

GRACE MOMENTS

*Set Me*  
**FREE**

TIME OF  
**GRACE**  
MINISTRY



BY PASTOR MARK JESKE

## GRACE MOMENTS

*Daily readings written to provide  
straight talk and real hope.*

# Set Me FREE

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Direct quotations from the  
Bible (NIV) are printed in **bold**.

## Foreword

*“Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty; we are free at last!”*

Thanks to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., those words from an African American spiritual will never be forgotten. They bring a triumphant conclusion to one of the greatest orations of all time, King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech, given in Washington, D.C. in 1963.

Black Americans waited a long, long time for civil rights, and when those freedoms came, they were sweet indeed—the freedom to live where you wanted, work and study where you wanted, and vote without harassment.

Because the terrible curse of sin hangs over our world, everybody is a prisoner in one way or another, possibly in many ways. We all yearn for freedom and deliverance. In the daily devotions in this little book, I’d like to tell some stories of people’s struggles and suffering and God’s various ways of bringing relief. Jesus tells us, **“If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”** (John 8:31,32).

Ready for some liberating adventures in God’s Word? Come on in!

*Pastor Mark Jeske*

Pastor Mark Jeske





# ONE: Set Me Free from Physical Limitations

## I'm in Prison

Some chains are visible. St. Paul's certainly were. Imprisoned three times, he died a victim of the official persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were sentenced to die by the king of Babylon. Their courageous testimony in front of a blazing furnace is a masterpiece of courage, trust, and serene resignation: **“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up”** (Daniel 3:17,18).

God can use even imprisonment to advance his saving agenda. Through his guidance, faith is planted and strengthened in human hearts and he is given glory. Isaiah said that **“freedom for the captives and release . . . for the prisoners”** (61:1) is a thrilling part of Christ's gospel work. Sometimes he brought about truly miraculous releases—Shadrach and friends were not only released but promoted to high governmental positions.

Some, like St. Paul and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, bring glory to God by suffering martyrdom. Their release from prison coincided with release from all earthly suffering.

## I'm Injured

In 1866, the year after the Civil War ended, one half of the budget of the state of Mississippi was used to purchase artificial limbs for returning veterans who had suffered battlefield amputations.

Children can also suffer injuries that steal their freedom of movement. **“Jonathan son of Saul had a son who was lame in both feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan (i.e., their deaths) came from Jezreel. His nurse picked him up and fled, but as she hurried to leave, he fell and became crippled. His name was Mephibosheth”** (2 Samuel 4:4).

Do you know someone who is the prisoner of a major injury? car crash? workplace accident? One of God's temporary liberating strategies is to use a disaster to bond people together. We all grow when we help and are helped. Another is his gift of the growing science of prosthetics. What a thrill it is to see how people with artificial legs can dance and even run.

Best of all is the total restoration that God promises in heaven. Isaiah chapter 35 promises that in heaven the lame will leap like deer. I can't wait.

## I'm Disabled

Does anyone in your family have a disability? Do you? My close family has been touched by polio, hydrocephalia, spina bifida, and Williams syndrome (missing genes inhibit full physical growth).

Jesus met many disabled people and loved them all. **“Another time he went into the synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there”** (Mark 3:1). What do you suppose it was like to have a shriveled hand? Kind of hard to play most sports, wouldn't you think? You'd better like soccer. A little tough to impress girls, maybe? Employers think twice about one-handed hires.

Jesus healed the man in the synagogue instantly, miraculously, with a word. His heart hurt with compassion for his hurting brother. And yet his mission on earth was not primarily to patch up every disabled person. There were still plenty of disabled people on earth when he left, and there are even more today.

Jesus' main mission was to demonstrate in word and deed that God's Son, the world's Savior, had come to earth to teach, suffer, die, and rise again. His greatest gift to us *right now*, disabled and “abled,” is not restoration of broken bodies but restoration of our broken souls through the forgiveness of our sins.

Complete restoration of our bodies will come later.

## It's Congenital

Our church's gospel choir once played for a conference involving the hard of hearing. A woman told me through an interpreter that she had “heard” music for the first time in her life—we sing and play pretty loud, and by standing up and leaning on a wall, she could “feel” our songs through the wall's vibration.

