

Unlikely Glimpses of
Grace

J. Patrick Vaughn

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For Mama and Daddy

Introduction

WHEN I ENTERED SEMINARY, I realized that I would be required to study the Bible and even learn a little Hebrew and Greek. But I really wasn't very interested in scripture. I looked forward to grappling with religious and philosophical themes and ideas.

As a matter of fact, when I was trying to decide where to attend graduate school, I had the opportunity to talk with a highly respected theologian. Given his acumen, I thought he would readily agree with me when I said, "Don't you think people just take the Bible too seriously?"

His response shocked me.

He took a puff on his pipe, smiled warmly, and replied, "No, not at all. I don't think most people take the Bible seriously enough."

After serving for more than twenty-five years as a pastor in Presbyterian churches, I continue to marvel at the wisdom of his words.

Far more than I ever imagined, scripture continually engages and startles me. It challenges me when I am a bit too comfortable or confident, and it offers hope and joy when I least expect it.

Instead of imparting information, scripture evokes transformation.

Instead of answering our questions, it questions our answers.

Instead of telling us what to believe (think), it points us to the One who risks rejection to believe (trust) in us.

The more I grapple with, resist, and digest the pages of scripture the more my eyes are opened to the unlikely grace of an unlikely God.

Just as it rained forty days and forty nights, as the children of Israel roamed for forty years, as Jesus struggled with temptation for forty days in the wilderness, and as Christians journey forty days through Lent to Easter, here you will encounter forty reflections on our unlikely God.

I hope you will be blessed in unexpected and unlikely ways.

Grace and peace,
Patrick

Way, Truth and Life

IN THE 14TH CHAPTER OF the Gospel of John, Jesus offers comfort to his disciples. He tells them, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God. Believe also in me."

In that same passage he says, "I am the way and the truth and the life." He says these words as an expression of comfort and reassurance, but we often interpret them as words of exclusion.

"If you don't believe that Jesus is the way and the truth and the life, you are cast out! You are excluded! You are outside the love and acceptance of God!"

This. Is not. At all. What Jesus is teaching us!

When he says that he is the way and the truth and the life, he is saying that if we want to see who God is, if we want to peer into the inner character of God, if we want to catch a glimpse of God in the world, then we should look at his life and his ministry.

When we begin to look carefully at Jesus and listen to him, we behold how radically inclusive God's love is for us; for Jesus is the one who knocks down all kinds of social taboos and barriers to embrace Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female.

"I am the way the truth and the life." It's not about exclusion. It's a radical promise about inclusion. Now, that might seem unlikely, but it's good news.

A Word about Heaven

THE THEOLOGIAN REINHOLD NIEBUHR ONCE said that we shouldn't spend much time speculating about the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell. Nevertheless, I, and I suspect you, sometimes wonder about heaven. What will it be like? Whom will we see? What will we do?

Scripture doesn't provide us with many details, but it does offer us an intriguing image. It says that heaven will be like a city. It will be "the new Jerusalem." So, imagine New York City, just for a moment. It's a bustling place, an active place with all kinds of people from all walks of life who speak in many different languages with many different accents with all kinds of things to do all day and all night.

That's not sitting all alone on a cloud, is it?

A city gives us an image of heaven that is so intriguing and exiting that it actually sounds rather unlikely!

About That Serpent

A FEW YEARS AGO, AS my wife and I were walking on a deserted dirt road in the mountains of Pennsylvania, we came across a five-foot long timber rattler. We both froze, scared to death.

I don't like snakes. I'm afraid of snakes. So when we come to the story about the serpent in the Garden way back at the beginning of Genesis, I'm prejudiced. I go into that story with a hatred and fear of snakes. They're bad. They're evil.

But that's not how Genesis describes the serpent in the Garden.

Genesis simply says that it was more crafty than all the other wild animals. The serpent is a trickster. The serpent is a troublemaker. He entices the man and the woman to sin.

Anything can be a serpent in our life. It can be a hobby. It can be a job. It can be a friend. It can be a form of entertainment. It can be the computer. It can be the television. Anything can entice us to pull away from God or pull away from our brothers and sisters and fracture our relationships with them. It doesn't have to be evil. It can just be tricky or crafty in its power and allure. How unlikely does that sound?