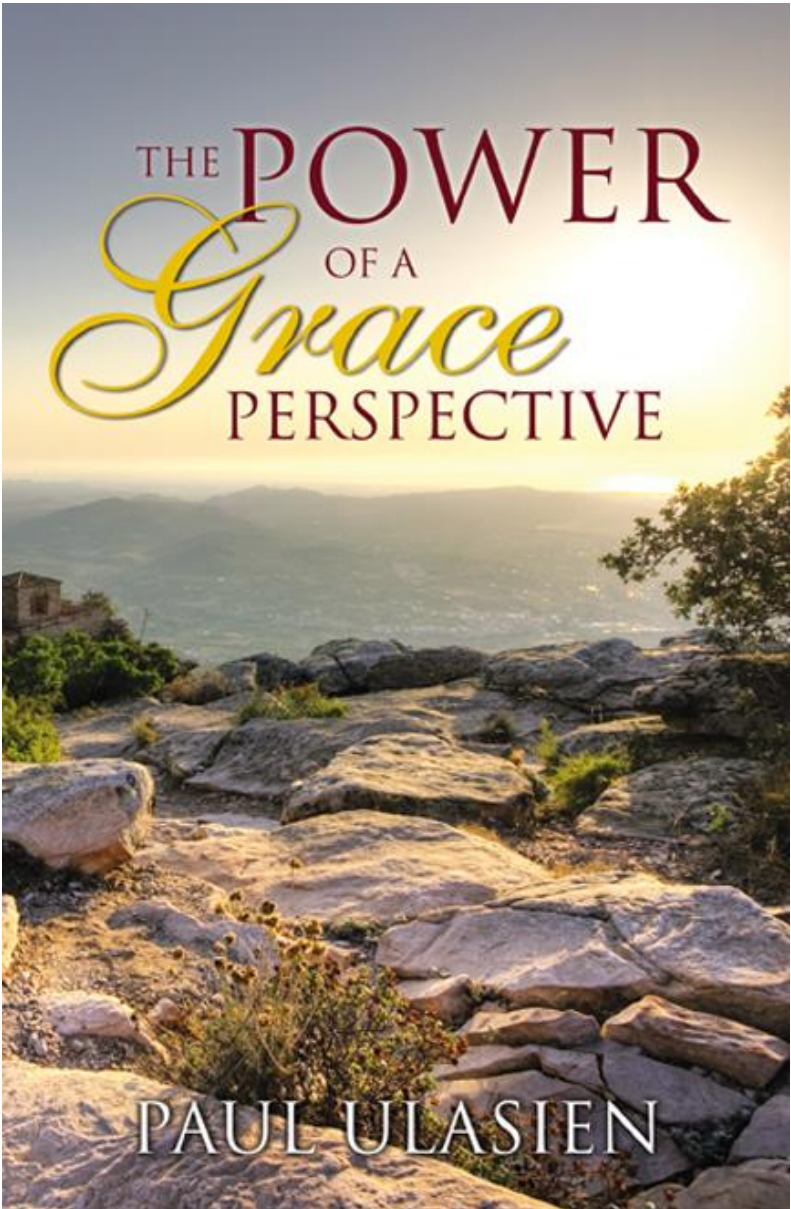




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The Power of A Grace Perspective *Sample*

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The Power of a Grace Perspective

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Chapter 12

Perspective

Close your eyes for a few moments and visualize standing in the most beautiful place you have ever imagined. Now turn in a virtual three-hundred-sixty-degree circle, all the while taking mental photographs of what you observe. Jot a few of these images on a piece of paper. Regardless of the fact that you may have never been to this place or may have seen it through a video or picture, you have still developed an image. That image is your perspective of the vista from that place. This perspective has an intrinsic significance. The point is not whether your perspective is accurate, but merely that you have one.

Perspective is a unique mental view or vista that you develop of an object or of a period of time. Your perspective of an object, perhaps like the summit of a tall mountain, contains unique specifics pertaining to your mental vista. Which of its aspects did you jot on your piece of paper? If you saw a mountain summit, you may have visually identified specifics such as snow, clouds, other peaks in the distance, etc.

Your mental view or vista of your past and present is the perspective of your life. Your perspective of a period of time depends on your existence as an individual. In your mental view or vista of the present and past are the many things that you can identify: people, places, things, and both good and bad times. This perspective is unique to you and you alone. However, all of the specifics that you can identify within your perspective are only part of the whole of

your identity. Identity is the foundation upon which we build perspective. The view or vista of your identity is paramount to the perspective image of your life.

The Nature of Identity

Popularized during the 1960s, the idea of having an identity developed as an effort to separate oneself from others. The goal of this separation was for the individual to decide personally what values to hold and what goals to pursue. However, noted psychologists of the era believed that the work of achieving an identity could come undone, particularly if a person were to become disillusioned or disassociated from his values and goals. People without a strong sense of identity are easy followers, experimenting with the ideals or causes of the moment while they allow an identity deficit to develop.

