

GRACEFULLY
GROUNDED

The Shattering That Sets Us Free

GRACEFULLY
GROUNDED

The Shattering That Sets Us Free

HOLLY STRATTON



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

Printed in U.S.A. All rights reserved.

RBP5528 • 978-1-64213-759-0

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under U.S. Copyright Law, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	7
1. Shattered Dreams	11
2. Shades of Suffering	23
3. Running on Empty	39
4. Grounded by Grace	57
5. Rooted in Love	79
Endnotes	93

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 of me staring wistfully out the plane's window. With his face pressed firmly against the glass, his blazing blue eyes attempted to soak in every corner of the world. I couldn't help but to think of all the golden dreams of innocent youth that danced wildly 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 with true freedom.

The Universal Reality of Disappointment

No matter how successful we are, we can't escape the reality that life on earth comes with unmet expectations and dashed dreams before ending with our appointment with death. Regardless of how hard we try to stand tall and defend against feeling small, our souls were created to be satisfied by something 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 adopted 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. And unless God intervenes, we will 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 a costly flight, 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 has come on the heels of draining yourself dry and bleeding yourself out trying to secure what you had so desperately hoped would be 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 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, rather deep disappointment in the deficiencies of another. Maybe it's disappointment in a lover's unwillingness 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 their 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 sorrowing of soul that's too seared by a complexity of wounds to be healed by the simplicity of words. For even when we know that the Great Physician has promised to heal the broken heart (Ps. 147:3), the severity of grief can loom large enough to make the sweetness of his presence as imperceptible as the certainty of his protection.

Though the accuser would love to have you believe otherwise about your suffering, I want you to know that you are not the subject of a small lot of sorry swimmers struggling to survive in a dark sea of emotion. My earnest desire for you is 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 "sure and steadfast" anchor for 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 where I proudly clutch my medal of merit and kiss my trophy

of triumph. 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. After years of circling my illusionary towers of strength on the full strength of my own prideful ambition, my testimony of grace that prompted the writing of this book is one of a merciful Redeemer who lovingly chose to ground me in order to teach me how to soar.

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. And in this process of being lifted, 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 also yearning for that heavenly home, where our annoyingly insatiable hunger for more will finally be *gone with the wind*. So 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

As an intense woman who often finds herself struggling in a sea of swirling emotion, I write as a seasoned eyewitness to the sustaining grace of my God. Sealed with the promise of a sweet ending, my life is a search and rescue story. It's a story that centers on a 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

If your personality is anything like mine, you'll understand when I tell you that I wrestle with a vivid imagination that often feels nothing less than an exhausting curse. I can far too easily spend sleepless nights with my mind racing faster than the streaming dreams that cloud it. I often think about how much easier my life would be if I possessed the subdued colors of my husband's mental palette. He's an accountant with no inclination to clutter his numerical life with needless distraction. And even when his mind does tackle a color run, he can always be counted on to carefully monitor his expenditure of emotional energy enough not to exceed his income.

In Richard's world, reality tends to enter a room as gently as he does. I'm certain some of you can relate to his emotionally tranquil world better than my turbulent one. His is a steady world where reality treads softly and blends smoothly into the cool gray landscape of modest expectation, gracing him with a calm contentment that I have always found annoyingly attractive.

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. Expectations detailed with the colorful fineries of faith, family, and friendship enough to pale the painted delights of Van Gogh.

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 whose solid intention was to live in a way that would stir my *desire* to change without any sassy inclination to *demand* that I change. The former has always worked at prodding me toward repentance and the latter at pushing me toward rebellion. It would be nice if I were sanctified enough to be sweet whether met with all things attractively

solid or annoyingly sassy, but that doesn't look promising this side of eternity. At least I'm gifted at inspiring a yearn for heaven, inciting Richard to smile like a Cheshire cat just thinking of that day when his wife will be walking around all cherubically glorified and sinless. He's confident he's going to recognize me, but all I can imagine is a woman in white wildly flailing her arms while leaping up and down as she shouts: *"Here I am, Honey! It's me! It's me!"*

Anyway, back to high school. Though the next nine years involved a journey that followed a course too erratic for even our families and closest to track, that harrowing romantic road 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 while wrestling with a liberal wanting.

Failed Delivery of Expectations

I have always strongly rejected a prosperity gospel that promotes expectation of material riches and earthly reward for spiritual labor, so I didn't enter marriage expecting to be schooled in the harsh reality that my sound theological framework was in need of deconstruction. But God had plans to enroll me in his challenging course of grace where I would be taught that, no matter how carefully I had constructed that framework, self-righteousness lurked in my heart. Self-righteousness that found me unwittingly erecting beams of my own design to bolster what I deemed to be 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 that my 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.

It is true. Sometimes the reward of 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 can arrive on our doorstep so visually torn and tattered that nothing within us can muster the belief that it's a good gift let alone a godly gift. That instead of a delivery of joyful bounty from a loving Father, it appears

as a delivery of sorrowful betrayal. A delivery we meet with stiff arms and silent screams of rejection cried out from a soul too crushed to utter a sound.

