machine? They have to kind of learn with that thing, because if they're not careful, it happens a lot of times when a person wakes up in a recovery room after surgery and they're on a breathing machine, they try to breathe.

And when they try to breathe, they're fighting against the machine, and all kind of alarms go off, and it's very uncomfortable for them. I've seen it again and again. My own dad had heart surgery, and I saw him on one when he was alive. The nurse will come in and say, "Calm down, don't struggle...." Listen to this, "You don't have to try to breathe, just relax. The machine will breathe for you." Sure enough, I've watched it again and again. The people would just kind of let go and relax and quit struggling, and the machine takes over and begins to breathe for them.

Isn't it interesting that the word for Spirit is *breathe*? So when we rely upon the Holy Spirit, we don't struggle to breathe. We just depend on the Spirit of Christ in us, the Spirit of Jesus that indwells us, and as we learn to just rest and realize, "I don't have to make it happen, I just trust him." As we learn that, then he does it through us. It's a rest.

It's one of those paradoxical statements. In Hebrews the Bible says...I like it, it's almost comical to me, "*Strive* to enter into that *rest*" (laughing). The reason we have to strive to enter into that rest is because it's not the default setting of the flesh to rest, and so we have to be very intentional about that.

We have to say, "No, no, no, no, I'm not going to take my life or my circumstances, my will, I'm not going to try to take this back into my own hands, I've already proven I'm not capable. So I'm going to just, by intentionality, which is the striving part, I'm going to choose, I'm going to decide, I'm going to go against the current of modern religion, I'm going to go against the current of my own fleshly inclinations, and I'm going to just trust and rest and let him be who he is in and through me." That's grace. It's the unilateral expression of his life and love in us and through us. He does it all. We're containers and we're conduits of his life, but we don't work it up.

**MM:** And that's the grace walk.

**SM:** That's the grace walk. Him doing it in us and through us. It's not a passive lifestyle. It's a lifestyle where we actively rest in him, and he does it all.

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We Will Never Overestimate God's Grace

MM: In an earlier program, you talked about how you had a couple of theological transitions in your life and you gave a synopsis of the first one. Maybe you could give an even briefer synopsis now, and then describe the second one.

SM: Sure, I'd be glad to. First let me back up and say that I understood the gospel as a young boy. I grew up in a Christian family and I believed in the Lord at a very early age, became a senior pastor at 19 years old, and for 17 years as a senior pastor I was very sincere, but I was caught up in the typical, I'll call it traditional, religious legalism, and that is the mindset that says that God blesses me or approves of me because I'm doing all the right things that I need to be doing, reading my Bible, praying, involved in church, sharing the gospel, those kinds of things.

In 1990, the Lord brought me to a place of brokenness. That is, I came to the end of myself and my struggle of trying to be the perfect Christian and trying to be a good pastor. He began to show me that it wasn't about me and what I could do for him, that he didn't call me for that, he didn't make me for that, but instead it was about him and what he wanted to do through me. I wrote about that in my first book, *Grace Walk*, in the early 90s. It came out in '95, and I wrote about that time in life.

That was the first, I'll call it as you said, monumental shift for me in my thinking. I realized, first of all, that I was in union with Christ and that it wasn't Steve with a split personality, an evil twin living inside, you know, a new nature and an old nature combating, but I began to understand co-crucifixion — that the old Steve was crucified with Jesus and now Christ is my life. I began to understand what it means to walk in grace instead of religious legalism, instead of building my life around rules, just relax and let him live his life through me. That was in 1990. We talked about that last time.

For another 15 years, I taught that message. It's what many have called the "exchanged life" message — that "exchanged life" is a phrase that some missionary coined to describe this idea of biblical truth, that our old life died with Christ and that in its place he's given us a new life. I call it the grace walk, Hudson Taylor called it exchanged life, some have called it the higher life, the deeper life, I think Andrew Murray called it the abiding life, Watchmen Nee called it the normal Christian life. Whatever you want to call it, it just means Jesus living his life through us, and understanding that our identity is in him.

The second, I'll call it cataclysmic event, a revelation even, if I can use that word, that came

to me and I began to grow in, was about six years ago. It was when I began to think...I've been a Calvinist for about 27 years. I believed, and still believe, in the sovereignty of God. That was the thing I found attractive about Calvinism, and so I'm not trying to be disrespectful to those who hold a Reformed theological view or are Calvinist. But I know in my own teaching I had said for many years, "No matter how big you imagine God's love to be, it's bigger."

Then I began to think about it and I thought, now wait a minute. Some of what I'm teaching about how big God's love is, is actually inconsistent with the tenets of what I have professed to believe, the five points of Calvinism (and for those who might be watching, they are represented by the acrostic TULIP, total depravity, unconditional election, and it was that third one that I began to grapple with — limited atonement, and then there was the irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints).

But I began to think about that "limited atonement." I thought, now wait a minute. Did God choose everybody, or not? Because I've said everywhere, God's love is bigger than you can imagine it to be. I thought, if God is love the way that I'm teaching, how could this God that I'm teaching and that the Bible clearly says is love by essence, how could he intentionally choose the majority of his creation, his people born, to be reprobates, to never have the opportunity to even know him? How can I say that's love? How can I say that a minority of us will go to heaven and celebrate forever how loving he is, when he purposely chose not to elect the majority of people?

My theology, my concept of God, began to mess with my biblical understanding. Some people might get rattled with me for this, but it wasn't that I looked at the Bible and said, wait a minute, my Calvinistic understanding won't line up with Scripture. That wasn't what precipitated the change in me. What precipitated the change was, I began to say, wait a minute, the Christ who lives in me, who is the exact representation of his Father, I know him. He's not somebody who would decide to never choose the majority of those that would ever be born and never include them in the finished work of the cross. My understanding of the Father through the Son who lives in me and the Spirit who illuminates truth caused me to say, I've got to go back and look at the Bible again. I went back and I began to study the Bible again with fresh eyes, if I can use that phrase — I hope that makes sense.

MM: With new lenses.

SM: A new lens. That's right. It was the lens that said my God is not a punitive judgmental God, but my God is love, pure and simple. That's not one of his characteristics. Love is not "one

of his attributes” — love is the DNA of God. I began to go back into the Bible and study it again. You know how the Holy Spirit works. I began to see things in Scripture in a different light, through the different lens, that I had never seen. I began to realize that this God the Father did indeed express who he is through the Son in his earthly ministry. The Holy Spirit does give us revelation of his love. I began to see a shift.

As I did begin to see a biblical transition in my thinking, the Lord brought along folks that, lo and behold, had written on this very subject of what we know is a Trinitarian perspective. The Lord began to bring people across my path, guys like you here at Grace Communion International, and people like Baxter Kruger, and Thomas Torrance, and J.B. Torrance, and others, Robert Capon, and some of these others that have written from that perspective. It’s like wow! All these years I’ve been teaching the grace of God as what I call the grace walk, and now I get it. The grace of God is even bigger than I had thought. I don’t guess we’ll ever overestimate God’s grace, will we?

That’s a long question for a short answer, but that at least sets us in the direction of where my thinking came from and where it is these days.

MM: So you examined the Bible from the perspective that God is like the Jesus you had been taught about, or the Jesus you had experienced. Was there previously a “disconnect” between what you thought of God and what you saw as Jesus?

SM: The problem with speaking of my experiences...it might sound to somebody like I’m being critical of the evangelical world, and I’m not, but I will say I don’t think my experience is unique. I had the idea that I think many do, that you have the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the Father, in my thinking at the time (not now, this is not how I see it now), but at the time, this Father was a *just* God who demanded that there be payment for sin, and he had this seething anger, and to get it out of his system and balance the books and satisfy his justice, somebody had to pay. That somebody was going to be me and you and everybody else. I had this concept of this judicial, punitive, harsh God who found everything in him screaming out that his justice be avenged.

Then I had the good cop (you know what I mean? Bad cop, good cop...) Jesus who says “Father, it’s okay. How about this? How about if I go down... [and I’m using hyperbole, okay. I’m not being fair to the evangelical perspective I grew up with, sometimes I exaggerate things to make a point, so let me concede that at the start, but there’s some truth in this]...

It's like my mind said it was Jesus who said, "Father, how about this? I'll go down to the world, I'll live a sinless life, and I'll go to the cross and you can vent all this anger you have against sin toward me, so that you won't have to vent it toward Steve." God says, "Okay." So Jesus comes down into this world, lives a sinless life, goes to the cross, and God kicks the daylight out of his own Son at the cross. He pours out his anger, he pours out his rage about sin onto Jesus and he gets it out of his system. And now I believe on Jesus, and so God won't pour out his rage on me, because he's poured it out on Jesus.

