

BECAUSE OF HIS AMAZING GRACE...

*God Will Put
More on You Than
You Can Bear*

I HAD KNOWN ED JACKSON for many years. All of his adult life he had been successful in business. Coming straight out of college, where he had been an admired running back on the football team, he moved immediately into a career position that would take most men ten years to attain. Ed soon married his college sweetheart, Julie, a beautiful lady, and before long they had two picture-perfect children. He was the kind of man many would envy. He was living the American dream—he had a successful career accompanied by an affluent lifestyle, a beautiful wife, and two exceptional children. It seemed that everything in life was being handed to him on a silver platter.

One day when Ed returned to the office after being out of town for a few days, he found a piece of paper on his desk that simply read, “Ed, see me. Kent.” Ed strolled into Kent’s office without a clue that another piece of paper awaited him there. It was a memorandum telling him that his job would end in 30 days. Kent explained something about a new C.E.O. who wanted to bring in his own team. Ed remembers the pained expression on Kent’s face when Kent had broken the bad news to him. Kent wasn’t only his immediate supervisor, he had become a friend.

Three weeks later Ed and I sat in a restaurant together as he expressed his pain. "It makes no sense at all. This is one situation I can't solve. I'm in too deep. My life is out of control!" At the time, I didn't think that he was looking for answers. Sometimes people just want to vent their pain and frustration to a friend without having the friend immediately try to fix them and their problem. I sensed this was one of those moments. I responded only with sincere sadness and compassion, trying to communicate my love and concern for him and his family.

Problems may be our personal escort to lead us straight into the place God has prepared for us.

In the weeks that followed I shared with Ed some biblical truths that applied to his situation. Several times he said to me, "I'm in this too deep. My life is totally out of control!" Finally the time came when I felt it was appropriate for me to speak the truth in love.

"Yes, Ed. You *are* in deep water here, but you aren't going to drown. Your life isn't out of control. It's simply out of *your* control."

"It's a spiritual attack from the devil!" he quickly countered.

"I would encourage you not to be so quick to give the enemy the glory for your troubles," I answered. "This may be the hand of God working in your life to accomplish His goal for you."

It is easy to blame our troubles on the enemy when we can make no sense of our circumstances. However, in doing so we make a mistake by failing to recognize that troubles may be the hand of God at work in our lives. The greatest opportunities for

us to advance spiritually are often couched in adversity. Problems may be our personal escort to lead us straight into the place God has prepared for us.

Facing Deep Waters

Like Ed, Joshua knew about deep waters. He must have awakened in the early morning hours on the day he was to lead Israel across the Jordan River and into Canaan. His heart probably raced as he thought about the prospect of moving two-and-a-half million people across the flooding river. This would surely be a miraculous day that the people would remember forever, if they didn't drown.

Between the place where Israel stood in the wilderness and the promised land was the Jordan. Running a distance of 70 miles from the southern tip of the Sea of Galilee to the northern end of the Dead Sea, the river is normally about ten feet deep at its deepest points and about a hundred feet wide. The elevation of the river drops from around 700 feet below sea level at the Sea of Galilee to almost 1300 feet below sea level where it ends at the Dead Sea. The word *Jordan* means "the descender." The biggest problem that Israel would face trying to walk across was the swift currents caused by the descending geography of the valley.¹ At some places the water in the Jordan River runs downhill *fast*. In fact, there are 27 series of rapids along its route down to the Dead Sea.

When the day came for the Israelites to cross over, the people had spent three days camped on its banks, watching its swift current. They knew the power of the river's strong current under *normal* conditions would make it difficult to walk across, but conditions weren't normal at this point. It was harvest season, and "the Jordan overflows all its banks all the days of harvest"

(Joshua 3:15). God didn't choose for the people to cross the Jordan River into Canaan when it would be difficult. He waited until it would be *impossible* for them to do it themselves.