Deficits occur when a person who has no formulated identity struggles with the concept of what he is versus who he is. At the points of major decisions, a deficit will cause him to search abstract concepts or ideas for answers. The basic need to develop an identity has led many to fall victim to movements and cult thinking that promise much but deliver nothing other than more promises. For example, one such metaphysical program presents the idea that a person can understand and apply in his or her life the natural and universal ideals that govern the body, mind, and soul. This program promises that you will be at peace with yourself and the world and enjoy health instead of illness and abundance instead of poverty. Oh, by the way, any interested seeker can fulfill his needs for the mere price of subscribing to a

thirty-five dollar annual membership, buying the program books and videos, and attending the seminar sessions.

Having a person or program developing your identity for a price can hardly lead to a foundation of strength and conviction, especially in regards to making life decisions. Falling prey to shallow ideals and abstract thinking based on a concept called suggestive therapy causes a lack of definition in values and goals. One cannot suggest his way into health, abundance, and peace. Suggestion is not reality. Reality admits that black is black and white is white. Trying to suggest to yourself otherwise will always keep reality beyond your reach and leave you a shallow and deficient life.

Making decisions, especially life decisions, requires the security of a foundation built on a conviction of inner and spiritual strength, not a suggestion. Going back to the definition of perspective (the mental view or vista of your past and present), your view or vista of your identity is paramount to your perspective. Consider making a life decision from a perspective built on a conviction of inner and spiritual strength to be like building a house on a foundation of granite. Making a life decision from a perspective of suggestive concepts would then be like setting the foundation of the house on silt and mud. A granite foundation will be reliable for ages, but silt and mud will wash away at the next suggestion.

The good news about identity is that it is not stamped on your forehead at birth. Identity develops over time and can change with time. Identity does not rely on others but on you. Earlier in this book, I described developing an identity from a balance-sheet mentality. My perspective dictated

accepting the fact that good things in life were only the absence of me not screwing up. When bad things did happen, they signaled that God was getting back at me for something I probably could not remember doing wrong. My identity depended on the quid quo pro (this for that) philosophy. No matter what I did, right or wrong, I lived under the suggestive fear that if I upset the balance sheet I would suffer the consequences.

Fortunately I changed, and so did my identity. A stark reminder of my balance sheet perspective and identity appeared recently when I connected through a social networking website with an old college friend, Bob. Bob's last recollection of me was after our college days and during my second divorce. I was a basket case at the time, making decisions and doing stupid things based on experimenting with different identities as if these identities were hats, trying to see which one would fit. In his posting on my social network webpage, Bob asked, "How are you doing? I've worried about you over the years, because you were always so down and discouraged about your life." WHOA, talk about a chilling reminder of my old identity!

The shock that I experienced as a result of Bob's perception of me illustrates a feature of identity called **continuity**. Continuity means that people perceive you to be the same person today as you were the last time they interacted with you. Even though thirty years had passed, Bob's view or vista of me was the one of discouragement and discontent that he originally experienced.

As humans, we are susceptible to change, which is the antithesis of continuity. Though qualities such as gender,

ethnicity, and your name remain stable over time, the identity, which is rooted in personality, will change. This second feature of identity is called **contrast**. Contrast means that your identity can change over time and differentiate your past from your present.

Side by side, the two features of identity obviously conflict. Continuity indicates the perception that we never change, but contrast indicates that we do. This paradox is why having an identity built on a solid foundation of conviction and strength versus suggestive concepts is so crucial. Identity continuity means that you are secure and confident in who you are. You base your decisions upon your convictions, and you have the strength to accept the outcomes. A contrasting identity means that you are insecure in your values and ideals. You make your decisions with difficulty, and you are full of apprehension once you have made them.

Developing a sense of continuity in your identity also gives continuity to your perspective. Confidence in who you are and in the decisions that you make allows you to have a perspective that your past is not fatal and your future is not final. The struggle to be the same person today and tomorrow as you were yesterday may seem improbable, but you can accomplish it. The place in which to find that continuity is the favor of God's grace. Grace is where you will find your continuity, and through grace you will minimize your contrasts.

The foundation upon which each is built provides the evidence that continuity comes from grace and not from abstract concepts and suggestive therapeutics. Based on the

definition that continuity means never changing, grace is unequivocally the answer. Dr. Patrick Morley once described the modern view of God as, “There is the God we want, and there is the God who is, and they are not the same God.”³ God is the same, yesterday, today, and for all eternity. Despite man’s tireless efforts to make God something other than he really is, only he represents a universal continuity.

Abstract and suggestive therapeutic programs such as Dianetics, Concept-Therapy, and Gestaltism cannot make the same claim to continuity. Programs such as these have foundations based on evolving ideals and practices. They are not the same today as they were yesterday, and they will morph into something different in future. These programs epitomize contrasting insecurities full of apprehension.

If you are so inclined and have access to the Internet, a visit to the websites of some of the aforementioned suggestive therapeutic programs to experience firsthand a complete absence of continuity would be worth your time. These programs are designed to immerse you so far in their concepts that you will make a hundred leaps of identity trying to find the one hat that fits.

Grace, on the other hand, requires you to base your identity on only two truths. The first is an understanding of who you are. You are the child of God, a God who never changes. The names of God in the ancient Greek and Hebrew language support this assertion. The Greeks referred to God as *Theos*, meaning one true or singular God. Among their many names for God, the Hebrews referred to God as *Elohim*, meaning strong one or strength. The Hebrew name

of God that truly embodies his continuity over time is *Jehovah*, which we translate to mean “I Am that I Am.” He has never been something different than what he is now, nor will he be something different as time passes. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. Now that is continuity.