The subtleties of a covert prosperity gospel¹ are just as problematic as the excesses of an overt one. For whenever reality unfolds outside the theological framework of its expectation, we will inevitably find ourselves watching the delivery of bounty to others even as we throb with the cruel ache of being cheated out of our own. Delivery of bounty that, according to our construct, we earned the right to receive.

I have learned that nothing sends us into a spiritual tailspin more easily than believing we're the victim of a failed delivery—one we leaned into as promised reward. It's a disappointment that reeks with the stench of all that is unfair, especially when we believe our own *working* hands have been left empty and *lazy* hands left full.

Graceful Grounding 101: A Sovereign Sanctification

I'll be unfolding more detail as we journey through this book together, 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. Richard and I knew we had polarizing personalities the moment we met, but we were blindsided by our opposite responses to the challenges that came as vulnerability deepened. In our desire to diffuse conflict, I moved toward the relationship with increasing emotional intensity and Richard moved away with increasing emotional withdrawal.

Although the knowledge we've gained about personality functioning since then would have provided helpful insight into those polarizing responses, at the time we were too blinded to recognize how deeply our heels had stubbornly dug into the sinful layers of protective pride. Both of us were determined to honor God and our commitment, but we found ourselves discouraged that it didn't seem to be making our relationship any easier. 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!*) Lovingly leading us to the Cross where they pointed us to Christ, they helped us to see our dark need

in the light of God's saving grace. 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 away from the pride of conflict long enough to seek help from those who are humble of heart.

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 heart is to stubbornly hold on to pride. It's a growth process of learning how to hold on to the joy of humility through repentance and 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, and his transforming grace has us singing of his mercies louder than ever. Through the years we have learned to savor the joy of repentance and the peace of reconciliation enough to ache for its goodness whenever our sin steals its sweetness.

Graceful Grounding 201: A Barren Beauty

Little did we know that learning to surrender our selfish pride was merely preparation for the exponentially more difficult assignment of walking the painful road of infertility. Both Richard and I had made purity a priority when we were passionate and hormonal teens, and like sentinels guarding a castle door 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 two years into a marriage that were filled with more bumps than a braille alphabet, I found myself watching beautiful gifts of grace wrapped in pink and blue perfection being delivered to our friends while I stood at our door with empty arms and a broken heart.

Help me, Lord. I'm hurting. Why would you withhold what I 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 struggled to accept the torn and tattered *gift of infertility* that God had sovereignly sent to us. Barrenness was far more

than a failed delivery. To me it felt like a betrayal from the very one who had promised me kindness. Not wanting to expose my internal turmoil and give myself away as a doubting Thomas (I didn't get 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.

Though difficult years, they were ones that ground me into the understanding that my Master Teacher loves me enough to drive the conviction of his goodness to the very core of my being. I praise him for every lesson that has found the following truth lodged in my heart as securely as my head—Christ is the satisfier of my parched soul even if my thirsting finds me crawling through the burning sands of the most grievous of disappointments. In the school of suffering, my Savior has mercifully taught me that he indeed is the one who delivers me from death into life. He is *not* a mirage who promises to heal yet only proves to hurt. He *is* the quencher of my thirst. He *is* the lover of my soul. Jesus 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 connection to the love that our hearts were created to crave, and this is why seeking it elsewhere inevitably leaves us struggling with an insatiable desire for more. It's this restless desiring that likens the world to one gigantic fire sale where the wearied can be found rummaging for affirmation of worth at tables both religious and reckless. It's this unquenchable thirst that drives our destructive cravings. The craving that leads one to throw themselves into ministry at the expense of family is the same craving that leads one into a sexual affair. The craving that leads one to become a workaholic is the same craving that leads one to become an alcoholic.

We are not designed to live with unquenched thirst. Whether we seek to satisfy that thirst in ways that are socially acceptable or not, drinking from any well but Jesus will always leave 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 trust him enough to hold out our cups of desire in humble need, he delights in filling our thirsty souls. It's

why I praise God for grounding me in scorching humility when I was far more thrilled to be soaring in soothing pride. Grounding me from my high-flying independence in order to teach me the satisfaction that comes with low-living dependence. Grounding me so that I could grow roots deeply into the truth that his love is indeed 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 melt me with the same depth of emotion as their sorrows move 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, his body warring against painful withdrawal of a toxic substance. 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. It would prove to be a difficult process accepting the reality that, in one way or another, that sound of suffering would ring its sour notes into other stages of his life as well. Sometimes quietly enough for even those who loved him most to miss.

As our son matured, we found ourselves agonizing over how to give him space to move and freedom to soar. I’m fairly confident 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’m also confident 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 of perpetual smiles happily racing 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 in the midst of 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. It's a path that 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. A path that has left us in awe of the goodness of a Redeemer who chose to rescue us and restore us, leaving us to marvel at his mercy. It's a messy marveling that 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, and parenting called us to lean into his 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. It's a process that has taught us much about suffering, and about tending to the souls of struggling children both young and old. It's taught us 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. Stories that, regardless of a painful beginning or a painful middle, are written in their entirety with the same perfection as their glorious ending.