

# River of Grace

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This story shows how demons' lies blind people to the lavish flow of God's love and kindness, until Christ frees them and opens their eyes.

Chapter 1. Victor and Lori Discover The River of Grace

Chapter 2. Victor and Lori Receive Assurance of Eternal Salvation

Chapter 3. Victor and Lori Resist the Old Serpent and his Lies

Chapter 4. Victor and Lori Discover Joyful Spiritual Freedom

Epilogue: Lori's Joyful Elegy to Grace

Discussion: Questions

## Chapter 1

### Victor and Lori Discover the River of Grace

Victor moved from a small town to the city and learned to weld. He found work in a cluttered car repair shop, and while seeking new friends met Lori who had also recently come to the city. Their friendship grew and they married. Lori surprised Victor by how cheerful she made their small apartment with flowers and other things that only women would imagine, especially those who read a lot, as Lori did. Victor told her, "You aren't only beautiful, Lori; you're also creative. Every day you give me something wonderfully new to discover about you and about life!" He stroked her long, sleek, straight black hair. "I'm a lucky man!"

Looking at his strong, determined face, she saw a man who would accept tough duties without complaint. "And you are very thoughtful, Victor," she replied softly. "You are a deep thinker. Life will never be boring for us! You always... How can I say it? You explore!"

Creating and exploring in their simple way in a simple world, life together was a paradise, until one evening when Victor arrived home with a cloudy face. Lori read his emotions at a glance, and saw what no one else would have detected. "What's wrong?"

"The repair shop no longer needs a welder. I'm out of work."

She sat down suddenly, breathed deeply and clasped her hands in her lap. "I hope you do so soon, because our family is going to grow. Today I found that out."

Three weeks later when Victor arrived home, Lori noticed that the clouds in Victor's face had grown darker. "Now what happened?"

"No one needs a welder. We cannot pay another month's rent." Victor dropped onto a chair, clenched his fists, and hit the table. "I'm stymied, Lori! Really worried!"

"I'm worried, too, Victor. I fear maybe God is punishing me for the bad things I've done."

"I feel concern about that, too. I'm so uptight! My cousin told me today that some friends are meeting with a Hindu swami tonight to meditate and learn to relax. Let's go try it. We haven't practiced any religion very well."

## River of Grace

“That sounds nice, Victor. I want to find deeper meaning in my life. In our lives, I mean. I’m willing to experiment.”

“Well then, I shall meet you there,” Victor suggested. “I am going to see our landlord first. He lives near there. I’ll beg him to wait for us to pay our rent. Here’s the address where they will meet with the Swami. I might arrive a little late.”

The address that Victor gave Lori had a number wrong, and she went to a house across the street from it. “Is this the meeting for meditation?” she asked at the door.

“Meditation? Oh! I guess so. You are early.” A lady about Lori’s age welcomed her. “Come in. I’m Julie. My husband, Tino, helps lead the group. It’s his turn to lead discussion tonight. Please, have some tea.”

Others arrived; some carried Bibles. Julie moved quietly from person to person, greeting them, asking about their health and families, and offering tea and cookies. She was quick to laugh, a confident person who made visitors feel at ease. The meeting began, and Lori was surprised to hear them pray for each other in the name of Jesus Christ. She was afraid they would call on her. She had never prayed aloud and would have been mortified. A middle-aged lady told how she came to know Jesus’ love: “I had so much sin to be forgiven! I didn’t know that God’s grace could cover the horrid things I’d done, but...” She couldn’t finish. She was sobbing.

An older man began shyly, “I been about to die, but you all begged God to heal my emphysema. He done it. The doc, he asked what new medicine I took. I told him it was prayer, and he said it musta been, cause nothing he knew accounted for it.”

“Praise the Lord!” Julie exclaimed so spontaneously that it surprised Lori, sitting beside her.

A younger man with spiked hair told his testimonial, “You know how miserable I was, addicted to illegal drugs. But our Lord Jesus Christ has freed me.”

They praised the Lord again, and Tino promised the young man, “We shall help you to grow in the grace of God.”

Lori whispered to Julie, “I hope no one asks me to speak. This is all new to me.”

“Talk only if you want, Lori.”

Julie’s husband Tino seemed scholarly: thick glasses, professor’s demeanor, neatly trimmed moustache and confident, firm speech. Studied his smiling face, Lori thought, “I think I can trust him.”

Tino urged the group, “Tonight we’ll find what God says about grace in Romans 5.” Julie handed Lori a Bible, but she could not find Romans.

“Let me help you,” Julie said softly, and turned the pages.

The young man whom Christ had freed from drug addiction read with intense feeling, “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, grace reigns through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Tino asked the group, “What does this reveal to us about God?”

They discussed God’s grace, and then took turns reading Bible verses about how grace flows like a river. An elderly lady wearing a worn, faded dress said, “Hear what Isaiah 55:1 promises,

## River of Grace

‘Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!’ I love that promise!”

The man who had been healed read slowly from Psalm 36:8-9, “They feast on the abundance of your house; you give them drink from your river of delights. With you is the fountain of life.”

Lori felt her heart stir each time someone read God’s Word. A child about ten shyly quoted Revelation 22:1-2 by memory: “The angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. Its leaves bring healing to the nations.”

A lady in a brightly colored dress stood suddenly and left. She had not spoken and her face showed no expression. Lori followed her, but soon returned, shaking her head slightly. The middle-aged lady who had praised God’s forgiveness read John 7:37-38, her voice ringing with joy, “Jesus stood and cried out, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.’”

They then sat in groups of two and three persons to talk with each other; some prayed. Julie asked Lori, “Did you understand what the group was talking about?”

“Not really. I’ve never heard of a river of grace.”

Formal discussion ended, but no one left. Some stood conversing and others sat in small groups, chatting and laughing. Julie suggested to her husband, “Tino, can you please explain to Lori what you meant by a river of grace?”

“Of course!” He and Julie sat facing Lori, his face a wide smile. “God’s grace is my favorite topic! It means His unearned favor, His perfect love and endless kindness. We never deserve it. We receive His grace only by faith when Jesus Christ saves us from our sins. God gives it to us freely the rest of our lives on earth and throughout eternity. The Bible says a river of healing waters flows from God’s heavenly throne.”

Lori wiped a tear. “But how...? I don’t understand.”

“Trust our Savior Jesus Christ to forgive you. The Holy Spirit flows from God the Father, who gives new life to those who believe. Lori. He promised to give you new, pure, abundant and eternal life. It’s free! God’s wonderful gift! The Lord Jesus asked His Father in Heaven, the one Almighty God, to send His Holy Spirit to us. He is the River that brings us God’s Grace!”

“I never heard such a thing,” Lori replied. “I only heard that God will judge our works. I wonder why my parents and teachers never told me about such a wonderful thing.”

“This is why.” Tino cupped his hands over both eyes. “The Bible reveals that Satan, man’s greatest enemy, blinds people spiritually. He lures our attention away from the generous flow of grace. God, in His infinite wisdom, allows the devil lie to us to test our trust. God wants us to resist Satan and let the God’s grace flow into our hearts. Some people welcome Satan’s lies, because they want to control their own lives and not let God enter rule in their hearts. They refuse to let God’s spirit awaken faith. I hope you’ll let us help you discover God’s love, Lori.”

“Is what you did here this evening how you meditate? Is your husband Tino a divine swami?”

## River of Grace

“Oh, no! The swami’s group meets across the street. He and his followers are drifting in outer space by now, high on marijuana or something worse, doing filthy things I can’t even mention. Did you come here by mistake?”

“The luckiest mistake I ever made! I’ve never seen such joy and love.”

### Chapter 2

#### Victor and Lori Receive Assurance of Eternal Salvation

Back home, Lori tried to describe to Victor the river of God’s grace. “It’s big! The Swami, I mean the Christian guru or whatever they call him, said this vast river of grace is wider than the Amazon, the Nile and the Ganges all put together. It flows constantly from God in Heaven.”

“What do you mean, Lori? There is no such river!”

