

FOREWORD

This is a story of God's grace. Even so, this book is hard to read. But even more, this book is good to read. Sean writes in a staccato style conveying his own experiences of some dark episodes of a broken life. He writes with unvarnished honesty, juxtaposing his experiences as a child with those he and his dear wife Amber are now providing for their own daughters. This makes the book bearable.

The style of the prose along with the stories recounted is brief and vivid. The impressions left are sometimes vague, but suggestive enough to be painfully poignant. Knowing Sean as a Christian, husband, father, friend and pastor I know that he had to be persuaded to share these memories. He is humble enough to let us into his own brokenness, and wise enough not to glorify any of it. There is no attractiveness in the sin Sean recounts.

Why should such a book be written and read? Because it gives us a unique account of God's goodness. "As grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God," Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:15. Surely eternity itself will be filled with recounting God's goodness in individual's lives, as more of His holiness and mercy, His creative grace and ingenious

kindness, His unfailing justice and His certain providence is revealed. God's manifold wisdom is displayed to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places through the Church (Eph. 3:10), and that very wisdom is seen in Esther's story. Have you read that story in the Bible?

Esther's story is worth considering here. Esther just happens to be Jewish, and she just happens to be beautiful. Esther just happens to be favored by the king. Mordecai just happens to overhear the plot against the king's life. A report of this just happens to be written in the king's chronicles. Haman just happens to notice someone not kneeling down before him, happens to find out he was a Jew, and then, when he plotted his revenge, the dice just happen to indicate that he should take his revenge almost a year in the future! (What is it Proverbs 16:33 says? "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.")

Then Esther happens to get the king's approval to speak, but then also happens to put off her request for another day. This just happens to send Haman out by Mordecai one more time, which just happens to cause him to recount it to his friends, which just happens to cause them to encourage him to build a scaffold immediately! So Haman just happens to be stirred up to go to the king's presence early the next morning.

And it just so happens that that very same night, the mighty king can't command a moment's sleep, and he just happens to have this book read to him, and in that book, they just happen to read about Mordecai's deed, and they happen to know that Mordecai had not been rewarded. Consider even the fact that Mordecai had just happened not to have been rewarded for saving the king's life! How

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unusual must that have been?! Could Mordecai even have been resentful at the time of being overlooked? I could go on, but you get the idea.

Nothing in Esther's life, or Sean's—or yours or mine—just happens. At least, not in the sense of happening without God's provident purpose for His own underlying it all. In these pages, Sean recounts everything from being committed to a mental hospital to uncovering soul-sickening corruption and abuse among some false teachers and bad shepherds. All along the way the tragedy of sin is played out in the growing light of confidence in God's overwhelming triumph.

Though I have twice been Sean's pastor and teacher, and am still his friend, I have never had the privilege of being his father. If I were to claim him as any sort of son, I would do so with affection for him, and with amazed thanksgiving to God for what He has done through Sean. I think that you, too, will join me in such thanksgiving after you read this important narrative. This is a story of God's grace.

Mark Dever

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THE BEGINNING

My first memory.

Thirty-some-odd years have passed since that terrible night. I'm there again, in the reddish hue of the room. A tequila sunset breaks through the smoke-darkened curtains. The air is acrid, heavy with sweat and stale vomit. Virginia Slim cigarette smoke curls up from the ashtray on the nightstand. The smell of Jim Beam fogs out from her breath, rolling hard over my nose and mouth. I feel her lips on my neck. She calls me by a name I don't know, the name of a man I've never met. Her tongue slips out and moves along my face. My young heart fills with fear and confusion. Panic. I bolt out of the bed, yelling behind me that I just need to use the bathroom and "I'll be right back."

But I don't come back. I lock myself in the bathroom and sit quickly on the wooden toilet seat. I cry, but I don't want to. I need to be quiet. I hope she doesn't hear me. Maybe she'll fall sleep. I listen for the sound of footsteps but hear none.

I can still feel the texture of that bathroom door, the wood thin and splintered as my fingers glide sideways across it. I can still hear the muffled sound of her voice

calling out to me somewhere from the middle distance of our tiny home. Calling me back into that room. Calling me back to bed. She cries out for me in anger. And then sadness. And then not at all. Silence.

My chubby little hands fold into a pretzel. I pray. I weep quietly. I ask God to help me, to protect me. That prayer was my first, most desperate, most sincere communication with God. I was six years old. Did he hear me? I slept on the cold floor until morning.

Why am I writing this book? It's hard to say. Why are you reading it? Consider the great and powerful autobiographies of Christian history: Elizabeth Elliot, George Mueller, Augustine of Hippo, etc. And then there's me—Sean DeMars. "Who is Sean DeMars?" No one. Nothing. Consider...

For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

Gal. 6:3

And yet, there may be a story here worth telling.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

2 Cor. 5:16-18

Other Christians have been telling me to tell and retell my story for as long as I've been saved. And so I will.

My daughters glide through the air, giggling on the swing hanging from an oak branch in our front yard. Patience is eight, Isabella is six, and I love them more than all love clichés combined. I watch them through the kitchen window. The world is a dark and scary place, but they are babes in evil. They dance in the driveway and build a fort in the backyard. They fear nothing other than chores and homework. Breathe in the Americana.

THE FENCE

The chain link fence around my childhood home was a mile high (or so it seemed), with sharp prongs jutting violently from the top, two by two, all the way around my prison grounds. Rusted diamond links formed the chain wall protecting the tiny house on Albemarle Street. I once saw a man try to come through the fence, body full of stab wounds, blood staining the cement like an oil leak.

Behind the house was a small thin strip of brown grass, a shed, and a clothesline that I loved to hang from as a boy. The poles were more rust than metal, their arms akimbo in the sun, clothes held in place by wooden pins from the bucket by the shed. The living room carpet was a deep green shag, covered in cigarette ash and cat urine. We spent many nights in the bathtub, ostensibly to keep us safe from stray bullets.

THE TV TRAY

The Kirkham family has been kind enough to invite me over for a meal and a game of UNO. They love me well. We laugh and joke and laugh again. I'm having the best night of my life. I've never felt so normal. In an attempt to really blow the roof off with laughter, I stop eating, fold to the right, and pass gas. Loudly. The table grows silent, the younger children snicker, the mother kindly pretends as if nothing has happened, and the patriarch leans in and puts his warm, heavy hand on my shoulder.

"We don't pass gas at the table. It's kind of rude. No big deal." A smile and a wink. He slaps me on the back and the meal moves on. I smile, blink away my tears, and take a big bite of food. I'm mortified. I've offended these people who, secretly, I want to be my family.

I'm eighteen years old, and this is my first family dinner. I feel like I'm in a movie.

"Pass the green beans."

"Can you hand me the mashed potatoes, please?"

"No hitting! And make sure you say please and thank you."

So Hollywood didn't make this stuff up; this is what real families do.

Most of my childhood meals were eaten on a metal TV tray, in my bedroom, in front of the television. The antenna was crude, always in need of adjustment, helped greatly by two balls of aluminum foil tipping the end of each rabbit ear. We changed the channel with a pair of pliers and slapped the side of the box whenever the picture grew fuzzy.

My TV tray had golden legs and a dark wood-patterned plastic cover curling in at each corner. It was heavy, squeaky and always at the foot of my bed. When my mother was sober, she would serve my favorite food in my room. TV on, tray open, door closed, sins atoned for.