But even then, I had this idea that God still is this judicial God who's really obsessed with right and wrong, so that even as a Christian when I would sin, God still would have come at me, but Jesus was going, "Father, Father, the scars, the scars." God would say, "Oh yeah, okay, you're right, the scars." I thought God saw me through his Son Jesus, and that's what protected me.

The fallacy in that, is that what we got is a schizophrenic God. And the Spirit, well, we don't even go there, because I didn't belong to a charismatic or Pentecostal denomination, so I knew the Spirit existed, but we didn't talk a lot about him. I knew the Spirit existed, but in my mind I had this harsh, judicial, judgmental God who had to have justice through punishment, and I had this loving Jesus.

But the fallacy in that view is that Jesus said, "If you've seen me, you've seen the Father." There's the disconnect. What? How can I see loving Jesus and him say I've seen the Father, if the Father was indeed angry and had some sort of justice (and that's a distorted sense of God's justice) that necessitated that he vent anger against somebody about sin. No. Our triune God, three in one, all share the same heart, and all share the same love and the same passion. They, he, has lived in this *perichoresis*, in this circle-dance of love that has existed through eternity past, it will exist through eternity future.

One day our God said, if I can take a little literary liberty — I'm a writer and a preacher, that's the double danger here. If I can use a little imagery here, he says, "This love we share, Father, Son, and Spirit, it can't be improved on. It's perfect. It couldn't be improved on, it's already perfect. But you know what we could do that would intensify it? We could share it. We could widen the circle."

So the Father, Son, and Spirit said in Genesis, "Let us make man in our own image." You know the story. It starts right there in the garden, where God created mankind. The reason we're

here is so that we can be loved by the Father through the Son and the communion of the Holy Spirit. That's what it's all about. It wasn't a good cop/bad cop. Even the fall of Adam didn't change God. Adam hid because he thought God had now gone over the edge and was angry. No. God came for his walk in the evening just like he'd always done.

MM: Even though he *knew* what Adam had done.

SM: Exactly. Adam's sin didn't change God — it changed Adam's perception of God, and it's affected us and contaminated our view of God ever since, unless we see the truth in Scripture that we're talking about today. So God came...and from the get-go he told him, "You don't have to sweat it. Your seed, his seed will bruise the heel of your offspring, but your offspring (speaking of Jesus) will bruise his head [Gen. 3:15]. One day the devil will be destroyed, and in the meantime I'm going to cover you with these animal skins, these bloody skins, to show that the remedy is on the way, don't panic. I'm going to banish you from the Garden and keep you out, so you won't eat from the tree of life and be doomed to this life of sin and distortion, forever living under the delusion and the lies."

From the beginning it's grace, grace, grace, grace, and then when Jesus came to the cross, contrary to my view (which as you understand, and some of the viewers will, is called the penal substitution view — the idea that Jesus took our punishment so that we wouldn't have to take it).

The apostle Paul said it this way in 2 Corinthians, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting those trespasses against them." God the Father was in the Son. Over in Hebrews it said he offered himself by the eternal Spirit. We've got the whole Trinity. We've got our Triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit on a rescue mission, not God the Father punishing Jesus, but the Father and the Son and the Spirit in sync working together to rescue us from this destroying thing called sin that would, to use C.S. Lewis's kind of imagery, make us wither away into nothingness if he didn't come along. I get excited about this.

MM: So there was no change in God's attitude toward us because of the death of Jesus?

SM: Here's a verse some people know: "God says, I am God and I change not." God has never changed. God's always loved us. God's heart was toward us before the death of Jesus. That's why Jesus came. It's not that God the Father was against us and Jesus came to change God's mind about us — Jesus came to change *our* mind about God the Father, not to change the Father's mind about us. The Father, the Son, the Spirit had always loved us, and Jesus came to help us see that.

Lo and behold, who were his biggest critics when he tried to show and express that love? It wasn't the drunken cursing sailors, was it? It wasn't the woman taken in adultery, it wasn't the harlot who washed his feet with her hair using the perfume from the alabaster box. No. The people who got all bent out of shape about Jesus saying let me show you the kind of loving Father you've got, the people that got bent out of shape by it were the religious people.

When I teach this message today and you teach it and everybody you have on this program teaches it, we find out the same thing still happens. It's not those "out there," so to speak. I hate to use that term in a dichotomy like that, but it's not those who don't believe, it's those who profess to believe who get mad as the devil about the love of God. They're the older brother in the story of the prodigal. I know, I'm a charter member of that club. You know what I'm saying? I've lived there.

MM: I know. But you, as the older brother, finally went in to the party.

SM: Which gives me hope. That's why I share this message of perichoresis now, because if I could one day say, you know...and thank God it speaks well of my Father that he stood out there in the darkness of my own religion, he stood out there in the darkness when I was saying, "No, no, God's not like that. It can't be that good. You can't tell me everybody gets off scott free. You can't tell me everybody's included. You can't tell me that God loves us all. No, no."

My Father didn't give up, but he kept pleading and appealing and showing and wooing (that's an old word, isn't it? That's a biblical word), and enticing me to see his love, until finally like that prodigal, at least we know, he melted in his father's embrace and accepted it. The interesting thing about the older brother in the story in Luke 15 is we don't know if he went in or not, but one thing we do know, the Father never went in without him. He didn't go in, but neither did the Father. Our God doesn't give up on us.

This whole idea of this perichoresis, this dancing with deity concept, this idea that we live in the communion of the Father, Son, and Spirit and we live out of that as our reality, that's enough to excite anybody. It's not just us, but the essence of this program that you guys have here, *You're Included*, points toward the good news of the gospel that God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to himself. Everybody was wrapped up in that big bear hug, that big group hug at the cross — not just the religious people. (That would be a sour party, wouldn't it?) Not just the people who believe, but we're all wrapped up in it.

Somebody's going to watch this and say, "Don't you think we have to believe?" Sure. Who

wants to stand outside in the darkness of unbelief if you're missing the party? But let the record show: both sons had the same privileges. It's just one accepted his acceptance, and the other didn't.

MM: What are the consequences if we don't believe?

SM: You're going to stand out there in the cold and the dark and miss out on the party, but don't blame your Father, because as the Father in Luke 15 said, the accepting father in that story that we call the prodigal, he said to his older son, "Everything that I have is yours." The problem with unbelievers is that — unbelief. It's not like there's something left for God to do for them. God's done what he's going to do for all of us. He's done what he's going to do for humanity.

The problem that exists, and listen, I'm speaking as a pastor, I've been preaching since I was 16 — for 40 years I've been preaching. I was pastor at traditional institutional churches for 21 years, and I'm telling you the problem is in the modern church world (I don't mean it to be mean, it's just a fact), the problem is we don't preach the pure gospel. By and large, we preach a *potential* gospel, not the pure gospel. We say, here's what Jesus did for you, now *if* you will believe, then he'll forgive your sin. No. It's not *if* you believe, then you'll be reconciled to God. No. *If* you believe then he'll do this or that. No, no, no.

That's not the gospel. That's a *potential* gospel. The gospel is good news that he says he's already done it whether you believe it or not. If you don't believe it and want to stand out in the darkness, you're going to miss out on the party, but the *truth* is that the objective reality of what he did at the cross is real, whether you believe it or not, but by believing it we experience it. And experiencing it is where the abundance comes in that Jesus talked about in John 10:10 when he said, "I've come so that you might have life and have it more abundantly."

MM: You said earlier that Jesus didn't die as a punishment. God didn't punish Jesus on the cross. Why then did he die? What's the connection between his death and our salvation?

SM: Good question. Because this thing called sin had infected all of humanity through Adam, and it's a congenital disease that everybody's born with, and incidentally it's fatal — the wages of sin is death, and such sin was being passed down from person to person to person through the generations from Adam. God saw that, left to ourselves, we would be destroyed by sin. Our God said "No, sin shall not have the last word. Sin will not be the trump card. I didn't create mankind to wither away into nothingness. I didn't create humanity to die out. No. Sin won't have the last word."

To use a literary imagery, it's like the Father, Son, and Spirit said, "We're going to go down there and we're not coming back until this thing is done." They came — Jesus the Son came empowered by the Spirit, superintended, if you will, by the sovereignty of the Father. He came into this world to finish a job. What did he come to finish? Daniel 9:24, prophesying about the Messiah, says, "He'll make an end of sin." He'll make an end...he'll finish the transgression. Along comes Jesus all these centuries later showing up on planet earth. The angels said, "Call him Jesus, because he's going save his people from their sin."

