

Held By Grace

*Reflections on How God Faithfully Works in
His Children's Lives*

*By
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heldbygrace2day.blogspot.com

HELD BY GRACE

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Dedicated to the Lover of my soul.

CONTENTS

Author's Note: Amazed by Grace.....	7
The Heart of the Matter.....	11
When the Soul Cries "No!".....	17
Cloaked in Darkness But Held By Grace.....	25
Held By Grace.....	33
Pressing on in Grace.....	39

-A Note from the Author-

Amazed By Grace

“My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore, I will boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why for Christ’s sake I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties, for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

--

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Here I stand, as it may seem, with my whole life in front of me. I am nothing great or extraordinary, but I humbly wish to share what Christ Jesus has taught me and impressed upon my heart this past year. I would consider my freshman year of college to be very insignificant; and yet, I believe God has used it as a small but crucial stepping-stone that will determine the course for the rest of my life.

“What does someone so young have to offer?” you may ask; a valid question that I have also asked myself. All I can say in reply is that I can offer nothing in and of myself that will be of use to anyone, but through Jesus Christ, my life can be used to point people to the cross and be a picture of God’s life-changing grace. My prayer is that my life, trivial as it is,

may be used of God to bring Him glory and praise, and that I would make much of Christ with every breath I take, word I speak, and action I do.

Galatians 6:6 states: “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.” Spurred on by this verse to be sharing what God has been teaching me, I put pen to paper. Summing up a year of life changing lessons is a difficult thing to do; but after reflecting upon God’s faithful work in my life, I come away amazed by His grace and stunned by His faithfulness. He has taught me to trust and depend upon Him alone, to rejoice in hard times, to believe His promises amidst my own doubts and fears, to follow Him when I cannot see, and to rest in His faithfulness no matter what I am going through. These are all lessons God keeps teaching and reteaching me day after day as He constantly deals with me in His great patience.

I pray that God will use my meager reflections upon His grace in my life to be a source of encouragement to the weary soul, hope to the broken spirit, and comfort to the hurting heart. I am writing these reflections for teens and young adults, like myself, to encourage and challenge them to hope and trust in God during the brightest and darkest days of their lives. I want to show how God has been faithfully at work in my life this past year especially during the times when I thought I was floundering in my faith and did not see God’s hand at work in me. I also hope that my thoughts might also be used to encourage and remind more mature Christians of the amazing grace we have in the Lord as He faithfully, continues to work in our lives.

I have no idea what God has in store for me in the future, but I do know and am confident that God will be faithful to continue the good work He began in me (Phil. 1:6). I know I will go through dark valleys as well as bright mountain peaks

and through it all I know that God will faithfully hold me by His amazing grace. May the Lord continue to teach me and impress upon all those who read this book that it is only when all the crutches and props, which we trust and depend upon, are removed from our lives that we will realize that we are held by grace and by grace alone.

-Sara-Grace Waite
Edgewood, New Mexico
June 26, 2009

The Heart of the Matter

*Lessons from the Fall of 2008: Learning to Trust
God*

When Dependence upon God is Turned to Doubt

August 2008 marked a momentous time in my life. After a 2000-mile road trip starting in Edgewood, New Mexico with most of my family accompanying me, we arrived in Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania where I was going to be attending college. Both my parents had graduated from Baptist Bible College, my older brother had also spent his first year of college at BBC before joining the Army, and now I was eagerly anticipating the time I would spend studying at BBC.

Arriving at my dorm with a couple of Rubbermaid containers, a few other bags packed with clothes, and very high expectations, I moved into my top-floor dorm room, J1. My mom was transported back in time as she helped me unpack my bags in the very same dorm she had lived in about twenty years earlier. Settling in fast, my new roommate, who was also one of my best friends from back home, and I enjoyed every moment as we began a new chapter of our lives; neither of us could imagine all the twists and turns God had in store for us.

An excerpt from my journal at the time describes how excited I was about the semester ahead of me. August 8, 2008-“I

moved into my dorm yesterday. I am really lovin' BBC. We had a get to know you time last night for all us Fletcher Girls. I love my dorm parents! God has been so good and so faithful. He has blessed me mightily." The next day I wrote down my number one reason for being at BBC: to glorify God and enjoy Him. The cry of my heart during this time was that God "would purify my heart from every worldly thing and make me like Christ. Yes, I want to be changed forever, though it will hurt and overwhelm me---God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." Little did I know that God was going to do exactly what I wanted.

The weeks leading up to my arrival at BBC and the first few weeks that followed, I was ready to take on the world, to confront sin, and to make a difference around me; but God had different plans for me. I wanted to change the world, but God wanted to change me. I did not know the depths of pride rooted in my heart nor how sinful and incapable I was of doing anything good and lasting. God had to break my heart and crush my pride, striping me of my family and self-confidence, in order to teach me valuable lessons I will never forget.

