

Chapter Nine

“I’D HAVE WAITED ALL NIGHT”

GRACE FEEDS on grace. If pastors are to dispense grace every time we turn around, then we need to take in grace the way runners take in carbs before a marathon. Jesus is our manna, our living grace, the bread of heaven. When we don’t get enough of Christ we get spiritually lightheaded and weak in the knees. What’s worse than weakness is that pastors who are not nourished by Christ’s grace get crotchety, indifferent, or suspicious around God’s people. We take on a Pharisee scowl every time people don’t perform. Our flocks stop seeing Jesus through us. Our Wordwork takes on a loveless clanging.

Like all believers, pastors are nourished by Christ when we come to sit, like Mary did, at His feet. Christ nourishes us when we study the Scriptures and when we pray for strength and wisdom. He feeds us when we worship and come to the Lord’s table, and when we overhear our own sermons and lessons as we speak them.

Ironically, pastors tend to overlook one of the most fundamental ways the Lord Jesus nourishes us with grace: through the very church we serve. It is His Body, after all. The church feeds us as surely as we feed the church. Communion not only preaches Jesus’ shed blood but also the nourishment His Body provides for us, His Body the church. First Corinthians 10:16-17 says, “And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.”

A PASTOR WHO DOESN’T LEARN SUBMISSION WILL DRIVE SHEEP RATHER THAN LEAD THEM.

All believers are nourished through Jesus’ church. But pastors often enjoy graces that few others will experience. When we forget this, we are like hungry people passing the pantry oblivious to what we’re missing. Sadly, some pastors serve churches that are about as nourishing as Styrofoam, but most congregations feed their pastors.

THE GRACE OF SUBMISSION

Being both headstrong and defensive, I have wished more than once that God wasn’t so big on submission. Yet Jesus has persistently

used His church to give me this gift. A pastor who doesn't learn submission will drive sheep rather than lead them.

Submission is a gift that often comes dressed in grave-digger's clothes. It is easy, of course, to submit to a senior pastor, board, or congregation that sees things the way we do. But submitting is a killer when we feel sure they are wrong and we're paying the price.

I was still a rookie pastor when I attended my first Walk Thru the Bible seminar. It was the most innovative way of teaching the Bible I had ever seen, and I wanted in. I applied and was stunned when a man called to say he wanted to fly to Chicago to interview me. Next thing I knew I was offered the opportunity to teach. Most of the other teachers were pastors or professors who flew to a destination on a Friday evening, taught all day Saturday, and then were home in time for church on Sunday. Perfect. I wouldn't have to give up a thing. There was just one small thing: Walk Thru the Bible required me to get the church board's permission.

They didn't give it to me, and they never really told me why. They just said no. I was shocked, angry, and deeply disappointed. A friend on the board said some of the leaders were worried that another church would "steal" me. That really ticked me off!

Some four months later I was frantic with all the work of a full-time ministry plus part-time seminary. I was hurrying to a class one Thursday when, out of the blue, the Lord seemed to whisper, "So what if you were flying somewhere to teach for Walk Thru the Bible this weekend on top of everything else?" I realized instantly that something would have had to go; probably my education, and that would have been a terrible mistake. I thought about how angry I had been with my church's leaders. That is when I learned that, apart from matters of deepest biblical conviction, God expects us to submit to those over us whether or not they make sense. Submission is a grace because God uses it to protect us, direct us, and sanctify us, even when we don't want help.

Submission is also a grace-gift because it practically forces humility on us, and that is about the only way some of us will come to it.

One evening a long time ago I stood in the back of the auditorium as the congregational vote was finally reported. I thought the proposal I'd brought to the church was a no-brainer; actually I thought it was a gift from God. But there had been a lot of suspicion—of me, I think, more than the proposal. Some people felt pushed and probably thought I was throwing my weight around once too often. The motion needed a 75 percent approval. It got 72 percent.

I couldn't believe it. I stood there in the back and, for the first time, thought seriously about leaving the church. To make matters worse, there was a new members' class waiting for me in another room. I wasn't in the mood to tell new people how great our church was.