The second truth about grace on which you can base your identity is that the God who never changes one iota passionately loves you! When I was a child, I had no concept of the depth or breadth of love that a parent can have for a child. Only after my sons were born did I come to realize this type of love. If you are a parent, you will know what I mean, and if you are not yet a parent, perhaps one day you will be. Parental love is an amazing yet overwhelming emotion that we cannot put into words but only experience. Take that passion and multiply by one million, and you still could not come close to how much God loves each of us.

I could not sacrifice either of my sons to die on a cross just to pardon a bunch of lowly and whiny sinners! I am too selfish and weak in spirit to allow that fate for my boys. Only God has the capacity of love to allow his Son to die in his presence for someone else’s benefit. He also brooks no contrast in loving one person more than another. He loves us all the same as if we were his one and only child.

You are a child of God, who passionately loves you. You have no need for a webpage full of meaningless books, videos, and seminars which suggest that you are something other than the person God sees. Building your identity on the simple principles of grace is not a difficult proposition, because sometimes less can be more.

The Four Myths of Identity

The foundation upon which you build your identity is paramount to the perspective of your values, goals, and decisions. If you are irrefutably confident in who you are, then regrets from past decisions and actions will not matter, because you have the strength to accept those outcomes and the wisdom to learn from your mistakes and move forward. On the other hand, if you harbor persistent doubts about your past, these doubts will fester and harm your future. Many people in such a predicament will actually decide to abandon their goals as they experience an identity deficit from a lack of continuity. None of the hats from programs or ideals of suggested identities have ever fit. The stark reality that one size does not fit all comes into view as promises from a program continually deliver disappointment.

In the scheme of identity, believing that health, abundance, and peace are merely a few clicks of a mouse or a few turns of a page away is as substantive as a screen door on a submarine (pardon the colloquial analogy). Seriously, the mythical promises of suggestive therapies and ideals are incompatible with the universal need for continuity of identity. Here are four general concepts among the many metaphysical programs that are myths with respect to the formulation of identity and ultimately perspective.

Myth one - image is everything. Oh, really? How you look, act, dress, and conduct yourself defines you as a person? The ageless adage that beauty is only skin deep should suffice as an adequate analogy to debunk the suggested importance of image. Regrettably, our pop-

culture-oriented society continuously bombards us with the shallow ideal of image. The media, entertainment, and marketing industries thrive on skewing reality when they present an image of how people should look and behave.

Imagine if you will a species of beings from another galaxy that have intercepted TV broadcasts from earth and decided to seek this glamorous species of millionaires with trim waistlines, clear complexions, and full heads of hair. Think of their shock and disappointment when they encounter a bunch of pot-bellied, pock-marked, thin-haired, middle-class Joes and Janes. They would probably think they took a wrong turn at the last black hole. In perfect candor, as benign and nonsensical as this analogy may seem, it does illustrate this myth in perspective. The view or vista that this alien culture encountered in reality was not what they were led to believe. If you have an identity that presents your image as something other than your true character, others will think that they took wrong turn somewhere when the real person emerges from that false image.

A great deal of what the media and institutions try to suggest is that self-esteem relates in direct proportion to self-image. They suggest that an image of success, prosperity, and beauty will produce a feeling of high self-esteem. The subliminal message that lies beneath the suggestion of glitz and glamour is that image must be had for a price. You can seriously damage your self-esteem if you do not become the image you just purchased for \$19.95. Anxiety and fear of failure may cause the opposite of the suggested image, actually producing a low self-esteem. As the late Dr. Martin

Luther King once said, we should be “judged not by the color of our skin but by the content of our character.”⁴ The same can hold true for your identity and perspective. Beauty is only skin deep, and what truly identifies you is not the image that lies on the surface but the character that shines beneath it.

Myth two – what truly matters is not what you believe but what you do. Okay, living by the golden rule of doing unto others as you would have them to do unto you is a noble and worthy goal. We should all strive to fulfill this ideal. The problem arises from the motivation with which a person performs good works.

Recently, I participated in a rigorous discussion with an acquaintance as to the merits of people who perform good deeds. My acquaintance was convinced that the key to going to heaven was not having a personal relationship with God but being a good person and doing good things for others.

“Okay,” I said, “that’s all well and good, but what is the baseline of what constitutes a good deed?”

“Well,” my friend replied, “there is only one kind of good; so I am not sure what you mean.”

I gave the following example to explain my point. Consider a person who is the head of a local bank. The economic conditions at the time are not good, and this person is in a quandary. Does he decide to keep the bank solvent until the economic tides turn, or does he seize an opportunity to make a windfall profit now? Hanging in the balance of this decision is the fate of a hundred mortgages in delinquency or the price per share of a hundred shareholders.

If the banker decides to work with the customers who are struggling to make their mortgage payments, the bank can still keep its doors open but barely break even. However, if he forecloses on the delinquent mortgages and sells the seized assets to an investor, he can turn the deal of the century to increase the price per share of the bank's stock a thousand percent.

Regardless of the decision the banker makes, a hundred people will consider it brilliant, while the other hundred people will consider the decision foolhardy or heartless. My friend looked at me with a blank stare and had no response.

