



THE CASE FOR  
Grace

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*A Journalist Explores the Evidence  
of Transformed Lives*

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STROBEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ZONDERVAN

*The Case for Grace*

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## CHAPTER 1

# The Mistake

### *Someday You'll Understand*

*Psychoanalysis . . . daily demonstrates to us how youthful persons lose their religious belief as soon as the authority of the father breaks down.*

Sigmund Freud<sup>1</sup>

It wasn't until my mother was on her deathbed that she confirmed what years of therapy had only suggested to me: I was a mistake, at least in the eyes of my father.

My parents started with three children—first a girl, then two boys—and my dad threw himself into fatherhood. He coached his sons in Little League, led a Cub Scout troop, headed the high school boosters club, went on family vacations, and attended gymnastics meets and graduations.

Then after a lengthy time gap came the unexpected news that my mother was pregnant with me.

“Your dad was . . . well, let's just say he was surprised,” my mom told me in the waning weeks of her life, when we would chat for hours as she was bedridden with cancer. We had never broached this topic before, but we were in the midst of wonderfully candid conversations about our family's history, and I wanted to seize the opportunity to get some answers.

“Surprised how?”

She paused. “Not in a good way,” she said, her eyes empathic.

“He was—what? Angry?”

“I don’t want to say *angry*. Frustrated, yes. Upset by the circumstances. This just wasn’t in his plans. And then I talked him into having another baby so you’d have a playmate.” That was my younger sister.

This made sense to me. Years earlier, when I told my therapist about my relationship with my father—the emotional distance, the lack of engagement, the ongoing strife and flares of anger—he speculated that my inconvenient arrival in the family had interrupted my dad’s plans for his future.

I could imagine my dad feeling that he had earned a respite after raising three kids. He was doing well financially, and I’m sure he wanted to travel and enjoy more freedom. Now at last was confirmation from my mother.

Our family lived in an upper-middle-class neighborhood northwest of Chicago. My dad worked hard to build his business, and he provided everything we needed—and more—materially. He was a faithful husband, well regarded in the community, and a committed friend to others.

Still, my relationship with him was always frosty. Maybe I needed more affirmation than the other kids, I don’t know. But by the time I came along, there would be no Cub Scouts, no cheering at my Little League games, no watching my speech tournaments or attending my graduations. I can’t think of a single in-depth conversation we ever had. I never heard the words I needed most.

Over time, I learned that the only way to gain his attention was through achievement. So I strived for good grades, was elected president of my junior high school, served as editor of the high school newspaper, and even wrote a column for the community paper. Still, none of the accolades satisfied. I don’t remember any words of affection coming from my dad. Not one.

My parents were members of a Lutheran church; as a lawyer, my

dad sat on the board of directors to offer free legal advice, although he was generally on the golf course on Sunday mornings.

I remember once when I was a youngster the entire family went to church together. After the service, my dad drove everyone home—but he forgot to bring me. I can still remember my panic as I searched frantically around the church, looking in vain for my father, my heart pounding.

It was an inadvertent mistake on his part, of course—but it was difficult for me not to see it as symbolic of how our relationship was developing.

## Fathers and Faith

One evening when I was about twelve, my father and I clashed over something. I walked away feeling shame and guilt, and I went to bed vowing to try to behave better, to be more obedient, to somehow make myself more acceptable to my dad. I can't recall the details of what caused our conflict that evening, but what happened next is still vivid in my mind fifty years later.

I dreamed I was making myself a sandwich in the kitchen when a luminous angel suddenly appeared and started telling me about how wonderful and glorious heaven is. I listened for a while, then said matter-of-factly, "I'm going there"—meaning, of course, at the end of my life.

The angel's reply stunned me. "How do you know?"

*How do I know? What kind of question is that?* "Well, uh, I've tried to be a good kid," I stammered. "I've tried to do what my parents say. I've tried to behave. I've been to church."

Said the angel, "That doesn't matter."

Now I was staggered. How could it *not* matter—all my efforts to be compliant, to be dutiful, to live up to the demands of my parents

and teachers. Panic rose in me. Words wouldn't come out of my mouth.

The angel let me stew for a few moments. Then he said, "Some day you'll understand." Instantly, he was gone—and I woke up in a sweat. It's the only dream I remember from my childhood. Periodically through the years it would come to mind, and yet I would always shake it off. It was just a dream.

As I got older, I found myself getting more confused about spiritual matters. When I became a teenager, my parents insisted that I attend confirmation classes at the church. "But I'm not sure I even believe that stuff," I told my dad. His response was stern: "Go. You can ask questions there."

The classes were built around rote memorization of the catechism; questions were only reluctantly tolerated and dealt with in a perfunctory way. I actually emerged with more doubts than when I started. I endured the process because when I was finally confirmed, the decision about whether to continue going to church would be mine—and I knew what the answer would be.