Classes began and along with them came homework, projects, and deadlines. At the end of two weeks, I was feeling a healthy amount of stress and pressure any first-time college student should feel. "These past two weeks have been a challenge for me. Homework and projects stacked up on top of each other, but God is so faithful and gives me the strength I need when I need it."

Also about this time is when I began to feel homesick like never before. I have always been known as "Hard as Nails" since I was a little child, and I had never envisioned feeling such heart-wrenching pain from leaving home. September 8, 2008- "I am feeling very homesick today. I really

am feeling like giving up this whole idea of college. God, help me---I just want to give up and quit. Remind me that it is with You that I shall do valiantly....My faith is weak. Hold me, Father. Hold me!”

September 13, 2008- “Oh, how I need the Almighty’s help. I am so homesick. I cried myself to sleep last night. I miss my family so much....It’s not like college has not lived up to what I thought it would be like---I love it, but I never dreamed I’d be missing home so much....I know, however, that God has me here for a reason right now and will support me...God keep me in Your hand for surely I will run away if you do not steady me and hold me. Getting to know you is one of the most beautiful and painful experiences of my life.”

Waves of homesickness washed over me during my time at BBC. My dependence upon God soon disappeared as I floundered in doubts and fears. However, even though I struggled greatly in my heart, God never left me alone. He sent wonderful blessings into my life everyday to remind me of His love and care for me, though at times my eyes were blinded to His provisions. Girls in my dorm encouraged me, my church challenged and brightened up my week, and classes kept me busy as I learned new things each day. God soothed my raging soul with His creation as I spent hours walking and running around campus.

The more I struggled with homesickness, the more God challenged me to fix my eyes upon my true home---not to give in to my despair, but to rejoice in the God of my salvation and be homesick for Him. I did not always succeed, in fact most of the time I do not think I tried at all, but God continued to lead me by the hand---gently and patiently; truly an ever present help in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1).

Chapel truly was a highlight on the days I had class. I learned so much and was challenged in numerous ways. The chapel speakers especially challenged BBC students not to become cold in their faith, losing their first love. September 21, 2008- "I do not want to waste my time here at BBC. It would be so easy to become apathetic in my faith. I pray by God's grace I won't....I am a deployed soldier of Jesus and should live so until I am home in heaven."

God taught me how easily dependence upon Him can be replaced by doubts and fears that are left to grow in my soul. Instead of relying upon my kind, heavenly Father, I turned my eyes to the waves crashing around me and sank beneath the weight of my doubts. God taught me to trust Him, rely upon Him, rest in Him and not lean on my own understanding (Proverbs 3:5-6).

When God's Will Hurts

Even now as I look back, I am confident that God led me to BBC; but during my time there, I fought and chaffed at the thought of staying at BBC after I finished the fall semester. I thought and prayed for another way, but failed to accompany my prayers with the heart attitude of "let Thy will be done." I struggled with complete surrender, not even aware I was struggling with it until my dad challenged me to press on and finish out my year at BBC as I had planned in the first place. I struggled and fought, but finally by God's grace I let go. October 16, 2008- "The Lord gave my heart rest yesterday. He soothed my homesick, weary heart and overwhelmed me with peace. Just like at times during a thunderstorm when a sunbeam shines down through the clouds---so it was with me. I have surrendered to the Lord---He is my treasure...not my family." The peace God gave me was not accompanied without bouts of soul darkness and heart sickness. October 20, 2008- "Very, very discouraged this morning. Everything

in me hurts. I fear I am drifting away.”

After reflecting upon my semester at Christmas, God impressed upon my heart that His will for my life is not without pain and difficulty. I long to live for Christ and make much of Him, but I don't think I ever understood the pain and agony that comes when one takes up his cross and follows after Christ. I found that my circumstances should never be what determine my outlook on life, but that my joy and happiness must be rooted in Christ. His will may hurt, but no greater joy can be found apart from living for the Almighty One.

The Joy of Reflecting on God's faithfulness

Months have gone by since my time at BBC, but God still reminds me of the lessons He taught me and used to shape my heart to be more like His Son. Recently after skimming through my journal during that time, I concluded that “at the darkest times when my soul ached, seem to be the very times God stretched and grew me closer to Himself the most.” Just as a rainbow is not seen until, the darkness of the rainstorm is passed, so I was not able to see God's faithfulness until the storm in my soul had occurred. Now as I look back, my soul explodes with joy as I see how God was faithfully at work in my life during times of great pain and darkness.

At the close of my first semester, I wrote down some thoughts. November 22, 2008- “Dear Heavenly Father, You are so awesome and holy. In You, I find true and lasting joy and contentment. Your Word is so precious to me. I long for Your Spirit to plant it deep in my heart...to transform me and renew me to be more like Christ.” December 14, 2008- “Rejoicing in the Lord this morning. What an awesome God I serve. I am feeling fears about the future but He is with me--- He upholds me and gives me courage. In Him, I can do the impossible. I am glad He holds me in His hands---I am safe. I love Him.”