Come on down the road another three decades or so and here's John the Baptist saying, "Look, it's the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." And before his crucifixion you've got Jesus holding up that cup saying, "This is the blood of the new covenant which is shed for the remission of sin." We're getting closer. He came on mission to finish a task. All the way from Daniel, he'll finish the transgression (Daniel 9:24), make an end to sin. Here's Jesus on the cross.

What does he do? He takes all the sin of the world and he draws it into himself. It's not God the Father punishing Jesus. It's *sin* punishing Jesus. Let's be clear, sin brings punishment. It's not God who brings the punishment, it's sin. The wages, the punishment, the penalty of sin is death. Jesus draws that into himself. It's not God. I'll give you an example. A poor diet and poor exercise habits will lead to the punishment of bad health. It's not God that's punishing you with bad health, it's your own choices. Those habits are pregnant with punishment, with penalty. And so it is with sin. It wasn't God punishing Jesus, it was sin punishing Jesus.

He drew it all into himself. When he had drawn the sin of the world into himself, now that which had been started in the eternal circle of heaven before the beginning of time comes to a climactic finish at the cross when Jesus said, "It's finished." He dealt with it, and that's the gospel we proclaim.

Later on, John in his epistle would say, "You know that he appeared to take away the sins of the world." The writer of Hebrews would say, "He put away sin by the sacrifice of himself." The question I would ask the evangelical church (and myself included) is, Did he succeed, or not? Did he fail, or did he do what he came to do? We know he did what he came to do, and he did succeed, and it is finished, and it's all over now except the celebrating. Those of us who believe it are celebrating.

MM: But yet we look around at the world around us, we even look in ourselves and say,

“the sin isn’t completely gone.”

SM: That’s right. We live in this little box called time/space, and we need to be clear about one thing, and that is the old Adamic race died with Jesus, and he did defeat sin. He conquered it once and for all, as the phrase goes, once and for all. We know the truth...people say the truth will set you free. The truth is, Jesus dealt with sin.

No, no, no...the Bible doesn’t say the *truth* will set you free. The Bible says, “You shall *know* the truth and the truth will set you free.” It’s not just the truth that sets you free, it’s *knowing* the truth that sets you free. The truth is, he has dealt with sin. He’s conquered it. It has no power over us. But if you either don’t know or you don’t believe the truth, then a person will still live under the lie that befell Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. If they appropriate the lie, then guess what they’re going to live like? They’re going to live as if the lie is true. It’s not. They’re going to live in a counterfeit reality, which seems like an oxymoron, but you get my point. They’re going to live out of a delusion, they’re going to live as if Christ didn’t really do what he did, but he did.

Back to the 2 Corinthians 5 passage, if I can turn over there, I want to read it instead of try to quote it. Verse 17, “If anyone is in Christ, he’s a new creation.” Most Christians know that one. But let’s come down to verse 19, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.” There’s the objective reality. That’s real whether anybody believes it or not. Then it says, “And he’s committed to us the message of reconciliation, therefore we’re ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us: we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” There’s the subjective reality. In other words, it is real whether you believe it or not, but we’re begging you, we’re appealing to you, believe it, so that it will be real to you.

MM: The verse said that he wasn’t counting people’s trespasses against them, does that mean that I don’t need to ask for his forgiveness?

SM: Bingo. In fact, it insults the finished work of Christ when you do ask for forgiveness. I’m glad you asked that because this is one of those things that are so misunderstood in the church world. How about Colossians 2? Let me just turn over there a minute. (You better be careful, you’re going to put me in a preaching mode here in just a minute, because I do get excited about this.) How about this one? Colossians 2:13, “When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made you alive together with him, having

forgiven us all our transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees which was against us and hostile to us, he's taken that away and nailed it to the cross."

I would say to everybody to watches us, do we believe this Bible or not? Because this Bible, Colossians 2:13 says he's blotted out all our transgressions. Somebody says, "You mean my future sins?" Here's a question, how many of our sins were future when Jesus died? They were *all* future sins. Yes, he dealt with all of our sins at the cross. They were all future sins, and he's dealt with them all.

Let me add real quickly, to *confess* my sin doesn't mean that I'm asking for forgiveness. Because somebody's going to throw out 1 John 1:9, that's what always pops out. I've been teaching this a long time now. That's not to say I won't confess, I won't admit. Confess just means to agree, to say the same. I'm going to acknowledge it when I've sinned, but I don't do it to *get* forgiveness, I do it because I've *already gotten* forgiveness. There's a big difference between the two.

1 John 1:9, if I can give an amplified explanation or paraphrase, might read like this. Since it's the nature of the believer to constantly admit it when we've sinned, so is it the nature of God to constantly relate to us from a posture of forgiveness, keeping us cleansed of all unrighteousness. My part is that I admit it. What else am I doing to do, lie? He knows. His part is to keep me in that state of constant forgiveness because of the work of the cross. What else is he going to do? It's finished.

MM: Often we try to repent and prove our repentance and show how sorry we are.

SM: That's idolatry, you know. Do you know why it's idolatry? Because if I think I have to show my sorrow and I have to wallow in self-condemnation and I have to rededicate myself and promise God this or that, then what I'm really saying is, I don't believe the work of the cross was enough to deal with sin, there's a contribution *I* need to add to it. And what I add is going to put it over the top, right? Idolatry.

Let's just relax. We're forgiven. Let's just believe in the finished work of Christ. Somebody says, "If you tell people that, they're going to go out and live like the devil." No, they won't. Authentic grace won't do that. Paul told Titus, "The grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all men, teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and how to live soberly, righteously, and just in this present age" [Titus 2:12]. Grace is divine enablement for us to live a godly lifestyle. It doesn't create a desire to sin, it creates an appetite for righteous living.

That's what grace does, real grace. Anything else is disgrace.

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The Father Gets a Bad Rap

MM: Last time we were talking about the sacrifice of Jesus, and you were commenting that many people view this sacrifice as God punishing Jesus. You objected strongly to that notion, and I thought maybe you could tell us a little bit today about why you think that's so important that people have an accurate understanding of what was going on there in the crucifixion of Jesus.

SM: I think that it is important because how we understand what happened at the cross will affect our view of the Father and who he is. In my own tradition growing up for a long time I didn't have any problem connecting to the idea of being intimate with Jesus because of what Jesus did for me. But when it came to the Father, I had a different understanding, because of what my view was, and I think it's a common view, is that Jesus took the punishment from the Father so that the Father wouldn't punish me. It's inevitable that if that's our view, we're going to think that Jesus is like the loving one and the Father is the stern harsh one who is exacting, and who insists on the books being balanced. It's almost like an angry father, and a mother who's trying to keep the dad from getting onto the children. That's kind of how I saw it, like Jesus was the loving one and the Father was the angry one.

When we look at the cross, if we see it that way, through the lens of what's called penal substitution — that Jesus was the substitute who took our punishment from God the Father so that the Father wouldn't punish us, how will we ever experience a sense of intimacy with the Father? That's very out of line with what Jesus came for. Paul the apostle told us about Jesus, that he is the exact representation of the Father. So, just as Jesus the Son is loving, so is God the Father and God the Spirit are equally as loving. I'm not saying that there wasn't a substitution there. Jesus did die on the cross in our place. He was our substitute. But he drew the penalty of sin into himself. The wages of sin is death.

Let me back up to the Garden of Eden. God didn't say to Adam and Eve, "If you eat from that tree of the knowledge of good and evil, I'll kill you." He didn't say that. He said, "If you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you'll die." He didn't say I'll kill you, he said you'll die. In the same way, coming back to the New Testament, it wasn't God that punished Jesus, it was sin that punished Jesus. Another word for punishment is the word penalty. It's the same Greek word. It's punishment, it's penalty. The penalty for sin was death.

But what did Jesus do at the cross? God the Father was in the Son empowered by the Spirit,

and our Triune God drew the penalty, the payment, the wages, the punishment that sin brings, into himself and away from us so that we wouldn't have to be punished by sin but that we would be delivered from sin's punishment. He took it into himself and died for us so that we could be free.

Why is it important to see it that way? It's important because if we think God the Father is angry, then Jesus didn't do a very good job of letting us know what he was like, because when Jesus came here he said, "If you've seen me you've seen the Father." Study the Gospels — you don't find Jesus portraying for us a God who's angry with us about our sin. To the contrary! Every time you see Jesus encountering people in sin, he extends grace, and mercy, and love, and forgiveness, because that's the Father.

Even in the story of the prodigal, the story that Jesus told...we call it the story of the prodigal, but it's really not the story of the prodigal, it's the story of the father. That story wasn't told to show us something about sinning people, or for that matter, even self-righteous people (the older brother). That story was told to teach us something about our Father. And what he told us in that story is this: He told us through the illustration of the younger brother, the prodigal who came back with his decision to rededicate himself and promised his father that if he'd forgive him, he'd do better, he'd serve him more, he'd be a better...but the father didn't even let him give his speech. I spent my life rededicating myself to God the Father, promising him I'd do better, I'd try harder... In that story of the prodigal, the boy tries to give the speech, but the Father interrupts him and doesn't let him give it.