Submitting to that decision came slowly. Someone afterward said, "It must have been God's will." But God's people have often done things that didn't please God. I finally concluded that I might never actually know what God's will was in this matter. But I also gradually realized that it was God's will for me to submit to that decision, right or wrong, because God wanted me to face three issues. 1) Some in the church no longer trusted me. 2) I had not been fair to people in rushing them through the process of decision making. 3) God would work for the good of all who trusted Him in this, whatever their vote, and is gracious enough to bless His church even if the decision was wrong.

THE GRACE OF THE FRONT ROW SEAT

This side of the cloud of witnesses, pastors have the best seat in the house for seeing God work among His people. I cannot think of another job on earth in which someone sees and hears what a pastor does. Much of what we witness feeds our souls. We grow in faith, hope, and love because we sit so close to the action.

For example, pastors midwife new births more often than most other Christians. We're told to seek the lost, but sometimes the lost seek us. Let me tell you just one story. Dan and I became acquainted through a wedding I performed. He was a strange combination of skeptical scientist and street fighter. He was brilliant, combative, uncontrolled, and as arrogant as Nebuchadnezzar. Dan didn't just consider the Lord, he sparred with Him. Finally, one day he came down to his last gasp. "I don't think I can live up to being a good Christian," he said. "I'm sure you can't," I replied, and talked to him about grace and the working of the Holy Spirit. The fight went out of him and he was ready for Jesus.

"Dan, you are a very proud man," I said. "I've never asked anyone to do this before, but when you ask Jesus into your heart, I think you should do it on your knees. You need to remember that you bowed before Him as Lord." So Dan knelt for maybe the first time in his life and gladly became a subject of the King. Only a couple of years later at age thirty-six, Dan's heart gave out, and this was the story I told at his funeral. The grace of Christ that saved Dan fed me for a long time.

From our front row seats, pastors are sometimes close enough to see God's grace in battle gear, coming to the aid of a saint like one of those "mighty men" around David. Kathleen was a delightful and effective Christian, but she was tormented by a dark, demonic power within who relentlessly urged her toward terrible fear and destructiveness. My associate pastor, Freddy, and his wife Eileen had considerable experience in spiritual warfare, so my wife and I went with them to meet with Kathleen and her husband in their apartment.

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Under Freddy's guidance, Kathleen drew on the strong name of Jesus first to identify the spirit tormenting her. A name came to her clearly, which she recognized as the name of one of the false gods mentioned in the Old Testament. Kathleen mentioned that she spoke in a tongue, so Freddy asked her to do so. Again, invoking the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, she insisted the spirit translate what he was saying. After a moment of quiet she looked up, shocked, "He's saying, 'I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!'" Freddy instructed her in her invincible position in Christ and her right as a child of God to demand that the spirit leave her. We prayed with her as she prayed aloud that Jesus Christ would banish the demon and reign completely in her life. We all grew quiet for a few moments. Then Kathleen raised her head, eyes shining, and said simply, "They're gone."

Not many Christians see something like that. You cannot imagine how many times that story has fed my confidence in the strong name of Christ.

From my place in the front row I see quiet and astonishing generosity, dogged daily service, and love blanketing a multitude of sins. I watch through the dark shadows as brothers and sisters wrestle with the Lord until they limp into the light. I've watched saints straighten their shoulders and go out to face death. Again and again, I have seen God's people trust Him and I've only rarely seen people turn away. "Didn't you ever get angry with God?" I asked a friend who had suffered a crushing loss. "No, I never did," he said. "I grieved, but I knew God was good." Remember how Jesus' disciples picked up whole baskets of food left over when Jesus fed the five thousand? Pastors do that, too.

THE GRACE BEHIND THE NUMBERS

Pastors are notoriously preoccupied with numbers. Sunday's attendance. Last month's giving. How many people signed up for the dinner or seminar. We keep telling ourselves and each other that numbers aren't what matter, but it is a tough sell! Regardless of whether they are going up or down, numbers are untrustworthy counselors. Yet the grace of God is in those numbers if you know how to decode it.

