

GRACEFULLY
GROUNDED

The Shattering That Sets Us Free

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Regular Baptist Books
Arlington Heights, Illinois

Gracefully Grounded: The Shattering That Sets Us Free
© 2022 Regular Baptist Press • Arlington Heights, Illinois
www.RegularBaptistPress.org • 1-800-727-4440
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RBP5528 • 978-1-64213-759-0

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Help Us Lord, We're Hurting

“God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.”

—

C. S. LEWIS, *THE PROBLEM OF PAIN*

I smiled as I watched the beautiful boy seated in front me staring wistfully out the plane's window. I thought of the golden dreams that had danced in my own head when the sky seemed to have no limit. But as we all come to know, the realities of life have a way of grounding us. Nobody lives in the clouds forever. While many appear to soar by the spread of their own wings and encourage us to do the same, only the soul that surrenders to God can ever fly freely.

The Universal Reality of Disappointment

No matter how successful we are, we can't escape that life on earth comes with unmet expectations and dashed dreams before ending with death. Regardless of how hard we try to stand tall and defend against feeling small, our souls were created to be satisfied by Someone so much greater than anything we can grasp in this life.

John Newton, the English abolitionist who penned “Amazing Grace,” understood this enough in 1772 to write the following words to his thirteen-year-old daughter:

My dear Betsy . . . If I could teach you a lesson, which, as yet, I have but poorly learned myself, I would teach you a way to never be disappointed. This would be the case if you could always form a right judgment of this world, and all things in it. If you go to a bramble-bush to look for grapes, you must be disappointed; but then you are old enough to know that grapes never grow upon brambles. So, if you expect much pleasure here in this world, you will not find it. But you ought not to say you are disappointed, because the Scripture plainly warned you beforehand to look for crosses, trials and hindrances every day. If you expect such things, you will not be disappointed when they happen.¹

I don't know what kind of student Betsy was in the classroom of parental instruction, but I do know that John Newton wasn't the only impoverished learner of this reality. Because the truth is, we're all slow learners. Unless God intervenes, we stubbornly hold onto our conviction that if we circle our towers of strength and security skillfully enough, our souls can find rest. But regardless of the success of that piloting, we will always discover that this circling is costly, requiring more power of positivity than we can produce and more wind beneath our wings than others can provide.

The Universal Problem of Pain

As I'm writing this, I know the likelihood is great that you are suffering deep disappointment. And I know the likelihood is equally great that this disappointment came on the heels of draining yourself dry trying to secure a different outcome. Maybe it's the disappointment of not being able to keep a friendship tended and a relationship mended, or from your inability to keep a marriage from malfunction and a family from dysfunction. Maybe it's the heartache of being powerless to keep a child safe from dark mental voices and sheltered from destructive choices, or to keep a parent from the ache of bodily decay and the agony of mental decline. Or worse, maybe it's the heartache of finding yourself helpless to maintain your own physical strength and manage your own mental health.

And maybe the disappointment is not rooted in your own insufficiencies but in another's deficiencies. Maybe it's disappointment in a lover's unwill-

ingness to tend to your spirit with sweetness or hold your heart with tenderness or in that person's unwillingness to fuel the fires of affection and fan its embers with focused attention. Maybe it's disappointment in a leader's failure to keep pride in check and power in control, or maybe it's disappointment in that leader's failure to discipline the mind or examine the heart. And maybe added to this deep disappointment in another, there's an even deeper disappointment that the loss of another's level head has somehow triggered the loss of your own.

I've counseled enough to know that behind even the warmest of smiles can lie a restless soul that is wholly unknown to others. I know that even if you're a Christian who desires to love God with all your heart, disappointment might have pierced your heart with such savagery that every chamber is suffering from the assault. I've learned that even the most passionate pursuers of Christ can wrestle with a soul that's too wounded to be healed by simple words. Even when we know that the Great Physician has promised to heal the broken heart (Ps. 147:3), grief can loom large enough to make His presence imperceptible.

