

MYSTIC LIGHT

Grace

WHAT IS GRACE? Let us think about it for a few minutes. It is a lovely name for a girl or lady. It used to be a short prayer we said before meals.

There is a book out now discoursing on ways to manage our food. This is a problem in our country where we are graced with plenty. We do want to be selective in the foods we eat, but are less likely to eat to live well and to remember from Whom all blessings flow, including our nourishment. If we think or meditate for a moment before we eat, as in anything else, we will manage better. It is not easy for some of us to eat wisely, but if we eat with gratitude and with this forethought, some maintain that there will be no need to diet. As Paul says, it is not what we put into our body but what comes out of it that harms us.

Grace operates subtly. It is not subject to power leverages or selfish implorings. It is seemingly an uncontingent favor. It comes unexpectedly. We cannot directly initiate it. Grace comes in such a way that it can often lead to mercy and forgiveness, as in the case of Mary Magdalene. Imagine: Here is Jesus at a special meal with Simon and some of the other well-appointed men of the neighborhood. Here comes this woman of ill repute—to say the least—disrupting the proper gathering, so driven by her gratitude and poignant feelings that, oblivious to her impropriety, she goes behind the couch where the Master is reclining and begins to wash his feet with her tears of deep regret—repentance—anoointing them with the expensive fragrance she brought—the love and appreciation of the truths Christ Jesus had taught her, and she wiped his feet with her long hair—the resolve that enlightenment had instilled in her. In former lives she evidently had developed the



Illustration from Treasures of the Bible, by Henry Davenport Northrop. Unknown illustrator.

Paul Struck by Grace

character which was receptive to the advanced principles of our Christian code.

On the other hand, Saul of Tarsus, a very active zealot, was struck unconscious by a direct visit of the resurrected Christ and spent several days in that state learning the truths of life in the unseen realms. God knew that once this dynamic man's energy was directed into constructive channels, he would be the one to launch the teachings of peace and love into the coming ages. Saul's own interests were not in God's interest. But by grace, born out of time, Paul, and we through him, was given more than he deserved or, for a time, could even comprehend.

Grace is sometimes vouchsafed to the brave and the daring—those who seek dangers, such as climbing formidable mountains, sailing around the world in little boats, or engaging in any daunting endeavor that challenges one's resolve and ability to cope.

Such person may earn great adulation when they break records or prove valiant under the duress of their chosen endeavor. Grace may come with the glory but seems more a factor in achievement if the achiever is himself gracious in bearing the notoriety and significance of his accomplishments.

One of the great men of our time, George Marshall, was selected and showed himself capable of being the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Forces during the Second World War. However, in post-war life he did not exploit his success, but served in less conspicuous positions, and gained in grace for this choice. Then there was Douglas MacArthur, whose record at West Point has never been equaled. He became a dramatic conqueror. Some have opined that MacArthur had the qualities of Alexander the Great combined with Julius Caesar, and indeed who could have figured so prominently in turning a totalitarian state into a democracy in just seven years? One assumes he was, in some respects, an old and experienced soul. But although, for diplomatic reasons, he could be gracious to the Japanese Emperor and the Japanese people, he made the grave mistake of not being gracious to his Commander-in-Chief.

To General MacArthur there was not, nor had there been, anyone superior to him. When he met with his President, who had already been aggravated by this general's high-handedness, MacArthur did not salute his CEO. He felt that Truman was a mid-western small-town politician who accidentally fell into the power of his high office. This lack of graciousness has affected history. Fortunately, we know that the angels and archangels of destiny always shape events for the best, so that the pride and bias of those in leadership positions teach the governed needed lessons, lessons learned by, for instance, George Washington, who wielded power with grace and redirected praise and honor due him to the glory and power of God. He was conscious of the debt he owed to the Guides of nations.

There is grace in gratitude. It is dangerous for a sports player or other celebrity to be lifted to the heights of adulation and later have to cope with an ordinary life. Many lessons learned in previous lives are necessary to sustain the come-down. A concurrence of grace can only be attendant upon accompanying effort. There are periods in life for rest and renovation, but it is important to keep a steady aim on

an objective and to be constant and vigilant in daily application if we would be blessed by the continuing grace of good fortune. For while grace is, in a sense, gratuitous, not at our beck and call, if we do not strive to be virtuous, just, and self-effacing, grace will far more likely be a stranger.

It is precisely the casual, off-guard moment that can catch us short. A lady moving from her family home to an apartment put several nice pieces of furniture on the front porch for the Salvation Army to pick up. When she returned to pick up the rest of her things, the furniture had been appropriated by the neighbor next door. Over the years there had been a very friendly relationship between the two families, but the lady's family was now gone, and her job was uncertain, making her future finances problematic. She needed the write-off from her taxes. She could not imagine anyone, especially someone she thought she knew, just taking her furniture, but after all this time she did not want to ruin the kindly feelings she had enjoyed with those next door—so she had the grace to say nothing. Later, when she visited them, she was shown how neatly the furniture complimented her former neighbor's home. So many times, it is a temptation associated with money that causes a problem. There seems to be a fear that God will not provide for those who are so tempted.