Ed and Joshua lived millennia apart, but they shared a similar problem. They both faced circumstances that were impossible to find a way through without a miracle. Impossible situations—those are the kind that God likes to create for those who follow Him. It is only when a believer has come to the end of confidence in his own ability to navigate his way that he will enter into the land where God's grace dwells. God doesn't just *allow* us to face impossible situations. As the Sovereign of every circumstance, He often *designs* such situations in order to bring us to the end of our own self-sufficiency.

The culture in which we live values self-sufficiency, in fact, it often *honors* it. Yet God places no value on our self-sufficiency at all. His thoughts and ways are not ours. He wants to bring us to the place where we realize that we cannot experience successful living on our own. He wants us to see that we can't accomplish a victorious life, but rather must accept it entirely as a gift. However, coming to the place where we give up on our own self-sufficiency doesn't come easily for most of us. God can place the gift of victory into only an open hand, not one clenched tightly around one's own assets. Often the only way He can bring us to the place where we can receive is to send a flood into our lives. Only when we are in too deep to handle life ourselves are we more likely to abandon ourselves completely into His loving hands.

God Won't Let You Succeed

Many Christians believe that if they are sincere enough and try hard enough, they can successfully live a godly lifestyle. Yet God wants us to realize that no matter how long and how hard we try,

we will never be able to successfully live as a Christian. God doesn't intend for the Christian life to be hard to live; He intends for victorious living to be *impossible* for us to achieve on our own. Only He can do it through us, and He will do whatever is necessary to bring us to the place where we see that.

I remember seeing something on television long ago that illustrates how we often try to manage our own lives. Did you ever see *The Ed Sullivan Show*? Even if you aren't old enough to have watched Ed Sullivan when he was on television, you probably have seen this act in reruns. There was a man who would spin plates on the top of long rods that measured about ten feet in length. He would start by spinning one plate on a rod, then he would stand the rod straight up with the plate still spinning on top, high up in the air. He would then gently shake the rod in such a way as to keep the plate spinning on top.

He would then take another rod and plate and do exactly the same thing again. Then he would take another...and another...and another. Eventually the man would have about a dozen plates spinning in the air all at the same time. Then he would frantically run back and forth across the stage, shaking the rods and keeping the plates going. He could keep all of them going at the same time. It was amazing to watch.

That man's act reminds me of a Christian who is enslaved to living in the wilderness of empty religion. Religion demands that we keep all our plates in the air. The plates represent the things of value from our own religious perspective—things that we believe we must sustain. The religious legalist spends his whole life running back and forth, "shaking his sticks" in an effort to manage his life. Surely none would argue that *this* is the life Christ died to give us! What a waste His death would have been.

Meanwhile, our loving heavenly Father sees us wearing ourselves out with this performance we call "the Christian life."

Moved by compassion, He determines to deliver us from the frenzied routine we have mistakenly thought of as "Christian living." So He walks across the stage of life and starts knocking our plates off the rods. One by one He causes them to fall and shatter at our feet.

It's interesting to see how the body of Christ reacts to this plate-breaking movement of God. I'll bet you never read about *that* movement of God in Christian magazines. How would you like "The Breaking Revival" to come to your church? People's lives would all start falling apart so that Christ could become their sufficiency.

To try is nothing more than religious performance, and God loves us enough that He will spoil our performance if necessary.

Different parts of the body of Christ respond to God's breaking process in different ways. The Baptists conclude that they need to rededicate themselves to try harder to keep their plates in the air the next time. The Pentecostals begin to rebuke the demon of plate-breaking. The charismatics lay hands on the plate and say, "In Jesus' name, be healed!" The Presbyterians conclude that the plate must have been predestined to break from the foundation of the world. The Methodists form a committee for a yearlong study on the causes of the plate-breaking and to determine whether it was a sin for the plate to break or simply the inherent predisposition present in the plate since the day of creation. The Salvation Army responds, "When you think about it, aren't we *all* really broken plates?"