Though the accuser would love to have you believe otherwise about your suffering, I want you to understand that the cloudless blue sky filled with strong soarers who somehow escaped the darkness that's swallowed you is only an illusion. I want you to know that the emptiness churning within you is, to varying degrees, churning within every human heart. I want you to know that sin has plunged every one of us into a dark sea of struggling survivors with only one "firm and secure" anchor of the soul (Heb. 6:19).

I desire that you not only understand you are not alone, but that you also know I am in this struggle for joy with you. I'm not sharing my heart with you from a place of personal victory. I'm not inviting you to join me in the winner's circle. Rather, I'm sharing my heart from a place of humbling defeat, a place that has me intentionally leaning hard into what it means to rest in my Savior and rejoice in the glory of His victory. The testimony of grace that's prompted the writing of this book is one of a merciful Redeemer Who lovingly chose to ground me. I have found that His shattering sets me free to soar for His glory.

So these imperfectly penned words flow from the heart of a woman who has been grounded by grace through the shattering of dreams and the darkness of disappointment. My heart required being brought low before it could be

lifted high. I have been conditioned to yearn for that day when I will stand fully in my Savior's presence and enjoy His beauty in a color more vivid than my wildest imagination.

It's with joy that I take this journey with you, praying all the way that your deep hurts will have you yearning for that heavenly Home, where our annoyingly insatiable hunger for more will finally be gone with the wind. And I'm praying that with even more resolve than Scarlett O'Hara, you'll join me in lifting your face to the sky and declaring, "As God is my witness, . . . I'm going to live through this, and when it's over, I'm never going to be [disappointed] again!"²

CHAPTER ONE

- SHATTERED DREAMS -

Help me, Lord. I'm hurting.

“I like to think of my pain as a sheepdog that keeps snapping at my heels to drive me down the road to Calvary, where, otherwise, I would not be naturally inclined to go.”

—

JONI EARECKSON TADA

I am an intense woman who often finds herself struggling in a sea of swirling emotion, so my story is one of sovereign search and rescue. It centers on my Savior. He is the reliable anchor for my restless soul. He is the relentless Savior Who desired my affection enough to make Himself my lighthouse, a lighthouse standing firm even when the darkest hours of the storm have snatched every ray of hope from my sight, a lighthouse securing my safety enough for me not just to survive but thrive.

“May our hearts make Jesus their anchor, their rudder, their lighthouse, their life-boat, and their harbor. . . . He himself is the great attraction; let us follow ever in his wake, mark his signals, steer by his chart, and never fear while he is within hail. Not one ship in the convoy shall suffer wreck; the great Commodore will steer every barque in safety to the desired haven.”

—Charles Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*

Tormentors of Disappointment

I wrestle with a vivid imagination that often exhausts me. I spend sleepless nights with my mind racing. I often think about how much easier my life would be if my mind was more like my husband's. He's an accountant with no inclination to clutter his life with needless distraction. And even when his mind does tackle a disappointment, he carefully monitors his expenditure of emotional energy so that he doesn't exceed his income.

In Richard's world, reality tends to enter a room as gently as he does. You may relate to his emotionally tranquil world better than to my turbulent one. In his and your world, reality typically treads softly and blends smoothly into the cool gray landscape of modest expectation, gracing you with calm contentment.

But in my world, reality rarely appears quietly. It prefers to intrude uninvited with stark bravado, waging war against the lofty expectations that I readily admit function as *tormentors of disappointment*. Expectations that, I confess, make my fight for joy as fierce as the fiery flare of my emotions.

There's a reason my excitable freshman self was so strongly attracted to the handsome junior redhead who dominated the soccer field and ruled the basketball court of our high school—a reason that ran far deeper than his chiseled good looks and athletic prowess. His passionate heart for God beat with a steadfast spirit of tenderness, and it provided a safe harbor of cool refreshment for the heat of my passion. His quiet strength effortlessly sustained the weight of my personality, and the moment I met him, I felt welcomed to present the full measure of myself without erasing layers to lighten uneasiness.