Then you've got the older brother, who's self-righteous. You've got the unrighteous on the one hand and the self-righteous on the other hand who says, "Look, all these many years I've served you and I've never violated and transgressed your commandments. The father says, "Son, what do you mean? All that I have is yours. What do you mean, I won't give you a party? All I have is yours." Both of those boys missed the point, because the one boy, the younger, the prodigal, thought that he would be rejected because of his misbehavior. The other thought he should be accepted and honored because of his good behavior. The father was trying to say to them both, "You don't get it. It's not about you and your behavior, it's about me and how much I love you, independent of anything you do or don't do. It's about me."

And so it is with our heavenly Father. He wants to see (and that's what Jesus came to reveal) that he loves us unconditionally, unilaterally if need be. Those of us who are believers love him,

but why do we love him? We love because he first loved us. That is a reciprocal response to his love for us. It's all about our concept of God the Father. He's got a bad rap because of the religious world. In spite of all Jesus did to give us the clarity on it, the religious world has clouded it.

MM: For a long time my concept of God the Father was like Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial, sitting in this huge throne, stone, impassive, stern, and it wasn't really the sort of God that I wanted to spend eternity with.

SM: Exactly. Back to the story of the father in Luke 15. You don't see some austere dignified father there. In fact, I love it, you see a picture of a father who sees his son in the distance and he stands up, and he's wearing these long flowing dignified garments, that they wear still in that part of the world, and he pulls those garments up high so he can run, because he can't run with them down at his feet. He pulls them up high above his knees so he can run and he takes off running.

And understand, nobody in that part of the world till today sees their dad's naked legs. Here's the key — that's a shame, it's a disgrace. That father didn't care. Here's what he did. He pulled the robes up and he ran, acting in an undignified way, but he was acting out of passionate love, even willing for those who were witnessing that scene who might have seen it to cause them to look away from the boy covered in the filth of the pigpen and look to the father and say, "What is he doing? He's running naked down the street," because he had pulled his robes up above his legs and they'd never seen that.

The kind of love that father had for the boy — he was willing to take the shame off of the boy and bring it onto himself if need be because he wasn't interested in protecting his reputation, he was interested in embracing and receiving his son back. That, Jesus wanted us to see, is the kind of father you have. He's passionate, he'll run down the street with his robe pulled up above his knees. He'll take the shame on himself to rescue him from your shame — different picture than the God sitting in the judge's chair than we imagined, huh? Totally different picture.

MM: Definitely.

SM: The beauty of it is, about this younger and older son in Luke 15 — and I didn't plan to say so much about this chapter, but another point comes to mind. The older boy, there's your religious church-going boy. There's your believer. The father says, "I love you, but I love this one the same." The privileges were extended to both equally.

Both were missing out on experiencing their abundant life their father provided for them, one because of his unrighteousness, the other because of his self-righteousness. The story in my mind there illustrates that sometimes it's easier for an unrighteous person to enter in and experience grace than it is a self-righteous person. Notice that self-righteous brother in Luke 15 — when the unbelieving son began to believe and accepted his father's acceptance and came into the party, the older boy got all bent out of shape about it. He didn't like that at all.

MM: The younger son had reached the bottom. He knew where his works had ended up.

SM: That's right. The religious son didn't want the younger one to be included, but he was. And the church world today doesn't want everybody to be included, we just want *us* to be included. After all, *we* go to church. We read our Bible every day.

MM: We're the ones that have been "cleaned up."

SM: We've been cleaned up. That's right. To quote that older brother, "Look, I've served you all these many years, I've never violated or transgressed your commandments in any way. What gives with you bringing this guy and telling me that he's as accepted as I am? I've behaved a lot better than he..." The father's saying, "Are you beginning to get it? It's not about your behavior. I don't love because of how good you are. I love because of how good I am." We're all included. Now if you can live in a pigpen, in the penitentiary of the pigpen, or like that older boy you can live in the penitentiary of your performance, but both live outside the pleasure of the grace of God.

We talked in the last program about this shift in my own mind. It's what you guys here at Grace Communion are all about, and it's what this program is all about...one thing that's shifted in my own mind is the understanding that we are all included, that what Jesus did, he didn't just do for good boys, so to speak. (I don't mean that literally — I say that tongue in cheek, because that's how a lot of folks would see church-going leaders.) He did that for everybody.

We all stand on equal ground at the foot of the cross, and we all need his grace the same, and thank God it's been poured out on all of us the same. Those of use that believe it enjoy it — we're in the party dancing and eating barbeque. Those that don't are standing out in the dark in the hell of their own choice. But don't act like they're out there in a hell because there's something left for God to do — he's done everything. They're out there because of their own pride and stubbornness.

MM: So you would say a person that's an atheist, even some of these militant atheists, their

sins are already forgiven?

SM: Absolutely. That's the gospel. Let me tell you a story. I've told this story for 20 years, but I've used a different application. I want to tell it for the sake of those who are familiar with my ministry and heard it and for those that aren't. Those who have heard my ministry are going to go "woah...now he's telling that story differently now. He's making a different application."

This story started, I think, with Bill Bright — the founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, the largest mission-sending agency in the world. Bill Bright used to tell about a guy named Mr. Yates out in Texas that had a farm. This was in the Depression days, right before the Depression struck. Mr. Yates was trying to eke out a living and the depression struck and he fell behind on his farm payments. One day a representative from the mortgage company came to him and said, "You're behind on your payments. You've got to make your payment on the farm or we'll foreclose and evict you." Yates said, "I can't make my payment." The guy said, "You're going to have to pay or you're going to be evicted." Yates said, "Well, I don't know what to do." The guy said, "In 30 days we're going to file a dispossessory notice and get you off the property."

The day started winding down and Yates didn't know what he was going to do. One day he heard a knock at the door and when he opened it up it was a man from an oil company. The guy said, "We're doing some wildcat drilling out here and we wanted to see if you'd let us drill on your property. We have reason to think there may be oil here." Yates said, "Go ahead." He's thinking in his mind, "I've lost it all anyway, I don't have a penny." They come onto his property the next day and they sink a drill into the ground and bang, they hit a gusher, 80,000 barrels, 85,000 barrels of oil a day come gushing up out of that well. Bang! Instantly Mr. Yates has millions of dollars in cash accessible to him.

Now here's the question. At what point did Mr. Yates become a millionaire? The answer is, he became a millionaire on the day he bought the farm. Why was he living like a pauper? Because he didn't know what he had.

The way I used to make that application is, I would say, "You see? You always have had riches in Jesus since the day you've been saved, since the day you trusted Christ, since the day you prayed and believed on him, but it's by believing it now that you experience it." But here's where that falls short, and here's where I've changed my story. I don't say anymore that we became millionaires on the day we trusted Christ. That was the day we struck oil. We became millionaires on the day Jesus died. For whom did Jesus die? I believe the Bible teaches he died

for everybody. We're all included.

MM: Right.

SM: So if everybody's included, then the benefits of the finished work of Christ at the cross belong to everybody. Then why is everybody not living out of that spiritual wealth? It's one of two reasons — either they don't know it, or they don't believe it, but it doesn't change the reality. The day they struck oil on Yate's property and he began to make withdraws, cash the checks so to speak, he began to live like a millionaire. But objectively, he'd been a millionaire all along. It only became a subjective experience when he cashed the check.

There you go — the objective work of Jesus for everybody. If he died for everybody, then what he did for everybody is true of everybody, if that makes sense. Does it matter whether we believe or not believe? Of course! It makes all the difference in the world because it's by believing that we cash the check and live out of the wealth that's ours in him. But it doesn't change the reality of what he did, even if we don't believe. We're living like paupers if we don't believe, but we're not paupers, we just don't know. Did I tell that in a way that makes sense?

MM: I think so. It might have made a story about the acres of diamonds.

SM: Yeah.

MM: People had diamonds in their field and didn't know it. It was theirs, they just didn't know the value.

SM: That's right. I remember that book from years ago. That's it. What Jesus did he didn't do for just a few of us — he did for everybody. So I don't say to an unbeliever, "If you will just pray and ask Jesus into your heart, he'll forgive your sin." That implies there's something left undone. That implies that what Jesus should have said at the cross was, "Okay, your move. I've done my part, now it's your move. What are you going to do? The game comes to a standstill until you make your move." No, no, no. Jesus said, "Game over. It's finished. You're in. Game over. Fold the board up, put it up. Game done. Now it's finished." If you don't want to believe it (and I don't mean you), if you don't want to believe it, okay. Live like a pauper then.