At the time I was oblivious to the fact that a young person's relationship with his father can greatly color his attitude toward God. I wasn't aware that many well-known atheists through history—including Friedrich Nietzsche, David Hume, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Arthur Schopenhauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, Baron d'Holbach, Voltaire, H. G. Wells, Madalyn Murray O'Hair, and others—had felt abandoned or deeply disappointed with their fathers, making it less likely they would want to know a heavenly Father.<sup>2</sup>

I saw this illustrated later in life when I became friends with Josh McDowell, whose father was a violent alcoholic. "I grew up believing fathers hurt," Josh said. "People would tell me there's a heavenly Father who loves you. That didn't bring joy. It brought pain because I could not discern the difference between a heavenly Father and an earthly

father.” Josh became a self-described “ornery agnostic” until his investigation of Christianity convinced him it was true.<sup>3</sup>

Growing up, I just knew that as doubts festered inside and as my teachers insisted that science has eclipsed the need for God, I was being increasingly pulled toward skepticism. Something was missing—in my family and in my soul—that created a gnawing need I couldn’t even describe at the time.

Years later I was driving down Northwest Highway in Palatine, Illinois—I can still recall the exact location, the time of day, the sunny weather—when I flipped the radio dial and heard something that flooded my eyes with tears.

I didn’t catch it all, but it was about fathers and faith and God and hope. The voice belonged to someone who was born about the same time I was and yet whose life, in its astonishing horror and brutality, was the polar opposite of my own. Still, there was an instant connection, a bridge between us.

I had to track her down. I had to sit down and hear her story, one on one. I had to ask her my questions. Somehow I knew she held a piece to the puzzle of grace.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Orphan

### *God's Grace Goes Far beyond Forgiveness*

*Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption. . . . Of all the gifts of grace, adoption is the highest.*

J. I. Packer<sup>1</sup>

Stephanie Fast has never known her father. She suspects he was an American soldier — possibly an officer — who fought in the Korean conflict that started in 1950. There's even a chance he's still alive somewhere. There's no way to tell.

I managed to track down Stephanie, that fleeting voice from the radio, and flew from Denver to meet her in her tidy townhouse in a wooded neighborhood in the Pacific Northwest. She's petite at five-foot-three, her black hair falling in soft waves past her shoulders, her almond eyes animated. Her husband, Darryl, a good-natured former missionary, brought us some coffee but left us alone to chat in the living room.

Stephanie is thoughtful as she begins to answer my questions, a gentle Asian cadence in her voice. At times she looks off to the side, as if reliving the experience she's struggling to describe. Other times she leans forward to gesture with her hands, as if soliciting understanding.<sup>2</sup>

I settled into a chair opposite her. Looking for a place to start, I said, "We were both born around the same time."

"I don't know exactly when or where I was born," she replied with a shrug. "Possibly, it was in Pusan, since I was told I had an accent

from that region. But when? I don't know, although it was definitely in the same era as you."

"My earliest memory," I said, "was my third birthday. My grandparents in Florida gave me a wooden sailboat as a gift. But when we went back to Chicago, I accidently left it there. I was crushed." I chuckled at the thought. "Such are the traumas of a middle-class white kid growing up in suburban America in the fifties. I'm sure your earliest memory is much different. What's the first thing you recall?"

She thought for a moment and smiled. "I was about the same age—three or four," she replied. "It was the harvest festival in Korea, when family members come to the ancestral home. I remember all the fun—the sweets and games and wearing a beautiful dress—but I vividly recall my mom being so sad and sorrowful."

"Do you know why?"

"Well, that night I heard arguing between family members about the choice that she had to make for her future."

"What kind of choice?"

"After the Korean War there wasn't a place for biracial children in that country. That night, my mom was being given the option of a marriage—and I was not part of that option. Family members were saying that they had found a man who was willing to take her, but she couldn't bring me along. For her, the choice was, 'Do I want a future? If I do, then I can't have this child with me.' There was a lot of arguing and shame and guilt. I remember my mom crying and holding me all night."

"Was this because of discrimination against children born out of wedlock?"

"Yes, especially biracial ones. We were a reminder of an ugly war. I don't know the English word, but Koreans have a strong conviction of purity, and when I was younger I looked different from the other children. My hair and skin color were lighter, I had a crease in my eyes

that most Koreans don't have, and I had wild, curly hair, which was quite unusual for Koreans. So people knew I was a half-breed."

"How did the family drama end?"

"At some point my mother reached her decision — she would entrust me to someone else. She told me I was going to my uncle's home. Within a few days, I remember walking down a dirt road to the city with her. It was the first time I ever heard a train. I asked her about it, and she said to me, 'That's where we're going.'

"When the train came, she got on board with me. Asians didn't have paper bags back then, so they would take a cloth about the size of a scarf and tie it together as a satchel. Inside I had a lunch and a couple of extra sets of clothing. She put it on a shelf above the seat, got on her knees, and told me, 'Don't be afraid.' She said I should get off the train with the other people, and my uncle would meet me. Then she left."

"What happened when you eventually got off the train?"

For a moment she didn't answer. She slowly shook her head.

"No one came for me."

### "Garbage, Dust, Bastard, Alien Devil"

Here was a child not much older than a toddler, cast adrift in a frightening and dangerous place that was predisposed to reject her — a world without grace. "You must have been panic-stricken," I said.

"Not at first. I thought, *I'll stand here on the platform, and my uncle will come for me.* But when evening came, the trains stopped. The trainmaster came out and asked me what I was doing there. I told him I was waiting for my uncle — and that was the first time someone called me a *toogee*," she said, almost spitting out the epithet.