To this day I'm so grateful that my youthful naivety didn't have me minimizing the importance of marrying a man who intended to live in a way that stirs my *desire* to change, with no inclination to *demand* that I change, because the former has always prodded me toward repentance and Christlikeness just as the latter has pushed me toward rebellion. It would be nice if I were sanctified enough to be sweet under either circumstance, but it doesn't look promising that change will happen this side of eternity.

Anyway, back to high school. The next nine years involved a journey of romance that eventually ended with a covenant of marriage and a commitment to love that will soon be forty years strong. Looking back, we can trace God's sovereign hand penning a beautiful love story with the permanent ink

of His mercy and grace, even the chapters covering the confusing dating years of warring against a lean waiting though wrestling with a liberal wanting.

Failed Delivery of Expectations

I didn't enter marriage expecting to be schooled in the harsh reality that my sound theological framework needed deconstruction. But God had plans to enroll me in His challenging course of grace, which would teach me that no matter how carefully I had constructed that framework, self-righteousness lurked within my heart. This self-righteousness found me unwittingly erecting support beams of my own design to bolster a good and godly desire: to know that if I prayed fervently enough, sacrificed selflessly enough, taught the Word diligently enough, and sought God faithfully enough, my "good and godly" effort would be seen in the reward of a happy marriage, a loving and faithful spouse, a quiver filled with healthy offspring, teens who didn't rebel, and adult children who lived for eternity.

Sometimes the reward of "good and godly effort" is delivered to our doorstep as a beautifully wrapped gift of grace just as we had imagined, tied with ribbons of realized dreams and topped with a bow of rendered desire. But sometimes the reward arrives on our doorstep so badly torn and tattered that nothing within us can muster the belief that it's a good gift, let alone a *godly* gift. It seems to us that instead of being a delivery of joyful bounty from a loving Father, it's a sorrowful betrayal. We "accept" such a gift with stiff arms and silent screams.

The subtleties of a covert prosperity gospel,¹ which is what I had, are just as problematic as the excesses of an overt one. For when reality unfolds outside the framework of expectation, we can find ourselves watching the delivery of beautiful bounty to others even as we throb with the ache of being cheated out of our own—especially if it's delivery of bounty that, according to our own construct, we *earned* the right to receive.

I have learned that nothing sends believers into a spiritual tailspin more easily than believing we're the victims of a failed delivery of our expectations; believing our faithful God has failed to deliver what we deserve; believing He has left our *working* hands empty while leaving others' *lazy* hands full.

Graceful Grounding 101: A Sovereign Sanctification

I'll be unfolding more detail throughout this book, but I want to begin by introducing a course of instruction that I'm calling Graceful Grounding 101. It's the course God sovereignly enrolled me in as a young college graduate. This course started with the daily assignment of learning to surrender my stubborn will in a marriage that found two newlyweds struggling to understand each other. The moment we met, Richard and I realized we have polarizing personalities, but as newlyweds we were blindsided by our opposite responses to the friction that came when we made ourselves vulnerable to each other. In our desire to diffuse conflict, I moved toward the relationship with emotional intensity, while Richard moved away with emotional withdrawal.

Now, better aware of how our personalities function, we understand what was happening in our relationship: we could not recognize just how deeply we had dug into the layers of our protective pride. Both of us were determined to honor God and our commitment, but we found ourselves discouraged that our love did not make life together easy. We finally admitted our insufficiency to handle the challenge and humbled ourselves enough to seek counsel from godly mentors. (*Thank you, Ken and Mardi Collier. You will never know how much God used you in our lives!*) They pointed us to Christ and lovingly led us to see our sin. Seeking help in our struggle was one of our best decisions, and I can't beat the drum hard enough when it comes to encouraging couples to step out of prideful conflict long enough to humbly reach for a helping hand.

