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THE VINEYARD

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser'
(John 15:1).

In the early 2000s, John and Molly Chester dropped out of the corporate rat race to pursue a new life. Leaving other careers, they purchased 200 acres of barren land in Moorpark, California, and euphemistically named it 'Apricot Lane Farms.' Thus began a seven-year battle to establish an organic apricot farm in an industrial wasteland. Their epic struggle against pests, predators, and wildfires was chronicled in the award-winning documentary, *The Biggest Little Farm* (Neon Films, 2018). A film critic extolled, 'Mother Nature has never been more inspiring!'

That film critic was partly right and partly wrong. There is no such thing as 'Mother Nature.' There is a living God who created the heavens and the earth. But the work He is doing is indeed inspiring. And, like the movie, the story of His re-

creation (the story of grace) unfolds in a garden. It may not look like much now, but wait until it is restored!

THIS WORLD IS A VINEYARD

The inspired, inerrant Word of God features gardens, both literal and figurative, beginning in Genesis and ending in Revelation. When God created the heavens and the earth, He filled the world with living creatures and made mankind in His image. Then it says:

And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:8-9).

His garden was beautiful and lush.

But the sanctity of the garden was spoiled when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, taking and tasting the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When the Lord visited the garden in the cool of the day, Adam and Eve fled from Him, aware of their nakedness and filled with shame. The Lord had come to commune with Adam and Eve, as if to inquire, 'What have you done today to exercise dominion over the garden?' But their fellowship had turned to fear. Their oneness with God, each other, and the ground itself was forever changed.

Yet even the curse on their disobedience contained, from the moment it was pronounced, the seeds of God's grace in His plan to restore all things to its original design. The 'covenant of grace' began with God's promise to send a redeemer to destroy the works of the serpent. 'I will put enmity between you and the

woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel' (Gen. 3:15).

Though the Lord's garden has been marred by man's sin, bearing the scars of sickness and death, pestilence and destruction, conflict and warfare, God's plan of redemption is to reverse the effects of the Fall. "Thus says the LORD God: 'On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities ... they shall say, "This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden"' (Ezek. 36: 33, 35). Operation Grace has begun!

The world as we know it will one day be fully restored as a garden, in 'the new heaven and the new earth' (Rev. 21:1). 'He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore ... Behold, I am making all things new' (Rev. 21:4-5). The river of life will flow through the garden, and on its banks will be the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be the curse of separation from God, but face-to-face fellowship with God and His Son will be restored. The final words of the Bible are this sure promise: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all' (Rev. 22:21). In other words, by His grace the restoration will be complete.

The story of redemption – 'HIS-story' – is really the story of grace. Redemption is the outworking of His undeserved favor, finding its fulfillment in the kingdom of grace. Human history begins and ends in a garden.

THE VINEYARD BELONGS TO OUR FATHER

One of the first questions we ask when we see a manicured property is, 'Who owns this place?' We understand that the grandeur of a landscape reflects the deep care and abundant resources of its owner. To see a beautiful lawn framed by

blooming flowers and manicured hedges, or a tree-lined avenue with orderly stone walls and freshly painted gates, tells us the owner cares.

Some may look at the world and see only the ravages of disease, distress, and disorder, concluding there is no master, or at least not one who is powerful and good. The atheist and the cynic alike pronounce, ‘There is no God.’ But only a fool looks at the universe and concludes there is no God. His eternal power and divine nature can be clearly perceived in all that has been made. The hymn writer William Cowper saw life with eyes of faith when he wrote, ‘Blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain. God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.’¹

William Cowper’s pastor and friend, John Newton, penned the best-known hymn in the English language, ‘Amazing Grace.’ Newton’s major theme in life was the animating and sustaining power of God’s sovereign grace in this world:

We cannot watch, unless he watches with us; we cannot strive, unless he strives with us; we cannot stand one moment, unless he holds us up; and we believe we must perish after all, unless his faithfulness is engaged to keep us. But this we trust he will do, not for our righteousness, but for his own name’s sake, and because having loved us with an everlasting love, he has been pleased in loving kindness to draw us to himself, and to be found of us when we sought him not.²

The early Christians knew exactly who owns and rules this world. When they felt pressure from persecuting enemies, they boldly cried out to the ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heavens

1. ‘God Moves In A Mysterious Way,’ *Olney Hymns in Three Books*, Chiswick, 1818, p. 199.

2. John Newton, *Select Letters of John Newton*, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2011, p. 81.

and the earth and the sea and everything in them,' and asked Him to 'do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place' (Acts 4:24, 29). Never think for a moment that a seemingly chaotic world means that God is not in control. He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.

