

What Is Grace?

Select Excerpts from *The Case For Grace* by Lee Strobel

Lee Strobel's latest book, The Case for Grace, is a collection of true stories that reveal the transforming power of God's grace. Included is the author's candid and compelling account of his own journey toward freedom and grace.

STEPHANIE – The Orphan

I thought you had to have some status in life to be loved. That was so ingrained in me that after I was adopted and my parents talked about the love of God, I still thought, He can't love me! I was raped. He can't love me! I was abused. He can't love me! I have this awful anger inside. He can't love me! My daddy says I need to forgive, and I just don't want to. But that night I came the realization: He ... loves ... me! He loves me as I am. And that changed me, inside out. It took me many, many more years to let go of certain patterns in my life and to heal. I hated myself for so long. The fact that I could finally look in the mirror and love myself was nothing less than a miracle. It's God's grace. So these days I have a phrase that I use. For me, I can honestly say there is no event in my life that I am better without. Why? Because everything in my life brought me to Jesus."

LEE – The Mistake

He put down the book. "Don't you see, Lee? Your life has been a quest for grace, and you've seen a unique picture of it in Stephanie. Twice she has been adopted, both times ambushed by grace. That's what has resonated with you—her story of finding the ultimate love of a perfect Father." He was right—and that's when it crystallized for me. What truly captivates me about grace is that God has not only erased the sins for which I deserved punishment, but he has become my loving and compassionate Father, whose divine acceptance of me rushes in to fill a heart left parched by an earthly dad. The truth is that God could have forgiven my past and given me assurance of heaven and yet kept me at arm's length. He could have made me a mere servant in his kingdom household— and even that would have been more than I merited. But his grace is far more outrageous than that. I desperately needed to absorb this truth anew: I'm beyond forgiven. I'm more than a servant. I'm adopted by a Father whose love is perfect, whose acceptance is unconditional, whose affection is never-ending, and whose generosity is boundless. A Father who is for me...forever.

JUD – The Addict

After I rediscovered the beauty of grace, I began to relax in my faith. I started to enjoy God again instead of feeling like I had to prove something to him. Like where Jesus said, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.' The word rest, in Greek, means 'revive,' or 'restore.' God offers to revive us from the inside out—and that's what he did for me. I felt like I was free to laugh, to be myself, and to mess up. I stopped policing others and started loving them. I was freed to be compassionate toward hurting people who don't have their lives together or who might have lifestyles different from mine. I stopped putting a lot of pressure on myself. I'm not perfect—I sin every day, but I've lowered my expectations of myself and others, while I've raised my expectations of God and his grace."

CRAIG – The Professor

As I explained to this student, it's true that people in other religious movements can have wonderful experiences that make them feel spiritually uplifted. In fact, good feelings can be generated in so many different ways that we ought not let our feelings dictate which religious direction we're going to go. Yes, you want to be transformed by your faith, but you also want to know that it's the real deal. So while grace sets apart Christianity, so does truth. Jesus was filled with grace and truth, and in Christianity you can know the truth, not just through some sort of spiritual experience, but also through careful investigation. In other words, Christianity can be tested. And when you check it out—as I know that you did, Lee, when you were an atheist—you find that it's supported by philosophy, science and history; in fact, Christianity makes the most sense of the world. No other religion lines up with reality as Christianity does.

CHRISTOPHER – The Executioner

....Grace is not fair. And everyone should be grateful for that, not just Duch [a man convicted of crimes against humanity who had become a Christian]. If God were to deny Duch grace by drawing a line and saying, 'No more,' then who's to say where the line might be drawn next time? Jesus's death has infinite value because he's an infinite God; it was enough to cover all the sins of the world. If we say some sin is too terrible, then we're saying Jesus fell short in his mission. Grace is only grace if it's available even to the Duchs of the world. In fact," he said, straightening himself in his chair, "here's a difficult thing for us to comprehend: God loves Duch as much as he loves you and me." LaPel continued. "The truth is that God looked beneath the filth that covered Duch's life and saw a core that is made in his image. That image is obscured but never destroyed. When the Bible says God loves the world, it doesn't footnote any exceptions. God's grace is inexhaustible. "Perhaps we don't think we need as much grace as Duch does, because, after all, our sins aren't egregious. We conveniently forget our various forms of idolatry, our blasphemy, our daily transgressions of God's teachings. No, we don't deserve grace—and neither does Duch. For each of us, it is a gift."