MM: So now all we're doing is telling a story of something that's already been done.

SM: That's the gospel. That's why it's good news. As I said in the last program, it's not a potential gospel like God's done something and now he's waiting for you do something — he's done it and it's finished. There's nothing left. Now you can live in that reality or you can live under the lie, again back to the garden. You can live under the lie that befell Adam and Eve and

hold onto all this distorted skewed thinking about your Father and who he is and what he's going to be like ...you can get all this messed-up thinking in your head and live outside the pleasure of it, you can go right on off into hell clinging to your lies if you want to, but there's nothing left for the Father to do — he's done it all.

MM: A hell of your own making.

SM: A hell of your own making and a hell of your own choosing. People said God's sending people to hell. You're already in hell if you're not believing this good news. Hell is not the absence of God...let's throw that snake on the table, since we're talking about some things here. Hell is not the absence of God, ask anybody in the Eastern Church. We in the Western world have the idea that hell means God's checked out and going home. No. Do we understand and believe where the Bible tells us that all things that exist consist by him? In other words, everything that holds together holds together because he's there holding it together. So if hell itself was the absence of God, then hell would implode or explode, and it would cease to exist.

No, far from it. Hell itself is not the absence of God. I believe, and this is another discussion and it may open a can of worms, but I believe hell itself is the presence, the inescapable presence, of the love of God. Those who loathe and detest it find it to be hellacious, but those of us who receive it find it to be heavenly. What did James say? He said if you love your enemy it seems to them like you're doing what? You're heaping coals of fire on their head.

MM: So it's the same reality, but a different perception.

SM: Absolutely. I'm not making this stuff up as I go. I'm not smart enough to do that. I've studied it and read it, and I can tell you outside our Western world, the Greek Church right now, the church in the Eastern part of the world, they get this. We, you and I, and the people watching us in this part of the world, we've been so influenced by Augustinian theology (and not just theologians, but even people like Dante and others) about what hell is and is not that, we've got it all scrambled in our brains.

I think the Eastern Church has a beat on this thing that God is love. So if I can say it this way — any and everything that can be understood about God must come to love as its resting place, or we haven't gone far enough, because God is love. Everything and anything that we're going to connect to him has to be an expression of that love, or we're not going far enough in our understanding to get to the root of it.

MM: Well, to get back to the crucifixion of Jesus. What then was its role? What changed for

all humanity? Was it just a forgiveness of sins or was there something deeper than that?

SM: Oh, so much, so much changed. Forgiveness of sins wasn't even the main thing. Forgiveness of sins was the B Team. That was the secondary issue. There had to be this forgiveness of sins thing so that the main event could take place. And the main event that took place was *we received life*.

I'll give you an example, a few verses. John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shouldn't perish but should have everlasting forgiveness (no, no, life)." John 10:10, "I've come so that you might have forgiveness and have it more abundantly (no, life!)." All the verses about life. He's come so that we can have life — life, not forgiveness. What happened at the cross, here it is. I'm going to be succinct and people watching will just have to dig this out for themselves instead ...look at all these other programs on *You're Included*. You've got them archived. I learned a lot watching the archived programs right here. I'm not saying that because I'm sitting here — it's the truth! There's a lot of good stuff on here.

Here's what happened. What the first Adam did was wrap us all up into himself as the federal head and brought humanity down into this place of sin. We were doomed and damned. We were condemned — not by God, by sin, as humanity. Jesus comes along — the Father, Son, and Spirit say "That's not going to stand. We're not going to let Adam get the final say on all this." So here's the Incarnation — Jesus comes, the last Adam, and he did (in a sense like the first Adam did), he was our federal head, and he wrapped us all up in himself, all of us, everybody that had been in Adam.

Paul said that what Jesus did was much more than what Adam did. He uses that phrase more than once. Much more. He wrapped us all up into himself and then Adam's race went to the cross with Jesus, and died with Jesus, and was buried with Jesus, and then, and this is pivotal, this is the good news, when Jesus came up out of the grave a new species was raised up with him. Those in Christ, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature, a new species.

Who do you think died with Jesus? As a Calvinist I used to say, only the elect, only those who were chosen. But listen to this, 2 Corinthians 5:14, this is out of the Bible. Let me hold it up where people can see I'm reading. "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died." Who's the one that died for all? Jesus. Therefore, who did he die for? Everybody. He tasted death for every man. Therefore, all died. We all died with Jesus.

We were all buried with Jesus.

But when Jesus came up out of the grave, a new species came into existence, something new. And the gospel is...here's what the cross did. The cross provided forgiveness of sin. We don't have to tell people he'll forgive your sin. He has. Jesus is the elect man, the elect one. He is a man. There's a God-man in heaven today. He's the elect man in whom we all reside. And therefore we were all elect. We were all chosen. We were all made holy.

And what does holy mean? If you look it up, the word means set apart. In the evangelical church we think, if I say he's holy, so and so over here, he's holy, people think, that means he lives a squeaky clean life. No, no, no. They don't mind calling this book a Holy Bible. That Bible doesn't live any way. They don't mind calling God's temple the Holy Temple — it just means set apart. In that sense he's called us all, set us all apart. He made us holy.

Righteous — that's another one. You use the word *righteous*, and one understanding of the word has to do with living a certain lifestyle. But now wait — if you look up, in Strong's Dictionary for instance, the Greek word righteous, one definition is living your life based on a certain religious or moral code. We know good and well that's not what the New Testament tells us our righteousness is. The other definition of righteousness is being made in a right standing with God. Ding ding ding ding! There's the one! There it is. It might be Number 2 on the list, but it's the one we better go to.

MM: I can see that in there.

SM: Yeah. We better go to that one because we know it's not about living a moral code. So there it is. So we've all been made right with God. We've been reconciled. So much happened on the cross. We've been joined in the union. There's the big one — we've been joined into union with him again. So the obvious question then people ask me sometimes is, "You sound like a universalist. Are you saying everybody drops dead and wakes up in heaven?" No. I'm not saying that.

MM: You've already talked about hell.

SM: That's right, I did. I've already talked about hell. No, no. If I can paraphrase him — and I hate to try to paraphrase someone as eloquent as Robert Capon, but Robert Capon the theologian and author said, he said, on the last day nobody goes to hell because of sin, because that sin issue has been dealt with. He said now if you get to judgment day (he too is a literary speaker), if you get to judgment day and face God and say I won't accept your acceptance, then

you can just go to hell, he says, but don't act like it's because of sin, because sin has been dealt with in totality by the finished work of Jesus. So, no, I'm not saying everybody's instantly in, whether they believe or not. I think that faith in Christ is essential — otherwise, back for the umpteenth time to the older brother, we'll stand out in the outer darkness if we don't believe, but it's not because God's locked us outside or won't let us in, it's because of our own stubbornness and pride.

MM: You've described how Jesus dying on the cross... God was in Jesus reconciling us. But yet the scriptures say that Jesus on the cross said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

SM: I'm glad you asked that, because that's one of the biggest misunderstandings in the modern church. You nailed it. You said Jesus asked the question. What did God answer in that gospel, in the Gospels? What was the answer God gave? He didn't, did he? He didn't give an answer. So people looking at God through that wrong lens assume God the Father forsook his son Jesus.

The answer is, he didn't forsake his Son. That was the cry of Jesus when he became sin for us. If he had heard the answer right then and there, God would have said, "I haven't forsaken you." You say, "How do you know?" I'll prove it.

Psalm 22 is the Messianic Psalm from which that verse, that cry of Jesus came. First verse, Psalm 22 of the Messianic Psalm, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" You can go on down and read that Psalm and bit by bit you see it's talking about the cross right down to them casting lots for his garments — everything . It's describing the cross.

If you go down to verse 24 in Psalm 22, you get the answer to the question. It's not recorded in the Gospels, but it is in Psalms. Psalm 22:1, "Why have you forsaken me?" Verse 24, "He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted nor has he hidden his face for him. But when he cried to him for help, he heard."

Now here's the neat thing. All the Jews knew these Psalms. If I say to you, anybody in America, I don't care how old you are, if I say to you...well, if you're old enough...I say, "Plop, plop, fizz, fizz," you know the rest — what is it?

MM: Um...I don't know.

SM: You don't know? I bet those watching know. Okay, how about this?

MM: Oh, is that Alka Seltzer?

SM: Alka Seltzer! Okay, now I'm going to pressure you because you've got to know...plop, plop, fizz, fizz — what's the rest of the jingle? Oh what a...

MM: Relief it is...

SM: There you go! All right, let's try another one. Let me give you another one.

MM: When I was a kid we didn't have TV.