Which do you suppose is worse—to be congenitally deaf or to lose your hearing later in life? Is it better to have known light and color at least for a little while before blindness sets in, or is it better never to know what you're missing?

Here's the worst fear of all: to dread that a congenital disability is a punishment from God. **“As [Jesus] went along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’”** Jesus' reply brings heartfelt comfort to all who fear that a disability is a punishment: **“Neither this man nor his parents sinned, . . . but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life”** (John 9:1-3).

What an honor it is to be a canvas on which our God can paint a beautiful picture! How much more joyful our lives can be when we are willing to let God use us as we are, broken and limping, blind and deaf, for his agenda of human spiritual rescue.

## I'm Disfigured

There was a reason why the phantom of the opera wore a half mask. The right side of his face was disfigured, and he was ashamed of it.

Life is hard. Life is even harder if your face or skin is disfigured. Our society worships and adores physical beauty and assigns much less value to people who aren't good-looking. Cleft palate, rosacea, and severe acne all make people feel like third-class members of society. They are self-conscious and know that their looks will close doors throughout their lives.

**“While Jesus was in one of the towns, a man came along who was covered with leprosy. When he saw Jesus, he fell with his face to the ground and begged him ‘LORD, if you are willing, you can make me clean’”** (Luke 5:12).

Leprosy brought a triple curse. Not only did it blotch your skin, but certain types caused nerve death in one's extremities, causing that tissue to die. Worst of all—it was thought to be contagious, and lepers were utterly quarantined and isolated from human contact.

Jesus' heart hurt when he encountered people who suffered from leprosy. He himself knew what it was like to be ugly. He himself was **“disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness”** (Isaiah 52:14). Then and now he responds with compassion, miraculous medical care, special blessings like reconstructive surgery, and hope for a better future.

## I Hurt

Pain in and of itself is not bad. In fact, it's actually good. Pain messages tell the truth. They tell you that something is wrong, perhaps very wrong, and they tell you exactly where the problem lies. Without pain messages you could easily bleed to death or suffer serious and life-threatening infections.

That said, pain makes life miserable. Chronic pain—fibromyalgia, migraines, neuralgia—makes it miserable all the time. Pain drains energy and leaves you exhausted. Pain keeps you from being productive, makes you crabby, and turns your life inward.

Usually when people say “this day and age,” they are groaning from the decline in morality and rise of crime and cruelty. “This day and age,” however, has also provided us with a wide array of legal narcotics that ease even severe pain and provide peace and rest to people recovering from major surgeries or to people dying of painful illness.

Pain can also be redemptive. St. Paul said, **“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead”** (Philippians 3:10,11). Pain makes us see our need for God. Pain helps us share the experience of Christ himself. Pain cures us of our fantasy that earth is a paradise and makes us long for heaven.



## Two: Set Me Free from Compulsions

### Alcohol

Wine is one of God's gifts. It eases stress and brings a smile—Psalm 104 says that it “**gladdens the heart of man**” (women seem to like it too). Jesus created 120 gallons of it to bless a wedding reception and even chose it as part of his holy meal of love and forgiveness.

But our sinful minds and damaged willpower are vulnerable to Satan's temptations. Careless alcohol use can make us act crazy or become its slaves. Even saints sometimes get stupid: “**Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent**” (Genesis 9:20,21).

Do you think people set out in life to become alcoholics? Do you think people crave the experience of liver damage, DWI arrests, uncontrollable vomiting, and slavery to liter after liter of vodka? Of course not.

When slaves of alcohol cry out to God for deliverance, he sends it. Pay attention—listen to his Word for strength, forgiveness, and direction. Listen to your family members and accept their help. Listen to your AA counselor and support group. “**Apart from me you can do nothing,**” Jesus said (John 15:5). With him you can do all things.

### Abuse

People don't dream of becoming alcoholics when they grow up, and I really doubt that they fantasize about how they will beat their wives and children someday. Where does abusive behavior come from?

It comes from insecurity. From a desire to control others. From a cheap desire to shift blame from me to you. From a failure to learn to control anger and temper. From an addiction to the adrenaline rush that comes with losing it. From intense selfishness. From fear. From a pathetic need to cover up one's own failures.

**“Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord”** (Ephesians 6:4). How can you be set free from the sickness of family violence?