Excitement pulsed through me when the day arrived that I would be flying home for Christmas break. I wanted to enjoy every moment possible with my family before I would have to return to BBC and finish out my freshman year. I flew home with my roommate, Rachel, and made it back home twenty-two hours later than expected. The trip was awful and wonderful at the same time. We were stranded in the Huston, Texas airport after missing a connecting flight because of weather delays. God never left us one moment though. He worked in amazing ways and we finally arrived in Albuquerque where our families met us.

The first semester was down---God had taught me to trust even when it hurts, to obey even when the path is hard, and to rejoice when darkness fills my soul. The second semester, however, had yet to begin perhaps holding even more twists and turns than the first one.

When the Soul Cries “No!”

Advice to the Weary Soul

As I look back over my semester spent at BBC, I see ways I could have done better. God was gracious though, and taught me so much through the struggles I encountered. At times, I wish I could go back and change things, but God in His sovereignty ordained my mistakes so that I can pass on what I learned to others who are experiencing similar situations and soul struggles. After months of evaluation, I realize and see that I did not completely rest in God’s will for my life, I did not rejoice in His plan for me, I did not remind myself of the cross of Christ, and I did not reach out to others to encourage them and be encouraged in return. I still have so much more to learn and relearn, but here is what God has challenged me to share with fellow Believers from the struggles He has sent into my life.

When The Path Is Hard

Hebrews 13:12-14 are verses that God often brought to the forefront of my mind during the hard days I faced at BBC: “And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through His own blood. Let us, then, go to Him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace He bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” The road that leads heavenward is not an easy path full of comforts and conveniences, but a winding moun-

tain trail laden with rocks, thorns, and peaks that test your endurance, commitment, and trust in God. The strength we need to survive this trail and make it to our goal is only given to us through Christ as we fix our eyes upon His cross. When your soul is weary and ready to give up, and everything in you is crying, “No! Stop, I am hurting. I don’t like this. I can’t go any farther!” remember four crucial actions your heart should take.

1. Rest in God’s Will. When the road is long and hard that leads heavenward do not stop and give up in defeat, but rather press on while resting in God’s will. I knew God had directed me to attend BBC; I had spent months beforehand praying and seeking God’s will for my life. I was delighting in God and He put the desire in my heart to go to BBC (Psalm 37:4). Yet even though I was confident that I was just where God wanted me, I struggled to rest in His will. My heart was hurting and did not like the pain I was experiencing, but instead of embracing the struggles, I had as gifts from God I fought and wrestled in my soul. I wanted a way out; escape from my pain, relief from the path God had set me upon. I wanted to go meet Christ in the midst of the fire, I longed to be made more like my Savior, but my strength seemed to melt the closer I came to the blazing fire. How would I make it to Christ’s side? My strength had already disappeared, my determination had crumbled, and my faith seemed to shrink, what was I to do? God striped me of all I thought I possessed---strength, courage, determination, etc.---and confronted me with my weakness, incapability, faithlessness, and sinfulness. Suddenly as if I woke from a dream, I realized my great neediness, insufficiency, and dependence upon God. He had to strip me---inflict loving pain---in order to show me how much I needed Him. When I did not rest in God’s will for my life---trusting that He had placed me at BBC for a reason, first and foremost to glorify Him---I became dissatisfied with His will.

I wanted Him to change His plan and make it easier and not so hard. I took my eyes off Christ and fixed them upon the waves crashing around me, I was looking to see what I would get out of it (and from my point of view, all I saw was pain), and as a result I sank beneath the swirling water.

God takes us through difficult days and situations in order to bring glory to His name; through these times, we also see how much we need Him. His will for our lives is perfect, but not painless. When He directs you to go down a certain path do not grow discouraged because the way seems hard and difficult, rather rest in His hands, knowing He has a reason for everything that He brings into your life. Do not allow worry and doubt to have a home in your heart, but trust, rely, and rest in His perfect will. He has placed you where you are, He has a purpose, it hurts, but turn the pain you feel into a reason to praise God. Praise Him that He is using you to bring Him glory, that He is working in your life, that He loves you enough to inflict pain in order to make you like Christ, that He is preparing you for your true home, and that He is always with you no matter what you are experiencing.

We are saved by grace through the Lord Jesus Christ and we must follow in His steps and go with Him outside the camp. Suffering comes in all shapes and sizes, and it is only as we rest in God's will that we will realize that God is our strength through suffering, He gives us courage to face the challenges of life, He upholds us by His grace, He is with us and our comfort in loneliness, and that His will is the best place for us to be because it is exactly where He has placed us for however long He keeps us there. Rest in His will for your life and press onward upon the path God has placed you.