"What does that mean?"

"It's a very nasty word, like using the n-word today. It basically means half-breed or child of two bloods, and yet it's more than that. It sort of means garbage, dust, bastard, alien devil — it has all those

connotations. It's odd—I'm sure my mom must have given me a name, but I can't remember it."

"And so that became your name, in a sense."

"Yes, it was like my identity began that day with *toogee*—garbage, bastard. That was what people called me."

"What happened next?"

"The trainmaster shooed me away, so I left and found an ox cart that was leaning up against a wall. I crawled in there the first night. I gathered some straw around me and opened the parcel and ate some food my mom had given me. I tried to sleep, but I remember hearing the dogs, the strange noises, the rustling sounds. I was scared, and yet I wasn't overly panicked."

"Even at that young age?"

"I trusted my mom, and somewhere in my mind I thought my uncle would come."

I hesitated before broaching the next question. Finally, I said, "Today, as you look back, do you think there ever really was an uncle?"

She didn't flinch. "Honestly I have no idea. It could be that she really was entrusting me to someone and I simply made a mistake by getting off at the wrong station. But in those days in Korea, it wasn't uncommon for mothers to abandon their children, especially if they were biracial. Sometimes they couldn't take the harassment, the social stigma, and being cruelly ostracized by others. They often left the children in train stations or other public areas."

"So to this day you don't really know your mother's intentions?"

Her eyes were downcast. "No, I don't," she said. Her eyes met mine again. "But I want to think the best of her. I have to, don't you see? I guess all orphans think of their mother as a princess. Still, she was under a lot of pressure, there's no question about that. Her whole future depended on it."

"I understand," I said. All of us, it seems, want to believe our par-

ents have the best intentions. “That day at the train station started an odyssey for you. How long did it last?”

“I was basically on my own for at least two to three years. If I had stayed in the city, organizations were starting to rescue biracial children, but I was always in the mountainsides and villages.”

A small child wandering aimlessly for years—what had she faced? My thoughts went to little Penelope, my cute granddaughter with the quick smile and spontaneous love for life. She’s so protected, so innocent, so tenderhearted—and so dependent on her family for everything.

“I’ve got a granddaughter who’s four years old—,” I began.

“Oh, I do too!” she exclaimed.

“Then you know what I’m going to ask. You probably look at her and think, *How in the world did I survive at age four?* How *did* you manage to survive?”

“Only the Lord, I think. One thing about Third World children is that they don’t have the pampering that our grandchildren do. Sometimes they don’t have the degree of nurturing that our children do. Often, from the time they’re little, they’re sort of raising themselves. My mother had been busy in the rice fields, so she wasn’t there to take care of me all the time. So that in itself was a blessing. I was already a bit self-sufficient.”

## Locusts and Field Mice

I imagined the bounty of food that’s put before Penelope three times a day—and which, like more preschoolers, she routinely picks at with casual disinterest. “How did you manage to eat?” I asked Stephanie.

“Actually, food was plentiful in the country, except in the winter,” she said. “I could steal whatever I wanted. There were fruit fields, vegetable fields, and rice fields. As long as I didn’t get caught, I could eat.

“I remember following a group of homeless children. At night they

would crawl on their bellies into the fields and get some of what we called sweet melons. I thought, *I could do that*. So there was a season where every night I would wait for the watchman of the field to fall asleep, and I would crawl on my belly and get what I wanted.

“Plus, the rice fields were full of grasshoppers and locusts. I would catch them and poke a rice straw through their head until I had a whole string of them, which I’d tie to my belt. By the end of the day they were pretty much dried and I’d eat them. And I killed field mice. They would come out of the same hole at the same time every day. I learned to be really, really patient. When they stuck out their head, I would grab them quicker than they could go back down the hole. I pretty much ate everything—the skin, the ears, the tail.”

I asked, “What about the winters? They must have been unbearable for you.”

“Yes, they were very cold, and I had nowhere to go and no food. Really, I should have died that first winter. I don’t know how I survived, except I remember I found a foxhole to live in. I gathered whatever straw I could find from the rice fields and brought it in to make a little den. I’d go down to the village when everybody was sleeping and steal what I could from the villagers.

“In Third World countries, street children grow up really fast. I learned to adapt quickly. In my wanderings, everything was a treasure. A tin can thrown by a soldier from a truck became my drinking can and boiling pot. We would find nails and put them on the railroad tracks to be run over and flattened—they became utensils. I would use one to gut the mice I would catch.”

“Did the villagers know you were there?”

“Oh, yes. Every once in a while a kind woman would leave her kitchen door open for me, and I would curl up on the dirt floor by the stove and stay warm. Those were answers to prayers, because in my dens I would be shivering all night.”

“You mentioned earlier that you were taunted.”

“It was constant. The children taunted me because I was biracial, and the farmers would yell at me because I was stealing from them. To everyone, I was a dirty *toogee*. And when you’re a little child and hear people call you that day after day, you begin to believe it about yourself. I believed anyone could do whatever they wanted to me physically because I wasn’t a person. I was worthless. I was dirty. I was unclean. I had no name. I had no identity. I had no family. I had no future and no hope. Over time, I began to hate myself.