SM: Oh, you didn't have TV. Well then, you certainly won't know this one: "Winston tastes good like a..."

MM: "Cigarette should."

SM: And you didn't even have TV and you know that, you old heathen! (laughing) All right. It was the same way with the Psalms. When people standing around the cross heard the first line of that Psalm, they knew the rest of it. When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" every self-respecting Jew standing there knew the rest of it, and the answer was he has not forsaken him or turned his face on him. But here we are 20 centuries later saying, he asked the question why did God forsake him — God must have forsook him. We've missed the point. No, he did not forsake him. He was right there in him and with him the whole time.

MM: We see in the resurrection that he didn't forsake him.

SM: That's right. The Father never forsook the Son. People say, Well, they were fragmented. Are you kidding? Deity being fragmented? The Godhead would have ceased to exist. Father, Son, and Spirit have always been in that perichoresis, in that circle of love. It's never wavered for one moment, even at the cross, which is encouraging to us, because like Jesus, when we cry out, why have you forsaken me, we can know God says, "I haven't. I'm with you." He'll never forsake us.

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## What Is God's Wrath?

**MM:** You talked before about the love of God, and I agree with you on that, but I did want to ask you about the other side. The scripture talks about the *wrath* of God as well. How does this fit in with a God who is love?

**SM:** People often raise that question, and I will cut to the chase and give the bottom line and then we'll unpack it. The question suggests that there is a dichotomy between the wrath of God and the love of God, and that would be a mistaken notion, to think that somehow God's wrath stands apart from his love. Let's go back to the fundamental essence of God. John said God is love, not God loves, God is love. Love, *agape*, is not one of the incidental characteristics of God's personality. Love is the foundational essence of who he is. If you could break down God's DNA, what you will find is love. Everything we understand about God has to be understood through the lens of his love, or else we've not studied it far enough ...

Let's use a syllogism here. God is pure love. Here's a certain act that is not an expression of pure love. This act then cannot be God, all right? So let's take wrath. God is pure love. Pure love can only express pure love. Wrath cannot be an expression of anything less than love if it comes from God. And, in fact, the wrath of God is an expression of his love.

This is where we get back into this whole thing of our Western mindset and Augustinian views of theology and all of this. We have had our minds tainted about the very subject of wrath through misguided teaching — some of it coming out of Augustinian thought, some of it coming from extra-biblical sources like Dante. A lot of people, their imagery of hell and the wrath of God is from Dante's *Inferno* and not from the Bible. Agreed?

**MM:** Yeah.

**SM:** So we've got to come back and say, no, wait a minute. Just like I've done with other things connected to God and who he is, I've had to come back to this whole subject of wrath and say wait a minute, wrath can't be God being mad, pouring out hate, because then he wouldn't be pure love. So I came back to that word *wrath* in the Bible. You're a seminary professor, so I'm sure you know this more than most of us. Let's start with the Greek word for wrath, what is it, teacher?

**MM:** *Orge*.

**SM:** All right. The Greek word *orge*, which is the biblical word for wrath in the New Testament, is an interesting word. Again, let me hit the pause button and say, the definition that

we use with words sometimes depends on our preexisting concept of who God is. Words can have more than one definition. For instance, I say I love my wife. I love Mexican food. Nobody thinks I hold Mexican food in the same esteem that I hold my wife. The same is true with biblical words, words like wrath.

If you look in the Greek for the definition of the word, and for the average person who's not a seminary prof, we have to fall back on more simple things — thank the Lord for the internet because we can go to places like Crosswalk.com or BibleGateway.com and we can click there on certain verses when we want to know a word. Let's take the word wrath. If I can just put this out there for those that are watching us, go to Crosswalk.com and type in the word wrath and look for it in the New Testament because we're going to go to the Greek now.

Find the word, let's say in Romans, where the word *wrath* is used a lot. Look it up in the New American Standard Version on Crosswalk.com, or the King James Version, and then when you look beneath that verse you have some options, and one of them is the interlinear version. (You know, and those that watch may not know, but the interlinear version is going to give you the meaning of the Greek words.) So you click on "interlinear" and it will put up that verse with every English word as a link to the Greek. When you click on the link, it will take you to Strong's and it will define that Greek word.

Now we've done that in our minds. We're talking people through that. We've done that, and so we've found the word wrath and we want to know what it means. One definition of wrath is going to be an expression of anger. But if you look down at, I think it's the second definition, maybe it's the third, you're going to see that another definition of wrath is "any intense emotion."

Let's come back to the Greek itself, the word *orge*. *Orge* is an interesting word. Now remember, it's [often] translated wrath, but it can mean any intense emotion. I'm only using this example because I want to make a clear point here. I'm not using it to be crude, but the word *orge* is the origin from which we get the English words *orgy* or *orgasm*. Those are intense words. Those words in mixed company almost would make you blush to use the words. But I make that point because I want it to be clear to our viewer that the word *orge*, which can yield the word *orgasm* or *orgy*, in that sense it has nothing to do with anger. In that sense it has to do with a very strong passion.

I'm going to come to a pause on this in a minute, but let me finish this train of thought. If

you look at the word orge and you go back to the root of that word, because orge is the derivative of the root, and you go back to the root of the word orge, it means to reach out and to strain in a quivering violent way, a shaking way, for something that you long to possess. Having said all that, you know where I'm going.

So the wrath of God...let me put it as a question: What if (and I believe it) the wrath of God is not God pouring out contempt on people in hell, but what if the wrath of God is him pouring out violent love? Grasping, quivering, reaching, shaking, but those who reject it are so adverse and opposed to his love that to them it's torment. From his perspective it's not that at all. The love of God is wonderful to those of us who receive it.

It's like the gospel — it's a savor of life unto life. But to those who reject it, it's horrible. It's hell. It's the savor of death unto death. James said (I mentioned it on an earlier program, but I'll say it again for those that might not have seen it), "When you love your enemies, it is as if you were pouring out heaping coals of fire on their heads." I don't think that the wrath of God is an expression of contempt. I think the wrath of God is a violent expression of God's love, and people hate it unless they perceive that love.

**MM:** So God might intend it for good, but they perceive it as bad?

**SM:** Absolutely. If I can give an example, let's suppose I see my little grandson out in my back yard and he's holding a snake in his hand. I see that snake coiling, and love rushes up in my consciousness for my grandson. So I run as fast as I can toward him. He's holding the snake and he looks up and he sees on his granddad's face this look of horror and rage. He's going to interpret what he sees through the only paradigm he has. He may not understand the danger of the snake. He sees this expression of rage and anger in my face, and it strikes terror in him. I run over to my grandson, and imagine I pick him up and I shake him and I shake him. That poor little boy is going to think he's never seen me so angry with him in his lifetime. But the reality is I'm not angry with him. I'm trying to shake something out of his hand.

So do you get the comparison I'm making? Back to the fire. Daniel, I believe it's chapter 7:10, talks about a river of fire that flows out of the throne of God. I think that's the white-hot love of God. And as they say, the same sun that hardens clay melts wax. Same with the love of God.

Can I give you a quote? I don't want to preach a sermon, but I brought a note here. I don't want to trust my memory on this. I brought a note here. This is Saint Isaac the Syrian, one of the

early church fathers. Here's what he said: "Paradise is the love of God wherein is the enjoyment of all blessedness." I've been going on about hell, here's what he says, one of the early church fathers. "I also maintain that those who are punished in Gehenna are scourged by the scourge of love. Nay, what is so bitter and vehement as the torment of love?"

**MM:** In Romans 1:18, Paul writes (and this is the first use of wrath in Romans): "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of human beings who suppressed the truth by their wickedness." He's saying that the wrath of God is being revealed. Doesn't that sound like God's kind of irritated by their refusal to accept what he's doing?

**SM:** I have to give you credit. When you use the word *irritated* in connection with wrath, that's understating it. I think it's more than irritated. But again, it depends on the lens you use to interpret the scripture. If you start with the fundamental belief that God is love, again I'll come back and say we have to interpret the scripture in light of everything that comes from God as being an expression of love, or else there's an incongruence in God that can't be explained. There's a conflict. He's not pure love if something comes from him that is something other than love.

There are those who will say well, then, love is just one of his characteristics, love is just *part* of what God is. He's part love, he's part wrath. Then I would say are you suggesting that God is schizophrenic? He's love some of the time, he's hate some of the time? No. Let's go back to the passage. Let me be clear on this for those who are watching. I'm not suggesting that the wrath of God is not real. The wrath of God is very real. What I'm saying is it's possible, and in my opinion I think probable, that many of us have misunderstood what that wrath is, the nature of that wrath. Let's look at the passage you quoted, or you read. "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven." Think of wrath there as an intense, violent expression of love is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.