The sanctification process is intended not to *strip* us of our God-ordered personalities, but to save us from them. Sanctification is a painful but beautiful process, intended to reveal just how prone our hearts are to stubbornly hold on to pride. Sanctification is intended to teach us to hold on to the joy of humility through repentance and to grasp the peace of forgiveness through reconciliation.

With our personalities solidly intact, my husband and I can still find ourselves struggling to respond to each other in humility instead of reacting to each other in pride. Like two big boss babies, we can still find ourselves clamoring for control with a stubborn aggression (mine) and a stubborn passivity (his). But God isn't finished with us yet. His transforming grace has us singing His mercies. We have learned to hold on to the joy of repentance and the peace of reconciliation.

Graceful Grounding 201: A Barren Beauty

A couple years into our marriage, we discovered that learning to surrender our selfish pride was merely preparation for walking the painful road of infertility. Both Richard and I had made purity a priority when we were passionate and hormonal teens. Like sentinels guarding a castle door, we had determined to keep our bodies for the pleasure of marriage. It was the right thing to do, right enough to fill my *self-righteous* heart with the silent expectation of *earned* matrimonial bliss littered with the fruit of my womb. But I watched year after year as beautiful gifts of grace wrapped in pink and blue perfection were delivered to our friends while I stood at our door with empty arms and a broken heart.

Help us, Lord. We're hurting. Why would You withhold what we have worked so hard to gain? The pain was too great to find housing within my theological framework, and as it spilled over its borders, I found myself fighting to accept the torn and tattered *gift of infertility* that God had sovereignly sent to us. My heart received this barrenness as betrayal more than kindness. Not wanting to expose my internal turmoil and give myself away as a doubting Thomas (I didn't get all those "Good Christian" ribbons and leadership awards for nothing!), I threw myself headlong into ministry and masked my deep hurt with smiles. While some of that was a right response, I would now counsel my much younger self to slow down instead of speed up—to slow down and lean into the silent communion with God that provides sacred space for lamenting, listening, and learning.

In time, I understood that my loving Master Teacher desired to drive home the conviction of His goodness; the conviction that Christ truly can satisfy the parched soul, even when our thirsting souls find us crawling through the hot sands of disappointment. My Savior desired to drive home the conviction that He is not a mirage Who promises to heal yet only proves to hurt; the conviction that He indeed is the great thirst quencher. For Jesus Himself said, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:13–14).

Only Jesus can provide the connection to love that our hearts crave, so seeking it elsewhere inevitably leaves us high and dry. That's why the world is like one gigantic rummage sale, with restless people rummaging for affirmation of worth at tables both religious and reckless. The craving that leads a person to

throw himself into ministry at the expense of his family is the same craving that leads a person into a sexual affair. The craving that leads a person to become a workaholic is the same craving that leads a person to become an alcoholic.

We are not designed to remain thirsty, and—whether we seek to satisfy that thirst in ways that are socially acceptable or not—drinking from any well but Jesus leaves us desperately reaching for *one more drink, one more drink of attention, one more drink of admiration, one more drink of connection.*

Jesus is the great thirst quencher. When we hold out our cups of desire in humble need, trusting Him to fill our thirsty souls, He delights to fill them. And that is why I praise my God for grounding me in scorching humility when I was far more thrilled to be soaring in soothing pride. Why I praise Him for grounding me to train my heart to beat for His glory with a singular devotion. Why I praise Him for training me in the truth that His love is better than life.