“There were times when I would follow a group of homeless children. Sometimes they would let me mingle with them, and other times they would do bad things to me, you just never knew. So I became hypervigilant. Very cautious. And yet the child in me would always want to be with people. I was always looking for someone to say, ‘Oh, be my friend. You can belong to us.’”

“What was it like for you emotionally?”

“I was in survival mode. I did cry when I was abused, I did beg for mercy, I would get angry, I would kick and scream, I learned cuss words really quickly. The first few days or weeks, I cried for my mommy. I was always trying to find my way back to her. Maybe she would be over the next hill; maybe she would be around the next corner. If I saw a village from the distance I would think, *Oh, that’s my village*, and I would run into it.

“But it was never my village.”

## The Well and the Water Wheel

“You mentioned abuse,” I said. “Were you victimized by people?”

“One time the farmers caught me stealing, and they threw me into some sort of abandoned cistern, like a well, hoping I would die,” she replied. “I panicked, because I didn’t know how to swim. There was water in the bottom, but in my thrashing I found a rock that was sticking out of the wall and I climbed up on it, though I was still

sitting in some water. I remember screaming and hearing my voice echo back to me, but nobody was coming to rescue me. I honestly thought, ‘Okay, I’m going to die.’ And in a sense, that was okay. I thought, ‘Yeah, if I just let go, I can die.’

“Finally, at dusk I heard a voice from an old woman, calling, ‘Little girl, little girl, are you down there?’ I hollered, ‘Yes, I am.’ She lowered a bucket—it was dark in there and hard to see, but I could hear the metal hitting the rocks. When it hit me, I climbed in as best as I could. She pulled me up—*clang, clang, clang, clang*, I can still hear that—and she grabbed me under my arms and dragged me to an ox stall. She covered me up with straw to get me warm, and then she brought me some food.

“Even though I had been taunted before, this was the first time it dawned on me that people might actually murder me. I thought, *Why am I so bad that people want to kill me? Why can’t I be like other children who have a mommy and daddy?*”

“What did the woman say to you?”

“She told me, ‘These people—they will hurt you. But it’s very, very important that you must live.’ As an adult looking back, I now believe those words were prophetic. But as a little girl I remember thinking that she must be telling me this because she knows my mommy. I thought she was suggesting that if I get up in the morning and I leave the village and go over the next mountaintop, my mommy will be there.

“Another time, I was also caught stealing food. I remember a farmer grabbing me by the back of my neck, calling me *toogee* and saying, ‘We’ve got to get rid of her,’ and the other farmers saying, ‘Yeah, she’s nothing but a menace. Let’s tie her to the water wheel.’

“They grabbed me by my feet and shoulders, took me to the water wheel on the canal, and tied me face up—if I close my eyes, I can still tell you the cloud formations that I saw. I remember hearing myself scream; I remember my feet and my legs being stretched; I remem-

ber going under the water; I remember the pebbles and sand going into my mouth and nose. I remember coming up, spitting it all out, screaming, cursing. I could taste blood, my eyes got swollen — and then, all of a sudden the water wheel stopped.

“I felt a hand, and I heard a man’s voice saying, ‘Everything’s okay. I’m going to take you off the water wheel, don’t fight me.’ He took me off the water wheel and placed me on the ground. My eyes were so swollen I couldn’t hardly see him, but I do remember that he was wearing white. A lot of grandfathers in Korea wore white outfits back then. He took a handkerchief and cleaned me up as best as he could and gave me a drink of water.

“Then he said the same words as the woman who rescued me from the well — ‘These people, they want to hurt you. You need to leave, but you must live, little girl. It’s very important. Listen to me — you must live.’”

## From Garbage Heap to Hope

Stephanie did continue to struggle and survive, finally wandering into Daejeon, one of the largest cities in South Korea. “This young man came toward me, called me *toogee* and said, ‘You’re new here in this town?’ I said, ‘Yes, I am.’ He said, ‘Do you need a place to stay?’ No one had ever asked me to stay with them. I said, ‘Yes, I do.’ He said, ‘Follow me.’

“There was a river that ran through the city, and the embankment had become a children’s village. There were hundreds of orphans on both sides. He was a leader of a little gang that oversaw everything, and he let me be a part of that gang. The first few days were wonderful. When they got food, they shared with me. They had blankets that they shared with me. They built bonfires and told folk stories, and when they went to sleep I got to sleep next to this boy and other children.

“But after a few days, it became really bad. I just sort of became their plaything. I was only seven. I knew it was wrong. It wasn’t just one person, it was multiple people. But in my little mind I reasoned that must happen to everybody. That’s what you do to belong to a family. I just didn’t realize the horror of it.