2. ***Rejoice in God's Plan.*** When the road is tough, do not seek escape and try to find a way out, instead rejoice in God's plan for you. Thank Him for His blessings---I guarantee you that

your list will go on and on once you begin. Your soul may be hurting, but realize that you cannot have gain without pain. God sees the big picture; we cannot. A heart full of rejoicing in Christ cannot be easily discouraged by circumstances no matter what they may be.

A lot of the soul agony I felt at BBC could have been alleviated if I had turned my discouraged heart into a rejoicing heart. I struggled to embrace my time at BBC as God's will and as a result instead of resting in God's will, which leads to a thankful spirit, I wrestled with God's will and dwelt on all the things I did not like about my new surroundings. My heart was full of complaints, a critical spirit swept over me, and I fixed my eyes on my problems instead of my Savior.

When you are going through a difficult situation or time in life (any situation that you do not want to be in), fix your gaze upon Christ and thank Him. Thank Him for His love, compassion, mercy, and grace. Thank Him that He saved you, took all your sin, bore God's wrath, and intercedes for You. Thank Him that He's placed you where you are to glorify Him, to make you more like Himself, to grow you in your faith, to teach you new and wonderful things, and to make you more dependant upon Him. Let thanksgiving flow from your heart and soul, and your perspective on life will completely change. Paul wrote to the Philippians commanding them to rejoice in the Lord, and his message to them should resound in our own hearts as well: "Rejoice in the Lord always..." (Philippians 4:8).

3. *Remind Yourself of the Cross.* The strength of discouragements grasp upon our souls can only be broken by the power of the Gospel as we momentarily draw near to the cross and find comfort in Christ.

When your heart is overwhelmed, when you are physically spent, when you are joyful and happy, when your heart is at

peace, when your soul is in despair, when life seems like it is going nowhere, and in all of life's circumstances, go to the cross.

My darkest, most difficult times at BBC were the days when my heart did not reflect upon God's great love in sending His only Son to earth to save me. When my soul lingered over my struggles, circumstances, difficulties, etc. discouragement gained a foothold in my life. My thoughts and affections were not fixed upon my Savior and His cross, but upon my struggles and discomforts.

Run to the cross. When your heart is weary, discouraged, and sad, do not delay to run to the Savior of your soul. Remind yourself of His sacrifice at Calvary, His selfless love, and matchless grace. Preach the Gospel to your soul and joy will overflow from your heart. Christ is enough---He is all we need. We can never read our Bible's enough, pray enough, memorize enough, learn enough, etc; but by God's grace, Christ is enough. Draw near to the cross of Christ, look upon His wounds, hear His anguished cries, and remember that it was our cross to bear---to be nailed to and bleed upon. God's wrath was our cup to drink---to suffer, to pay for our debt for all eternity, and be completely forsaken---but Christ took it from us and emptied it, leaving not one drop left for His people; He drank it all. Remember the cross...

4. Reach Out to Others. The right perspective on our life will cause our hearts to overflow with joy into the lives of others. When we are resting in God's will, rejoicing in His plan, and remembering the cross, we will also reach out to others who are hurting in order to help them. Also we will be willing to receive the help of others as we go through tough days.

The best thing to do when you are hurting is to reach out to someone else who is also hurting. When you reach out to oth-

shove us heavenward. God is our greatest helper, but He uses means to help us and one of those means is His children.

When you are discouraged and weary, find someone else who needs a helping hand. Helping others takes our thoughts off ourselves and our problems. In the process, we will also receive encouragement and help along the way as others reach out to help us up the path.

Today rest in God's will, rejoice in His plan, remind yourself of the cross, and reach out to others. These actions will bring glory to God, joy to your heart, and help to the fellow Believers around you.

Never Give In

Winston Churchill once said, "Never give in.. never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in...never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy." As Churchill charged the men under His leadership to never give in to an enemy force made up of flesh and blood so I charge you to never give in to the enemies of your soul. Your flesh wages war constantly as well as the powers of darkness that we cannot see with our eyes. Your sinful flesh does not want God to sit on the throne of your heart, and continually lures you away from the greatest treasure and pleasure of all with inferior objects. At times, the enemy seems overwhelmingly strong---so strong that we cannot stand against it, but there is one stronger. We must run to the rock and refuge of our souls. In 1 John 4:4 John address this, "You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world." God is greater than our enemy, and it is Christ who makes us stand --- so stand firm in Him and do not give in to your flesh. He has saved you from the punishment of sin and the power of sin, but not until we die will God remove the presence of sin from our lives.