Listen. Listen to the voice of your God, who accepts and loves you and encourages you to be at peace with yourself. You are forgiven and freed from the shame of your past. Listen to the voices of your spouse and children. Listen to the generation older than you. Listen to friends and neighbors. Fight the urge to control other people. Instead, by love and leadership, allow their God-given potential to blossom and flourish.

## Fantasy

Pretending and fantasy are integral to the Disney World<sup>®</sup> experience. In fact, Disney coined the term “imagineering” to describe the way in which its writers and designers and artists construct wonderful imaginary realities on a grand scale.

Pretending makes Disney World work. Too much pretending in your day-to-day life, however, can make you spiritually sick. A woman who invites her boyfriend to move in with her might only be fantasizing that he is committed to her. She might imagine that having his baby will bond him to her forever. A man might fantasize that the models in his porn magazines really do desire him, and he comes to find more satisfaction in pretending with his virtual babes than in actually building a real relationship with a real woman.

A woman wants a loving home so badly that she puts up with verbal and physical abuse, redefining what “normal” is just to keep the illusion alive. **“He who chases fantasies lacks judgment”** (Proverbs 12:11).

How can you be set free from sinful fantasy? Listen. Listen to the Word of your God. His Word is always true and healthy, even though it is sometimes not fashionable or cool. Pray for wisdom and discernment. Listen to the advice of people who have earned the right to tell you things you may not want to hear.

## Spending

Are you a skinflint or a spender? Some of you pinch your pennies hard enough to make Lincoln cry. Like Ebenezer Scrooge, you would rather shiver in a cold office than “splurge” on more coal. But others, probably many more, absolutely love spending. They live the phrase: “When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.” What is it about spending money that is so addictive?

Well, it’s fun to be waited on, isn’t it? It’s fun to be pampered, to spoil yourself, to indulge. Having stuff is good. Having more is better. We imagine that we will impress other people with our new clothes or toys. Jesus warned that loving spending would lead to loving money, a deadly form of idolatry. He said, **“Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions”** (Luke 12:15).

How can you tell if you are a problem spender? (1) Do you get into family fights over spending? (2) Do you charge more purchases than you can pay off each month? (3) Do your impulse purchases mean that you have no money left for more important things like education or your offerings to the Lord? (4) Are you under water in consumer debt?

How can you be set free from addictive spending? Make spending decisions jointly with your family—a fiscal buddy system. Pray to the Spirit to help you grow in the grace of contentment. Remember that your money really belongs to the King and that you are merely a manager in his company.

## Eating

There may be people who really like being obese, but I've never met one yet. Obesity is uncomfortable, unhealthy, and unpopular. So then why do so many people eat far more than their bodies need?

How about you? Do you carry too much extra weight? Be honest. Sometimes you eat to prolong the pleasure of favorite foods. Sometimes you eat when you are anxious or stressed, and that greasy fried chicken just improves your entire worldview. If two cookies make you feel a little better about life, maybe eating the whole package will make you feel a lot better. Maybe you inherited a genetic disposition, and everything seems to stick to your hips. Maybe you're too lazy or disorganized to shop for healthy food and simply garbage up on whatever is lying around.

Regardless, overeating is a disturbing sign of the lack of personal self-control, and we need to stay vigilant. **“Do not join those who drink too much wine or gorge themselves on meat, for drunkards and gluttons become poor, and drowsiness clothes them in rags”** (Proverbs 23:20,21).

Overeating can also leave you with hypertension, diabetes, and heart disease. Do you need to be a weight watcher?



## THREE: *Set Me Free from Mental Prisons*

### Anxiety

Do you ever have panic attacks? When you feel as though your life is being swept up in a tornado of bad things and you are helpless? Do you get exhausted from worry because your whole life seems to be teetering on the edge? Do you assume that things will always turn out for the worst? Does your mind race while you are trying to fall asleep? Do you jump when the phone rings, dreading the call that loved ones are dead in a ditch?

Relax. You were created by a loving, omnipotent genius who designed you for a life of joy, not fear. You were rescued by God's Son, Christ Jesus, who lived for you, died your death for you, rose again as a prototype of your own rising, and guarantees your forgiveness as your personal intercessor. Your needs matter to your heavenly Father, and you have but to ask.