In another instance, a woman was driving to work when a man in dirty clothes lurched out from the curb. She stomped on the brakes and screeched to a stop so fast she was almost certain she had not hit him, but as his clothes were so near the color of the street, she was not sure. He bent over and seemed to be in pain, and after exchanging information, she took him to a nearby hospital.

The insurance agent working on the claim repeatedly urged her to say that the man was not in the crosswalk, which would have been a lie, and she couldn't do it. As the case was closing, the agent called to make a final offer. He reminded the woman that the man was largely at fault, feigning injury, and that it would also be a blight on her driving record—especially if she had encountered him in the crosswalk.

It so happened that the woman had been living in a cramped little apartment trying whenever she could to find a better place which she could afford. The agent knew this, and when she hesitated a second after his argument, he said he knew of a condo just a short distance from where she was living which he

could get for her at an affordable price. Was she absolutely sure that this greedy man she supposedly slightly hit was in the crosswalk? For a moment the woman envisioned a beautiful life in the larger new place. But if she succumbed to the agent's arguments, she knew she would be out of grace and her conscience would plague her. So she continued to live in her cramped little place. Two months later, a friend told her of a beautiful apartment well within her means.

If we stick to our principles, unseen helpers send us grace. We can neither predict nor prescribe it, but it comes in ways that are as generous and unexpected as our learning experiences are trying of our patience and persistence. We admire those who show grace in the context of daily doing. Others need to pit themselves against the elements, conquer the physical heights, depths, and breadths of nature. The Himalayan Mountains are so massive and lofty that they distort the roundness of our globe. In the early attempts to climb Mt. Everest, a good number failed and some lost their lives. Sir Edmund Hillary and the man from the local area known as a Sherpa were the first to plant a flag on that imperious peak, but when the media questioned and even taunted to know which of the two stood there first, neither would say. Such people are not only courageous and resourceful, they also have the enhancing grace of generosity and a humility born of most daunting trials.

What are the lessons of grace to be learned on a daily basis? How do we react to someone who is always late? Can we come up with the soft answer that turns away wrath? Grace finds a way around any negativity. Some people learn to overcome many faults in one lifetime; others seem to never learn—especially if they are those we live with. On the street or in public, it seems easier to be courteous, but at home so many take out their frustrations on their dearest ones. Dealing with neighbors can really teach us a lot. Not to mention what kind of neighbors we ourselves happen to be! We all have had noisy ones, sloppy ones, careless ones who park halfway in our driveway, or borrow things they never bring back, or who spread rumors or even less pleasing truths about us. Graciousness can mollify many irritations, and if it does not solve a problem outright, we are ever afforded chances to discipline ourselves.

There was a native Indian couple living next door to a young family. The young lady had just finished

her college education and unconsciously flaunted her newly acquired superiority. The Indian woman was made to feel resentful and spread mean comments about her high-toned neighbor, which got back to the younger woman and she decided to put some of her knowledge to use by trying to make a friend of her neighbor. She was beginning to realize some of her own mistakes in the process. She was a serviceman's wife and could get groceries much cheaper at the commissary, so she often would buy an item or two for her neighbor. She offered to take care of her plants when the neighbor went on vacation. She admired her neighbor's cooking and her ability to keep her home immaculate; in fact, the supposedly well-educated young woman learned much of practical wisdom from the woman next door. During the time they lived so close together, they learned to truly care for each other, and when the young woman's husband was transferred, they missed each other. During the time the younger woman was overseas, they corresponded, and when she returned to the states they lived in opposite directions from each other. The older woman's health began to deteriorate, but her ex-neighbor didn't know this. When the older woman visited her, it was shocking to see how much she had aged. The old lady said she came to tell her friend how much she appreciated knowing her; that she had been the best person she had ever known. The older lady barely got back to her home before she died. To the younger woman, this relationship had always been an example of how the principles of Christ's teachings yielded happiness and grace to life.

Even today, we will be tempted to allow some annoyance to disturb our peace. Those in charge of our spiritual education, the unseen Guardians, do not miss one opportunity to give us good practice.

And you have noticed, when we have actually passed some tests of our integrity and patience, there can be at times a state of grace when we come across something that would otherwise have been lost, or when a person speaks words that are cheering and complimentary; our hand surely and quickly falls on what we need and we are shown a beautiful way of living in time.

We can also apply the teachings of grace as given in the Scripture, through the stories of those who demonstrated uncommon pluck and dignity, to beautify our inner as well as our outer life. □

—Allyce C. Bothmann