“Their leader, Tino, said that the River of Grace runs near enough for us to drink from it at any moment; because God’s Holy Spirit is as near as the air we breathe, Victor.”

“Are they Christians?”

“They surely love Jesus Christ. Tino, the host, said when our faith in God weakens, we listen to demons’ lies and turn away from the water of life. Our souls get thirsty; and our spirits become dry. He said if we doubt God’s grace, we become legalistic.”

“Wait! You left me behind! What did you drink at the meeting? Did you use drugs? What did they mean by ‘legalistic’?”

“So many questions! I think they meant we try to make ourselves holy by practicing petty religious rules. We reject the River of Grace and we keep others from it. We substitute human rituals and religious works instead of God’s work in our hearts. I hope I understood right.”

“Did they burn incense? Decorate with weird pictures? Use weird electronic gadgets?”

“Oh, no! It wasn’t like that at all, Victor. They said grace brings love, joy and forgiveness from God, not through electronics, beautiful buildings, incense or mysterious chants.”

Later that week Tino and Julie visited Victor and Lori. Tino asked Victor, “May we tell you the Good News, the true story of Christ’s death and resurrection?”

“Please do. Lori, bring tea.”

Tino read from Luke 24:46-48 and summarized the accounts of Jesus’ death and resurrection. He added, “God forgives all who turn to Him and receive the good news.”

“It sounds too good to be true,” Victor reasoned, and asked several questions about it.

Before Tino and Julie left, they invited Victor and Lori to the meeting in Tino’s home the next evening. At that meeting Ishmael, an elder who helped to lead Tino’s small group, told Tino, “I heard you’re a welder. I own a small metalworking shop and need a welder.”

Victor began the next day to work in Ishmael’s shop. He hugged Lori tightly that night and asked her, “Do you think we could pray like the Christians do, and thank God for my new job?”

“It will be the first time I ever prayed using my own words like our friends do.”

## River of Grace

At the next meeting, Victor and Lori prayed to Jesus, the divine Son of the One All-powerful God, and asked Him to save them from their sins. Several stayed afterwards to talk with them, and Lori exclaimed, "I feel so relieved!" Victor said he did, too.

Tino urged, "Since you've repented and trust our Lord Jesus Christ, you should be baptized."

On the way out, when nobody else was listening, Ishmael the shop owner told Tino and Lori, "To confirm your conversion you have to straighten out your lives first. Everything! Lori, Victor welds for me and when a spark burns him, he sometimes uses obscene language. You also must learn to dress like a Christian, Lori. You use too much cosmetic. Victor, you must stop smoking. You both must wait at least a year and learn all our doctrines. Then, if you haven't fallen into sin in the meantime, we can baptize you." Lori felt he was being unfair, but she was afraid to confront such a strong-minded man. Ishmael had a broad chest, muscular arms and large, powerful hands. His face reflected determination and he never smiled.

Victor replied, "Ishmael, that isn't what Tino read about the way the apostles baptized. They didn't wait that way."

Ishmael paid no attention, and handed Victor a sheet of paper. "Here are some rules I listed for new believers to obey, in order to become official members of our group. All new members must first leave drugs, liquor, fornication, cards, all forms of dancing, smoking, bad language and worldly music, and these other things on the list. You must fast weekly and spend at least two hours a day in prayer. You have to prove to us that you live absolutely holy lives!"

Victor and Lori felt crushed. Ishmael had used Satan's cruelest weapons to keep people from trusting God's grace, a flaming arrow labeled 'legalism'! They went home painfully discouraged.

At the next meeting, Victor started to tell Tino what Ishmael had told them, and Ishmael interrupted in an angry voice. "We must be careful with God's grace! We cannot move as fast as you'd like to do, Tino. Victor and Lori, now that you're Christians, you must earn God's approval by avoiding the sins I listed for you. Furthermore, I have a list of thirty-one doctrines that you must learn before you can become official members." He handed Victor the list.

Victor glanced at it and handed it back to Ishmael, sighing. "I'm no scholar. I could never remember all these details. Well, this leaves us out of this group! I'm sorry. We'll be going."

"Wait!" Tino replied firmly. "No one's going to exclude you. Ishmael, I didn't know you had such views when we agreed to lead this group together. You overwhelm these new believers! In God's sight, they are newborn babies spiritually, and you demand of them more than what most mature Christians can attain. You discourage and deter new believers by refusing to accept them until they master every doctrine and convince you they are perfect. Your list of prohibitions comes from your opinions, not from Scripture. Victor and Lori need assurance of God's grace." Tino read to Victor and Lori from the book of Acts how new, repentant believers were baptized without delay to confirm their salvation.

Ishmael grumbled, "Things were different in those ancient times, Tino."

"Baptism has not changed since then, or the need for it. When you were born, Ishmael, did your mom leave you outside in the cold and rain until you stopped fouling your diapers? Victor and Lori are newborn in Christ, and we'll bring them into a loving church body at once, as the apostles did. They need its warmth. No, they're not perfect, and neither are you and I. The apostles accepted bad people who trusted Jesus, and baptized them without delaying."

## River of Grace

Later that week Paul baptized the young couple and they felt happy assured, but they also felt confused by things that Ishmael had said, and the discord in the group that it caused. At the next meeting, Paul presented Victor and Lori to the group as new members, but Ishmael interrupted. “Listen to me! We cannot receive people as members while they still have sin in their lives.”

An awkward silence ensued until Tino replied calmly, “The apostles received folks that still had sin, Ishmael. Face it. They corrected new believers’ sin without condemning them. Paul corrected very bad sins in 1 Corinthians without condemning the believers’ souls. He reminded them of who they were — sons of God — and urged them to live up to their new identity.”

“You make the door into God’s kingdom too wide!” Ishmael snapped. “Becoming a Christian is a serious matter; that’s why Moses said to stone people to death who worked on the Sabbath.”

“Oh, please!” Tino replied. “We’re not stoning anyone!” God replaced that covenant of Law. New Christians all have faults; some faults are more obvious and public than others. That’s why God gave shepherds to lead His lambs. In the New Testament, baptism was for bad people. Victor and Lori qualify, because they’ve confessed their sin to God with repentant hearts.”

“You degrade the church!” Ishmael shouted, his face red.

“You degrade God’s grace,” Tino replied firmly in a softer tone. “Religious folk asked John the Baptist to baptize them, assuming they were good enough to merit it. He called them ‘snakes’ and refused. However, he baptized those who confessed their evil ways. The apostles baptized all who expressed repentance and faith, and then taught them to live the new life that baptism initiates, just as Romans 6 requires. The apostles dealt with new believers’ bad habits within the body of Christ, where they were accountable, receiving pastoral care, and the Holy Spirit was active. As long as I help lead this group, you will not invent legalistic requirements for baptism.”

“But things have changed since then!” Ishmael sputtered.

“Of course,” Tino clarified. “Society has changed and technology has grown. But the spiritual realities related to baptism are changeless. Sin is still sin. Grace is still grace. Jesus is the same forever. The church’s responsibility to bring grace freely to God’s newborn lambs can never change. Victor and Lori need grace today as much as Saul did on the way to Damascus.”

Ishmael looked at the young couple. “You work for me, Victor. You will do as I say!”

“Hey, that’s not fair!” Tino asserted. “Please, Ishmael! Let new believers simply do what Jesus said to do. He’s the one who commanded baptism. Let Victor obey Jesus out of love, not because you threaten to fire him! We have no authority to force him and Lori to do things in a way different from what the apostles required.”

“Ishmael,” Victor asked, “do you prefer that Lori and I obey you instead of Christ? We can’t do both. I respect you as my employer, and you treated me well on the job. But in these meetings, you take on a different personality. You seem driven to make Lori and I jump through your religious hoops. Must we obey your rules instead of the commands of Jesus?”

“Okay, let’s let it rest for now,” replied Ishmael, and we all sat. The doorbell sounded, and Julie let in a stranger. Ishmael stood. “I’d like to introduce a friend. Arthur is a man of unusually passionate spirituality. He’s an owl; he works all night driving a taxi while we’re all asleep. During the day, he serves the Lord. I don’t know when he sleeps!”