All true Believers will go through hard days---days of testing, days of suffering, and days of temptation---it is only through God's refining fire that we are shaped into Christ's likeness. As little children cannot understand why their parents would make them undergo vaccinations so we cannot understand why God makes us go through trials, but we can be confident it is for a reason---ultimately to bring Him glory and to make us like Christ. We must trust our loving, heavenly Father who knows exactly what is best for us. The battle will be hard and fierce though, and the temptation to give up will be present; but do not give in. Stand firm in Christ, fix your eyes upon Him, fight with all your might, hate sin, love God, trust His plan, and never give in.

Cloaked in Darkness, but Held by Grace

*Lessons from the Spring of 2009: Learning to Rest
in Christ*

When the Path is Unclear

Christmas break flew by quickly and with it came many unexpected changes to my future plans. I had intended to return to BBC and finish the Spring semester there. However as I began working through finances and figuring out how I was going to fund my next semester, I believed God did not want me to go into debt by taking out a loan to pay for school. God closed the door to BBC that I had long since feared to enter; but first, He brought me to a point where I was willing to go through the door, surrendering to His will if He led me that way---He was definitely teaching me to trust Him.

I had my hands full the last week of Christmas break, making arrangements to attend a community college near my home. Registering for classes was crazy, but I made it, "I am all registered for classes at CNM. I will begin on Tuesday---four classes. I am excited and at peace knowing God's hand is at work in my life---yes in the change of plans." At the time, I was thinking of getting all my general education classes out of the way at CNM and then I would

go for a teaching degree in TESOL. Missions was still a great burden upon my heart and I wanted to go into a field I could use as a missionary. transfer to the University of New Mexico and go for a teaching degree in TESOL. Missions was still a great burden upon my heart and I wanted to go into a field I could use as a missionary.

God truly blessed me as I attended CNM. I enjoyed my classes for the most part and was stretched by being surrounded by unbelievers. Of course, since it was a community college, I also found the classes and the homework was much easier than BBC's, but God was going to be challenging me in different ways this semester.

This was also an exciting time for my family because they began actively pursuing full-time, mission opportunities. My parents both have had a burden for missions ever since they were in college, but God had never given them the green light. However, now God was working in different ways and leading them to check out different mission agencies. I was excited, and wished they had gone into missions years before and so were my other siblings.

Many conflicting thoughts and possibilities confronted me though, as my parents continued to pray about missions. I was not sure if I should join them on the field, stay in New Mexico and finish school, or who knows what else. I began feeling lost and confused not due to my parents' desire to be missionaries, but because I wanted to be a missionary too, and did not know how to reach my long-term goal. God had been teaching me to trust Him through difficult days at BBC, and now He was teaching me to trust Him when I could not see the way. The path God had placed me on was unclear. I believed He wanted me to be a missionary---and I wanted to be a missionary---but I was struggling with the thought of "paying my dues" and getting the training I needed to best

serve the Lord on the field.

At first, I thought I came up with the right solution to my dilemma. “I am going to see the Air Force recruiter next week. My goal is to enlist as an Airborne Cryptologic Linguist. Daddy challenged me with the question of whether I was living my dream (that God has given me to be a missionary and maybe be a Bible translator) or his dream (if I went with my family to the mission field).” I longed to follow Christ no matter where He would lead me; even if it meant being homesick, surrounded by unbelievers, and facing stress and pressure from different difficulties and challenges I would encounter along the way. February 15, 2009- “...I know that God’s grace is sufficient...to follow Christ down the Golgotha road is my desire. Oh, may God hold me up even against myself and my faithlessness. I must put my hand to the plow and not look back.

When Darkness Clouds Your Eyes

Struggles continued to bombard me as I sought the Lord for His direction for my life. Questions filled my mind and brought fear into my heart; questions like: Is this really where God wants me? Has He really called me to be a Bible translator? Would the Air Force be the best place to receive training for missions? Did I really want to do this? My path was not only unclear, but my eyes seemed unable to see accurately because of the darkness surrounding me. ”

I continued to pray and pray and pray some more. My parents and I spent hours talking about it, friends lifted me up in prayer, and God was an ever-present help. Many times, I felt like He had left me alone to sift through all the life-changing decisions I was having to make, but in reality, He held me in His gracious hands the whole time even as I struggled. February 25, 2009- “Today I am struggling more with my Air Force decision---going back and forth...I know I must trust the Lord

and not lean on my own understanding. . . . Sometimes I cannot bear to think of leaving home again and actually entering the adult world. The responsibility looming ahead of me feels as if I will be crushed. My heart hurts, but I fix my eyes on Christ.”

As I wrestled in prayer, God gently led me down the path of His choosing. Confusion clouded my vision---darkness seemed to be all I could see, but the Lord was at my side. He closed the door to the Air Force, but prompted my heart to check out the Coast Guard. My parents and I visited a recruiter one morning, and I remember as soon as we walked in the office I knew it---this is it. I liked everything about the Coast Guard, especially the training opportunities. I passed all the exams and was scheduled to swear into the delayed entry program. I had my date when I would be shipping off to boot camp---August 18---and I was going in as an E-3 (thanks to my dad’s past Coast Guard service!). To say the least, I was excited.

