

Grace – a Memoir

by Roland Foster

"God our Savior ... desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4)

To my Family and Friends:

At a very young age I came to believe that God is real, that He is good, and that He requires people to be good, and not to sin. I had no reason to doubt it. Now I am old and have learned much, and I have come to know that my childhood belief was correct.

As a teen-ager and a young adult I became painfully aware of Heaven and Hell. Heaven was to be desired; Hell was to be feared. Good people die and go to Heaven; sinful people die and go to Hell. That was scary, because I was a sinner. I had cursed, lied, stolen, and done other things that I knew were sinful. I despaired of ever becoming good enough to go to Heaven. Fortunately, my despair never became so intense that I contemplated suicide. After all, why hurry to the inevitable awful destination? But I fervently wished, on many occasions, that I had never been born.

I attended churches a few dozen times in those years, and I'm sure the doctrines of the Gospel of Jesus Christ must have been preached in my hearing. But for some reason I didn't understand any of it. I lived with, and worried about, the burden of being hopelessly doomed and destined for Hell.

But God eventually brought me to a place where I could hear, and begin to understand, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is God's "Good News."

In 1969, we had moved into a growing neighborhood near Jacksonville, Florida. The neighbors across the street invited Marian to bring our three-year-old son, Charles, to Sunday School. They went, and they both liked it. Pretty soon Marian invited me to come along, and I did.

The pastor of that church was a young man, about my age. He was just beginning to teach an adult confirmation class, and I was invited to join it, so I did. For six weeks or so Pastor Ken taught what the Bible says about sin, salvation, and grace. I don't remember which Bible passages he taught from, but I expect these were two of them:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

As the teaching finally registered in my consciousness, I was flabbergasted.

"I really don't have to go to Hell when I die? I can be saved? I can go to Heaven?"

"No, yes, and yes."

"Even as sinful as I have been? I really don't have to be good enough?"

"Your sins are forgiven. And you can't be good enough. Nobody can."

"How can that be?"

"God made a way. It's called Grace. He sent a Savior, His Son, Jesus, who suffered and died to take the punishment for our sins—for all sins, for all time."

"I don't understand ..."

Of course I didn't understand. The Bible calls God's plan to redeem the world a "mystery," and we can only understand as much of it as He chooses to make clear to us. But John 3:16-17 summarizes it:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Later that year Charles and I were baptized together, and thus were "marked" by the Holy Spirit as adopted children of God. Of course, there was still a lot that I didn't know about being a child of God. But at least I knew that He is God (and I am not) and that He loves me.

I have now lived as God's child for over fifty years. I've been both faithful and faithless; a part-time saint and too often still a sinner. I've learned an amazing amount about love, and sin, and worrying (don't do it!), and forgiving (do it!). But more importantly, I have become a different person than I was.

Different, how? Once I was afraid of God. I didn't want to be anywhere near Him, especially on Judgment Day. Now I talk with Him every day. I try to please Him by doing what I know He wants me to do. I depend on His Holy Spirit to guide me and help me — and He does — in so many ways.

The biggest difference, though, is that my fear of Him has become joy — primarily the joy of recognizing and celebrating who God is. When I look carefully at something He created — a giraffe especially comes to mind — I want to laugh and shout praises for His astonishing creativity, His engineering excellence, and His wonderful sense of humor. Our God is truly awesome!

And I add to that the joy of knowing that I am accepted and loved by Him. I am cooperating (however imperfectly) with His plan for my life, which is totally right and good and satisfying. The more I learn of Him, the more joy I have, and I fully trust His promise that that will continue forever.

But being His child has also brought me sadness, because there are people I love — family members and friends — who do not know God as their loving Heavenly Father. I hope this short memoir will prompt them to think about it, and then check it out to see if God's love for them is real.

Hell is real — it consists of eternal existence apart from God, and thus separated from everything that is bright and beautiful and good. There is no love and no joy in Hell, there

is only despair and regret and pain, forever. My heart aches for those who will choose Hell by simply rejecting God.

Heaven is also real — it consists of eternal life in an intimate, joyful love relationship with God. There is love, beauty, goodness, and joy forever in His presence. That's what He desires for you and me. One of my greatest joys is that my younger brother, the last stubborn hold-out among my siblings, became a believer and accepted God's gift of grace.

We have to choose: Heaven or Hell. I hope your choice is Heaven. If you haven't already decided that, now would be a good time. Just ask God to be your God and Father, and to give you the Holy Spirit to guide you. He is eager to do it, because He loves you. And with His help, find a church family where Jesus is Lord, where you will be blessed and be a blessing.

I praise God with my whole heart. I am learning every day to appreciate and love Him more. May His Peace and His Grace be with you.

*Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is
the one who takes refuge in him! (Psalm 34:8)*