Back to the illustration I gave about charging up to my grandson holding the snake. That was wrath. It was an intense expression of love, and it came out as violence because of the contempt that I had in this imaginary story for the snake, but it was love for the child. But the child, if he doesn't clearly understand my heart, may think that what's he's seeing is anger against him, and that's not what it is.

Notice that Paul talks about in verse 18 of Romans 1, the verse you read, he talks about the

unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. For them to suppress the truth, the truth is already in them, or they wouldn't be able to suppress it. To suppress means to push down something that's already there, and there can't be any real disagreement with people watching about this, because go down to the next verse. It elaborates and says in verse 19, "Because that which is known about God is evident within them." Not outside them, within them, for God made it evident. God has put this intrinsic knowledge in us, and when we reject or suppress the truth of his love for us, then you know what he does? He expresses wrath. Let me say it another way. He turns up the fire of his love so that it becomes hotter. You're not going to beat God's love, so stop trying, is the way I might say it.

Can I read another quote from Saint Isaac the Syrian that we mentioned earlier? Can I read one more quote from him?

**MM:** Well, he's not my favorite author, but...

**SM:** All right, I think he does a good job expressing the Orthodox tradition on this. Here's what he said: "The power of love works in two ways. It torments the sinners even as it happens here when a friend suffers from a friend, but it becomes a source of joy for those who have observed its duties. Therefore, the same love of God, the same energy will fall upon all men, but it will work differently." It's just what Paul said, the comparison, the parallel. It's what Paul the apostle said of the gospel. It's the savor of life unto life for those who believe, but it's the savor or stench of death for those who don't believe.

**MM:** Okay, suppose these people don't like God's love. Why does God insist on doing something that he knows that they'll find unpleasant?

**SM:** Because he's sovereign. Because his love is agape, it's unconditional. He loves whether you love him back or not. He doesn't love because he anticipates a certain response from us. You see what I'm saying?

**MM:** He's going to love whether we like it or not.

**SM:** He's going to love because that's who he is. That's right. He's going to love whether we like it or not, and whether we receive it or not. That's who he is, he's God. He's love. God is love. For God to do something other than love would be a conflict of who he is. He'd cease to be who he is if he didn't love.

**MM:** And you can't just ignore it.

**SM:** Well, you can, but it's hell, buddy. Right? (laughing) You can, but it's hell if you

ignore it, if you try to resist it. Let's play this out a minute. I understand you're the seminary prof., but I want you to play the devil's advocate, okay? I'm going to walk this out and I'm going to ask you the question that I think maybe the viewer would. Can pure love...is God pure love, first of all? The obvious answer is yes.

**MM:** Yes.

**SM:** If he's pure love, could anything come from him that's not loving?

**MM:** No.

**SM:** No. Does wrath come from him?

**MM:** Yes.

**SM:** So is wrath an expression of his love?

**MM:** Somehow, it must be.

**SM:** It's got to be. You follow down that trail and there's just no other way around it. If God is love, and he is, and if pure love can only do what's loving, and that's true, and wrath comes from God, and it does, then it has to be an expression of love or else God is not loving. It has to be. People that watch and grapple with this main difference, "oh, I don't believe that." Well then, what are you going to believe? How are we going to explain the wrath of God unless we say God is not....

There are those who watch and there are those that I've talked to who say, well, love is just one characteristic of God. Oh really? What are the others? Well, wrath. By wrath do you mean hate against sinners? That was the Calvinistic view I held. I thought God hated sinners, reprobates. That was my view when I was a Calvinist. I'm not out of line with mainstream thought when I say that's the viewpoint many hold. So you're saying God is part love and part hate? At the least you'd have to admit (I'd say to this imaginary critic) that God is not pure love if he's part hate.

**MM:** You need to catch him on a good day.

**SM:** Exactly. And what is agape? Let's back it up a step. Not only is he not pure love, but he's not even agape, unconditional love, because if it's unconditional, then what would make him hate. If this would make God hate instead of love, then the love that's left is not unconditional because there was a condition that wasn't met that caused it to become hate. Am I talking in circles or does that make sense, you think?

**MM:** It connects with a couple other ideas — but many people think that the wrath of God

means that God desires to punish.

**SM:** Yeah.

**MM:** And that ties in with what you had said earlier about God not punishing Jesus on the cross. God has no desire to punish us — he wants to rescue us.

**SM:** He has rescued us, in fact.

**MM:** Oh. Done deal.

**SM:** It is finished. I heard that line somewhere before.

**MM:** Yeah.

**SM:** It is finished. He has rescued us whether we acknowledge it or not.

**MM:** Continuing in Romans 1, I find it interesting that Paul describes what God does in his wrath. Paul is eloquent about how bad they are, and in verse 24, “Therefore, God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity...” etcetera... in other words, he let them do what they wanted.

**SM:** That’s right. What’s the rest of the verse? So that their bodies would be degraded among them. What’s sin going to do? Left to itself, what will sin do in a person? Those people or any of us, what will sin do? It will...

**MM:** It hurts.

**SM:** It hurts. There’s a penalty. We will spiral downward. The wages of sin is still death. But guess what? Once we get down to that place of death, now we’re in a great spot, because guess what? Our God’s grace doesn’t make *sick* men well, our God’s grace makes *dead* people live.

**MM:** Dead men alive.

**SM:** So for God to raise you up, you have to get dead enough. So does God call sin sinful behavior? Of course not. But again, the grace of God is so big that sin won’t get the last word. Our God will say, let sin give its best shot. And when it’s killed you, I will raise you up, because that’s what I do. That’s my thing — resurrection.

**MM:** But in a way, Jesus has already killed sin.

**SM:** He has. You guys do a remarkable job here at Grace Communion International of helping folks understand the difference between union and communion, objective and subjective. There is the objective reality that exists, and it’s real. Hebrews 9:26 says, “At the consummation of ages he’s been manifest to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” Jesus, in the objective

sense, he's dealt with sin once and for all. Here's the wonderful thing. Sin is not an offense to God. It's not like sin does something to God anymore. God defeated sin. He absolutely vanquished and defeated sin. Sin does nothing to God.

Then somebody might say, then why does God care about sin? Does God not hate sin? Sure he hates it. Why? Because of what it does to you and me. We still live in this little box called time/space. The objective reality is he's dealt with sin, but in this little box we're living in called time and space, in the experiential subjective sense, we can still experience the consequence, the penalty, the punishment of sin. God hates it for that reason, because he loves us and doesn't want to see us hurt. God doesn't say to us, "Don't sin because I hate it when people do that. It really just bugs me — I'm holy and righteous and I'm so squeaky clean it just disgusts me to see people do something nasty and dirty and sinful."

**MM:** Violating my rules.

**SM:** Exactly. You're offending my sensitivities. No, that's ridiculous. No. God says that same thing he said to Adam and Eve about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Don't do that because this is going to kill you. Don't do that, it's going to hurt you, it's going to kill you, and I love you, and I hate sin not because of what it does to me, God says, but because of what it does to you. I love you and I don't want to see you hurt. That's God's thing with sin today, in this world we live in. It's not what it does to him, but what it does to us in the subjective world.

**MM:** That would explain why we should avoid sin even though we've already been forgiven.

**SM:** That's right. We avoid sin because sin is drinking poison and God loves us.

**MM:** What if we really like the taste of that poison?

**SM:** That's a good question. And the one who would seriously ask that, would reveal that they don't know their identity in Christ. Because the truth is, we *don't* love the taste of that poison. Here's the thing — that apple tastes good until it gives you a stomachache, and then you realize yuck, the pleasure of sin is, as the Bible says, for a season. It's got a sweet taste coming in, but boy does it turn sour on my stomach in a hurry.

The picture I've given is a guy walking down the road and he looks over here, and here's the sin house. He hears music and there's a party going on, and it looks like they're having a fun time in there. The guy says, "I'd like to live in that place." He goes in there, and the minute he walks into the sin house with all kinds of things going on, the guy immediately says, "This is as

wonderful and exhilarating and thrilling as I thought it would be,” because there is pleasure in sin for a season. It’s gratifying. Not satisfying, but gratifying.

He gets a rush out of it, but then after a while he’s in the sin house and he starts thinking, “This is getting old. I don’t know.” But the thing of it is, he finds out he can’t find his way out. And the longer he’s trapped in there, the more he hates it, until finally the place that he couldn’t wait to get into, now that he’s in it, he finally, in fact soon, reaches a place where (because it’s not his nature to live in that house), from the depths of his being he finds his heart crying out, “Dear God, get me out of here. I don’t want to be in here.” Why do we like the taste of sin? The answer is, we don’t. We only *think* we do. It’s got a momentary flavor that appeals to us, but it will quickly turn on you.