When Fears Paralyze You

However, as the day drew closer that I was supposed to swear in, I began to become overwhelmed by fear---fear of what others would think of me, fear of what I might face as a woman in the military, fear of leaving home, fear of failure, fear of not knowing if I was really doing what God wanted me to do, and the list went on. Fear is a powerful thing that at times distorts the truth (of course there is healthy fears that we all should have, but that is not what I am talking about) when we allow it to have control over us. At the time, I did not realize what I was doing---I was making a decision based off fear. I was not trusting God for protection and strength and guidance, but began to rely upon my own understanding.

I checked out other possibilities to pursue: mission

training schools, nursing schools, midwifery schools, mission agencies, mission trips, and a whole slew of other things as well. I prayed but felt hopeless---God was not opening any doors. The one mission training school I was set on attending for a while never responded to the application I sent in. I did not know what to do, where to go, or how to begin; I felt like my life was going nowhere---just a dead end road. April 8, 2009- “Hard day. Struggled greatly with despair over my direction in life. I want to serve God but feel great weights pulling me down. The Lord has strengthened me with His grace though....”

As I look back over my spring semester, I see how God had planned and used the darkness that clouded my eyes to make me rest in Him. So many times, my soul felt defeated, turmoil constantly rocking my heart back and forth; but God was in charge and working in my life even when I could not see His hand at all. One day as I reflected on my struggles I wrote, “The Christian life is not easy. It is an upward road; a difficult climb---but Christians are to be ever rejoicing. Not that the view from here is paradise, but that our climb will bring us to our Home with Christ. Press onward in joy through the upward climb.”

God took me through a dark time in my life; the magnitude of my trial was nothing compared to others, but at the same time, my soul was discouraged, confused, and ready to give up. I had checked out so many possibilities and nothing had opened up. My life felt like it was going nowhere. April 14, 2009- “A continual darkness is over my soul. Perhaps the scary thing is that I think I am growing used to it. I think I am almost at the point of giving up on this ‘missionary idea’. There seems to be no way to get there.” April 27, 2009- “How long, O Lord, will darkness cloak my soul?! ?! Life is so hard for me. I look at others and cannot understand what

life. I am just a complete loser and wimp who should preach the Gospel to herself but cannot.”

I no longer felt the awful pangs of homesickness that I had the previous semester, but the discouragement filling my soul caused me just as much heartache. My eyes were not fixed upon Christ, but upon my darkened path, and yet God dealt so patiently with me. He took me through fears, discouragements, struggles, and uncertainties to make me depend upon Him. His timing was perfect; and though I was ready to give up, He remained faithful.

My discouragement came to a climax one day as I was out running with my dad. I spilled out all my frustrations, discouragements, and hopelessness about the future to my dad and talked everything out with Him. From that conversation, I decided to check out the military again and not make a decision based off fear. At first I did not want to call up my recruiter and ask him for a second shot at the Coast Guard (once again I fell into the trap of making a decision based off fear). So I checked out the Navy, set up an appointment, and went down to Albuquerque with my parents to see what would happen. My meeting with the Navy probably lasted no more than five minutes---God definitely shut the door. We walked out of their office and wondered what to do next. The Army recruiter was in the same complex so we went in to see what they could offer me. I was out of there in less than two minutes---God shut that door too. Now I was confronted face to face with my fears---I knew I had to call my Coast Guard recruiter.

Here is what I wrote in my journal after everything was said and done:

April 30, 2009- Wow! What an amazing God I serve, who uses all situations especially discouragement and doubts (sin) for good. He is always at work even when I cannot see. Yesterday, I changed my mind to go to back to the military.

I didn't want to call my recruiter 'cause I had told him no. so I went to the Navy---closed door. The Army---closed door. And then I swallowed my pride and called the Coast Guard...[the recruiter told me I could have one more chance]. I am so excited and at peace. I see God's hand at work in all of this. I'm going in the Coast Guard!

God gave me a peace and confidence that the Coast Guard was exactly where He wanted me. Before I had kind of wondered if I was really doing the right thing, and now I was certain. May 5, 2009- "I swore into the United States Coast Guard this morning. God has given me such a sure confidence that this is where He wants me and where I should be. I know I will need this assurance later on when the days are tough---I will be able to look back and remind myself that this is indeed where God placed me." God had orchestrated everything so intricately. The date I had requested was still available, I was still an E-3, and I had also learned so many important lessons through it all. The fears I had before were still real---I would still have to face them, but I was not going to let my fear determine my decisions but God and His Word.