## River of Grace

The group welcomed Arthur. During the meeting, following discussion, Ishmael asked the visitor, “What do you think about what we’ve been discussing, Arthur?”

“I like what you said about fasting once a week. I have more things to add to that. A group that follows stricter rules is more spiritual! Oh yes! It makes sure all members are sincere!”

Tino replied, “Ishmael and Arthur, do you both enjoy multiply rules? Jesus freed us from the Old Testament law with all its rules. I hope you don’t try to take us back to the ancient Law.” Tino noticed Victor’s worried face and added, “We shouldn’t discuss these things now.”

Arthur paid no attention; he looked at Victor and began adding things that a “true” Christian had to do. He then faced Tino. “What is wrong with observing some Old Testament laws?”

“What is wrong is your view of the Law. You want folks to earn God’s approval by their works. The New Covenant that Christ sealed with His blood offers grace through faith. God keeps us in His hands by His grace, through the work of the risen Christ, not by our efforts. Ephesians assures new believers like Victor and Lori of God’s grace and acceptance in Christ.”

“Yes, of course. As I was saying, I require all members to give a tenth of their income to support to God’s work. Look at what we can do with the money! My group bought me a beautiful, huge, mahogany pulpit.” The taxi driver began speaking rapidly, stopping only to lick his lips between sentences, words flowing like machine gun bursts. His head jerked from side to side as his owlish eyes seemed to peer at everyone at once. Then he leaned toward Victor and glared without blinking into Victor’s eyes, like a tiger about to pounce. “Yes, young man! Making believers follow strict rules and give sacrificially proves they know God’s ways!

Tino tactfully quieted the visitor, and closed the meeting with prayer. While the rest were eating cake, Tino came to Victor and Lori to assure them, “You don’t have to do all the things that Ishmael and Arthur said, in order to win God’s approval.”

“I’m confused,” Victor confessed. “What is the place of good works in our Christian life?”

“God is always pleased when we do good works, Victor. He will reward you in heaven for them, but our good works don’t get us to heaven. Only Christ does that, by letting us participate by faith in His death and resurrection. Good works are necessary in our life, but they’re the result of God’s salvation, not its cause. Ephesians 2:8-10 makes this clear. I am sorry you had to listen to us argue about God’s grace. God’s Word assures you that He has forgiven you. You believed Him, and He’s begun His transforming work in you. He’s keeping you securely in His hands, and will do so for all eternity, as Jesus said in John 10.”

Victor replied, “Ishmael isn’t convinced that Lori and I are true Christians. If mature leaders such as Ishmael and Arthur doubt our salvation, then how can Lori and I be sure of it?”

“I talked with other leaders in our association of churches yesterday, and they told me to stand firm, and not require you to follow human rules to be baptized. Let’s read Romans chapter 8 to find assurances of God’s grace. Would you read it, Victor?”

Lori wept when Victor read that it is impossible for believers in Christ to be separated from God’s eternal love. Victor exclaimed, “How reassuring! I felt so discouraged by Ishmael and Arthur! It was like being hit in the stomach. How’d I let myself doubt so quickly, Tino?”

“You were hit, all right — with Satan’s flaming arrow labeled ‘Legalism’.”

Lori remarked, “It was painful! Is there no protection, Tino?”

## River of Grace

“God provides protection. Ephesians 6 says the shield of faith deflects Satan’s arrows.”

“Can we read that?” Victor begged, and read how God’s armor protects against the devil. He exclaimed, “Now I see why we felt so bad. We were wounded by those flaming arrows!”

“Not only you and Lori. Our brothers Ishmael and Arthur have been poisoned by the arrow of legalism. They need our prayers.”

“They’re so adamant!” Lori lamented. She closed her eyes for a moment, and then exclaimed, “Just think! If we could have seen with angel’s eyes yesterday, we’d have seen Satan aim his bow shoot his arrows. We could have dodged his arrow of ‘Legalism’.”

Tino laughed. “That’s good, Lori! Jesus warned us to avoid the virus of the Pharisees. They were quite religious, but opposed Jesus when He offered God’s free grace to sinners.”

### Exercises

Which is the better way to assure believers that God accepts and forgives them?

- Give them many strict rules to follow.
- Encourage them to trust God’s Word and His love.

*[You might want to let your group discuss the answer in Colossians 2:20 through 3:1.]*

Which is the better motive for a believer to obey Jesus?

- Love
- Fear

*[You might want to let your group discuss the answer in John 14:15.]*

## Chapter 3

### Victor and Lori Resist the Old Serpent and his Lies

Twang!

Unseen by human eye, the enemy of all men shot in a flaming arrow labeled ‘Fear.’

Twang!

A second missile flew, leveled ‘Distrust’ and soared straight toward Victor and Lori.

The Adversary aimed again, at Ishmael and Arthur. Twang! Twang! A pair of sharp-pointed, flaming arrows labeled ‘Materialism’ and ‘Rationalism’ hurtled toward earth. The emperor who reigns over all evil spirits roared with grotesque laughter, and then commanded his demon aides, “Bring the missiles that burn hottest. The time has come to launch them!” His evil, hollow laugh echoed throughout hell’s chambers as a leering demon lit the wicks on the venomous arrows.

Twang! Twang! Twang! A volley of arrows flew. “Craving for Power” said their labels, and they soared straight toward Tino’s group. The demons’ master gloated with a twisted sneer, “That will clog the flow of my Enemy’s disgusting grace!”

At the next meeting, before worship started, Ishmael announced, “Good news! Arthur has decided to leave the group he’s been leading to join ours. Now we’ll have godly discipline.”

“Why’d you leave your group?” Tino asked Arthur.

## River of Grace

“They’re unspiritual, unwilling to do what I required as leader. So I withdrew fellowship from them. They aren’t true Christians.”

“The tiger has pounced!” Lori whispered to Victor, squeezing his hand.

During the meeting, Ishmael and Arthur dominated the discussion whenever they could. Tino seemed to lose control. When they started to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, Ishmael told Victor and Lori, “You cannot participate if you committed any sin this past week.”

Arthur held up the bread. “This won’t help you. God does nothing special during the Lord’s Supper. There is no mystery. It’s only a visual aid to help us remember that Jesus died. The Holy Spirit does nothing supernatural. The bread only represents Jesus’ Body, a visual aid to our memory and nothing more. Don’t say that it ‘is’ Jesus’ body. It only ‘represents’ Jesus’ body.”

Tino groaned. “That’s Arthur’s opinion. There is a very real mystery in this sacrament.” Arthur started to argue, but Tino said, “We’ll debate it later. Right now we’re worshipping.”

Tino baptized Victor and Lori in a private ceremony; they invited only a few friends and relatives, to avoid arguing with Arthur and Ishmael. A time of joy followed this for about a month when, following a meeting, Julie tugged Lori by the arm and they stepped into another room where Julie remarked, “You look troubled this evening, Lori.”

“I feel troubled. I’ve lost the joy I had when I first received Jesus. The river of grace dried up for me. I’ve done some bad things. I argued with Victor when I should have been submissive. I was shamefully stubborn. I can’t act nice all the time as you do, Julie! I’m a worthless failure!”

“No, Lori! You are a new believer, a spiritual child in Christ. We all experience failures.”

“Has God really saved us? Both Victor and I get discouraged whenever we hear Ishmael or Arthur. They make so many demands! We wonder if we’re worthy to receive God’s grace.”

“Oh! Lori!” Julie embraced the tearful young lady. “None of us is worthy of grace! The Holy Spirit lives in you, bringing to you all of God’s grace. Grace is always there for you. We simply have to embrace the things that God promises us to assure us of His presence and His grace.”

“But how can we be sure of God’s grace when we feel so ashamed, Julie?”

“God gives His children joy, peace and other virtues. This grace comes from Him through His Word and through His work in our hearts as we serve one another with the power of God’s Holy Spirit. It also comes through baptism, prayer and the Lord’s Supper.”