**MM:** The perception is the key element in all of it.

**SM:** Well, it’s not our nature to like sin. Sin is resident in us. Paul said in Romans 7, “So now if I’m doing the thing I don’t want to do, I’m not doing it, but sin which dwells in me.” He said that in two verses in Romans 7, within three verses apart. He was drawing a distinction between his authentic self, his true identity in Christ, and the power of indwelling sin, which he says again and again in Romans 7 is “in my members.” It’s not who I am.

I jokingly tell people the first time I went to London, England, I had a kidney stone, but I never asked anybody to call me Rocky. It was in me, but it didn’t define me. In the same way, there’s the power of indwelling sin that’s in our members, but that’s not who we are. Let me tell you who we are. Who we are is that we’re righteous, called, holy, set-apart people who, if we will get out from under the lie — and how do you do that? You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. (And by the way, the truth is a person named Jesus, and when we really come to know him, we will understand I don’t want to live a life of sin.)

Back to the verse in Titus we’ve referenced a number of times, “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires.” It doesn’t teach us to sin. Grace doesn’t make you want to sin, grace makes you want to glorify the Lord and say no to sin.

**MM:** To me it says we desire the divine life more because of the grace, and this other part and these other things aren’t part of the divine life. It’s like there’s no attractiveness there.

**SM:** Right. There’s an inconsistency. There’s a momentary appeal to it. Let’s not talk as if there’s *no* attraction to sin. But the fact that sin is pleasurable doesn’t say something about our

nature, it says something about the nature of sin. Do you see what I'm saying? That speaks of the nature of sin, not our nature. It's not natural for us to live in sin because that's not our nature. I can teach your dog to walk on its back legs, but it will never be comfortable doing it, because it's not his nature to do it, nor, Peter the apostle said in 2 Peter 1:4, "We've become a partaker of divine nature." We sin, but there's always this internal conflict when we commit sins, because something deep within us, namely the Spirit, the new man knows that's not who I am. It might gratify, but it won't satisfy, because I'm not living out of my core. I'm not living out of my authentic self when I do that.

**MM:** I wanted to go back to your image of this person trapped in the house of sin.

**SM:** Okay.

**MM:** How real is...they think they're trapped.

**SM:** Good point.

**MM:** How real is that house?

**SM:** It's all an illusion. They're not trapped.

**MM:** It's all a hologram.

**SM:** It's like the elephant at the circus. You come outside the circus tent and there's this 2-ton elephant standing there with a chain link this long and he's hooked to a little post in the ground that big. That elephant could drag a Greyhound bus down the road, but he thinks that thing's holding him there. Why does he think that? Because when he was a baby elephant, they put a big chain around his leg and put the other end on something he couldn't drag, and he lived that way day after day until he began to be conditioned, "I cannot move when this chain is on my leg." So he becomes this huge elephant, and he could drag a bus down the road, but when they put the chain on his leg he stands there thinking he can't move.

What holds him in that spot? Is it the chain? No, what holds him there, it's a lie. It's a faulty perception that holds him there. That's what keeps people in this imaginary sin house. They think they're trapped. They believe the lie that they can't get out. But the truth is, sin has no power over us. When we understand the grace of God, we'll know what Paul meant when he said, "Sin shall no longer have dominion over you because you're not under law but under grace." We understand that when we lock in on what grace really is — unconditional love and acceptance, divine enablement for us to be all that we've been called to be and do all we've been called to do. Then we can walk out of that house just that quick. It's a mirage. It's not even real.

**MM:** A lot of people walk out of that house and kind of want to go back in sometimes.

**SM:** Then they didn't stay long enough.

**MM:** (laughing).

**SM:** I'm serious. Martin Luther said this: "When thou sinnest, sin boldly." That green apple didn't give you a stomachache? Eat three more and watch what happens. They hadn't hit bottom, in other words. They haven't hit bottom. I'm not advocating sinful behavior, but I'm telling you one thing. Let sin run its course, and the wages of sin is death, and you won't want to go back there again.

**MM:** A little aversion therapy.

**SM:** Yeah. That's the good point. We found out that the new man, which is who we are in Christ, does have an aversion to sin. Read Romans 7, verses 16 through the end of the chapter where Paul says, "I don't understand myself at all. I'm going the things I hate and the things I want to do I don't do." Read the text. Does that sound like a man who wanted to sin? Not at all. It is our nature, when we understand who we are in Christ, to hate sin. It is our nature to hate sin. We don't want to live that way. If we think people are going to do what they want, let them, they'll hit bottom. I think we're overly sin conscious in the modern church. If we were as Christ-conscious and taught others to be Christ-conscious as the Bible says we can be, sin would become a moot point.

Here's a passage in Hebrews (I love talking about the Old Testament sacrifices). Hebrews 10, starting in verse 1, "The law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, it can never by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year make perfect those who draw near" [NASB]. Let's stop there. Paul said the law cannot perfect ...the sacrifices of all could not perfect people. Look at verse 2, "Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered?" Why? "Because the worshipers, having been once cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sin."

**MM:** Hmm.

**SM:** Paul, or whoever wrote Hebrews, says that if the old covenant sacrifice had been a perfect sacrifice and those people had been permanently cleansed, they wouldn't have even thought about sin anymore. He goes on and says, "But," verse 3, "in those sacrifices there's a reminder of sin year by year." The implication is, we come over to the new covenant and Jesus is the perfect sacrifice and we have been cleansed completely, past, present, and future, so we don't

need to live with sin consciousness. We need to live with Jesus-consciousness.

**MM:** Focus on the positive.

**SM:** Focus on Jesus. I often tell about how I loved basketball when I was a teenager, and I played every weekend. On Fridays I played till late at night, because I didn't have to go to school. If you had said the Friday will come, the time will come you can't play basketball on Fridays, I would have argued and said you're crazy. But one Sunday I went to church and on Sunday morning in Sunday School a girl came in that I had never seen, and when I met that girl I thought, "I want to ask her out." I ended up asking that girl to go out on a date, and I went out the next Friday night with her.

The next morning on Saturday my friends came over banging on my door and said, "Where were you? You know we play basketball every Friday night." 16-year-old boy, I said, "I was with a chick. I didn't have time for basketball." I dated that girl every Friday for three years and I ended up marrying her, and I've been married to her now since 1973, and I cannot tell you when I played basketball on Friday night. Why? Not because I disciplined myself to give up Friday night basketball, but because I found something I wanted more. That's the thing about sin. We don't live with sin consciousness — we fall so in love with Jesus that sin loses its grip over us and we just walk out, because we're holding hands with Jesus and walk away from it without even thinking about it, without struggling against it.

**MM:** That is great.

**SM:** Isn't it great? I think of the old song we used to sing when I was a teenager — you're my age, I bet you remember this one song we sang that said, turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full into his wonderful face. Do you remember the next part? No? You lived a sheltered life didn't you?

**MM:** I did. I didn't go to church.

**SM:** You didn't go to church? There you go. No wonder.

**MM:** I didn't have TV, didn't go to church.

**SM:** You were spared some things and you were deprived of others, and I won't say which is which, but I'll let you figure out which one you were deprived of and which one you were spared from, but there's the old song that says, turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full into his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace. And that's it.

God's not mad, God's delivered us from sin, back to what we started out with — the wrath of God, that even that is an expression of his love. Let's get it down in our minds once and for all — God is love. And if you ever hear, read, see anything that seems to contradict that, then let's step back away from it a minute and say, wait a minute, I must be misinterpreting what I'm hearing, seeing, or reading, because God is love. Let's settle that once and for all. Let's not have to put God on trial every time something comes along we can't make sense of and say, is God really love? No. Let's settle that.

We may not have answers for everything. We won't, but that's okay. We don't have to have answers for everything. Our God is a mystery, so we push up to the edge of our understanding as far as we can push and then we stop and say okay, all I know is that in the fog there beyond what I can see, there's a God who is love, and we live with that assurance even we can't make sense out of it whether it's hell, wrath, the sin house, anything else.

**MM:** That's great. It's been a pleasure having you here.

**SM:** Thank you. I've enjoyed these programs with you, Mike, it's been my pleasure. Thank you for what you guys are doing at Grace Communion International. I point people your way.

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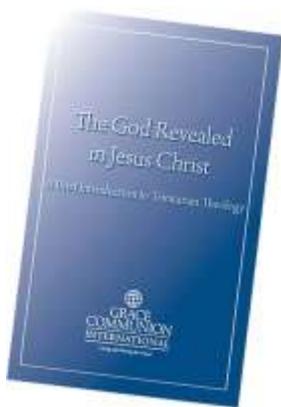
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