My future was set---at least the next four years---and the best part was knowing I was held by grace. My life was in God's hands and He would take me where He wanted me---I needed to trust Him still.

Looking back over my spring semester, I see that God used it to teach me two very important lessons: always keep your eyes fixed on Christ and never base a decision off fear. When darkness fills your soul within and surrounds you without do not give in and take your eyes off Christ. Remember that you are held by grace---grace that will not let you go---and though darkness is all that you can see and feel, God will never leave you and He is faithful to finish the good work He began in you. I see that God used the lessons I learned my

semester at BBC as a foundation to prepare me first for my spring semester and also for everything else He has planned for me in the future.

Held By Grace

Closing Thoughts on God's Grip of Grace on a Believer's Soul: He Does Not Let Go!

Now as it stands, I have thirty-four more days left until I leave for boot camp. I am constantly blown away by God's grace and how He faithfully works in His children's lives. Looking back on a year of changes and decisions I am struck with the fact that no matter how hard the road is or how dark my soul feels, God's grip of grace on my soul is rock solid--- He will not let go. When I fall, He picks me up; when I struggle, He comforts me; when I cannot see, He still knows the way; and no matter what He brings into my life, I can and should rest in His will, rejoice in His plan, remind myself of the cross, and reach out to others to help them along heavenward.

These past several weeks as I have been preparing for boot camp---a major change in my life---Psalm 23 has become very special and comforting to me. God is my loving Shepherd who leads me and takes care of me. I especially cling to verse four, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me." I will not be afraid of what I may face in the future because God is with me, I will not fear what others think because God is with me, I will not fear any evil thing because *God is with me*---I will trust in Him.

God has shown me His grace in a deeper way this past year than before and I know He will continue to grow me in this area as I begin a new chapter in my life. . I believe it is good to remember that the overview of a mountain peak is beautiful. The steep cliffs, thick brush, and jagged rocks all blend into the picture, adding depth and a quiet, peaceful strength to the scenery that points to its Creator. However, climbing to the mountain peak is hard, difficult labor. The thorn bushes cut into our flesh, the steep cliffs cause our muscles to burn, and the jagged rocks bruise us as we stumble along. But we can be certain that every step of the way to the peak is a part of what makes it so beautiful when you see it from God's perspective.

As I leave home again in a few short days, I know I will struggle with homesickness as I did before and go through dark days, but I must remind myself to look at my life from God's perspective not from my own limited view. I cannot see the big picture---God can. I must trust Him, depending upon Him with all my heart. I do not have the strength or might to endure what lies ahead of me, but by God's grace, I can press on and not give in to struggles, fear, and pain. I continue in Christ's strength and for His glory. I know that even though I struggle I am held by grace---and God's grip is fierce! He will not let go.

The View From Here

As I think of what God has in store for me in the future, excitement pulses through me. He has provided a way for me to receive training for missions through the Coast Guard, He has filled my heart with a burden for unreached, remote people groups, and I cannot wait to see where He ends up placing me. Hard work and difficult days lay ahead of me, but is any mountain peak worth climbing if it does not demand every ounce of strength you have and then some?

So I stand on this side of the mission field, admiring the view and eagerly anticipating the day that God brings my dreams to fruition. Very much like someone admiring rose bushes from afar, enjoying their beauty and fragrance but not knowing the pain of tending such bushes---observing the beauty but not experiencing the thorns. I know and see how rewarding missionary work can be---sharing Christ and watching lives be transformed---but I also know that such work is not without pain, loss, and hardship; following after Christ does not come without a cost. Right now, I can see the "roses" but not the "thorns".

As I think through these reflections, I wonder if I will be able to make it and endure the hardships God sends into my life or will I just crumble to pieces? How can I know when I do not know? I suppose I cannot know until I am there, but this I do know that God's grace is sufficient. Now I do not know the hardships---thorns--- that lay ahead, but I do know the One who does; the same One who holds me in His hand.

So I see the roses from here and know the thorns lay ahead, and I follow on confident---not that I have the strength and endurance to remain steadfast in trying times---but confident that the One who has planned the trying times is also my precious Savior who makes me stand, who holds me in His hand, and who will provide me with the strength and endurance I need to face any trial that He gives me.

I am not strong, but I am to fix my eyes on the One who is.

Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men so that you will not grow weary and lose heart (Hebrews 12:3).