Doing something that on the surface may appear to be a good deed to one person could have the opposite appearance to another. Decisions based on the complexity of a situation are decisions of rationale. Weighing the rationale of good and bad outcomes to an action only produces a result and does not quantify a baseline for a good deed. Sir Isaac Newton's third law of motion states that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. No baseline in this law of motion constitutes whether the reaction is positive or negative; it states only that a reaction occurs. Equally, the rationale of weighing the good or bad reactions of a deed also lacks a baseline.

The baseline for determining a good deed is the motivation behind the act itself. People daily perform thousands of deeds with good intentions, but they also daily perform thousands of deeds that are of circumstantial intent. Some choose to act because doing so is right and just, versus doing something because they can.

The quandary of the motivation behind a deed lies in the source from whence it emanates. C.S. Lewis very succinctly addressed this quandary in his description of the three components of morality.⁵ First is the concept of fair play and harmony between individuals. This concept echoes the golden rule, treating people as you would like to be treated. This concept is not difficult to grasp, and it can be universally applied.

The second concept, tidying or harmonizing your soul, is where we begin to lose a few individuals. Fair play and harmony between individuals is an action predicated on a sense of feeling good about a situation. However, such actions rely on an individual's need for conveyance without conviction. People will perform a deed to avoid causing disharmony or conflict because their identity lacks continuity. Contrasts will infiltrate their decisions, and they will react only in the moment with no regard to consistency.

The third and final of C.S. Lewis' components of morality is the general purpose of human life and why we exist. In my first job out of college, I worked as a technical draftsman for a consulting engineering company that designed power plants. The drawings that were part of my work had many intricate components, such as the nuts and bolts that held the steel superstructure of the plant together. Each nut and bolt had to be individually numbered and identified, yet in the purpose of the greater design of the power plant these components existed as a collective contribution to the plant's creation of electrical energy.

In the realm of infamous engineering disasters, many times a failure in the most insignificant part of a whole can

set into motion a chain of events that can lead to a catastrophe. Our morals and values are no different. As our cultures have begun the process of ceding morality for the sake legality, the fabric of human life and our existence has started to unravel. As C.S. Lewis most aptly wrote, “You cannot make good men by law, and without good men you cannot have a good society.”⁶

When we stop at the concept of fair play and harmony to establish a baseline for what constitutes a good deed, we grease the slippery slope of our declining culture. Here are a few examples. Declaring school prayer unconstitutional may placate those who loudly advocate the contrived notion of the separation of church and state, but since that ruling, what has happened to the state of public education? Enabling the no-fault divorce laws may have simplified the messiness, embarrassment, and complexity of a contested divorce, but what has happened to the state of marriage and the family since then? Legalizing abortions may support one interpretation of the constitutional rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but what has happened to the concepts of personal responsibility and the value of human life since then? The answers to these questions refer to what C.S. Lewis said, “You cannot make good men by law, and without good men you cannot have a good society.”

And the fact that something has been legalized in many instances still does not make it right. First the cohesiveness of humanity begins to decay, and we begin to overreact with our heads and ignore the callings of the heart. Once that process of desensitization has been set into motion, the

guidance of our deeds becomes a matter of procedure rather than character, inner reliance on the soul and spirit.

Myth three - likability is better than sensibility.

Everyone wants to be well-liked and respected; these desires are natural components of human emotion. What is unnatural is the extent to which some will go to be well-liked and respected.

Each of us can relate to the emotions that likability and respect produce. Take a few moments to remember your days in high school. If your high school was anything like mine, everyone belonged to one of three distinct castes: popular, unpopular, or somewhere in between. The popular kids were Homecoming King and Queen and members of the student council, those cheerleaders, babes, and jocks who drove cool cars. The unpopular kids, largely ignored by the popular kids during school and social events, maintained their own social networks, such as chess and science club. I was one of the in-betweeners. I had friends who were popular and friends who were anything but popular, and I vacillated between the two extremes. In the presence of the popular kids, I kept my unpopular friends at arm's length, but I hovered in the airspace of my unpopular friends when no one of importance was watching.

As hypocritical as being an in-beweenner may have seemed, my emotional need for acceptance into the higher strata of the school's social hierarchy dented my sensibility. During the formative years of a child's life, the consuming need of acceptance can override the hurt that it may cause others. For most of us, the need for acceptance dims

somewhat as we mature emotionally and develop a sense of confidence and self-reliance. However, for others the need for acceptance becomes so ingrained into their psyche that they will go to any and all extremes to fill their insatiable void of self-confidence.

An identity formulated on the idea that being liked is better than being sensible surrenders to contrast rather than standing on continuity. People who are obsessed with being liked refuse to allow the formative emotion of need to wane naturally with maturity. An idea of who they are trying to be supplants who they really are. Dressing to impress, driving flashy cars, buying opulent homes, chasing professional titles, and flaunting social status can demonstrate a burning need for acceptance.

Although many people have nice clothes, cars, homes, jobs, and respect, they obtain these things over time with a modicum of patience and planning. The obsession with possessions and titles divides people who want to be the center of constant attention from people who are confident in who they are. Some psychological issues can explain this obsession for attention, such as narcissistic and histrionic personality disorders, but in other cases, just as I was in my high school days as an in betweener, attention seeking can result from hypocrisy, which is not our purpose in life.