In writing this, it isn't my goal to offend Christians of every denomination. I hope you have a sense of humor and can see that what I want to point out is that while different parts of the body of Christ respond to our problems in different ways, we all have the same tendency. We fail to see that God may be the One who is causing our problems to come so that He can bring us to the place where we give up on our self-sufficiency and begin to totally trust in Him alone.

God wants to bring each of His children to brokenness, a condition that exists when we have given up all confidence in our own ability to manage life. Before we can cross over into His land of grace, we must come to the end of ourselves and recognize that we will never accomplish victory by our own strength. To *try* is nothing more than a religious performance, and God loves us enough that He will spoil our performance if necessary.

When Israel prepared to cross over into Canaan, the people had no doubt that it would take a miracle for them to get across the Jordan. The flood-stage waters preached a sermon to them: "You can't do it because it is impossible. Only God can." Once they said "Amen" to that truth, they were ready to go across, but not a minute sooner. The same acknowledgment is necessary on our part before we can enter. We must come to the point where we realize that it isn't hard for us to live a victorious life; it is *impossible* for us to do it. Only one Person can live the Christ-life, and that is the Christ Himself. He will live it through us only when we give up on our own efforts and learn to abide in Him.

Burdens Greater Than We Can Bear

The title of this chapter is intended to shake you up in order to wake you up. Maybe you have heard all of your life that God won't put more on you than you can bear. I don't believe it.

God *will* put greater burdens on you than you can bear. In response, perhaps your mind is racing to 1 Corinthians 10:13: "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able; but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it." While it's a good verse, it doesn't disprove my assertion that God *will* put greater burdens on you than you can bear. First Corinthians 10:13 is talking about temptation to sin, not burdens. It's true that God will not allow you to be tested beyond your ability to endure, but the same can't be said about the troubles He allows in your life.

Consider the words of the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9:

We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.

Let's dissect those two verses and determine exactly what they mean in light of the burdens that we experience as Christians.

- *Paul's trouble seemed to come from nowhere.* Paul said that he didn't want the Corinthians to be ignorant about the trouble that *came to him* while he was in Asia. Have you ever felt like you were walking through life minding your own business when suddenly here comes trouble? Seemingly out of nowhere, we are sometimes ambushed by problems.
- *Paul's burden was excessive.* Paul contends that not only did he find himself facing a burden, but it was an excessive one. It was trouble to an extreme degree.

- *The burden was beyond Paul's strength.* There is the biblical proof—he said the problem was “beyond our strength” (NASB). Other translations read that Paul said his problem was “far beyond our ability to endure” (NIV); “beyond our power” (ASV); “above our power” (YOUNG’S). It doesn’t take a Bible scholar to see what Scripture clearly says in this text. Just look at the plain words of Scripture. Paul’s burden was more than he could bear.
- *The burden caused Paul to despair of life.* Lest anyone argue with the weight of what he has already said, Paul states that he despaired of living. Death would have been a welcomed release (compare with Philippians 1:23-24).
- *Paul's problem was a death sentence to him.* The burden Paul carried caused him to feel like the kiss of death was on his circumstances. Have you ever felt like everything you did faltered and died right before your eyes? Paul knew what it was to feel that way.

As a young man I found myself at a place in ministry where I sometimes wished I could die. I served as a local pastor in a hard place where it seemed that circumstances continually progressed from bad to worse. There were critics in the church who often drove me to the point of despair. One of the leaders of the church actually asked me one day, “How do you really *know* that there is a God?” While serving there my income was repeatedly reduced until I could barely eke out an existence for my family. Get the picture? That church wasn’t exactly a Disneyland for pastors who served there. Certainly there were some loving people there who remain friends to this day, but overall it was a very hard place to be.

My response to the situation was not unlike that of many pastors in similar circumstances. I went to the printer and had a thousand résumés printed, and began circulating them to everybody I knew and to some people I *didn't* know. I wanted to go to

a new place. I reasoned that if God would only put me in the right kind of situation, things would be better. Eventually I became bitter and rebellious toward the Lord in my heart. I went through the motions of ministry, but my heart was turned away from God. I was angry because He wouldn't help me by changing my circumstances. I was burdened excessively, beyond my strength, so that I despaired of life. I had the sentence of death on myself.