**“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”** (Philippians 4:6,7).

The Father's kind wishes for you are carried out by legions of holy, mighty angels who leap to do his bidding. You are loved. You are safe. You are immortal.

## Anger

Emperor Palpatine spoke for Satan himself, and spoke also for the unconverted beast inside each of us, when he tried to goad Luke Skywalker into violence: “Give in to your anger. Make yourself more my servant. Let the hate flow through you.”

People generally like being angry. It makes them feel righteous and aggrieved. We love it when movie characters burst out of their passivity and good manners: “I’m mad as h— —, and I’m not going to take it anymore.” We admire gangsters who bypass the (slow) criminal justice system and simply carry out their own revenge.

Anger usually destroys. It rarely builds. **“My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires”** (James 1:19,20).

Let go. Let God take care of retribution and vengeance. Pray for the Spirit’s brakes on your mouth. Forgive your enemies . . . and your friends.

## Impatience

When you’re a kid, you’re always waiting for something. Waiting to be old enough to try out for the team. Waiting to get your license. Waiting until the prom. Waiting to get accepted into the college you want. Waiting to have enough money to buy a car.

It’s good to be focused on a goal. It’s bad to be so into what you want that you no longer enjoy the place you are right now. What are you longing for right now? Is the wait driving you crazy? Does God’s “slowness” make you doubt his love? his power? his wisdom?

David had to wait for seven *years* after his coronation to be fully accepted as king of Israel. During part of that time, he had to live in exile, waiting, waiting, waiting for God to do something. He learned from experience that God’s ways are worth the wait. **“I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD”** (Psalm 27:13,14).

You’ve heard the old saying about smelling the roses? Walk a little slower. Look around a little more. Notice the people around you—some were sent directly by God. Listen first; talk later. Tip waitresses well. Take time to hug people. Let God’s plans ripen, knowing that they are all good plans.

Is your life a success? Would you consider yourself a successful person? How do you think other people view you? How do you measure success? What are your life goals? Whose approval do you most crave?

Some people measure success in terms of acquiring material things. Gold jewelry, a big boat, and designer clothes proclaim “I made it; I’m somebody.” And here’s trap #1: If you lose your job or income source, you might feel destroyed as a person. Suddenly you think you’re a nobody. Trap #2: If you enthrone money and possessions in your heart, you have set up an idol, a false god that neither loves you nor will help you.

**“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you’”** (Hebrews 13:5).

Christians in Egypt in the fourth century began the practice of going out to the desert to live as hermits, cutting off as much contact with the (sinful) world as possible. That option won’t work for most of you. But what you can do is decide what you value most in your life. Practice with me and say, “I like my life right now. I don’t need to acquire stuff to impress people. My relationships are more important than my stuff. I am somebody! My Savior is my most valuable treasure.”

Every year tearful people stand in front of the casket of someone who died sooner than anybody ever expected. When someone has passed, it is no longer possible to say, “I’m sorry.” “It was my fault.” “Let’s not fight anymore.” “I miss your friendship.”

Pride is a terrible master. It keeps us so aware of our own wounds and hurt feelings that we don’t notice the pain in others, even hurts that we have caused. Pride makes everything always all about Me. Pride turns misunderstandings into arguments and arguments into fights. Pride makes people sullen, brooding over the changeless past.

Pride seduces you into thinking that you are innocent and have it all together. Here’s what St. Paul learned the hard way: **“If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”** (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Jesus has the cure. Jesus is the cure. First he demonstrated true personal humility. He came to our world and emptied himself of all heavenly splendor, taking the form and nature of a slave. He submitted to the laws of God and Caesar and kept them all for us. He surrendered to a miserable death on the cross of atonement. Risen and glorified, he now calls us to believe in him and to be like him, “proud” to be a humble servant. This is the cure for pride—to find joy in making other people’s lives better.

## Fear

There is a line of BMX clothing called No Fear. I suppose the hook is to make the wearers think that they are as cool as the motocross guys who fearlessly swoop around dirt tracks. Is it good to have no fear at all?

*Fear* in the sense of *respect* is good. We should all fear and respect Satan's vow to destroy us. We should all respect God's words and will. But sometimes our peace of mind and cheerful spirit are ruined by fears that God thinks are small. Do you dread bad things that might happen? Does your mind always go to the worst possible outcome? Does a cold make you think of pneumonia? Does a stock market dip make you dread bankruptcy?