“Victor and I are doing all that, Julie, but we still feel ashamed and fearful because of bad things we’ve done, and sometimes still do.”

“Satan is shooting his fiery arrows again, Lori, to poison your minds with doubt. This happens to new believers after their first joy weakens. We must not trust our feelings.”

The two ladies returned to the group, and Lori confessed to Tino, “I can’t help feeling doubts when I listen to Arthur.”

“Arthur means well, but he’s a rationalist.”

“What is a rationalist?”

“Christian rationalists analyze God’s Word with human reason. They have to understand something fully before they can believe it. However, no one can understand God’s grace

## River of Grace

byreasoning. Grace is illogical. Justice, on the other hand, is logical. Grace defies human reason; it's always undeserved. When men spat upon our Lord Jesus Christ, and insulted, slapped and crucified Him, He responded to His tormentors only with loving forgiveness. That was pure grace, Lori, beyond human understanding."

"Is that why Arthur denied any mystery in the Lord's Supper?" Victor asked. "That bothered me. I read in 1 Corinthians 10:16 that we participate in Jesus' body. That's a mystery to me."

"A precious mystery!" Lori added.

Tino affirmed, "God takes the mystery very seriously. 1 Corinthians 11 states that He punished believers who failed to discern Christ's body when taking the sacrament. Arthur defines it in purely rationalistic terms and denies any supernatural work. I guess he thinks the Holy Spirit takes a vacation when we break bread together! I once thought that way, but I asked God to forgive my doubts. He did, Lori. I have learned to doubt my own doubts."

"What do you mean by a mystery?" Victor asked.

"Jesus and Paul both said the bread 'is' Christ's body. They didn't say that it 'represents' His body. The bread remains bread, but in a real spiritual way it is Christ's body. It may be a symbol, but the symbol takes on the power of the reality that it symbolizes, if we receive it with faith."

"I sensed God working during the Lord's Supper," Victor replied. "I felt that Christ was really present. Now I know why, but I have another question. Arthur pushes people to give money and says things that make me feel guilty. You and Arthur both use the Bible, but you don't leave us feeling guilty. Why the difference?"

"Arthur is a materialist. He measures God's blessing in people's lives by the material things that they own. Arthur told me that a church is successful only when it owns valuable property. I'm praying for him and Ishmael. They mean well but let the world sway them. Even Christians can get ideas that originate from demons."

A month later, Tino announced to at a meeting, "Our group is growing too big to care for all its members. We should form another group as a home church. I think Victor and Lori can lead it. They are growing rapidly in Christ. Julie and I mentor them."

"That would cause division, Tino!" Ishmael was shaking with emotion. "We can't let new believers lead home groups."

Arthur added, "I don't trust innovators like you, Tino. They always want to start new things. We must keep tight control over the home groups. We cannot let home groups act as though they were small churches; they'd have too much freedom. They should all use the study materials that Ishmael has provided, and remain as Bible study groups."

"Please, Arthur!" Tino groaned. "Such restrictions would destroy what God is doing in our group. God requires much more than studying the Bible. We must practice all the activities that the New Testament requires for a group of believers. If we follow your teaching schedule, then we can't select studies that fit current needs of our believers."

Arthur asked Tino, "Why did you say that we use the New Testament to find our guidelines? We also use the Old Testament."

## River of Grace

“We use the Old Testament for praise and edifying study, but not to define the activities of a New Testament church. Otherwise, we’d have to circumcise babies and do a host of other things that Christ freed us from. We must do the activities that Christ and His apostles required.”

Arthur answered Tino, “If we do form several groups, each group will practice a different ministry as well as teach the Word. One group will do evangelism. Another will lead united worship. Another will manage finances and promote giving. With this specialized organization we can keep a tight control over all of the groups and know what everyone is doing.”

Tino cautioned, “Your ‘specialized organization’ locks folks into isolated compartments. It disconnects the varied spiritual gifts that Christ gives to His Body! It gathers those with the same gift into one group, rather than letting them use their gifts reciprocally to serve folk with other gifts. God’s Word requires that people with gifts for different ministries serve one another.”

“I disagree!” Arthur shot back. “By organizing separate programs we can control the groups. It’s the only prudent way.” Two other elders murmured agreement with Arthur.

Tino looked discouraged. He begged, “Please consider the biblical way. To organize the body of Christ, we bring folk with different spiritual gifts together to harmonize their work; we do not separate them. Read 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12 and Ephesians 4:11-16. We’re to serve one another in love with our different ministries in the same way organs of our bodies work as one. Our home groups do this, and our groups serve each other. Why abandon a biblical procedure?”

“You’d make each group into a church!” Arthur griped. “Such groups would be hard for us to control. We need the kind of organization that gives firm control to leaders like us, Tino.”

“You worry too much about power. Let’s trust the Holy Spirit to guide the groups, and let a group develop ministries as God leads it. 2 Corinthians 3:17 grants this freedom in the Spirit.”

Arthur whined, “You’d let everyone do something different. We’d not know what might happen from one week to the next. Such freedom creates confusion. We need one standard practice for all groups, and for everyone in a group! That’s the only way to maintain true unity!”

“Let’s not confuse unity with uniformity,” Tino begged. “True unity in Christ doesn’t mean that everyone does the same activity. It means the opposite! The apostles taught about unity in the body when they dealt with diverse spiritual gifts. Biblical unity in Christ means that the Holy Spirit harmonizes all our different gift-based ministries in love.”

An elder who had agreed with Arthur spoke. “That’s a probing truth, Tino. I hadn’t noticed it. Yes! 1 Corinthians 12 does teach that very clearly. Thank you, Tino. Let’s teach and equip the believers in any group to serve in different ways to build up the entire Body.”

“Good!” Tino responded. “You will find that the needs and opportunities for serving one another change constantly, just as in the New Testament.”

Ishmael argued, “You say believers can do whatever they want. We’ll lose discipline in our groups! This grows out your twisted view of grace. One can do whatever he wants! Even sin!”

Tino groaned. “I’ve never taught that. Only a fool teaches that grace gives the right to sin. Those who receive God’s grace ‘die to sin,’ as the apostle Paul said. Let’s define grace the way that God defines it. Grace is God’s unmerited favor; repentant believers receive it freely through Christ when they die to sin and God raises them together with Jesus to new life. They are reborn

## River of Grace

into God's family, God's adopted children, heirs together with Christ of heaven's unlimited riches.

"Sadly, some teach that grace means we must never offend anyone; we must maintain loving relationships at all costs. That twists God's Word dangerously! Shepherds in the Kingdom of God must confront correct those who err firmly, even if it causes temporary sadness, just as Christ and His apostles did. The most loving thing we can do for a mistaken or sinning brother in Christ is correct him when he needs it. If he is God's true child, he'll bounce back. However, Christ and Paul both said to shunerring believers who refuse to repent.

"Another misunderstanding of grace says God will not hold believers accountable for their sins. He certainly will! His forgiveness assures us that He will not send us into eternal punishment, however, Christ will sit on His judgment seat and test our works at the entry gate into His heavenly Kingdom. He will burn up our bad works, just as Moses burned the illegal contraband that soldiers tried to smuggle into God's holy camp, in Numbers 31. Then, Christ will reward us for our good works that withstand His trial by fire."

Ishmael murmured, "You emphasize grace too much, Tino."

"You force me to. I have to emphasize it in order to counteract your legalism, Ishmael."

Ishmael challenged, "I've noted all the verses you've cited about grace, and I'm going to check them out. I'll find out who's right!"

Later that month, Tino and Julie visited Victor and Lori. Tino remarked, "You missed our last two meetings, Victor. Is something wrong?"

"I'm tired of fearing I'll offend Ishmael and Arthur. I just do what they want to avoid a hassle. At work, Ishmael tells me what to do to be a Christian, and makes me feel guilty if I disagree."

Lori added, "Arthur makes me fear God's rejection. I don't enjoy the fellowship anymore."

Tino thought a moment and replied firmly, "If Ishmael or Arthur drive new believers away, then we must discipline and correct them as God requires."