CODY – The Homeless

Cody turned and found Michelle looking him straight in the eyes. "Sir," she said simply, "You look like you need a hug." Cody was aghast. A hug? He was gaunt, his hair matted, his beard scraggly, his clothes dirty and stained, his teeth rotting in his mouth. A hug? He shook his head.

"Ma'am, I haven't taken a shower in three months," he said. "I smell horrible."

Michelle smiled. "You don't smell to me," she said—and then she wrapped her arms around him. Again, she looked him in the eyes. "Do you know," she said, "that Jesus loves you?"

Jesus can't love me, Cody was thinking. I'm homeless. Jesus can't love me. I'm a drug addict. I'm a bad man.

"Jesus loves you," she repeated.

At that moment, in an instant, something spiritual sparked inside of Cody Huff. To this day, years later, he can't talk about it without his voice cracking. "Plain and simple, that was the pivotal moment of my life," he told me. "It was like a personal encounter with Jesus. It was love—pure love. She didn't care what I looked like or how much I smelled. It was like Jesus himself was standing in front of me and saying, 'Cody, I love you.' At the time in my life when I was the least lovable, when everyone shunned me, when there was no hope of getting out of the mess I was in, when I smelled so bad that even the other homeless didn't want to be around me—there she was, with this simple expression of the grace of God. And something happened in my heart."

BRAD – The Pastor

“My conclusion was that Christians don’t get to pick and choose what they want to forgive and what they don’t,” [his wife] said. “The Bible says, ‘Forgive as the Lord forgave you.’ I didn’t see any wiggle room in that. As Christ had forgiven me for my sins, I needed to offer grace to Brad. Otherwise, bitterness would consume me—and bitterness is poison in the soul of a Christian. I didn’t know if our marriage could be saved, but I knew I needed to forgive him.”

“So forgiveness was a matter of obedience?” I asked.

“Initially, yes. I was committed to following Christ, even when it got hard. My relationship with Brad was already damaged; I didn’t want my relationship with God to become strained because I refused to follow him when times were tough.”

“Did you feel like forgiving Brad?”

“No, not at all. I was hurting too much. But I was determined to forgive. I knew that if I made the choice to offer forgiveness, the feelings might eventually follow. Maybe. But grace is a decision before it’s an emotion.”

ANDREW – The Prodigal

...Repentance is the rebel’s only path to God. I needed to confess that I’m wrong and God is right; I needed to see my depravity in contrast with his holiness; I needed his cleansing and leadership of my life. This is how transformation and renewal begin. It’s not enough just to pray, God, make me a better person. It was repentance that opened the floodgates of grace for me—and it was grace that changed my life and eternity.”

LEE – Empty Hands

The doctor assured me that this entire ordeal was a fluke, an extraordinary confluence of medical complications that would never recur. The hallucinations? They’re typical for severe hyponatremia cases, I was told. They wouldn’t come back—and yet I knew they had left their mark. God would use that bizarre experience for my ultimate good, as Romans 8:28 promises. I would never see the homeless the same way again. Or the imprisoned. Or the ostracized and abandoned. Or those whose lives are taking them on a dangerous road away from God, toward an eternity of regret and remorse. And I would never see myself the same again. I was determined to cling to my true identity—a son of the Most High, amazed by grace.

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By Lee Strobel

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Contact Pamela McClure, McClure Muntsinger Public Relations,
615-595-8321 or pamela@mmpublicrelations.com