**“As for me, I watch in hope for the LORD, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me”** (Micah 7:7). The One who is listening when you pray commands ten thousand times ten thousand angels. There is no limit to his power, to his love for you, or to his willingness to help you.

Happy life rule #1: Don't sweat the small stuff. Happy life rule #2: Relax. God thinks your troubles are mostly small stuff. No fear. Really.

## Perfectionism

Do you have friends who always seem to criticize and never praise? Worse—did your own mother simply make demands on you and never let you know that you had done anything well? Do you still live in fear of her criticism? Do you dread your father's constant disapproval of your decisions? Worst of all—do you beat yourself up because nothing you have ever done seems good enough?

What makes people so perfectionistic? Perhaps they grew up on a steady diet of criticism. Perhaps they are even more insecure than you. You can't control what other people say to you, but you can decide whether to accept their judgment or not, and you can control how you talk to other people.

Here is St. Paul's therapy for healing strained relationships: **“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you”** (Ephesians 4:32).

There has been only one perfect human being, and his name is Jesus. Get this—through your faith in him, God considers you as perfect as Jesus is. If he likes you and accepts you, you can like and accept yourself.

I'll tell you what. I can certainly spot selfishness in other people a lot faster than I will admit it in myself. This should come as no surprise though. What is sin but being bent inwards on MeMeMe? We are all born with a brain and spirit disease that is intensely interested in *my* comfort, *my* pleasure, *my* wishes, *my* agenda, *my* feelings, *my* appetites.

**“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others”** (Philippians 2:3,4). I am convicted by those words. How far I have fallen short! How my own ego has kept me from fulfilling my calling as a servant working for his Master.

But my Master does not despise me, punish me, or throw me away. He patiently forgives me, puts me back on my feet, and calls me to selfless service over and over. Refreshed by his gospel love and thrilled by his personal example, I am inspired to find satisfaction in lifting up the people around me.

Does that sound like pious pie in the sky? Maybe. But I'm here to tell you that the times in my life when I am the happiest are not when I am getting stuff or bossing other people around. I have found that I am happiest when I am acting like Jesus, spending myself on behalf of someone else.

Are pessimists born that way, or is it an attitude that they choose? Your genes or upbringing may have contributed to a gloomy outlook, but God's Word will not let you stay that way.

You are not a slave of your attitudes. Your spirit has been reborn by the power of the Spirit. Your new Christ-like self is in charge—you've been given authority and power over your crabby, old self. Jesus has paid your debts. Satan is broken and doomed. Death is temporary. You have been preapproved for a suite in the heavenly mansions. So act like the winner you are!

You can choose what to let your mind dwell on. If you look for failure, ugliness, defeat, and pain, you can certainly find it. But here's a better way: **“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things”** (Philippians 4:8).

Both God's Word and God's world are full of beauty, grace, and hope. If you choose to look for them, you will find them all around you. Let your mind dwell on those things, and you will be transformed into an optimist.

## Fate

Do you ever feel trapped by an evil *destiny*? Does it ever seem that your future has already been decided by unknown forces and that you are locked into bad outcomes? Do you feel *doomed* to repeat the sins of your parents and grandparents? Do you talk as though your whole life were in the grip of *fate*?

You have a lot of company. Great literature abounds in stories of people who were “destined” for tragedy. Oedipus’ horrible future was told him far in advance. Macbeth found out from three witches that he was doomed. Romeo and Juliet were star-crossed lovers. Giuseppe Verdi wrote an entire opera called *The Force of Destiny*.

But that’s all romantic baloney. Fate doesn’t exist. The idea is based on Roman mythology—the three Fates were imaginary goddesses who determined everyone’s life trajectory. Here’s the real power behind your life: **“I trust in you, O LORD; I say, ‘You are my God.’ My times are in your hands”** (Psalm 31:14,15).

You are not a puppet that’s operated by a divine puppeteer. You are not a marionette, dancing to strings pulled by a cruel or indifferent master. You were designed and created to be a child of the Most High, designed in God’s image, designed to think and act and to love and will in perfect accord with God’s holiness and purity. God is the guiding force in your life. And your choices do matter.