“I don’t know how long I was with them, but a cholera epidemic swept through South Korea, and I became very, very sick. When you get cholera, you lose weight, you have a high fever, you become delirious. I thought, *I’ve got to leave here. I’ll go back into the country, where the air is better and I can get fresh food. Everything will be okay.*

“I was walking through a dark alley, and I saw another child, who most likely had cholera, in an open sewage way. I went down to get her—she was screaming. I didn’t know how sick we were, but I was thinking, *She’s hungry, I’m hungry, so I’ll go steal some food.*

“But we were caught by the farmers again. They took us to a building that had been bombed out during the war. Now, the street family had told us about this building. Where we lived along the embankments there were lots of gutter rats. They came down to the river in packs, and we were afraid of them, but as long as we were together they didn’t bother us. But that building was their territory, and we were to never go in there. And the farmers—there were four or five of them—threw us in there. I can recall picking that little girl up, I remember screaming—but that’s the last thing I remember.”

“What’s your next memory?”

“Opening my eyes and staring into blue eyes.”

“Blue eyes? Whose were they?”

“I later learned her name—Iris Eriksson, a World Vision nurse from Sweden. Her job was to rescue babies from the street, because at that time children were being abandoned left and right, mainly because Korea was still trying to survive after the war, and if you had more babies than you could feed, you just abandoned them. She was told to bring back the babies—not older kids like me—because they

were more likely to survive, more likely to get adopted, and less likely to have behavioral issues.”

“You must have been about seven years old,” I said. “So what happened to you?”

“Here’s the story I was told later. She found me on a garbage heap and realized I was more sick than alive. Of course, she felt pity for me, but I was much too old for her clinic. She actually got up and was going to leave me there, but she said two things happened that changed her mind. And you need to understand Miss Eriksson was a very quiet Lutheran woman, very reserved in her faith, so this was certainly not typical for her.”

“What happened?”

“As she got up and was walking away, she said her legs felt really, really heavy. She didn’t know why. As she was trying to figure it out, she heard an audible voice.”

I must have looked startled, because Stephanie let out a laugh. “You had to be there when she was telling it, you know? Miss Eriksson said, ‘I heard a voice in my native tongue, and it only said two words: *She’s mine.*’ She was stunned, to say the least!”

“There was nobody around?”

“No, not a soul. She said, ‘I knew it was God—and I knew I had to answer him.’ So she did. She scooped me up and brought me to her clinic. She let me stay for a few weeks, and then, when I was healthy enough, she transferred me to the World Vision orphanage in the city.

“Miss Eriksson—well, how can I put this? In a way, she was my savior before Jesus.”

## A Man Like Goliath

The orphanage became a house, but hardly a home. The conditions were primitive—outdoor plumbing, mats for beds, and hundreds of children needing attention. “I was one of the oldest ones,” Stephanie

said. “My job became caring for the babies—washing the diapers, hanging up the diapers, folding the diapers, changing the children, putting them on my back while I was working. I loved the babies.”

*Love*—that was a word I hadn’t heard during the story of Stephanie’s journey. “Was this a new emotion for you—building relationships with them?”

“Oh, yes. When I went into the baby section, they all had their arms out, wanting me to hold them. I felt loved. The workers didn’t have enough time for all of them, so I would sing to them and hug them and carry them around. Then, every once in a while, a baby would disappear.”

“Disappear?”

“Yes, and when I would ask where the baby went, they would say, ‘He went to America.’”

“Oh, so they were adopted.”

“Well, that’s the thing—I didn’t know what adoption meant. I just knew that when they said a baby went to America, it was a good thing. So one day the director said an American couple was coming to pick out a baby boy. I immediately started working to get them ready—brushing their hair, giving them a bath, pinching their cheeks, putting them in the best rags we had available.

“The next day, the bell rang in the compound. A worker opened the door, and it was like Mr. Goliath was coming in. Not only was he tall, he was massive. Back then in Korea the only people with extra weight were rich, so I thought he must be the wealthiest person on the face of the earth. He stepped aside and Mrs. Goliath came in. She wasn’t much smaller.

“They were speaking English and had an interpreter with them. The bassinets were lined up along the hallway, and I watched as the man would pick up a baby and tuck it under his neck.” Her face lit up at the memory.

“I was just overwhelmed by him; I don’t think I had ever seen a

man hold a baby like that. He brought the baby right up to his cheek, and he was kissing him and talking to him, and it was just . . . well, an emotion began to rise in me. I saw him put that baby down and pick up another baby, and what I didn't realize was that I was inching closer to him. I was very curious.

"He put the second baby under his chin, and then I looked into his eyes—and he was crying. And my heart was starting to *pump pump pump pump pump*, because I knew: This is good. Something in me said, *This is good*. He put that baby down and did the same thing with a third one—and with the third one, he saw me out of the corner of his eye. He did the same, kissing and putting the baby down, and he turned around to look toward me—and I started backing up, backpedaling."

"When he looked at you, what was he seeing at that time?"

"Although I was almost nine years old and had been in the orphanage for about two years, I still had dirt on my body, especially my elbows and knees—it was ground into my skin. I had lice so bad that my head was actually white. I had worms so bad in my stomach that when they got hungry they'd crawl out of my throat. I had a lazy eye that sort of flopped around in its socket. I couldn't see very well at all, probably from malnutrition. My face was devoid of expression. I weighed a little less than thirty pounds. I was a scrawny thing. I had boils all over me and scars on my face.

"And yet still, he came over to where I was. He got down as low as he could, right down on his haunches, and looked straight into my eyes. He stretched out his enormous hand, and he laid it on my face, just like this," she said, closing her eyes as she tenderly demonstrated with her own hand. "His hand covered my head; it felt so good and so right. And then he started stroking my face."