"How will you punish them?" Victor asked.

"I don't mean to punish! We leave punishment to God. God disciplines His children, sometimes painfully, because He loves them. We correct offending believer to restore them, not to punish them. When believers err seriously, we are to correct them gently but firmly, as Galatians 6:1 requires. If they rebel against such correction and keep sinning, are we to exclude them from the Lord's Supper until they repent, as 1 Corinthians 5 requires. Let's pray."

Victor and Lori gained courage and witnessed to friends about what Jesus had done for them. They resumed attending the meetings, and after a few weeks Tino told them, "Your friends are coming to Christ. It's time you lead a new group in your home. What do you think, Victor?"

"Could I do that? Ishmael won't like it if I led a group. I might make mistakes, Tino."

"Stop paying them attention. They are not your leaders."

"They are so stingy with God's grace!" Lori exclaimed. "It disturbs me, Tino."

"They have no power to stop the flow of grace as long as we stand firm in our faith."

## River of Grace

After praying, Victor agreed to lead a new group. After their first two meetings, he told Lori, “It was easier than I thought. We simply repeated the things that Tino and Julie did for us.”

“I read this morning what Paul told the Corinthians, ‘Imitate me as I imitate Christ.’ We’re doing that, Victor. We imitate our mentor Tino, and he imitates Jesus.”

“And look at the result!” Victor rejoiced. “Our friends, and their friends, and the friends of their friends, are coming to Christ! The River of Grace flows swifter than I had imagined!”

Tino met weekly with Victor to listen to how his new group was progressing, and helped him plan their next meetings. After growing in Christ and in understanding God’s Word, they met less often with Tino and Lori.

During a mentoring session, Tino told Victor, “I’m going to visit missionaries that we sent to another part of the country. I’ll be gone for several weeks. While I am gone, I want you and Lori to concentrate on the ‘one another’ commands and help each person in your group to serve each other with their different spiritual gifts.”

“What are the ‘one-another’ commands?” Victor asked.

“Serve one another, bear one another’s burdens, confess your faults to one another, correct one another, love one another fervently, forgive one another, and many more.”

Victor agreed; heread the ‘one-another’ commands and grouped them in categories:

### ‘One-another’ Commands for Interaction

Develop *fellowship* within and among groups

#### Love:

Love one another: John 13:34-35; 5:12, 17; Romans 12: 10; 1 Thessalonians 4:9; 1 John 3:11, 14, 23; 4:7, 11, 12; 2 John 1:5; 1 Peter 1:22  
Love one another to fulfill the law: Romans 13:8  
Increase our love one for another: 2 Thessalonians 1:3  
Abound in love for another: 1 Thessalonians 3:12  
Love each other deeply, to cover a multitude of sins: 1 Peter 4:8

#### Interact with care:

Have fellowship one with another: 1 John 1:7  
Forgive one another: Ephesians 3:13; 4:32; Colossians. 3:13  
Greet one another with a holy kiss (embrace, in some cultures): Romans 16:16;  
1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Peter 5:14  
Wait for one another to break bread: 1 Corinthians 11:33  
Bear one another’s sufferings: 1 Corinthians 12:26

*Serve* one another (Apply to individuals and to groups; groups serve other groups)

#### Serve:

Serve one another with the gifts each person has received: 1 Peter 4:10  
Serve one another in love: Galatians 5:13  
Be kind to each other: 1 Thessalonians 5:15  
Care for one another: 1 Corinthians 12:25  
Bear the burdens one for another: Galatians 6:2  
Wash one another’s feet (sign of humble service to others): John 13:14  
Work with one another: 1 Corinthians 3:9; 2 Corinthians 6:1

## River of Grace

### Teach:

Teach one another: Colossians 3:16

Instruct one another: Romans 5:14

### Encourage:

Encourage one another: Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 10:25

Exhort one another: Hebrews 3:13

Speak the truth to one another: Ephesians 4:25

Lay down our lives one for another: 1 John 3:16

Spur one another to love and good deeds: Hebrews 10:24

### Edify:

Edify (strengthen, build up) one another: 1 Thessalonians 4:18 & 5:1, 11

Edify one another gathering together each one with a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or its interpretation: 1 Corinthians 14:26

### Give spiritual care:

Confess our sins one to another: James 5:16

Pray for one another: James 5:16

Cultivate *unity* in and between groups

### Act with humility:

Honor one another: Romans 12:10

Agree one with another: 2 Corinthians 13:11; Romans 12:16; 15:5

Don't criticize one another: Romans 14:13

Don't speak bad one of another: James 4:11; 5:9

Submit to one another: Ephesians 5:21

Be clothed with humility toward one another: 1 Peter 5:5

### Live in harmony:

Have patience one with another: Ephesians 4:2

Live in peace one with another: Matthew 9:50

Receive one another with hospitality: Romans 15:7; 1 Peter. 4:9

Glorify God together: Romans 15:6

The next time Victor met with Tino, he reported his progress. "We started with the 'one anothers' and it caused a problem. Some folks just argued with each other."

"That's because Satan opposes such loving interaction. His demons try to keep us from serving one another the way God requires. Satan hates it when believers use their spiritual gifts to serve one another. He never stops struggling to stifle the flow of God's grace. Just resist him, as James said, and he will flee from you. Jesus destroyed forever the demons' power over us."

"That's what they argued about, spiritual gifts. I didn't know how to answer their questions."

"The original word for 'gifts' in the Bible was *charismas*. It meant 'graces' or 'gifts.' God gives special abilities to serve others. All believers have gifts, as Ephesians 4:11-12 reveals. They are to use them in different ministries."

"Arthur told me that ministry means preaching."

"There are many ministries," Tino emphasized. They discussed different ways to serve that the New Testament requires, and Victor wrote them:

Doing pastoral counseling, correcting and consoling those who grieve,

## River of Grace

Healing, helping and showing mercy,  
Speaking words of exhortation, prophecy and encouragement,  
Practicing stewardship (giving),  
Interceding in prayer and having family devotions,  
Strengthening marriage, family and child care,  
Worshipping and planning special events for fellowship,  
Evangelizing, discipling and shepherding,  
Starting new churches or cell groups, and sending missionaries,  
Applying the Word of God to people's needs, and training leaders.

Victor commented, "So many things to do! How can we ever do them all?"

"God promised to help you. If your group is weak in a ministry, let another group help you."

Early next morning, noise at the door awakened Victor, and he looked out the window. "Ishmael! Something's wrong!" He rushed to let Ishmael in while Lori put on a robe.

"Victor!" gasped Ishmael. "No need to go to work today! The shop burned down!"

"What?"

"It burned down. Nothing but ashes. Heat ruined all the equipment. Nothing's left. Like a fool, I'd let the insurance lapse." Ishmael wept. Lori held his hand while Victor prayed.

Victor went and helped Ishmael clean up the mess; they found nothing among the ashes except a few small tools worth saving. Ishmael came home with Victor, bathed and sat in borrowed clothes in silence. Lori brought tea and asked, "What can we do to help you, Ishmael?"

No answer. They endured another long silence, and then Ishmael cried, "God did it to me!"

"No!" Lori emphasized. "Satan did it."

"God let Satan do it!"

Victor tried to talk with Ishmael, but he just sat with his face buried in his hands. Finally, he spoke softly. "Lori, bring matches."

"Matches?" she asked. "Why? Do you want to burn something else up?"

"Yes." He reached into his pocket. "This is the list of things that I said you and Victor had to do. I've kept using it with other new believers. I'm going to burn it up."

Lori brought matches. "Please, not over the rug, Ishmael."

He took the grace-denying rules to the sink, burned it up and scorched a finger in the process. "I attended my uncle's church. Like my father, he had rejected Islam and become a zealous Christian, but a very strict one. He'd brought over from Islam much of its legalism. He taught me the things I told you to do. I was afraid if I didn't do them, then God would punish me. I lived in fear. Since I was your employer, I tried to care for you the same way, and make you do the same things, so God wouldn't punish you. Then I read the verses about grace that Tino gave us; that, and the fire that destroyed the shop, forced me to face reality. I've been very wrong. I was fighting against God's grace."