“In Order That We Should Not Trust in Ourselves”

Can you relate to the confusion and anger I felt? I'm certainly not attempting to justify my feelings or actions at the time. I'm simply being honest with you about where I was in my life at that point in time. Have you ever faced circumstances that caused you to feel the way I have described?

I wish that when I faced those difficult days I had understood the truth that sustained Paul when he was overtaken by his burden. A question many people often ask when facing tough circumstances that cause them to feel forsaken by God is, “Why?” Why would God allow Paul to face such extreme burdens that he despaired of life? Why would He allow a zealous young pastor to be overwhelmed by adversity until he was crushed by the weight of his problems?

The Bible gives a clear and concise answer to the question. Second Corinthians 1:9 says this happens “in order that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead.” Trust in ourselves is the default setting of contemporary society. It is applauded in American culture as a virtue, but God's perspective stands in sharp contradiction to the opinion of man. He loathes our independence, instead desiring that we become like little children who recognize our need to totally depend upon

Him. While society may be attracted to strength, God is repulsed by human self-sufficiency. The thing that He finds most attractive in man is weakness and the realization of the need to be completely sustained by Him alone.

Michael Yaconelli tells the story of a woman who was on vacation on one of the barrier islands in South Carolina. It happened to be the time of year when the loggerhead turtles (huge 300-pound sea turtles) were laying their eggs. One night the woman discovered a loggerhead laying her eggs. Not wanting to disturb the turtle, she decided to come back the next morning to the place where the turtle had laid her eggs. When she returned the next day, she was alarmed to find the turtle's tracks were headed in the wrong direction, away from the sea. The turtle had apparently lost her bearings and wandered into the hot sand dunes, where she would surely die.

The woman followed the tracks and soon found the turtle covered with hot, dry sand. She quickly poured cool seawater on the turtle, covered her with seaweed, and went for help. She returned shortly with a park ranger, who flipped the turtle over, wrapped tire chains around her front legs, and hooked the chains to the trailer hitch on the Jeep. He then drove toward the sea, dragging her through the sand, filling her mouth with sand and bending her head back as if it would break. Reaching the beach, he unhooked her and flipped her right side up. As the waves washed over her, she began to move slowly, then pushed off into the water and disappeared. The woman later observed, "Watching her swim slowly away and remembering her nightmare ride through the dunes, I noticed that sometimes it is hard to tell whether you are being killed or saved by the hands that turn your life upside down."²

Sometimes we may feel as if God is dragging us through the sand. We may wonder why He permits us to be hurt. We want to

be strong, but we find ourselves in circumstances that continue to weaken us more and more. As a result, we become discouraged and want to give up, which is actually a good thing. God finds a weak person to be irresistible. He says, "To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit" (Isaiah 66:2). The Lord "saves those who are crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18). He is opposed to those who are strong. It is those who have been humbled who receive His grace (James 4:6). Our résumé may impress the people around us, but God is impressed only by those who know they are complete losers apart from His intervening grace. We don't get strong enough to be useful to God; we must become *weak* enough (see 1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

Consequently, when God prepares to use a person's life for His glory, that person must be totally stripped of self-sufficiency. God won't be anybody's co-pilot. He doesn't even simply want to be the pilot. He wants us to know that He is the pilot, the airplane, the runway, the air that holds us up, and the final destination at which we will arrive. In other words, He is everything. He is our very Life. "In Him we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:28).

This Can Be Your Liberation Day

Is your goal in life to become a victorious Christian? The only way that will ever happen is if you admit that you can never accomplish it. You can only *receive* it. Israel wandered in the wilderness of self-sufficiency for 40 years. Some Christians have lived there that long too. It's easy to be self-sufficient in a religious lifestyle, but to walk in grace requires that we voluntarily give up control of our own lives. In order to motivate you toward that end, God may lead you to the place where a rushing flood is before you.