I sat spellbound. Here it was—the image of grace I had been seeking: an aspiring father bringing unconditional acceptance to a

child who had absolutely nothing to offer, no accolades or accomplishments, just herself in all of her vulnerability and scars and weaknesses.

My eyes moistened. *This* is the love of a dad. Maybe—*just maybe*—this is the love of a Father.

## Slamming the Window Shut

Then something incredible happened. “The hand on my face felt so good,” Stephanie was telling me, “and inside I was saying, *Oh, keep that up! Don’t let your hand go!* But nobody had ever reached out to me that way before, and I didn’t know how to respond.”

“What did you do?”

Her eyes widened as if she were still astonished by her own actions. “I yanked his hand off my face,” she said, “and I looked him in the eye—and I spit on him! Twice, I spit on him! And then I ran away and hid in a closet.”

*Spit on him?* My mind was reeling. Grace was throwing open a window of opportunity for her—a chance for hope, security, and a future—and she deliberately slammed it shut.

“How?” I asked. “How could you possibly do that?”

Yet as she searched for a fuller explanation, my mind flooded with all the ways I had yanked God’s hand off my face the many times he had reached out to me in my days of rebellion and skepticism.

There was the time as a child when a Sunday school teacher spoke glowingly about the love of God. I felt drawn toward faith—but uncomfortable with the emotions, I pulled away. Or the time at a friend’s wedding when the pastor spoke powerfully about building a marriage around Christ. I was intrigued, but quickly the busyness of my career doused my budding spiritual curiosity.

Or the time I cried out to the God I didn’t believe in, desperate for him to heal our newborn daughter of the mysterious illness that was threatening her life. Suddenly—somehow, inexplicably—she

recovered fully, but I promptly forgot about the prayer, chalking up the healing to a miracle of modern medicine, even though the doctors had no explanation for what happened. More than once, I had to admit, I had allowed the window of spiritual opportunity to slowly . . . slide . . . *shut*.

For Stephanie, in many ways this could have been the end of her story. Still, incredibly, the man and woman at the orphanage were persistent. They continued to pursue her, despite her initial rejection. The next day, they came back.

“I was called into the director’s office, and there was the foreign couple,” Stephanie was telling me. “I was thinking, *I’m in real trouble now! I’m going to get punished for what I did to him. They’re going to beat the tar out of me.* But the interpreter pointed to this man and this woman—these strangers, these foreigners, this enormous man with the huge heart who wept over children—and she said, ‘They want to take you to their house.’”

What struck me was that this couple could easily have chosen a more compliant child—perhaps the baby boy they had originally envisioned adopting, a child without the emotional baggage and physical ailments of this recalcitrant street girl, someone who was not suffering from the effects of years of deprivation and abuse, someone who wouldn’t require as much of a sacrifice to parent. Nobody would have blamed them. Nobody would have given it a second thought. Nevertheless, David and Judy Merwin, newly arrived missionaries from the United States, unexpectedly declared on that day: *This is the child we want.*

“At the time, I didn’t realize that I was being adopted,” Stephanie said. “I thought I was going to become their servant. That’s basically what happened in Korea: when a child got a certain age, he or she was sold as a bond servant to rich people.”

A servant—yes, she could envision that. She could pay off their kindness, she could work her way out of her indebtedness, she could

repay them for taking a risk on her, she could earn her room and board. Becoming a servant was the only way she could make any sense of her situation. A very understandable reaction.

### “There Are No Words”

The Merwins had expected to adopt a boy and name him Stephen, so they gave their new little girl the name Stephanie. Their house in Korea, modest by Western standards, seemed huge to her.

“I had never seen a refrigerator, a flush toilet, or a bed before. I thought, *Wow, this will be a fun place to work!* They even had eggs, which only affluent Koreans could afford. They cleaned me up, gave me antibiotics, and got me healthy. They kept feeding me, tucking me into bed, buying me new clothes, but never putting me to work.”

“Did that confuse you?”

“Yes, I wondered why for several months, but I was afraid to bring it up to them. We’d go into a village, and everybody would treat me like I was something wonderful. I couldn’t understand—I had been a *toogee*, but now I was being treated like a princess.

“Then one day a girl said to me, ‘You smell American.’ I said, ‘What do you mean?’ She said, ‘You smell like cheese.’ Korean children always said foreigners smelled like cheese. I said, ‘No, I’m not an American, but those Americans are really funny. They haven’t put me to work yet. They’re really treating me nice.’

“She looked at me with a surprised expression and said, ‘Stephanie, don’t you realize that you’re their daughter?’ That idea had never occurred to me. I said, ‘No, I’m not their daughter!’ And she said, ‘Yes, you are! *You . . . are . . . their . . . daughter.*’

“I was astonished! I turned and ran out of the room and up the hill toward my house, thinking to myself, *I’m their daughter, I’m their daughter, I’m their daughter! Oh, that’s why I’ve been treated this way.*

*That's why no one's beating me. That's why nobody's calling me a toogee. I'm their daughter!*

"I ran into the house to my mom, who was sitting in a chair, and I declared in Korean, 'I'm your daughter!' She didn't speak Korean yet, but a worker said to my mom, 'She's saying she's your daughter.' With that, big tears began to run down my mommy's face. She nodded and said to me, 'Yes, Stephanie, you're my daughter!'"