In the New Testament book of Matthew, Jesus speaks to his apostles about the issue of drawing attention to one's self as an act of hypocrisy. Giving to the needy out of humility and compassion is preferable to fanfare and public proclamations of philanthropy. God disdains those who trumpet their charity to draw attention to themselves rather

than give out of the goodness of their hearts. Hypocrites cannot bamboozle God by acts done merely to stroke the ego. God knows what is in your heart even before you do.

Likability does need to correlate with acceptance, not the acceptance of an identity that is based on what you are trying to be, but acceptance based on security in who you really are. If you are secure in your identity, then you will view quality dress, nice cars, beautiful homes, professional titles, and social status as gifts from God rather than possessions or obsessions. People will accept you for who you are. Moreover, if they cannot handle your real identity, do not worry, because God can.

Myth four –don’t worry; be happy. I have to admit that what inspired my formulation of myth four is the title of the Bobby McFerrin’s 1980s hit song, “Don’t Worry; Be Happy.”⁷ The words in this song encourage a person to look beyond the daily travails of life to the bright side beyond and be happy. As one of the lyrics states, “In your life / expect some trouble /but when you worry / you make it double / don’t worry / be happy.” This lyric does have some truth. We can all attest to the fact that life is not a smooth road to travel and that a preoccupation with worrying can amplify the problem. However, you cannot just happy a problem away by ignoring its reality.

In the world of politics, the old adage of “kicking the can down the road” aptly describes what I am trying to illustrate with the phrase: “don’t worry; be happy.” Politicians love to defer problems to another day until another generation has to solve them. Most entitlement programs begin with good

intentions but, unfortunately, without any semblance of sustainability. Buy now and pay later political philosophies are pushing many countries, including ours, towards the brink of bankruptcy as we draw closer to the end of the road and inevitability run out of room to kick the can.

A “don’t worry; be happy” identity may create the impression of a person who is open, conscientious, and agreeable. Hidden behind this veiled view, however, are shallowness, denial, and possibly neuroses. Wishing for happiness at the expense of ignoring inevitability does not work. Happiness requires hard work to achieve. To be happy, a person must work to overcome the problems, losses, and failures that constitute reality. The “don’t worry; be happy” attitude buys happiness now and pays dearly for it later. In order to succeed, you have to pay as you go.

Erik Erikson was a twentieth century developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst known for his theory on social development of human beings, and he became most famous for coining the term “identity crises.”⁸ During his career, Erikson’s main body of work involved his theory of the eight stages of psychosocial development through which a healthily developing human should pass from infancy to late adulthood. The first seven stages of development, also called the life-stage virtues, occur in the following periods of development:

- 1) Hope – infancy
- 2) Will – toddler
- 3) Purpose – kindergarten
- 4) Competence – age six to puberty

- 5) Fidelity – teenager
- 6) Love – young adult
- 7) Caring – the mid-life crises

The previous seven stages culminate in the eighth and final stage of development which occurs in old age: Wisdom. During this final stage, a perspective of integrity versus despair develops as an individual defines his or her journey through the previous seven stages. Faced with the specter of more days behind than ahead, a person in the final stages of life takes stock of his or her accomplishments and failures, thereby setting the stage for how he or she will live the remainder of their life. Individuals with a perspective of integrity will find comfort in their memories and will view their lives with satisfaction. They will actually handle the prospect of death quite well without the burden of regret. However, despair in this final stage will cause bitterness and dissatisfaction with unreach goals, which engender preoccupation with death and obsessive fear of it.

A “don’t worry; be happy” attitude or a buy now and pay later mentality through the earlier stages of development causes the identity crises that Erikson described in his work. Like maxing out a credit card, eventually the bill comes due, and it must be paid. The book of Proverbs says that a person who puts little to no effort into life’s journey or does not plow in season looks at harvest time or the end of life and finds nothing but despair (Proverbs 20:4). Sadly, this scenario leaves no room for happiness.

Overcoming in the face of adversity or paying as you go through life may not maintain a state of constant happiness,

but grace both lightens your burdens and makes you strong enough to bear them. One of my favorite sayings is “When things get tough, God will not get you around trouble; he will get you through it.” Earlier in this book, I wrote of my mother’s reference to the part of life she called heartache and sorrow. As difficult as I can imagine that heartache and sorrow was for her to bear, I witnessed how God’s grace got her through it and how grace can work for everyone.

I am not trying to depress you with the prospect that each of us will have to deal with adversity in our lives. Adversity is a part of life that we cannot avoid by just being happy. Ignoring reality will only lead to an identity crisis from which we may not recover. However, when you relinquish to God’s grace your desire to control your life, he may just surprise you with a pot of unanticipated happiness at the end. God never promised that life would be easy, but without grace your identity and ultimately your perspective may leave you nothing but despair.

Be happy in who you are, comfortable in what you believe, sensible in how others view you, and face life’s challenges as they come. Being faithful in your image, beliefs, likability, and happiness defines your character, identity, and perspective. Consistency will never be easy, but in the end it will definitely be worth the effort.