Victor was too surprised to speak. After another long silence, Lori said softly. "I don't know whether I should weep or shout for joy!" She did both.

## River of Grace

Victor returned home a few days later to tell Lori, "I found another job! To test me, they told me to weld some things that only an experienced welder could do well. The manager said I had a steady, quick hand and will double what Ishmael paid!"

"All our problems are going away!" she exclaimed.

"Not all. Arthur received money from a large church somewhere, to develop his ministry. He's paying people, some in our group, to teach those legalistic things that Ishmael has abandoned. Arthur is taking advantage of Tino's absence and has convinced two families to leave Tino's group and follow him. They've starting a congregation that they call the One True Way. On the way home, I saw Arthur enter the house of the family that joined our group last week. The poison from the devil's arrow is spreading!"

Lori sat and groaned.

### Exercises

God promises to bless us in this life with:

Material blessings  
Spiritual blessings

[You might want to discuss the answer in Ephesians 1:3 with your group. Its alternative does not account for the millions of Christians in the world who are poor materially.]

Rationalistic thinkers deny that God brings to us His supernatural grace through a sacrament. What danger lies in defining by human reasoning alone how we receive God's grace?

[Grace goes beyond human reason. No religious leader or philosopher ever conceived of grace without biblical revelation.]

Materialists define grace in terms of earthly wealth. Give a better biblical definition:

What are your plans for your congregation or cell group, to help believers serve one another in love, as God requires in the 'one-another' commands?

What are your plans to organize your group in a way that allows the believers to use their spiritual gifts to practice all the ministries that the New Testament requires?

If you are training others, what are your plans to avoid abusive control by new leaders that you train?

## Chapter 4

### Victor and Lori Discover Joyful Spiritual Freedom

Tino returned from his trip and told Victor and Lori, "I'm going back soon for a month. God has begun a movement, and they need help to train leaders. While I'm gone, Victor, please attend my group's meetings and help lead. Watch for 'wolves' that take advantage of my absence."

"Wolves?"

"Wolves search for weak sheep. Jesus and the apostle Paul called false shepherds 'wolves' because they rob sheep from other shepherds, Tino."

"A wolf's already sniffing around our flock. Arthur's cousin, Shaji, tries to make the new believers think that he's the only person in our group who is truly spiritual."

## River of Grace

“So watch out! Satan’s lies are like yeast that spreads through a mass of dough. His lies sound spiritual and spread among unsuspecting believers like measles. God will help you detect and resist them, Victor. They infuse individualism and proud dogmatism to stifle grace.”

“How individualism stifle grace?”

“You’ll find out when you practice the ‘one-another’ commands. Satan injects individualism to hinder interaction. Individualists want private faith. They avoid closely-knit groups.

“You also mentioned ‘proud dogmatism.’ How does it cancel grace, Tino?”

“Proud dogmatism builds faith on knowledge. “Knowledge puffs us up with pride, as Paul warned. Our one foundation is Jesus, the Rock upon which the wise man built his house, in Jesus’ parable of the two builders. The wise builder and the foolish one who built on sand both heard Jesus’ words. They both had knowledge, but only the wise man loved Jesus enough to obey Him. A proud dogmatist is satisfied with teaching good doctrine. He trusts his superior knowledge and neglects other activities that Jesus requires.”

Julie added, “Proud teachers drill a hole in your head, insert a funnel and pour in their opinions! Fortunately, the new believers in our group want to interact with active discussion. They want freedom to discuss what the Bible says and let the Holy Spirit guide them, rather than blindly accepting opinions of dogmatists.”

“Dogmatism isn’t always wrong,” Tino replied. “Sheep need fences. We can’t let sheep wander wherever they want, or they’ll die. A wise shepherd helps believers to avoid error, work together and think how to apply God’s liberating Word.”

Victor asked, “How can our group work together more actively as they learn God’s Word?”

“Ask them to read or tell Bible stories,” Tino suggested, “and then discuss what the story teaches about God, and what they should do about it. Use role-plays and briefly dramatize stories. Make clear what you want them to learn. Ask questions that help them meditate on God and His work. Let different folks teach rather than just one person teaching all the time.”

“Oh!” Lori exclaimed. “I would love to help others prepare short dramas that teach God’s Word! Can we act out the Garden of Eden? Or Ruth?”

“I’d enjoy watching you play Queen Esther,” Victor told Lori. “I could play the wasteful son that spent the inheritance that his father gave him. I’ve had the experience!”

“I hope you don’t cast me as the fattened calf and slit my throat!” Tino laughed.

“Will the leaders of our movement let us teach in such a creative way?” Lori asked Tino.

“You have freedom now to teach creatively. We fought the spiritual war against proud dogmatism and won.”

“You said dogmatism isn’t always wrong,” Victor recalled. “When is it proper, Tino?”

“Whenever we deal with vital convictions based on God’s Word. We exercise dogmatism to stand against bad teaching and bad preaching.”

“When is preaching bad?” Victor asked Tino.

“A bad preacher wants hearers to sit and listen passively to his dogmatic oratory. He doesn’t see them as a living body, serving one another, warring against Satan and serving the needy.”

## River of Grace

Victor glanced at his notebook in which he always wrote Tino's remarks, and sighed. "Will I ever learn all these things?"

Tino assured him, "You and Lori already understand more about God and His grace than some people do who have been believers for forty years. Victor, you have an explorer's mind! You ask more questions than anyone I know!"

"Too many?"

"Oh, no! Your curiosity and discernment are gifts of God's grace, work of the Holy Spirit."

"How does the Holy Spirit give us discernment, Tino?"

"He illuminates our minds, to apply God's Word to our lives, our friends and our enemies. Paul wrote that Satan, the god of this world, blinds unbelievers' minds. By the miracle of grace, but believers discern God's truth when they keep attuned to Christ. The Holy Spirit gives us an inner witness; He guides us, as Romans 8 says, and assures us that we are sons of God."

Victor asked Tino, "Does the Holy Spirit only use Scripture to illuminate our minds?"

"Scripture is our final authority, but Psalm 19 and Romans 1 reveal that God also uses other things to instruct us: nature, history, friends, conscience, prayer, sometimes dreams."

"I read in Jeremiah that false prophets preached dreams," Victor recalled.

"False prophets always contradict Scripture or twist it, and never glorify Jesus Christ. They glorify themselves or an organization that keeps power-hungry religious tyrants in power. However, another kind of false teaching does not come from false prophets. It comes from misled believers, and can be even more deceptive because it's not the content but the intent that is false. Watch out for teachers who use the Word of God only as content for preaching or teaching. We must teach the Word to guide our group's activities and the way we witness, worship, confirm new believers, organize for ministry, train pastors and send missionaries. Misled teachers often use the Bible accurately as to the content of their teaching, but they do other activities in ways that are totally contrary to the New Testament."

"How can we avoid that, Tino?" Victor asked. "How do we discern God's will?"

"Some Christians let only by their feelings and experiences guide them. Others seek to be led only by Scripture. Still others only want people in their congregation to lead them. We need to balance all these ways. The Holy Spirit uses all three ways to guide us — our experiences, the Word, and the community of believers. Without this balance, a congregation emphasizes one aspect of learning to excess. Satan tries to destroy balance in the body of Christ. Almost always, a congregation's greatest weakness is its greatest strength taken to excess."

Victor remarked, "My greatest struggle is still with Arthur and his followers. They've calmed down a bit, but still manipulate the consciences of new believers to make them feel guilty. Arthur often quotes Old Testament prophets about how God punishes."

"Arthur and other legalists sometimes make little distinction between the Old and New Testaments. We must discern between law and grace, and the vast difference between the Old and New Covenants. The death and resurrection of Jesus changed forever God's way of dealing with sinful men. God's people have passed from law to grace, as Romans 6:14 affirms. Legalists cling to Old Testament Law or its modern counterpart; they multiply rules."