God uses the floods of life to bring us to the place of absolute surrender to Him. Are you tired of living like you've been living?

I have discovered in my own life that doing all the right things isn't enough. Religious behavior is the way many try to control their lives and, in a sense, control God. Our approach to the Christian life is as absurd as the enthusiastic young man who had just received his plumber's license and was taken to see Niagara Falls. He studied it for a minute and then said, "I think I can fix this."³ We may reason that if we *do* the right things God will be pleased and bless us, but God doesn't care about what we do unless it is an expression of the union life we share with Him.

*God finds a weak person irresistible.
He "saves those who are crushed in spirit."*

My friend Ed Jackson, who came home from vacation to find that he had lost his job, eventually came to understand this truth, and it set him free from the fear that initially gripped him. One day I asked him, "Ed, are you willing to give up the control of your own life and surrender yourself and every part of your existence into the hands of God?"

Tears filled his eyes and he nodded. We bowed our heads and he began to pray, "Lord, I know that I'll never enter into the lifestyle You have for me until I'm willing to let go of control over my own life. By faith I choose to do that very thing at this very moment. In Jesus' name, amen."

That day was Ed's Liberation Day. It is the day he crossed the river.

Are you willing to relinquish control over your own life? The only way we will enter into enjoying God's amazing grace is to live in total abandonment to Him. Total abandon means that we willingly surrender the deed to life into His hands. It is an intentional yielding of every detail of our existence to His control, trusting Him to do whatever He may want to do in us, to us, or through us. It is a leap of faith that takes us from our own pathetic attempts to create security and into the hands of a sovereign God.

Absolute surrender to God is scary to the extent that we don't know or trust His character. Yet God will often allow us to face circumstances that thrust burdens upon us that are greater than we can bear so that we will be motivated to trust Him and take our hands off our own lives. It is a step of faith taken in spite of the fact that we may feel fearful and be uncertain of the future.

Many Christians have already trusted God to lead them out of the bondage of the past. They have trusted Him to forgive their sins, but then have taken the control of their lives back into their own hands. They are sincerely *trying* to find their way into Canaan, but their efforts have led them to endless wandering in a religious wilderness.

Many of us are tired of religion. Deep in our hearts, we know there *must* be more to being a Christian than what we have experienced. There is. Yet to experience more than empty religious ritual, it is necessary that we abandon ourselves to Him and begin to move forward in faith.

Israel may have stared at the swift waters of the flooded Jordan River and concluded, "Yes, the water is deep and the current is swift. Common sense indicates that we could be swept away if we step into the water to cross over, but *we are tired of living like we've been living*. We're willing to risk it all in order to trust God. We will follow Him and whatever happens, happens."

Are you ready to cross over? Then step into the water by abandoning yourself and everything you think you've ever known to Christ. Then prepare to move forward into a new land. Leave all your religious baggage behind. You won't need it where you're going. You will soon discover that God's land of grace is unlike any place you have ever been.



Dear Father,

I now realize that the need in my spiritual life is not to be stronger, but to be weaker. I have often tried to swim through the deep waters of life by myself. When there have been times I couldn't get myself through, I have chosen to tread water until things got better. Teach me to trust You and to know that Your main goal isn't to change my circumstances, but to free me from self-sufficiency. I now abandon myself into Your hands. I trust You.

G.R.A.C.E. Group Questions

1. Describe the most recent circumstance in which God allowed you to face deep waters.
2. Read 2 Corinthians 1:8-9. Why will God allow a Christian to be burdened beyond his own strength? Why does God value weakness in people and not strength?
3. Define the meaning of absolute surrender to God. Why are Christians sometimes afraid of absolutely surrendering everything in their lives to God?
4. Recount a time when a friend shared a problem with you. What did you tell him? Would your answer to him be different now? Why or why not?
5. Define *brokenness*. Are brokenness and suffering the same thing? Can one experience suffering without experiencing brokenness?