Chapter 14

Applying the Power of a Grace Perspective

One nice thing about perspective, unlike what lies behind us, is that perspective is not etched into stone. Perspective can evolve and change over a lifetime or even overnight. Before my hospital stay, my perspective had been evolving for the better, from balance sheet influences to unconditional love and grace. However, some times in our lives can deliver our perspectives a jolt, intended or unintended. I received such a jolt when I woke from ten days at the brink of death. Some profound changes in my life and perspective have occurred since that day.

Now or Maybe Never

Life is short. Though I know how clichéd that statement must sound, it so true, and it sounds so profound if you have spent a bit of time at the brink of death. Life does eventually come to an end. For some the end comes sooner than later, but regardless of timing, the end does come. While we are engrossed in the middle of life, we tend to ignore its finality. After all, always worrying about death would not be healthy for anyone's psyche. That fear would just get in the way of living. However, a certain beneficial perspective can accrue from almost dying, and I would like to share it with you.

Before teetering at the brink of death, I have to admit that I was somewhat of a procrastinator. I commonly put off chores like yard work or projects such as writing or business initiatives. Remember, I was that low stress easy going kind of a guy who rolled with the punches. Not anymore. I may

not have tomorrow, and all that I want to do may never happen unless I get started. I now have a purpose in all that I do and, unlike before, a pure joy in doing it.

So now, how do I deal with the stress? I have learned that I created many of the stresses that I felt in past situations through a lack of diligence and faith in God's willingness to help me through those situations. When I came to grips with the finality of life and the importance of time being of the essence and the essence of time, I began to **do** rather than **put off**. I no longer have the worry of undone things hanging over my head! I could have avoided all those years of dealing with stress through artificiality merely by dealing expeditiously with it through God rather than just anesthetizing it. How simple was that?

Getting things done before I assume room temperature for the final time is not the only perspective that I gained from realizing that life is short. My relationships with family, friends, and strangers have changed as well. Those who know me also know that I am a friendly and open person to people who I know and to people whom I have just met for the first time. I have always been quick to wave as I pass or as people pass me. Coming face to face with the realization of how short life is, however, has changed that reflex somewhat. I do less waving these days and a great deal more stopping. By this I mean that, instead of driving through the neighborhood, seeing an old friend or neighbor, waving to him, and moving on, I now take the time to stop and talk.

Who knows? I may never have the opportunity to talk with that person again, and you would be amazed at the

therapeutic value that stopping and talking has over just waving. Smiles begin to appear on people's faces, and even for a brief period of the day, the hustle and bustle of life takes a break. You get the opportunity to reconnect with someone with whom you may have had a waning friendship. You may even get a cup of coffee out of the deal or maybe a nice cool drink to enjoy. You would be surprised at how little time it takes away from your day and how much it adds to you as a person just to stop for a few minutes versus waving as you pass.

Blessings Are in the Eye of the Beholder

Our days on earth may be numbered, but the blessings that we receive each day are not. In every moment of the day from waking until falling back to sleep, I find an abundance of blessings that I once ignored or took for granted. My first act every morning is to thank God for letting me wake to enjoy another day. My second is usually to thank him that I can walk from the bed without a walker, wheelchair, or oxygen tube. This habit may sound a bit kooky to you, but I can assure you that it is God's honest truth. Realistically, I do not spend my entire day thanking God for every breath and every step that I take. That would be kooky! Nonetheless, I certainly am more aware of all the little things that I once thought to be minutia, and I recognize that they truly are blessings not only to prompt gratitude but also to enjoy.

I have always marveled at the beauty of sunrises, sunsets, clouds, and such, but since my brush with death, my senses have begun to absorb so much more of what I used to

dismiss as just life and environment. Many things may seem insignificant to some of you, like a field of corn or the sun peeking through a cloud, but to me they have the same great significance as God's most spectacular vistas.

My new perception is very similar to the way a blind or deaf person's other senses become more acute to compensate for the loss of sight or hearing. Everything appears sharper to me in a similar way, only I also have the luxury of enjoying all my senses intact. Things that I never noticed before are now very distinct in all respects: sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste.

Just now, as I look to my left at the scene from my office window, the homes, trees, and foliage that have been there for more than twelve years look different every day. Each day, I see things outside my window that I had never seen before. These new sights and sounds have always been there, I am just more aware of them now. This awareness has also caused me to be more appreciative as well. Several times a day I find myself saying: *Thanks, God, for this*, or *Thanks, God, for that*. Before my illness, I doubt if I thanked God for much of anything during the course of a day. I was always too preoccupied with life to notice all the beauty and blessings that surrounded me. Just as God's presence surrounds us, so also does his creation, which can affect our perspective as well.

Looking at everything around and inside of us as a blessing rather than just happenstance does powerfully impact your perspective. In times of joy it will humble, and in times of grief it can comfort. This view was no truer for our family than just recently. Our precious lab-mix Katie

girl went to be with the angels just a few short weeks before I wrote this passage, at the age of fifteen years and four months. But our family feels so blessed to have been able to experience those fifteen years and four months of joy and happiness. We miss our Katie girl with all our hearts, and a permanent emptiness has replaced her warm companionship. Nevertheless, through all the tears we have also smiled and laughed as we reminisced about how much joy she brought to our entire family and what a blessing in our lives this little angel was for so many years. Although I grieve at her loss, my perspective is so full of joy and happiness. Her love for us was unconditional, and therefore I know that she is in a place where unconditional love abounds. When my journey is finally complete, just like when I returned home from the hospital, my Katie girl will be there to greet me, and we will once more and forever take those long walks and chase rabbits like we only parted yesterday.

