

How Grace Overcomes

Living with Grace:

Romans 12:9-21

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Wesley J. Gabel

There are situations we face that seem devoid of love or grace. They seem hopeless. Some eleven years ago a civil war broke out in Rwanda between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes. One fourth of Rwanda's population was either killed or fled the country. Between 500,000 and a million Rwandans were murdered and another 20,000 died in refugee camps from cholera. In 1995 a UN committee surveyed 3000 Rwandan children between the ages of 8 and 19. Virtually every child had witnessed violence. One third had witnessed the murder of one or more of their family members. One third had seen another child take part in a killing. One third had witnessed some form of sexual assault. Half witnessed mass murder. Half observed brutal killings with machetes. More than forty percent saw murders with firearms. Sixty percent were threatened with death. Eighty percent hid to survive. Sixteen percent hid to survive under dead bodies. Most thought they would die during the massacre; and at the time of the survey, fully one third did not believe they would live long enough to be adults.

What was witnessed in the past decade is not unique. Both Moses and Jesus were born into worlds where their lives were threatened in infancy. Cruelty and hopeless domination were suffered by many. The thirst for justice provoked many to violence. Terror not only disrupted the lives of peaceful people; it also dominated the world into which they were born.

Consider the Apostle Paul. In Damascus where he first believed in Jesus, he had to be hidden in a basket and lowered through an opening in the city wall because people watched the gates to kill him (Acts 9:23-25). Then, in Jerusalem Christians secretly escorted Paul to the

Mediterranean coast to escape conspirators (Acts 9:29-30). Much later in Pisidian Antioch, civic officials expelled Paul (Acts 13:50). Then, in Iconium, Paul fled for his life. Next in Lystra, a mob stoned Paul and then dragged his body outside the city thinking he was dead (Acts 14:19-20). In Philippi, angry businessmen grabbed Paul. Its city officials had him publicly stripped, severely flogged and thrown in prison (Acts 16:19-24). Believers in Thessalonica sent Paul away at night because of a riot (Acts 17:10). Next in Berea, Paul's stay was cut short when agitators from Thessalonica arrived and poisoned the atmosphere (Acts 17:13-15). Paul was summoned to court in Corinth (Acts 18:12) and decided to leave Ephesus after a riot (Acts 20:1). While in Greece, Paul altered his travel plans to avoid a plot against his life (Acts 20:2-3). Despite all this trouble and the certainty as he traveled to Jerusalem that he would face violent opposition there, he saw the Christian faith take root in region after region and transform life. Every aspect of life was affected by the gospel, the economy, the government and social habits. There was now nowhere else for Paul to go in the known world where the gospel hadn't been heard. Grace was overcoming the grip of evil on the nations of the Middle East. He wrote the Roman Christians to get help with a missionary trip he planned to a remote part of the earth. He felt called to Spain.

I don't know what you face. I don't know your struggle with health or a difficult relationship. I don't know if you're battling finances or family issues. I do know for all of us that our social relationships, our relationships with our city, state and nation, challenge rather than support our faith. With every turn of a channel, every click of a mouse, every flip of a magazine, we encounter temptations and beliefs contrary to the truth. Some of our workplaces and neighborhoods are oppressive. I also know that in the Bible, in our history as believers and around the world today, grace is overcoming evil, even in places like Rwanda.

As Paul asked the Roman Christians for help with his mission, he shared the grace that changes everything. In the first eleven chapters of Romans, Paul explains the grace of God. Beginning with the twelfth chapter, Paul instructs the Romans what to do with it. He tells them how to overcome evil with good. He reveals how grace overcomes personal, family, community, and even national problems. He shares it, and he lived it.

He begins with the commitment: *offer your bodies*. In life, there is only one enemy worthy of fear and only one ally worthy of trust. God! Only God is almighty! You, your friends and your enemies all depend, whether they know it or not, on his grace. Paul wrote:

I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.
(Romans 12:1-2, NIV)

God has done everything necessary to birth you, rebirth you and make you whole. When you recognize God's love and gift to you, living your life for him becomes a pleasure. Overcoming in grace begins right there. It begins with our decision to live and die for Jesus. In the book of Revelation, a voice told John how believers overcame the power of the devil:

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.
(Revelation 12:11, NIV)

They overcame the devil because of what God did in giving Christ and what they did in sharing their story and offering their bodies. They didn't shrink from death. If you don't have anything worth dying for, then you have nothing worth living for. Jesus said, "***I am the way, the truth and the life***" (John 14:6). Jesus offered his body and so do we.

Grace overcomes every evil when we *choose to be transformed*. Paul wrote:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:2, NIV)

Our church's parsonage was part of a farmstead. Until a couple years ago, a horseshoe was cemented in the sidewalk near the house to scrape off your boots. As you entered the house, the first room was a mudroom. If you turned right, you descended stairs to a basement shower. The layout of the parsonage reveals a truth about farming. The farmer tends to pick up and carry whatever is outside; and much of it is not appropriate for the farmhouse. I understand this truth is still relevant when it comes to my shoes and the kitchen floor. The problem is that I think my shoes are clean, but tracks on the kitchen floor reveal that I'm personally affected by the environment, especially when there is no one else around to blame.

Walking around this earth, we pick up all kinds of things that are hostile to a life with God. What shapes our view of life? What forms our view in business, government, love, marriage and health? We are picking up stuff all the time that affects our thinking and our behavior. Grace overcomes as it gives our heads, hearts and hands a bath. Immersed in the truth of God, we repent of sins and discover true love. We think differently and then act differently. We become lights in a world of darkness. ***“Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”***

Grace overcomes when we *think of ourselves* with sober judgment. Paul wrote:

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. (Romans 12:3-6, NIV)

Paul was living by grace and overcoming exactly because of that. He didn't try to do things for which he had no grace. He was given ability to teach so he said: ***“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you.”*** God does not expect you to fix everything. God has given you gifts to use, so that with others you overcome. With others you overcome. You are not the body of

Christ. You are a member of it with a critical function. Grace overcomes when you stop putting all the weight on your shoulders and realize that God has a plan that involves you with others.

We must think of ourselves with sober judgment.

Grace overcomes when you *live in Christian fellowship* devoted to one another in brotherly love. You cannot be devoted to brotherly love if you are distant or aloof from others. It is in fellowship, when you get together, that you learn the joy and demands of love. It is in fellowship that your zeal for God and his kingdom grow. When you live around hot coals for God, you catch the heat. In fellowship you gain encouragement to persevere, and you learn the work of peace. In fellowship you experience the relief of mercy, the joy of grace and the security of love. Consequently, it isn't as difficult to take the final step where grace overcomes. Indeed, it is natural.

Grace overcomes when you *bless and pray for those who hurt you*. Paul wrote:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:14, 17, 19-21, NIV)

It is exactly these practices that are healing individuals, families, communities and even nations. Recently a Minnesota pastor gathered some Hutu and Tutsi leaders from Rwanda who hated each other. They had lost family at the hands of one another. As they gathered around a cross and invited Jesus to minister, their tears began to spill. Their anguish was exposed and forgiveness flooded their hearts with love. Rwandan leaders declared this to be the hope of their nation; and brothers and sister, it is the hope for us all. It is the gospel to which we are called.