I think it is good to remind ourselves that God never intended life to be easy and comfortable for His children. No, He has called us to be lights in the darkness and going into the darkness is not an easy thing to do. God is about to take me down a path, which will be the training grounds for my future service in missions as well as my mission field for the time being. I am excited that I am going to be surrounded by unbelievers, having the opportunity to share my faith by living it out in front of them; and yet, I am also scared too death. I know I will face persecution of varies kinds, be confronted with temptation, see the ugliness of sin in myself and others; yet God pushes me on and reminds me to trust in Him. I could try to protect myself from being tainted by the world, but what would the point be? I was already as tainted by sin as a person can be and Christ cleansed me by His own blood--not so that I can now hide from what I once was, but so that I can confront it with the power of the Gospel. The battle of faith is fierce, raging constantly with intensity that I think none of us is truly aware of, and I cannot passively sit back watching others proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ and not join in the greatest cause that we can spend our lives being a part of. Living to make much of Christ, requires that we make much of the Gospel, and we cannot make much of the Gospel if we are not proclaiming it first to ourselves and then to the world around us.

God gives everyone different adventures, but I am truly thankful and excited about the one He has placed in front of me. What great hurdles, challenges, and difficulties lay ahead; but on the other hand, who would trade the opportunity to live amongst lost sinners, sharing the message of the cross, all the while being paid and receiving training for future service? To put it simply, I have a few more days to prepare for an amazing, four-year mission trip around the United States---all expenses paid! How amazing is that!

Facing adventures is not easy, but they are truly amazing experiences when we realize that we are held by grace. Nothing can touch us apart from God's sovereign will, and His plan cannot be thwarted. Here I stand, confident that the Lord is the one who leads me forth---the shepherd of my soul and the sustainer of my faith---I will not be afraid because He is with me; I am held by grace.

Pressing on in Grace

Living in Grace When the Path Is Not Easy

I pray that God has used the lessons He has taught me to encourage and challenge you on your journey heavenward. The road home is not easy, but we can be assured that we are never alone, even one step of the way. So to close this book, I want to leave you with a story—a story about a weary pilgrim on his journey home.

Thick mists of darkness rested heavy in the valley, adorned only by a lonely path, which continued to dip lower into darkness. A weary traveler trudged along quietly; his eyes filled with pain and unspeakable anguish. His shoes appeared ragged and worn, his clothes were threadbare, and the marks of suffering scarred his heart. Obviously he seemed to be in search of something, but the length of his journey and the bitterness of pain had snatched the spring from his step, the light from his eyes, and the joy from his heart.

Sitting down on a small bolder, the man lowered his head and closed his eyes. The glorious city---his home---seemed out of reach. Oh, the stories he had heard, and longed to believe about the city of the Lamb, but the darkness seemed too thick, the road too long, and his heart too weary to continue on to his destination. Hunger and thirst filled his being, but he ignored the pangs of his soul and shut his eyes to the light. He

was a pilgrim, but it was too hard, he was too tired, and his soul was too overcome by despair.

At that exact moment of soul darkness, the lonely man heard approaching steps. He looked up and found that another traveler dressed in worn clothes was coming down the path. Something was different about him though---something about the intensity of his gaze or maybe the sincerity of warmth the weary traveler felt from the man's heart.

"Fellow Traveler, how is your journey so far?" The man asked the weary traveler, stopping at the small bolder.

"Good, but it is not as I imagined it to be." He replied simply.

"The road is difficult, isn't it?"

"Yes, very difficult and dreary." The weary traveler sighed and peered down at his worn shoes.

"True," The man sat down on another bolder. "But does the goal, which brought you to walk down this path not burn in your heart, causing you to see that which is unseen?"

"I suppose, but darkness rests in my soul and has pushed out all the joy I once possessed. I no longer can see the goal of this road and I am simply too weary to continue on. My lot is a difficult one and this road is too hard."

The man shook his head. "Did you expect this road to be easy? Did you not know that for you to enjoy true life you would be required to daily die to self? If you want an easy path, there are plenty to choose from, but if you want what will last then don't let the difficulties you experience now deter you from the joy that will be yours in such a short time."

The weary traveler nodded. "I know what you say is true, but it still does not help me feel any better about my weary heart or the awfulness of this lonely path."

"Do feelings matter?" The man prodded. "If you wait until you feel good about walking down this path you will never make it to the glorious city of the Lamb. Don't think of how you feel---think of the Lamb. Don't sit wallowing in weariness---get up and begin walking again and the Lamb will strengthen your weary heart. Laziness will keep you in darkness as long as it can, but diligence to seek the Lamb will be like the light of the sunrise to your soul. Open your map---the Word of the Lamb---and light will spill over the path (though only enough light for each new step)."

The traveler pondered the wise words of the man before him. "You are right." His heart still lingered in sadness.

"Perhaps you have forgotten what is real, my Friend," The man's voice was firm with conviction yet also filled with compassion. "This world is but a whisper---a shadow---but what lays ahead down this road is real and true and better than anything else you have ever known. Go forth now and be about the work the Lamb has assigned you. Walk the path, rejoice through darkness, sing in the valleys, enjoy the mountain peaks, help the weary, come along the broken, fix your eyes on the Lamb, think of Him lest you sit here forever until it is too late. If you are a true pilgrim you will carry on because the Lamb won't let you go."