THE LORD IS RESTORING HIS GARDEN

Every garden begins with a designer's plan. The Lord's master plan for His people was declared long ago by His prophets. He 'had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; and he looked for it to yield grapes' (Isa. 5:1-2). Jesus would pick up this same theme in a parable to explain the redemptive nature of His work:

There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a winepress in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants, and went into a far country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit (Matt. 21:33-34).

The point of these passages is two-fold. First, the Lord loves His vineyard. He loves the plants, nurtures the fruit, and expects a full harvest. As a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up among the nations (Isa. 61:11). This is what He cares about the most in the world. Second, the Lord has done everything necessary to insure that growth happens. Left untended, the vineyard would yield only wild grapes. Therefore, He commits the resources to produce a bumper crop of sweet fruit. And, as any farmer can attest, the task is far more difficult and expensive than we imagine!

God is like that farmer. The personal cost to Him is staggering. ‘He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?’ (Rom. 8:32). He gives *graciously*, generously committing all the resources needed to bear fruit.

From God’s perspective, the grand design of human history is to set apart a people for His own possession. At the heart of the covenant of grace is divine relationship: ‘I will be their God, and they will be my people’ (Jer. 31:33).

From the believer’s perspective, our chief aim in life is to grow in grace, bearing fruit for God’s glory. But how can the mortal put on immortality, the rebel be reconciled to the King?

THE LORD’S INSTRUMENT IS CHRIST

One day, Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, and He asked for the scroll of Isaiah’s prophecy to be brought to Him. Finding the text, He read,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Luke 4:18-19).

When He finished reading, the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him, and He said, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’ You could have heard a pin drop. He claimed to be the instrument through which *the Lord’s favor* – did you catch those words? – would be administered. The kingdom of grace had arrived! Jesus is the king of grace, the liberator of the captives, the healer of the blind, the herald of the good news of God’s favor.

This is the key to understanding grace. Without Jesus, the source of grace, there is no access to God’s favor. With Jesus,

we stand in God's grace. 'We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand' (Rom. 5:1-2). Jesus gives us right standing with God, and allows us to tap into His endless supply of grace.

The Apostle Paul was a champion of the gospel of free grace. In his letter to the Roman believers, Paul explains that all have sinned (Rom. 5:12) and therefore deserve death. 'But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (5:8). Therefore, 'we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son' and 'shall be saved by his life' (5:10). 'The free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many ... much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ' (5:15, 17).

The substitutionary death of Jesus is why the acrostic 'G.R.A.C.E.' is often cited—'God's Riches At Christ's Expense.' Though that expression may sound trite, it drives home the point that Christ is the instrument of God's grace toward us: 'For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich' (2 Cor. 8:9). Elsewhere, Paul put it this way: 'In [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace' (Eph. 1:7). Jesus alone is the fountain of grace.

Jesus lives and reigns, laboring on behalf of His people without ceasing. As one commentator put it, 'We are in his thoughts and prayers every day, and he is working with every ounce of his being to restore us from our sad exile to the glory to which we are entitled by the grace of God.'³

3. Philip G. Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory*, Crossway, 2005, p. 377.

GRACE IS A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS

As Southerners, we hear the word ‘grace’ used often in daily conversation. It creeps into our lexicon in various ways, mostly as offshoots of its true meaning. It is a popular name for women: ‘Grace.’ It is a description of a good athlete: ‘he moves with grace.’ We use it to describe a friendly or welcoming attitude: ‘Bless her heart, she is such a gracious hostess.’ It is even a colloquialism for the prayer before a meal: ‘John Henry, will you say grace?’ There are hints of true grace in these phrases, but its root meaning is obscured.

Grace is not a *thing*, like a food supplement, that makes us bigger and stronger. It is the influence of a personal relationship that changes how we think and how we act. Just as a spouse or close friend slowly and imperceptibly affects the way we think, speak and act, so it is with the living Christ. ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth ... And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace’ (John 1:14, 16). Simply knowing Jesus is the life-giving, life-changing agent that brings us into fellowship with God and fundamentally changes everything about us. The Father of grace produces children of grace. Grace is not a thing, but a relationship!

John Winthrop, the English lawyer who became leader of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in New England in 1630, described his relationship with Jesus this way:

I have now grown familiar with the Lord Jesus Christ ... If I go abroad, he goes with me; when I return he comes home with me; I talk to him along the way; he lies down with me, and usually I awake with him; and so sweet is his love to me, I desire nothing but him in heaven or earth.⁴

4. Ibid., p. 1024.

The dynamic power of Christ's indestructible life becomes the lifeline for His people. 'I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing' (John 15:5). The one who 'abides' with Jesus will bear fruit; it happens every time. The one who does not abide in Him does not bear fruit; it cannot happen. Religion without Jesus is fruitless.