Dear God, thank you for your blessings, even for the ones that you have to take back. They still leave beautiful memories, and what blessings those are! Thank you also for the blessing of the power of a grace perspective!

The Miracle of a Miracle

We often use the word miracle merely to describe happenings of unexplainable luck or to give credence to happenings that have no physical or logical explanation. Scientists and skeptics (question marks) tend to debunk the existence of miracles by claiming that things which cannot be explained are merely happenings for which someone has yet to discover an answer. That definition of science is

certainly true: the discovery of things that have always existed. Science has little room and no patience for faith and miracles, only for what it can prove.

I cannot help but chuckle when I witness, either on TV or in person, an evolutionist and creationist debating which theory can lay claim to the existence of humans on earth. Each side will espouse its merits of the argument, always leaving each other just a tad bit short of bridging the gap between theory and fact. That gap is why we have the theory of evolution and the theory of creation instead of the ability to explain the true facts of either. In the gap between theory and fact lies something that we know to exist in the natural world but also something that we cannot and never will have the capability to explain in the supernatural world: the miracle.

The miracle of a miracle is the requisite belief that miracles do indeed occur. Most times, belief in miracles arises from personal experiences or witnessing something otherwise inexplicable. Many other times, the belief in miracles merely flows from faith. Regardless, whether from experience, witness, or faith, just believing that miracles can and do occur will have a tremendous impact on one's perspective.

Just like in the story of Job, miracles affect our perspective of who controls events and why relying on faith is so crucial. My string of miracles not only saved me from the brink of death but also put into distinct terms the span of control that I have over my life and the span of control that God has over it. All my decisions and actions over a lifetime are in the realm of the little picture, what I can see that lies

around and behind. God's actions, however, are in the realm of the big picture, including what lies ahead. Although God encourages us to reach forward to what lies ahead, only he can see what is there.

The first in my string of miracles is irrefutable evidence of God's ability to see what lies ahead. If you recall that particular experience, I had to make a decision on whether or not to proceed with my surgery while my wife Sherry was out of the country. I focused on what lay behind me: the information the doctors had told me a few days prior that the procedure would be a piece of cake. God, on the other hand, knew the possibility of what was lying ahead of me, spiraling down towards the brink of death. God could see that fate, but I could not. With that knowledge in mind, God needed to insert the miracle of my overwhelming feeling of **being alert** to every word spoken by the anesthetist and my need to ask questions about how this procedure may affect me. Through this miracle, I altered my initial instincts to go ahead with the surgery as planned for the next day and instead waited a week for Sherry to return. Had I proceeded, I more than likely would not have survived.

The author C.S. Lewis once described God's ability to see the big picture in the context of a sheet of paper.¹¹ The sheet of paper is our life, which to us appears in only two dimensions: length and width. Within the human two dimensions, we can subdivide the paper in many different ways to illustrate how we could view the flat sheet of paper from a two-dimensional perspective. C.S. Lewis illustrated this subdivision of a flat sheet of paper as containing a series of connected squares, but instead of squares, I would like to

use words on a sheet of paper as my two-dimensional illustration.

From the beginning to the end of the sheet of paper are a series of words describing our life's story, past and present. We know what has transpired and is transpiring in our lives, but the two dimensions limit what we can see of the flat sheet of paper. Similar to the way we read a sheet of paper one word at a time, we also progress through our life's story one word at a time. We can see today and can remember what we have read in the past, but we must rely on faith and God's grace for what words of our life's story we cannot yet read.

God, on the other hand, does not see our life's story in two dimensions on a sheet of paper as we do, but in a multi-dimensional view where the flat sheet of paper is instead shaped and folded into a geometrical object. In God's view, our lives are multifaceted with many sides, each side having many possibilities and interconnected around a space in the center. Each of the facets can be multiple combinations of life stories with countless possibilities and outcomes depending on the choices that we make through our two-dimensional journey. We are in the center open space of the geometrical object, moving from side to side depending on our choices or actions, and God is on the outside looking at the entire object with a big picture view of the total sum of the possible outcomes. This view of all facets and outcomes gives God the ability to see forward via the big picture and even to communicate to us sometimes the outcomes of certain decisions or actions before we make a choice.

As I reflect through the subsequent miracles in my string of miracles, each instance can attest to God's ability to see forward via the big picture. In miracle number two, for example, my friend David felt compelled to walk back into the house at just the right moment to retrieve his cell phone when Sherry tried to reach him on his home phone line. Had he not obeyed that conscious impulse to return into the house, I again more than likely would not have survived. God, who knew the outcomes of David's actions with his ability to see the big picture, communicated to David that conscious thought to walk back into the house just as Sherry made the phone call.

Miracle after subsequent miracle in the string put the right person in the right place at just the right time to keep me from falling over the brink of death; such coordination depended upon God's view of the big picture. As God communicated to each individual his view of the possible outcomes, he manifested his presence in the form of a miracle. I believe with all my heart and soul that these happenings were not any mere set of coincidences, but miracles plain and simple.