## River of Grace

“I know the ancient Law applied to Israel,” Victor replied. “Do none of its laws apply today?”

“Jesus and His apostles repeated some Old Testament laws as guidelines for the church. They explicitly commanded all the Ten Commandments that were the base of the Old Covenant, except the Sabbath command; Paul allowed the Romans to gather for worship on any day. We follow New Testament guidelines now; it confuses if we mix in Old Testament laws arbitrarily.”

“Which of the old laws would we not obey today?”

“Keep uncircumcised men out of worship. Stab children who curse parents. Stone adulterers and Sabbath-breakers. Slay idolaters. Spear any who prophesy what fails to come true. Let grain fields lie idle every seventh year. Go only to Jerusalem to worship and slay a male sheep. Marry a childless brother’s widow and have two wives.”

“How severe the old law was!” Lori commented to Tino.

“Very harsh. The letter of the Law condemned and led to death, as 2 Corinthians 3 says.

Victor asked, with his pen poised to write, “So why did God give the Law to Moses?”

“The ancient law had three main purposes.

“First, Romans 3:20 says God gave the Law so people would know they were sinners.

“Second, Galatians 3:24 says the Law was a tutor to prepare God’s people to receive Christ.

“Third, the Law gave provided civil, military and religious government to the nation of Israel to provide security and justice.

“We participate now in a New Covenant of grace that Jeremiah 31:31 foretold hundreds of years before Jesus was born. God revealed that the old, temporary covenant would be replaced by a New Covenant in which God’s laws would be written in our hearts instead of on stone.”

Victor asked, “Does the New Testament say that the Law no longer applies to us?”

“In Matthew 22, Jesus said the entire Old Testament law is fulfilled in the law of love, which is a fruit of the Spirit that God Gives to all believers. Romans 6 asserts that we are no longer under law but under grace. Galatians 2 and 3 show that we are not justified by the works of the law, but by grace through faith. Colossians 2 teaches that Jesus, by His death and resurrection, canceled the sentence of death by the Law’s decrees. 2 Corinthians 3 states that the glory of the eternal New Covenant far surpasses the glory of the Old Covenant that God made to fade away.

“Such a relief!” exclaimed Lori. “Now I see why Arthur can’t force us to heed all his rules.”

At the first meeting after Tino had left, Victor was pleased to see some former members of both his and Tino’s groups return after joining Arthur’s “anti” group that had lasted only a month. Arthur had also returned and announced, “We are going to have a business meeting. We will now elect a new leader for this group. We had too much confusion under Tino’s leadership, but now that he’s gone I am merging my group with this one. Blessed unity!”

One who had come with Arthur spoke. “My name is Shaji. I belong to this group now. We know that Tino led this group without discipline. He let new believers like Victor do whatever they wanted. We’ve come to restore God’s true order. I nominate Arthur to be our new leader.”

“Sir,” Ishmael spoke firmly. “We don’t know you, and we’ll have no election while our leader Tino is absent. Two months ago I’d have joined you, but I’ve discovered God’s grace.”

## River of Grace

Arthur snapped, "I assumed that we had your support, Ishmael."

"I know what you want, Arthur," Ishmael replied. "You and I made those plans. I agreed with you then. You want to control all of our groups. You make believers feel guilty if they don't do the things you demand. You make them fear God will punish them, if they don't yield to your will. You make them give money out of guilt. You use fear to manipulate people. You learned to do so from me." He paused and dropped his head. "I am ashamed of that now."

"What... What has happened to you, Ishmael?" Arthur stammered.

"I drank from God's River of Grace. The Almighty renewed by spirit. I no longer share your ambitions, Arthur. God's love destroyed my business with fire, forcing me to stop thinking only about money and controlling people. Now I love and serve our Lord Jesus Christ."

"There are demons in this room!" Shaji cried. "Demons! Demons!"

Ishmael continued, "I know why you came today, Arthur. Believers who joined your "anti" group have returned to their original groups. They realized that you are a wolf. They saw your fangs as you criticized and divided God's people to gain control over their minds. You lost control of your flock, so now you try to control ours. It won't work now."

"Blasphemy!" Arthur interrupted. "Blasphemy! You speak wickedness! Ishmael, the shock that you received from your fire has left you emotionally unstable!"

"Demons!" Shaji shouted, jumping up and down and spinning in circles. "The Holy Spirit opened my eyes to see demons! Ishmael and Victor brought them. Out, Satan! Away! Leave in the name of God! I rebuke you! Go at once!" His face twisted with fury.

"Calm yourself, Shaji." Victor begged.

Shaji began speak in a strange voice, which sounded rather like a frog, "I dreamed last night! I meditated all night and dreamed of an apostle and a prophet! Transcendental revelation! Six demons threw fuel on the fire that burned Ishmael's shop! Tino, Ishmael and Victor ran to those demons and bowed before them. They worshipped the demons while the fire blazed! Then the demons grabbed those three traitors and threw them into the flames!"

"Enough!" Victor said firmly. "We don't preach our dreams here, Shaji, unless a dream agrees with the Word of God and edifies the church body. What you said is destructive and hateful. And please stop jumping around like a frog. It distracts everyone."

Several laughed, which seemed to jolt Shaji back to reality. He calmed and Victor continued, "We are here to worship and learn God's Word." Several believers responded, "Amen!"

"Thank you, Victor, for keeping order," Arthur responded calmly. "I prefer order. Oh, yes, yes! Now I have something important to say. We need better rules for this group. I propose that we elect only two elders to serve as leaders, for a term of two years. They will replace Tino and the other elders who have been helping. They failed to keep order."

"I second the motion!" Shaji shouted.

"How democratic!" Victor quipped. "However, your rules destroy our freedom in the Spirit. You want only two shepherding elders, but what if the Holy Spirit gives more than two people the gift for shepherding? Your rule limits it to two years. Do God's gifts terminate after one's elected term expires? Your rules take away our freedom in Christ. We are free to let any persons

## River of Grace

serve as shepherding elders, if they meet the qualifications of God's Word. We will not cancel God's requirements by replacing them with human rules. We have freedom in our groups to adapt procedures to current needs and opportunities. 2 Corinthians 3:17 assures that 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom'."

"You sound just like Tino!" Arthur exclaimed bitterly.

"I hope so! He asked me to help lead this group in his absence, and I will do so. We will deal with something else now, the 'one-another' commands to serve and bless one another."

Beads of sweat appeared on Arthur's forehead as he stood facing the group. He looked quickly around the room, at each person. Then he suddenly left without a word, followed by Shaji and the other visitors that had come with them.

After the meeting ended, a lady lingered until the others left except Victor and Lori. Lori recognized her. The lady was at the first meeting that Lori had attended and left when the group began praising Christ for His wonderful grace.

"My name is Judy," she told them. "I liked what you said about having freedom, Victor. I myself have also arrived at an advanced level of faith. I now see what few people ever come to see, that God is bigger than any one religion. We can believe whatever we want as long as we are sincere. Your truth is true for you; my truth is true for me. Ah! So liberating! All those details in the Bible are too confining! And the Bible has violence in it! It says that sinners are washed in Jesus' blood! How primitive!"

Lori replied, "Judy, we believe that Jesus' blood paid the penalty for our sins."

"What have Jesus' red corpuscles got to do with anyone today?"

Victor asked, "Are you carving your own god, then? That would be idolatry!"

"I don't believe in idols, young man, much less make them!"

"You don't make them with chisel and stone; you mold your god with words. You invent your own beliefs about the spiritual world and about God. Pagan idolaters have always done that. We all need to receive God's grace and..."

"You tell me about grace?" she interrupted. "I know more about grace than you do, young man. I reject your primitive doctrine about God's judgment. A loving God will not punish people that way! Salvation is universal."

Lori answered, "Ephesians 1:7 says that we have redemption through Jesus' blood. I couldn't understand God's judgment either, Judy, until we studied His infinite holiness. God is perfect love and goodness. That is why He must punish sin. He wants His people to live forever with Him, but He is perfectly holy and cannot allow sin to enter into His presence. Heaven would become hell if he did."

