

A PERFECT MESS

The grace of God comes to one who was "doing the best she could"

A testimony to grace by Rebecca Morse Long

HI. My name is Becky. I'm a recovering Pharisee, learning to live by grace. So, how did I live before?

Since childhood, I was a Christian, but I lived under law. Everything I did was driven by duty. Now? I still feel the pull to return to the old way, but I have been set free from the slavery to the deep habits that were destroying my joy and fruitfulness for God—self-reliance, living for the praise of people, and an obsession to be righteous in my own strength. Sad to say, these habits came from a heart taught from childhood that the blood of Jesus shed for her on the cross was the only way to be connected to God. But, after one begins with Jesus, how does one keep connected to Him? I was in a complete muddle about that. Jesus said "*Be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect,*" so I put myself on the treadmill of work, work, work, but with no understanding of the strength he offered me.

The reason I didn't understand, was due in part to my upbringing. I am the third of seven children from a Christian pastor's home. My father knew Jesus as his Lord and Savior, but late in his life he admitted that he never learned how to rest as a son in the Father's love. As a result, his life and ministry were driven more by duty and responsibility than by grateful joy. He loved Jesus with all his heart and would often weep over it, but there was a disconnect between that love and obedience.

I love my father very much, and am grateful for the way he taught us the Scriptures. But, because of his model of legalism and drivenness, I am only beginning to learn to live a life of love. My Mum and Dad are in heaven now, and surely rejoicing that their daughter is learning a better way to live.

Our family must have resembled an Old Testament Jewish family. We knew the Law of God and sought to keep it perfectly. But we worked hard to keep it out of our own resources rather than by faith. (Rom.10:2,3). We expected perfect obedience—from ourselves and one another. We were seven children, six girls and one boy, and we all helped with family chores. There was much work to do. We had a large

vegetable garden, and had to keep the house (and ourselves) tidy. Our Mum posted charts to ensure that everyone knew exactly what his or her job was and when it should be done.

Organization is necessary for any family, and I'm glad we were taught personal responsibility from an early age. But we never seemed to move from duty to love. As I think back on it, this is strange because Jesus said *love is the fulfillment of the law*. We, on the other hand, were mired down in Old Testament law, not understanding what Jesus meant by that. This is all the more strange because we had family worship and our daily bread was to read the Scriptures and discuss them.

Our failure to sense that something was terribly wrong is a tribute to the deceptive power of the flesh. We congratulated ourselves that we were obeying the law to the best of our ability, but all the

while, we were failing to live up to what the law really required—love (Rom. 13:8-10). The crux of our problem is in the phrase, "*to the best of our ability.*" I know now that our ability is the enemy of grace (Gal. 3:1-5). Lutheran professor Gerhard Fredie put his finger on it: "*Christianity is not a movement from vice to virtue, but a movement from virtue to grace.*" Ironic, isn't it, that in striving to establish our virtue, we short-circuited the Gospel's transforming power in our lives.

My father taught us the Scriptures so that we would know God's law and "be responsible for our lives." There was never a double standard. He measured himself against the same high mark he set for us. He drove himself to obey and serve Jesus with his whole heart, but his measuring stick was too short! His measure was perfect *outward* obedience to God's law. When any of us failed, everyone else would become angry. I share this not to excuse myself, but to explain why after I married and had children, I continued to think this was the way of holiness. It seemed normal to me. If I was angry, I felt that other people were to blame. "*After all,*" I reasoned,

“ To fully appropriate the grace of God, one must despair of self rather than depend on it. ”

"they aren't living up to God's standards!" Like my Dad, I often had terrible outbursts of anger. Then I would say to myself, "It's not my fault; if I could just live alone with Jesus, he and I would be perfect." I was sure that any stress in my life was everyone else's fault. Yes, I was a Christian, but I was very judgmental and unforgiving of others. At the same time, I was filled with self-condemnation for my own failures. I wanted to

“ **If I could just live alone with Jesus, he and I would be perfect.** ”

be perfect, and so I was... a perfect mess!

In 1962, while attending a Christian university, I met and fell in love with Johnny Long. We aspired to

be foreign missionaries, and in 1973, after 8 years of marriage and with John Wade Long, III, our 3 year-old in-tow, we set out for the bush of Kenya, East Africa. Our second child, Rebecca Elizabeth was born that year. We had a trying time in Africa, but not because of the place. We had travelled half way round the world to give others the Gospel, but were not mastered by the Gospel ourselves. I cringe to remember how busy we were, striving to do well—to please others and so earn our "ministry righteousness." Some fruit we had there remains, but those years were marred by conflict with our fellow missionaries, and after five years of frustration, we resigned and returned to the USA to re-enter pastoral ministry.

It is a testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit that despite our flesh, Jesus used us to help build His Kingdom in Kenya and the USA, because in our hearts and family there was turmoil, lack of forgiveness, bitterness, anger, fear, and pain. Johnny and I were "doing the best we could," and honestly thought all Christians lived that way. (In fact, most of them we knew did.) As we raised our two older children, we assumed that their outward obedience to God's law was an indication of changed hearts. But, when our son left home for university, the flaws in our self-reliant lifestyle began to show as he acted out his rebellion against God and us. We can see that our legalistic parenting was partly responsible for driving him away from Christ. As Paul said in Romans 7, the law, rather than encouraging holiness, tends to stir up sin. We ruled our home by law, so quite predictably, reaped lawlessness.

Mary Elizabeth ("Libba") was born in 1982.