"How did that make you feel?"

Stephanie had been speaking so candidly about her life, including unthinkable mistreatment and suffering, abandonment and rejection, humiliation and pain. But now she was flustered. This time, words failed her.

"It was —," she began, then threw up her hands. "There are no words, Lee. There are simply no words."

Sometimes language cannot contain grace.

## And Then, Jesus

"Your adoptive parents showed you so much love," I said. "Did that point you toward Jesus? How did you end up becoming a Christian?"

"We were at a beach in Korea, and my daddy asked me if I wanted to be baptized, and I said, 'Sure, let's just do it in the ocean.' So my daddy baptized me."

"Did you really have faith at that point, or were you trying to please your parents?"

"I loved the Lord as much as I knew how, but I just had so much hurt inside. My problem was that I was scared to show people my pain. If my mommy and daddy saw my pain, I thought they would bring me back to the orphanage. If my teachers saw my pain, they would tell my parents. If my friends saw my pain, they'd tell my parents. I never wanted them to find out about my life as a street kid. I was afraid they'd reject me. That went on until I was about seventeen."

“What happened then?”

“We had moved to a small town in Indiana, where my father was a pastor, and I was doing everything to deny my Korean heritage. I was the only Asian in high school, and I wanted to be the perfect American girl. I was the homecoming queen and won the citizenship award, yet every night I’d go to bed scared to death I’d be discovered and lose my parents’ love.

“Then the summer before my seventeenth birthday, I was sullen and irritable and withdrawn, and my mom gently confronted me. I stalked off to my bedroom, shut the door, and looked in the mirror. I felt like I was still nothing but a *toogee*, a piece of trash. I crawled under the covers of my bed.

“A little while later, my dad opened the door, and I heard him call softly, ‘Stephanie?’ He came in and sat next to my bed and said, ‘Your mother and I want you to know that we love you very much, but you seem to have a hard time accepting that love. The time has come for us to release you to God.’

“Now, I was a pastor’s daughter, so I knew the Bible, right? But my dad knew better. He said, ‘Stephanie, can I share with you about Jesus?’ I sort of rolled my eyes and said, ‘Sure.’ He told me to think about Jesus—he knows how I feel, and he is the only one who can help me. And then my daddy left me by myself.

“Until that moment, I only saw Jesus as the Son of God. I knew he had come down to earth, but that night for the first time it dawned on me: *He understands me*. He walked in my shoes! As a matter of fact, he was sort of a *toogee*. You know? His daddy—his earthly father—wasn’t his real daddy. He slept in the straw as a child. He was ridiculed and abused. They chased him and tried to kill him.

“And it was dawning on me, *Oh, that’s what daddy means when he says Jesus understands me*. So after my dad left that night, I prayed—but my prayer was not a nice prayer. I said ‘God, if you’re what

mom and dad say you are, then do something and do it right now!’ And he did.”

“What did he do?”

“I started crying. I hadn’t cried in years; I hadn’t been able to. In the process of being abused and taunted, I realized that the more I cried, the more pain I would experience. But that night something cold and hard broke inside of me—a barrier between me and God. He finally let me shed tears—and I couldn’t stop them.

“I started wailing, and my mom and dad came into the room. They didn’t say anything. I wouldn’t let them snuggle with me, so my dad held my feet and my mom held my hands and they prayed silently to the Lord. And I had this supernatural intervention.

“Suddenly, it just came to me: Jesus knows me—and *he still loves me!* He knows all my shame, he knows all my guilt, he knows all my fears, he knows all my loneliness—yet he still loves me. And I’ve never been the same since.

“Before then, when I would hear about God’s love, I always felt it was love for everyone else. He couldn’t love me, right? I was a mistake! He couldn’t love me—I was born out of sin. He couldn’t love me—I’m biracial. I thought you had to have some status in life to be loved. That was so ingrained in me that after I was adopted and my parents talked about the love of God, I still thought, *He can’t love me! I was raped. He can’t love me! I was abused. He can’t love me! I have this awful anger inside. He can’t love me! My daddy says I need to forgive, and I just don’t want to.*

“But that night came the realization: *He . . . loves . . . me!* He loves me as I am. And that changed me, inside out. It took me many, many more years to let go of certain patterns in my life and to heal. I hated myself for so long. The fact that I could finally look in the mirror and love myself was nothing less than a miracle. It’s God’s grace.

“So these days I have a phrase that I use. For me, I can honestly say

there is no event in my life that I am better without. Why? Because everything in my life brought me to Jesus.”

“That’s radical, Stephanie, given all you’ve been through.”

“Maybe so, but that’s what I live on. I counsel a lot of women with abuse in their past—in fact, that’s a large part of my ministry today—and they’re always looking for a finished resolution. Maybe that will happen for some of them—I hope so. But for me, that’s not going to happen until heaven.”

“And when you get there,” I said, “what do you want to ask Jesus?”

Stephanie settled back in her chair. She glanced out the window, where the afternoon sunshine had chased away the Oregon gray, and then she looked back at me.