The corollary of the connected branch is the severed branch. In the natural world, a branch cut off from the vine is dead, and simply cannot bear fruit. So we, apart from Christ, 'can do nothing.' Each winter at Limerick, when the vines are dormant, we prune the branches, and throw the cuttings into the burn pile. Once a branch is cut off, it remains supple for a short time before it dries and withers, but it has no chance of living on its own. Only the life-giving sap from the vine causes the branch to live, grow, and produce fruit. Thus, Christ's warning: 'If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned' (John 15:6). There is no life in a branch detached from the vine.

Stated differently, all grace is derived from Jesus. It comes only through abiding with Him. 'Abiding' means living together in close communion. As Winthrop described, living with Jesus includes frequent conversations – both the talking part and the listening part – with periods of comfortable silence. Sharing thoughts and daily needs or frustrations. Confessing sin. Sharing meals together. Disclosing hopes and fears, dreams and decisions. He is the wonderful counselor who guides, the mighty God who guards, the everlasting Father who provides, the prince of peace who steadies.

In short, abiding with Christ means having a real, interactive relationship with the living Savior, walking together through life. This is what Peter meant when he challenged believers to 'grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ'

(2 Pet. 3:18). As we walk with Him daily, He strengthens, guides, and changes us. His words change our thinking, our values, and our priorities. We become more like Him, ‘growing up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ’ (Eph. 4:15).

This spiritual relationship and its transforming influence take place through time spent with the unseen but ever-present Master. Peter knew that communion with the risen Savior would be a spiritual exercise of faith. ‘Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory’ (1 Pet. 1:8). It is a living relationship that comes from being grafted into Christ, like a branch that is grafted into an olive tree. We draw spiritual life from the branch, and are infused with its life-giving power. ‘As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me’ (John 15:4).

Faith in Christ is a gift. In fact, the root word for grace in Greek is ‘charis,’ from which we get the English word ‘charity.’ It is simply a gift, not something we earn. ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one can boast’ (Eph. 2:8-9). This may not go over very well with our natural self-esteem, but the reality is that unmerited favor is exactly that – undeserved. We do not and cannot earn it, but only receive it as a free gift.

The giver of a gift chooses the form of the gift, one that fits the needs of the recipient. A parent might bequeath land to one child, while giving others cash or stocks. In love and wisdom, the testator gives according to their differing needs. So it is with faith: the Lord chooses the recipients of the gift and the form of the gift. He has determined that union with the living Christ is the only means of eternal life. Knowing Jesus – the man of grace – is God’s inheritance to the nations. At the last day,

many will claim to have lived a good life or to have performed great works for God, but Jesus will say to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness' (Matt. 7:23).

CAN GRACE REALLY TRANSFORM ME?

The ambitious farmer who tills the land and plants a crop is not guaranteed success. He knows he has a fight on his hands, with many forces working against him. The travails of farming are legendary: enduring heat and cold; risking drought and flood; fighting the weeds; fending off pests; patching broken equipment; rushing to harvest; hoping for a market. Farming is a fight all the way! But it is the very struggle that defines and transforms the one who puts his hand to the plow. 'As much as you transform the land by farming, farming transforms you.'⁵

Spiritually, the challenge we all face is how to be transformed from this world into eternal life. God has planted eternity in our hearts, but not the understanding of how to find our way there without His guidance. All of Scripture points to faith in Christ alone to save us.

Ask yourself: do I really trust Christ to bring me safely home, or should I find some other way? The answer is clear: all who follow Christ will be renewed, sustained and transformed by His unfailing grace. You can rest assured the seed of faith will in fact produce a hundredfold at the harvest. 'Grace life' (that is, a life following Jesus) not only saves us, but its authenticity is proven by the way it changes us. No longer conformed to the world, we begin to live transformed lives. The Apostle John put it bluntly: 'By this it is evident who are the children of God ... whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother' (1 John 3:10). God will

5. Kristin Kimball, *The Dirty Life: A Memoir of Farming, Food, and Love*, Scribner Books, 2011.

do by His Spirit what we cannot do to change ourselves. As Paul said, 'I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus' (Phil. 1:6). Each one who is rooted in Christ will be built up. Grace produces fruit, so that God can point to His people in the age to come as examples of the life-giving power of union with Christ.

Ask God for the gift of spiritual wisdom and hunger to grow in your relationship with Christ. Ask for confident hope in the transforming power of His Spirit. God grows rich grace in poor soil, to prove the authority, honor and glory of His Son, both in this world and in the world to come. He causes all things to work together according to His master plan, preparing a magnificent garden in which He and His people will dwell together.