Five years later, I began listening to a sermon series on Galatians, by Dr. Jack Miller. He was a pastor, professor of practical theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, and the founder of World Harvest Mission. I would weep as I listened to Jack's words of grace for *Christians*. It

began to dawn on me that there was a better way to live! Several friends and I worked through the Galatians series and prayed for wisdom to apply what we were hearing. Johnny says of that time that he was so proud, self-satisfied, and clueless, he thought the lot of us were balmy.

Then, in 1990, Johnny and I attended a conference called *SONSHIP*. It was a week-long renewal conference for ministry couples, and Jack Miller was the main speaker. That week was the culmination of four years of searching for me, and, for the two of us, the beginning of a deep surrender of our self-reliant lives to Christ.

How did this fresh surrender reshape our lives? My feelings of self-condemnation and the need to criticise others began to give-way to a childlike rest in the Father's love for me. Although I had been a Christian since the age of six, I had not understood that the Father loved me unconditionally because of Jesus. As I "laid my deadly doing down, down at Jesus' feet", the gracious Holy Spirit began to work a joyful, loving obedience in me—what Paul calls "the obedience that comes from faith" (Rom. 1:5).

I began to live a life of repentance and forgiveness towards myself and others. And I repented—especially to our two older children, begging them to forgive me for the way I had parented them so harshly. I began to relate to them as a fellow sinner who saw her sins and struggles. I repented of living a life of working to be *RIGHT*. Johnny and I had *much* less conflict as we began to relate to one another as two big sinners who needed Jesus every day! Our pretense to perfection went to the rubbish heap where it belonged. Secure in God's love, we began sharing with each other honestly and from the heart. Our home became a place of peace as our growing belief in the Father's love enabled us to extend grace and mercy to one another. Instead of pouncing on one another's weaknesses, we could bear one another's burdens. Still when we do quarrel, we move quickly to forgiveness. We are "safe" for each other. I was and am able to talk to Johnny about my bitterness and the things I had held against him, and he was and is able to *AGREE* with me and ask me to forgive him. *Glory be to the Father!*

My idolatry of living for the praise of others, has largely fallen away. Although I still value the opinions of others, my trust in the Father's love for me is so real, I no longer depend on peoples' praise to make me feel worthy. The Triune God has gradually healed my fear of rejection and enables me to love others freely. This new way of living is ongoing. I have a deepening sense of my utter inability to handle life apart from God's

grace, and when I forget that, I repent and run to Jesus for fresh cleansing. I'm learning to abandon my attempts to produce a righteousness of my own and rest in the righteousness Christ provides (Phil.3:7-11). Faith in Jesus changes me even when it's weak because it unites me to the Mighty Christ! As Johnny says, "I'm still a big mess, I just repent a lot".

The Holy Spirit is so gentle. He is patiently teaching me how to live on a repentance/faith basis rather than on a success/fail basis. What a difference to live one's life "in the atmosphere of the Gospel". Yes, we have our ups and downs, but there is a new vibrancy in our daily communion with the Father, and a profound sense of the reality of Jesus' intercession for us before God's Throne (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). We're learning to admit our weaknesses, and live as dependent children on the Holy Spirit for the power to live and do ministry. What a relief!!

In 1993, Johnny and I returned to Africa, to write and teach *SONSHIP for Africa*. In 2005, we moved here to London as "empty nesters" and hope to spend the rest of our lives in the specialised ministry of "teaching the Gospel to Christians"! This was what we needed for so long, and we've discovered the need is universal. Our chief tool for this ministry is the *Grace4Life* course, though Johnny also teaches courses in grace-centred preaching. Like *SONSHIP for Africa* before it, *Grace4Life* is nothing more or less than the Gospel applied to the daily life of the believer. We like to joke that no one ever graduates from our course because it is impossible to outgrow our need for Jesus.

I failed so miserably for so long, from now on, I want my life to be a "window of grace" through which others can see the love of Jesus. If my story has struck a chord in you, and you'd like to know more, please contact us. Perhaps we can study together and learn how to walk by faith. God wants us to live like the loved daughters and sons we are. Our "Abba" is the King of the Universe. He



is ready to lead us into a new life in which we can resist the pull to think, live and act like lonely, self-reliant orphans.

In our Father's strong love,

Becky

Rebecca Morse Long

Post Script

Countless "how to" books have been written about the Christian life, but there's one I consider the best because it is doctrinally sound *and* painfully honest. You will find no "Three Easy Steps to Holiness" here, just the true story of one woman's painful struggle to learn to live by grace.

The author is Rose Marie Miller—wife of the late Jack Miller whom I've mentioned. The battles in Rose Marie's life are eerily parallel to mine. Both of us tried to please God and others in our own strength. Perhaps you're caught up in the same of struggle. If so, I highly recommend: *From Fear to Freedom - Living as Sons and Daughters of God*.¹

How good is this book? Jerry Bridges, best-selling author and longtime member of the Navigators says: "*From Fear to Freedom* is a powerful and captivating book. By freely opening her own life to us, Rose Marie Miller allows the Holy Spirit to probe deeply into ours. This book is 'must reading' for those who want to live daily in the freedom and joy of God's grace."

Dr. Dan Allender, Christian psychologist and author of *Bold Love, The Wounded Heart* and other titles has this to say:

"*This book invites the soul to a celebration—a party. It sings of grace and offers a vision of hope we have lost in our day. No age is more in need of the radical call to live as sons and daughters of God. We strive endlessly; we are exhausted, depleted, and lonely. Is this the abundant life? What is the problem? Few have the courage of Rose Marie Miller to say it simply and forthrightly—the problem is self-righteousness. Rose Marie offers us a profoundly personal and painful glimpse into her story, exposes the dark corners of our self-righteousness, and invites us to dance with God. Get ready to party.*"



¹ Harold Shaw Publishers, Wheaton, IL, 1994.
Interested? See: <https://www.whm.org/store/>