“You know,” she said, her smile gentle, “some people say they will ask tons of questions when they get to the other side. And that’s fine. But I don’t think that way anymore. I’ve come to realize that when I get to the other side, then I won’t need the answers.”

I nodded. “I think I understand,” I said. “But your story is so completely different from mine that I can’t imagine how you’re able to process it all.”

She took a sip from a cup of coffee on the table next to her. “Maybe we have more in common than you think,” she said.

I wasn’t sure what she meant. In an earlier conversation, in response to her questions about my background, I had mentioned the issues that prompted my exploration of grace, but I still didn’t see the connection she was referring to.

“The Bible talks about orphans, but sometimes it uses the word *fatherless*,” she said. “It sounds like your father protected and provided for you—believe me, that’s good. You should be grateful for that, as I’m sure you are. But still, a person can be an orphan of the heart.”

*An orphan of the heart.* I shuddered. Her words penetrated to my core.

“And that’s where God can provide,” she said. “That’s where grace

can come in. As the psalm says, ‘Thou, God, art the helper of the fatherless.’”<sup>3</sup>

## Adopted by God

As I flew back to Denver the next day, I felt as if I’d looked into the eyes of grace. Once untrusting, uncertain, and anticipating the worst, today Stephanie’s gaze is warm, gentle, and serenely confident. Such a remarkable transformation, first because of a father who sacrificed his dream of a son and reached out to her when she was a social untouchable, and then because of a Father who sacrificed his own Son in order to lavish on her a redemptive and healing love.

Now she spends her life counseling broken young women, sharing with them her story, and capping it with the most unlikely of declarations: *I can honestly say there is no event in my life that I am better without.*

Over the telephone, I related the details of our conversation to my longtime friend Mark Mittelberg, and a few days later we met for lunch in a dusty café on the Front Range of Colorado.

“Do you remember this?” Mark asked, tossing a dog-eared paper-back on the table.

I picked it up and smiled. It was a forty-year-old edition of theologian J. I. Packer’s classic book *Knowing God*, a volume of insights that I had researched during my initial investigation of Christianity and which has sat on my shelf for decades.

“Sure, I remember it,” I said as I paged through his copy, which had sentences emphatically underlined and stars penciled in the margins. “I mean, I remember that it clarified a lot of issues for me, but I can’t recall many of the specifics. Why did you bring it?”

“Because of what you told me about Stephanie,” he said. “Don’t you remember? One of Packer’s big points is that you can’t fully appreciate grace apart from adoption. Here—listen to this,” he said,

grabbing back the book, flipping to a page and reading: “If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father. If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers, and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.”<sup>4</sup>

He put down the book. “Don’t you see? Your life has been a quest for grace, and you’ve seen a unique picture of it in Stephanie. Twice she has been adopted, both times ambushed by grace. That’s what has resonated with you—her story of finding the ultimate love of a perfect Father.”

He was right—and *that’s* when it crystalized for me. What truly captivates me about grace is that God has not only erased the sins for which I deserved punishment, but he has become my loving and compassionate Father, whose divine acceptance of me rushes in to fill a heart left parched by an earthly dad.

The truth is that God could have forgiven my past and given me assurance of heaven and yet kept me at arm’s length. He could have made me a mere servant in his kingdom household—and even that would have been more than I merited. But his grace is far more outrageous than that.

“To be right with God the judge is a great thing,” writes Packer, “but to be loved and cared for by God the father is greater.”<sup>5</sup>

Of course, I’ve understood the theology behind adoption for a long time. After nearly two years of satisfying myself intellectually that Christianity was true, the last verse I read before surrendering my life to Jesus was John 1:12: “Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

*Children of God*—yes, I have long understood that God’s grace invites us into his eternal family. But this was the day, sitting in that café, when the grace of adoption struck me afresh and registered deep inside of me. The puzzle pieces fit together more snugly than ever.

“It is like a fairy story,” wrote Packer. “The reigning monarch adopts waifs and strays to make princes of them—but, praise God, it is not a fairy story: it is hard and solid fact, founded on the bedrock of free and sovereign grace. This, and nothing less than this, is what adoption means. No wonder that John cries, ‘Behold, what manner of love . . .!’ When you understand adoption, your heart will cry the same.”<sup>6</sup>

My mind reveled in the image of Stephanie, running with unrestrained joy toward home, declaring to herself, *I’m their daughter, I’m their daughter, I’m their daughter! Oh, that’s why I’ve been treated this way. That’s why no one’s beating me. That’s why nobody’s calling me a toogee. I’m their daughter!*

I desperately needed to absorb this truth anew: I’m beyond forgiven. I’m more than a servant. I’m adopted by a Father whose love is perfect, whose acceptance is unconditional, whose affection is never-ending, and whose generosity is boundless. A Father who is *for* me . . . forever.

As much as I tried to temper it in the midst of the crowded café, a broad smile spread over my face. I couldn’t mask the celebration that was breaking out inside of me. Once again, I found myself running toward Home.

*I’m his son, I’m his son, I’m his son! Oh, that’s why I’ve been treated this way. I’m his son!*

# **CASE FOR GRACE**

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