The miracle of a miracle in terms of our perspective is the assurance that God can see what lies ahead in the realm of the big picture or what words are yet to be read, beyond our abilities. With that forward vision, God can intercede through the medium of a miracle. Whether or not the miracle will occur, as evidenced in my case, may depend on the decisions that we make to be alert or not, but our possible blindness does not diminish the miracle of a miracle.

A Grace Perspective Follows the Heart

I am not as smart or as tough or as self-sufficient as I once thought twenty or thirty years ago. Much of that attitude waned as I got older and came to grips with my vulnerability. I do remember the days of my late teens and early twenties, when I felt invincible and thus lived on the edge. Fortunately, I did not fall over the edge; I survived in spite of my attitude and perspective.

Those were carefree and fun filled days, but they were also empty and insecure days. During this early period of my life, I loved and lost in many relationships. I struggled through two divorces and several bouts of depression. I started my latter teens wanting to travel the world as a photo-journalist; then I wanted to be a linguist, then an engineer, then a professional photographer, all the while never stopping long enough to complete anything. I look back on those days and feel as though I drifted from person to person, place to place, and ideal to ideal.

This period of my life was also a time of rebellion against my father for hanging that balance sheet over my head like the sword of Damocles (**faith**). I rebelled against religion as I felt it was corrupt (**cynicism**), and I rebelled against God because I thought I could do just fine on my own (**arrogance**). My perspective stank during this period, as I had a serious glass-half-empty view of life. Everywhere I went in everything I did, I saw no periods but plenty of question marks.

During this time of my life, my efforts never seemed to prove successful. Even in times of desperation when I put my arrogance momentarily aside and called to God, I felt as

though he was not listening. Today I know that my feeling was not true. God was always listening, but while he was hearing my wails for help and guidance, he was also waiting. He was waiting for me to ask him not only to help, but also to become foremost in my life. The soul does not have enough room for both arrogance and grace; one or the other has to go. When I finally lost my grip on arrogance, God's grace began to fill the void, and my life has never been better.

Do I mean to imply that everything is now a bed of roses? Nope, no way, no how! God never promised me a smooth passage through life, but if I keep the faith, he will steer me to a safe landing at the end. As you have read in my story, my life has included plenty of ups and downs, and more of both lie ahead. The difference between my days of arrogance and my days of God's grace is that now, no matter what, everything always seems to resolve beneficially. In matters of family, finance, or work, no matter how glum a situation may appear at first, it ends better than I had first hoped. Sometimes I have to pinch myself, because the resolution seems a bit surreal, but it is the miracle of God's grace and its amazing impact on the power of my grace perspective.

I have been noticing from time to time a pompous atheist author who has been making quite a good living lately doing the talk show and anti-religion speaking circuit, debunking the existence of God and faith. As unnerving and annoying as this person is, he is also worthy of much pity. Of the numerous times that I have seen him on talk shows and cable

TV spewing his acerbic rhetoric, not once have I ever witnessed him smile. Just a plain and simple smile escapes him! That lack alone is pitiful, and it shows what a lousy perspective he must have.

Watching him, I have also gained a sense that what is closest to his heart is intelligence (he is very intelligent) and self-reliance. He may be convinced that intelligence and self-reliance are all that is necessary to sustain his perspective. Unfortunately for him, in spite of his intellect, he is severely deficient in perspective.

Intellect has become one the greatest conveyances for arrogance and cynicism. Intellect has also become a convenient substitute for faith. Mind you, there is absolutely nothing wrong with intelligence. In fact, God never discourages us from learning and becoming as intelligent as we can, as long as the sum total of our intelligence does not obscure truth.

Reliance on intellect, wealth, power, career, or a plethora of other things such as artificial substances, as I know firsthand, is shallow and finite. Such reliance has nothing solid with which to sustain the spirit, and so it can also come to an abrupt end. At the end of a life journey, coming face to face with a perspective full of question marks must be a hellish experience. A journey ending that way has nothing but unanswered questions and unrealized opportunities. I cannot imagine my journey not mattering in the end the same way as those who have nothing worthwhile to remember.

Regardless of the perceived accomplishments, finality and shallowness contain a vacuum called missed opportunities of grace. I wish that question mark people

could just take a grace pill to experience however briefly what a perspective based on grace and unconditional love can be like. I would be willing to bet that more than just a few perspectives would change. In the end, however, that pill would violate God's insistence on allowing us the free will to make our own decisions.

"Wherever your treasure is, there your heart [and your perspective] will be also" (Matthew 6:21). The key to that perspective is whether the heart is following something that is finite and shallow or something that is eternal. Everything in life between your first and last breath comes to an end. Youth comes and goes; wealth comes and goes; careers come and go; relationships come and go; the euphoria from drugs and alcohol come and go. Everything of the physical world follows the same pattern. So people who have allowed their hearts to follow something that has no permanence moan, groan, and lament about what was or what could have been. I have been there and done that, and I never care to go there again.

On the other hand, I prefer to smile, laugh, and anticipate life. Although my perspective has changed over the decades, my recent experiences at the brink of death have only solidified my resolve to keep my heart's treasure where I know it belongs, in what was there before my first breath and will be there long after I take my last one: God. Life is less complex and less stressful when you stand shoulder to shoulder with God rather than all alone. A simple smile is all the evidence that you will ever need to verify it.