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PEOPLE PUT PRAISE IN AN OFFERING PLATE AND WE DON'T
HEAR A SOUND.

The numbers tell me that we had five visitors. The encoded message of grace is that two of them, from a country on the other side of the world, have never come to church before. Two others are out-of-town parents thrilled to see that their daughter is attending such a good church. And as for the fifth, Jeff, who rarely shows up himself, brought a buddy he used to work with.

When our ushers count our attendance, they stand at the back of the auditorium and count the backs of heads. Pastors had better know the faces. Over there is a couple who may not yet be Christians. Their former neighbors have prayed for them for years, and now here they are. Toward the back left side there is a row of some of the church's grandmothers. They will go out for lunch together after the service and then visit one of their group who can't get out to church any more. There is a young man who told me he loves reading A. W. Tozer. Over there, a young woman who wants to be a missionary in Europe. There in the back is a woman who has started a blog about being a servant of Christ in a secular workplace. There is the couple grieving the loss of a son and the terrible illness of a daughter-in-law, and yet they sing.

Whether there are more people here this week than last doesn't matter so much when you look at the faces.

Finances work the same way. Offering envelopes don't just carry checks. They also carry faith and sacrifice for Jesus' sake. People put praise in an offering plate and we don't hear a sound. Jesus asked in Luke 16:11, "If you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?" There

are many in our churches who *are* trustworthy and whom God *has* trusted with true riches, and we are their pastors.

Recently we invited the Gideons to make a presentation in our service, and we took a special offering for them. When it was counted, the man who made the presentation wept for joy. The next Sunday when we told the congregation that our gifts would purchase more than 340 Bibles, we all applauded the grace of God at work among us.

THE GRACE OF THE LONG HAUL

Pastoral work is slow going most of the time. There are moments of high drama, to be sure, but mostly we watch sheep grow. One of God's gracious gifts to pastors, if you stick with it awhile, is seeing the slow, inexorable work of His grace in lives and in a church.

Matt was my first child dedication, some thirty years ago now. I wrote earlier that since I started carrying babies through the congregation for their blessing I had never had one cry. But that first time, the little guy went berserk there on the platform in front of God and everybody. Screamed and twisted so that all I could do was put my hand on his head and try to pray loudly enough to be heard over his bawling. His life has been kind of like that, from what his parents tell me. But the good work God began that day is far closer to completion. Matt, who wandered far, has come home from the far country, married a wonderful Christian woman, and despite dropping out of high school, now has a masters degree. The baby who didn't want to be dedicated to Christ is now His growing disciple and father of two little ones of his own.

In the summer of 2004, I heard that our former church baptized thirty-five people out at the lake. One of them was Harold. I could hardly believe it. Linda, Harold's wife, had prayed for him for thirty years. He had always been a great guy—kind, helpful, very willing to let Linda and the boys be involved in church—but he just wasn't interested. He had even invited me to be the chaplain for his volunteer fire department. When I heard about the baptism, I called them to get the story straight. "Harold," I said, "what's this I hear?"

He said that some tough times were getting the best of him a few months earlier. He asked Linda to go with him to see the pastor. In the course of that meeting, Pastor Jeff asked Harold if he would like to accept Christ. Harold said yes. Linda said she was shocked. She told me on the phone, "I waited all those years to have him sit beside me in church." She said that when Harold was baptized, through his tears, he thanked everyone for praying all those years.

“He’s ushering at church,” she told me. “You’ve never seen anyone so proud to be an usher.” I know everyone in the church rejoiced over the grace in that story, but I suspect Pastor Jeff and I fed on it as only pastors can.

One evening a few years ago, Cathy called me. When I first met her, some twenty years earlier, she was recovering from a divorce and trying to set her life right with the Lord. She told me about her profoundly mentally handicapped son, Nicholas. He was in a care facility nearby and she would visit him every week.