You, God, are my God,
earnestly I seek you;
I thirst for you,
my whole being longs for you,
in a dry and parched land
where there is no water.
I have seen you in the sanctuary
and beheld your power and your glory.
Because *your love is better than life,*
my lips will glorify you.
I will praise you as long as I live,
and in your name I will lift up my hands.
I will be fully satisfied as with the richest of foods;
with singing lips my mouth will praise you.
—King David, Psalm 63:1–5 (italics added)

Graceful Grounding 301: A Messy Marveling of Mercy

Seven years into our marriage God gifted us with the incredible joy of adopting a beautiful one-week-old baby boy. Seven years later, He doubled

that joy by gifting us with the adoption of a beautiful one-day-old baby girl. My barrenness had been filled not only with the joy of my salvation, but also with the joy of two children whose smiles melted me with the same depth of emotion as their sorrows moved me.

The moments of pain that inevitably come when parenting even the easiest of children were, for us, wholly overwhelmed by the pleasure of parenting. My husband and I are both educators who find great personal delight in paths of instruction, and we welcomed with open arms the challenge of nurturing our children in the admonition of the Lord. Church, camp, community, and cultural instruction; private and public schooling, homeschooling, no schooling; Suzuki, swim, soccer, and sewing lessons; piano, private, fashion, and flute lessons—parenting was truly a dream.

But there were sorrows too. Poor prenatal care had left our son struggling with a rough start. We thought that in our home—well-padded with nurturing love as it was—his newborn cries of suffering would echo for only a limited time. There’s a naivety that comes with youthful zeal, and we were zealous. But the sound of his suffering rang its sour notes into other stages of his life as well.

As our son matured, we found ourselves agonizing over how to give him space to move and freedom to soar. I think he would agree that his most difficult hours as a young boy had him confined to a chair in the classroom, then leaning against a fence at recess for falling out of that chair. (I have much to say about all that now, but I digress.) I also believe he would agree that his most memorable moments as a young boy, when he was not wrestling and wreaking havoc with his dad, involved running wildly free with his two grandpas, who, we grew increasingly convinced, loved him far more than they ever loved us.

But it was part of God’s plan to allow both those grandfathers to be taken (one suddenly and one with a lingering illness), opening wide a deep wound that was already crying for healing that only a Savior could touch. Our son has always been one of the most tenderhearted and affectionate people I know, and it was so difficult to watch things coming apart privately even as he projected a public image of the crazy kid who happily ran through life. When he left our home, he entered a fight for his life, finding himself struggling to breathe as the wind of the world whipped around his heart. But during the storm, grace was calling his name. He couldn’t hear it, and it took a quiet courage not his own for him to be still enough to listen. Quiet courage to stop numbing the pain. Quiet courage to stand in the middle of the darkness and wait with faith

smaller than that all-familiar grain of a mustard seed for God to rescue him.

God sovereignly put our family on a path that bent our knees and forced us to live as we truly are—poor beggars of mercy who awaken each morning in desperate need of His grace. This path has forced us to learn the deep value of quiet courage that comes with no shine of the extraordinary, only the shine of an extraordinary God. This path has also left us in awe of the Redeemer, Who chose to rescue us and restore us, leaving us to marvel at His mercy. Our messy marveling will always come with threatening storm clouds that blow anxiety into the soul, but God knows our frailty. His faithfulness is steadfast and sure, and He is there to hold us even when our feeble hearts shake with fear.

The fun-loving spirit and boundless energy of our beautiful son masked a sensitive heart of harbored hurts. Parenting has called us to lean into our son's pain, to listen and learn with humble hearts—not just to listen to how we have unwittingly hurt him, but to learn how we can better love him. God has used this process of leaning so we can now lean into the pain of others. The process has taught us much about caring for struggling children, both young and old, about the importance of tenderly wrapping wounds with bandages of love and mercy, and about waiting patiently for the Healer to do the surgical work of the heart.

Penned with Perfection

Though our son has given permission to share his story, the details are known only by him and the unread chapters known only by God, the loving author of all our perfectly penned stories. We know these stories have a glorious ending if we are His children. These stories, regardless of a painful beginning or a painful middle, are written in their entirety with the same perfection as their glorious ending.