"Hell? You speak of hell? Young lady, if God punished in anger, then He's no God of grace!"

Lori looked at Victor, pleading with her eyes for him to answer. He recalled what Tino had taught him about God's judgment. "We cannot appreciate God's grace until we see it against the painful background of sin, punishment, blood sacrifice and perfect judgment. Hell is the place of perfect justice; God's judgment will be absolutely fair, or He would cease to be God. Heaven is the place of grace and mercy."

## River of Grace

“Riddles!” Judy looked like her mind was far away, but let Victor continue.

Judy, think how Jesus Christ suffered for you on the cross, so that your sins would be forgiven. Then you will love Him so passionately that you’d never think of reducing him to a little god that men can mold according to their imaginations.”

Lori begged, “Please, let us visit you and discuss...”

“I think not! They have brainwashed you both! I thank God that I have worked my way free from all that dogma. Good night.”

She left, and Lori fell into a chair sighing. “I smelled marijuana when I stood by her, Victor.”

“I saw needle punctures on her arm. Drugs. Those who refuse to build their beliefs on solid truth soon become victims of false philosophies. Judy is a prisoner of her own unbelief.”

“She said that people can believe whatever they want! She condemns all forms of dogma.”

“People who turn from the truths of Scripture build a shell around themselves, Lori. Judy’s shell is a dream world more confining than any Christian dogma. She said she was free, but no one is free without the love that only God’s grace brings.”

They prayed for Judy, and then Lori asked Victor, “What did you mean when you said people aren’t free unless they love?”

“Sinful persons cannot do everything they want because they want to do bad things. Police, society, conscience and God restrain them. But loving persons are free to do they want, because what they want is always good. That’s why Jesus said that to love fulfills the whole law.”

Tino returned and congratulated Victor, “Ishmael told me how you restored order when Arthur and his cohorts tried to seize control. Others also say you and Lori have been a blessing. Your new group has started two newer groups, and you are mentoring their new leaders.”

“I’m just doing what you did for us, imitating you, Tino. It’s easy this way. Real easy!”

Lori exclaimed, “God’s grace is flowing! From family to family and friend to friend!”

“It’s flowing in many places,” Tino replied. “Our missionaries started groups that are multiplying now, invading Satan’s territory! They have the same struggles with legalism that we’ve had here. However, everywhere believers in Christ call on His name for grace and power, the Holy Spirit proves that the Almighty is more powerful than Satan and his evil spirits.”

Lori wept, and Victor asked, “What’s wrong?”

“So many don’t know this blessing! I’d love to compose a poem about God’s wonderful grace so others can rejoice with us, but I’m not a poet. I can’t get the meter and rhyme just right.”

“Lori,” Tino spoke gently. “Write it, please! It doesn’t need to rhyme. Hebrew poetry used parallel thoughts instead of similar sounds. Just write what the Lord gives you. Call it an ‘elegy’ and it doesn’t have to heed the restraints of classic poetry.”

“Really?” She clasped Victor’s hand. “Will you help me get the theology right?”

When Victor and Lori met next with Tino, Julie and Ishmael, Victor announced, “Lori wants to read a poem she composed, an elegy to grace.” Lori began reading shyly, her soft voice trembling:

## River of Grace

### Flow, Flow, Sweet Grace, through Heaven's Vine

Grace streams from heights that dwarf the Himalayas,  
More deep than all the streams on earth, and wide,  
It leaps restraining walls to reach all lands.

Oh, taste its priceless, life-producing tide!

The tree of life in Eden Adam spurned,  
That tree was barred from men by cherub's flame,  
But now it's free wherever flows sweet grace  
"True Vine" has now become its timeless name.

Earth's crust could not support the crushing weight  
Of that great stream, too pure for sinner's hearts.  
When Adam fell, hell's legions sang in triumph  
As demons plied their soul-destroying arts.

Hell's serpent jeers, "No man avoids the curse!  
Accuse a man of sin, and he is dead."  
The Lord replies, "You've spoiled both earth and men.  
But one of woman born will crush your head!"

The angels hush! The Father bids the Son,  
"Go let grace flow, and let men freely drink."  
The devils scoff, "No man can hold God's wine.  
It's far too pure, beyond what men can think!"

God tells His Son, "Don't flesh that man has stained.  
Bear sin's foul curse; let drink all men who thirst;  
Unblock the flow; let blood dissolve the clog,  
Free those who've lived, now live, will live, on earth!"

With twisted grins, the demons mock God's plan.  
Archangels ask, "How can He blot out sin?  
How can the Holy One come near such filth  
That men's cruel foe has sown, their souls to win?"

The rebel brags, "No human savior dares,  
Unholy souls belong in my strong hands!  
Let vermin strive to reach that river's flow!  
We'll spoil with ease their wishful, hopeless plans!"

The angels watch God enter space and time;  
True God inside compliant Mary's womb!  
The woman's son, the serpent's bane foretold!  
Her son will die, and lie in death's sealed tomb.

## River of Grace

Since God is everywhere and *everywhen*,  
Man's time cannot restrain His arms' broad span.  
The great "I AM" comes when and where He wants.  
The Lamb that's slain will enter death's cold land.

They lash Him! Shame Him! Pierce Him! Watch him bleed!"  
He dies. Earth shakes. The sky grows dark, forlorn.  
The dragon's seizes trophy foully gained;  
Like Jonah's fish, devours Christ's flesh so torn!

With pride the serpent brags, "I won! Rejoice!  
Let angels weep! How well the grave devours!  
God's law assures no man can break death's grip.  
God cast us down, but now revenge is ours!"

Cheers echo in hell, "God must enforce his Law!"  
"Our charges seal men's tombs — the changeless rule!  
Our accusations make men's doom endure.  
Men sin; thus Christ, a man, dies, too — the fool!

The One who kept God's law in every way  
In full repose lay dead, that Sabbath day.  
The dragon, blind with hate, can't grasp such love;  
The *Final Adam's* blood washed sin away!

New week's first day sees Christ pry loose death's grasp.  
Who could foresee it! Look what God has done!  
That law of death says, too, the righteous live.  
Accusing lips could not indict God's Son.

The angels cheer to see our Lord arise.  
And raise in Him, like Noah's boat, the race  
Of men redeemed, who've died in faith  
And those who yet will die and see Christ's face.

That serpent lost all power except deceit.  
Let those who trust his lies imbibe that slime!  
God's river flows! Drink, freely all who thirst!  
Oh! Taste Christ' love! Embrace His grace sublime!

Flow! Flow! Sweet grace of God through heaven's Vine!  
The Vine whose precious fruit the branch bears down.  
He prunes us — ouch! God's shears cause healthy pain;  
Such grace prepares us soon to wear a crown.

## River of Grace

### DISCUSS

Ask folk:

    Nameways in which that Satan blocks the flow of God's grace.

    (Good answers:

- Individualism that seeks a private faith, which hinders sharing it with others.
- Dogmatism that refuses to listen to others' views or limits ministry to teaching.
- Following traditions of men instead of Scripture.
- Teaching in a way that makes people be passive hearers.
- Idolatry, including the kind that lets one believe whatever he wants as long as he is sincere.
- Power-hungry leaders who only enforce rules and do not share leadership responsibilities.
- Organizing in ways that fail to help believers serve one another with their spiritual gifts.
- Demanding obedience to God for motives besides love, such as fear or threats of rejection.
- Measuring God's grace by how much wealth a person or church has.
- Rationalism that denies that God's grace comes to us in a supernatural way.)

Ask folk:

    Why should Jesus' followers not try to follow the laws of the Old Covenant (Old Testament), except those that are reaffirmed in the New Testament?

    What New Testament books might you read with believers to help them understand that God, through Christ, has instituted an entirely new covenant of grace that replaced the covenant of law?

    (Good answers: Romans, Galatians, 2 Corinthians, Hebrews. Nearly all New Testament books combat legalism.)

Discuss plans to help other believers find the joy and freedom that flow to them in God's River of Grace.