When Nicholas was eight or nine years old Cathy came to me with an unusual request. She asked if the elders of our church would anoint and pray for Nicholas in keeping with James 5:14-16. Cathy said she wasn’t thinking that God might heal all Nicholas’s disabilities; she simply felt that God wanted her to have the elders pray for him. She didn’t know why. So one Sunday she brought him to church in a wheelchair and after the service we met in my office, anointed Nicholas with oil, and prayed for him.

Nicholas was twenty-five years old when Cathy called me all those years later. Every week for twenty-five years Cathy had visited him. In all those visits Nicholas never communicated with her except for laughing sometimes as she entered the room. It seemed that nothing ever changed.

Cathy had just had her annual consultation with the team of professionals who care for Nicholas. In the course of that meeting the speech therapist said, “I think Nicholas is making some progress. We’ve been using green and red cards for ‘yes’ and ‘no.’ He is learning to point at the right card in answer to some questions. Would you like to see?”

“Of course,” Cathy replied, her heart pounding. So they went to Nicholas’s room.

The therapist held up the green and red cards, and asked, “Nicholas, is your mom with us today?” And Nicholas pointed at the green card. Cathy could hardly believe it. Other questions convinced her that it wasn’t an accident; he really understood.

She called me in tears to tell me her good news. “All these years I’d visit him,” she said, “and I never knew if he even knew who I was. And now I know. He knows I’m his mother. And he is excited to see me.” Then Cathy asked, “Do you remember when the elders prayed for Nicholas? This is God’s answer.” Guess what I think about now when someone asks our elders to pray for them?

Exodus 17 tells how Joshua led the Israelites into battle while Moses, Aaron, and Hur watched from a high hill. Verses 11-13 say:

As long as Moses held up his hands, the Israelites were winning, but whenever he lowered his hands, the Amalekites were winning. When Moses' hands grew tired, they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held his hands up—one on one side, one on the other—so that his hands remained steady till sunset. So Joshua overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.

Like many other pastors, I have known the descendants of Aaron and Hur. I have felt the grace of their hands lifting mine.

In the frightening early days in this church, I was deeply disheartened to see people leave who had warmly welcomed us only three months before. I hadn't even had time to mess up! One day Dill happened by my office. She is as stalwart a soul as I know, and like a mother to me. I told her of my discouragement. "Lee," she said, "if everyone else leaves, I will follow you out the door and turn off the lights." What a gracious gift of God to have someone hold up your weary hands until the battle turns.

One night years ago, a couple demanded a meeting with me and another person with whom they were very upset. They also insisted on having an elder present and another couple for their support. They had gone through a painful loss and I felt then (and now) that I had done a good job making sure they were cared for by the church and a counselor. They were hurt and angry that I personally hadn't done more. I don't think I have ever taken such a tongue lashing, and I had to take it with witnesses.

A few days earlier someone had given me one of those little WWJD bracelets, and it was still sitting on my desk. I kept glancing at it while they scolded me. What would Jesus do? The only verse the Lord brought to my mind was I Peter 2:23, "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate." These people who were so angry with me were in no way like Jesus' enemies. In fact, they were His beloved children. I am by nature incredibly defensive, but I knew I had to be silent even as Jesus had been. So I sat there saying almost nothing, feeling like a punching bag. When they were finished I was wrung out. But the evening wasn't over. I'm a pastor so, naturally, I had a committee meeting waiting for me.

It was about 9:30 p.m. when everyone left. I was bone-tired and shaken. As I walked out of my office into the dark foyer I noticed

a light on in the church library. I went to shut it off and found Tom there. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I heard you had kind of a rough meeting," he said.

"Yeah, it was," I agreed. Tears came to my eyes. When I regained my composure I asked, "Have you been waiting all this time? How did you know how long I'd be?"

"I didn't," Tom said, "but I would have waited here all night to be sure you were all right." And he hugged me.

There are times when pastors have to go it alone, but thank God for the times He sends us the heirs of Aaron and Hur.