## FOUR: Set Me Free from Self-Hatred

### The Beauty Trap

The pressure on women to be thin and beautiful is astounding. Cosmetic surgery has become an enormous industry. Makeup, hair, clothes—think of the time and money that women feel they must invest in these things.

It’s one thing to try to clean up and look nice. It’s another entirely to live in daily self-hatred. The other day I saw a video about a young woman lamenting how she looked. She was despairing because she had “man shoulders.” Good grief. It’s a battle you can never win—there’s always somebody around who is taller, thinner, cuter, with better hair, skin, clothes, and jewelry.

You cannot escape the culture. What you can escape is the self-torment of wishing you were somebody else. One of the blessings of the gospel is to allow us to accept ourselves and identify and enjoy our own unique gifts and blessings. Here’s Jesus voice: **“The LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor . . . to bind up the brokenhearted, to . . . provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes”** (Isaiah 61:1,3).

Whose admiration do you most crave? Crave God’s. Through the lens of Christ’s work, your “pictures” look nice to him. In fact, you’re beautiful.

## Rejection

I don't know about you, but one of the biggest feeders of the feeling of self-hatred in my own heart is rejection. I still remember keenly every one of the girls who didn't want to go out with me in my youth. And here's the reason for that secret pain—I'm not angry with them and never was. I don't blame them at all. In fact, I fear that they were right. I fear that I am boring, ugly, and too big a loser to be seen with in public.

Surely you know the taste of rejection: Cut from the team. Dumped by your girlfriend or wife. Fired from your job, which not only cuts off your income but devastates your self-worth and even your identity. Mocked and ignored by your children.

Rejection will be a part of human life until the end. That's why it's so important for all of us to tap into a steady and unlimited stream of affection and approval from our Savior-God: **“Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me”** (Psalm 27:10).

If I choose to let God be the ultimate arbiter of my self-worth, then I will never have to see myself as a loser. Faith in my Savior Jesus makes me a winner.

## Prodigal

'Tis a sad thing that the past cannot be changed. Even the great St. Paul had some permanent and painful memories of violent and unbelieving things he had done as a young man. I certainly am ashamed of time and money wasted on stupid things in my own youth.

That's why we so resonate with Jesus' parable of the prodigal son: **“The younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living”** (Luke 15:13). We know that feeling. Shame persists long after the deeds. Embarrassing memories of squandered resources contribute mightily to our feelings of self-hatred.

But 'tis a great thing that the past cannot be changed. Jesus' triumphant death and resurrection cannot be changed. God's not guilty verdict on us cannot be changed. And that means that the Father's love for his sometimes lost and wayward children is always there for us. Wear his ring! Dine on his fatted calf!

The gospel tells us, with great tenderness and sincerity, that God is more interested in building our future than beating on us for our past. Your past failures and waste have already been freely forgiven. Hey—look through your windshield, not the rearview.

## Guilt

Guilt is a tremendous short-term motivator, isn't it? You can get your husband and children moving through nagging and guilt trips. You can even rouse yourself to quite a bit of energy at first through shame and self-scolding.

But it wears off, leaving you worse off. Consistently using guilt as a motivator eventually leaves you (and your spouse and children) with a strongly negative self-image: "I never do anything right." Sadly, negative motivation gets addictive, and we instinctively reach for the stick instead of the carrot.

You can't stop the negativity toward other people until you first stop it in your own heart. The primary message of the Bible is that God unconditionally and freely decided to love you. He preforgave you all your sins, hoping to inspire you in that way to embrace his love and choose to change your sinful life. **"Come now, let us reason together," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool"** (Isaiah 1:18).

You don't have to set yourself free from guilt. Jesus already did it for you. You are now free to stop hating yourself and free to speak patiently and kindly to the people around you.

## Hopelessness

Children are by nature optimistic and resilient. When they're small, they haven't yet seen the full range of human cruelty. They believe in fairies, ghosts, and handsome princes on white horses. They know that every story will end with everyone living happily ever after.

But years of disappointment and frustration can beat the hope out of a person's heart. After a while, you not only expect loss and failure, but some people even sabotage their own efforts as a self-fulfilling prophecy—"See, I knew I would fail." We all need hope. It is the oxygen of the human spirit. But like oxygen it is consumable, and we must learn how to find it and breathe it.

The Bible and the sacraments bring the life-giving O<sub>2</sub> of the Holy Spirit (whose very name in both Hebrew and Greek means "wind" or "breath." **"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit"** (Romans 15:13).

Reconnected to the message of God's deeds for us and God's love for us, even a hopeless heart can start beating again. Those stories are all true! Yes he did. Yes I can.



## SIX: Set Me Free from My Greatest Fear

**Dying**

*“Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”*

### **Aging**

American culture is all about worshipping youth, beauty, and strength. How can you not be depressed about the way in which your body is steadily breaking down?

Decline in looks is bad enough—wrinkles, gray hair, and male-pattern baldness. Even worse is the slow erosion of health—onset of diabetes, hypertension, and cataracts. Moses nailed it 3,500 years ago: **“The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away”** (Psalm 90:10).

But there are some splendid features about aging that I have come to appreciate: (1) Every day I am one step closer to being in heaven with the Savior and people I miss. (2) With age have come serenity, wisdom, and greater inner peace. God’s marvelous agenda is becoming clearer to me. (3) There are things I can do for God in my 50s that I couldn’t have done in my 20s (and I trust that if I make it into the 80s, God will have opportunities for me unique to that age).

Aging doesn’t mean that our efforts become less important to God. On the contrary, sometimes God entrusts his biggest jobs to geezers—Moses was 80 when he led Israel out of Egypt, and Abraham was 99 before God thought him ready for fatherhood.

The above lines are from Welsh poet Dylan Thomas’ most famous poem. He wrote them as he watched his father, a once vigorous soldier, grow weak and frail. Thomas’ words grip our hearts—we all dread dying, and we fear the dying of those we love. Thomas’ own “light” was extinguished in 1953, and he probably did not go gently.

I get his point. Dying is the last human adventure on this earth. Dying exists for God’s once immortal human race as a punishment for human evil and rebellion. It is not nice or natural.

But Jesus has changed everything. By taking on himself the guilt and blame and condemnation for human sin, the dying process loses its terror and fear and becomes merely the fall into Jesus’ arms. Here are sweet words from a man in his 90s: **“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. . . . Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life”** (Revelation 2:10). You can go gently when you know Christ is waiting for you.

Burial is a big deal in every culture. In ours you will see caskets with locking screws, a long parade of cars with high beams on, concrete vaults with rubber gaskets, plastic flowers at gravesites, green carpeting around the hole as mourners gather, polished granite markers with names and two very important four-digit numbers.

The whole scene is solemn, respectful, and a little creepy. As hard as we try to prettify the death business, we know there's a lot of pretending going on. Our loved one is not just taking a nap in an expensive steel or mahogany bed. Cemeteries are not merely lovely picnic sites. Graves hold the casualties of mankind's war with God. Whether the people died of illness or injury or old age, they are still paying the ultimate price for the wages of sin.

Only God has a solution. But wow—what a solution. He is going to undo it all: **“On this mountain [the Lord] will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever”** (Isaiah 25:7,8).

Did you get that? Faith in Jesus Christ makes you immortal in soul and body. Death itself will die when Jesus comes back, never to intimidate you again. Funeral directors will need to find new work in heaven.

As bad as aging, dying, and burial are, condemnation in hell is far worse. It is living death. It is dying without ending. It is suffering without relief. It is despair without hope. Its terror is the ultimate terror and lurks behind every other thing on earth that we dread.

Does your imagination need a little help to visualize it? Have you watched any modern horror movies lately?

Better yet, do you remember what the crucifixion of Jesus looked like? **“About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice . . . ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”** (Mathew 27:46). As bad as the physical torment must have been—torn flesh, screaming muscles, dehydration, shock, and exhaustion from loss of blood—the spiritual torment was far worse.

On the cross, as his Father turned his back on him in righteous contempt, Jesus experienced the full weight of the world's condemnation. At that moment he was alone, all alone, to bear his misery. That is what hell will be like.

And because God's pure and innocent Son endured it for you, you won't have to. You are free.

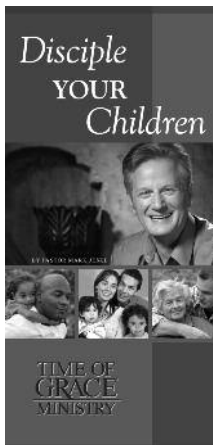


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