

GRACE LIKE A RIVER

Christopher
Parkening

WITH KATHY TYERS



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Grace Like a River: An Autobiography

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DEDICATION

To my son, Luke:

My heart's desire for you, Luke, is that you will love the Lord Jesus with all your heart and that whatever you do in life, you will do with excellence for His glory.

I will love you always,

Dad

And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 1:9-11

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FOREWORD BY JOHN MACARTHUR

Christopher Parkening's life has been filled with amazing experiences in two very different worlds—classical guitar and fly-fishing. He is a master of both the closed concert hall, with its skeptical audience, and the open stream, with its uncaring isolation. He moves from the public performance, which demands disciplined perfection, to the rippling water where in the midst of failures, one hopes for success.

Both are solo experiences. In one you are alone in a crowd. In the other you are absolutely alone.

Each has captured Chris's heart and taken him to world-class opportunities. He has known the fulfillment of the highest awards in classical music and in fly-fishing.

Though the two seem so far apart, they each require unusual athletic ability, manual dexterity, mastery of equipment, and—more critically—relentless discipline and hard practice. To be able to capture an audience with breathtaking artistry on six strings and also be able to capture a wild trout with the same delicate skill on one string are wondrously related in the extraordinary life of Chris Parkening.

This is the riveting story of the experiences of a man who has conquered his two worlds. More important, it is the story of how the grace of God has conquered him.

God has used Chris to grace my life for many years—Chris is about to do the same for you.

John MacArthur
July 2005

FOREWORD BY JONI EARECKSON TADA

It was a delightful summer evening, and my husband, Ken, was standing outside over a barbecue, flipping steaks, and “talking fish” with his friend Chris Parkening. Ken would describe his latest ocean-fishing adventure of fighting tuna, and Chris would counter with tales about the trout he was able to hook and release from the stream by his cabin. Back and forth it went. From my view in the kitchen, I wondered when they would run out of stories.

The steaks were great that night, and I was hoping during dinner that the discussion might turn from trout and tuna to something more . . . refined. Like music. Surely Christopher Parkening would enjoy talking with me about thirty-second notes, transcriptions by Segovia, and his latest performance at the Hollywood Bowl. Fat chance. The two men were as animated as before, discussing the fine points of rods and hooks, and the time Chris jumped out of his boat and wrestled a tarpon into submission in the Florida Keys. No getting around it: Chris’s stories were really fun. But I knew I would not hear—at least that night—about Bach or Bernstein.

Shortly after dessert, as we were moving into the living room, I confided to Chris that I had a dream of one day sitting close to him and watching him play “Recuerdos de la Alhambra,” a beautifully sensuous guitar piece that was one of my favorites from his recordings. “We’ll do that sometime,” Chris said in a chipper voice. Then it was time for fish videos.

When Chris was about to put on his coat to leave, Ken said,



“Wait a minute, there’s something I want you to see.” He disappeared into the bedroom and returned with his old guitar from high school. It was dusty, and probably the last thing played on it was “Michael, Row the Boat Ashore.” But Chris took it from Ken as though he were being handed a Stradivarius violin. He ran his hand over the dry wood of the face and then gently turned it over to inspect its back. The wood had a couple of small cracks. Chris rested the guitar on his knee and fingered the fossilized strings. He then leaned down to inspect the pitch as he tightened the strings. By this time, Ken had finished telling Chris about his teenage guitar-playing days. Now we were wondering what our friend was up to.

Without a word—and with me looking over his shoulder—Chris closed his eyes, nodded a few times as though he were reaching for something in his memory, and then launched into “Recuerdos de la Alhambra.” I was breathless. Tears welled in my eyes as our friend wove a melody that turned our living room into a romantic Spanish hideaway. The night suddenly seemed filled with mystery, with stars above and a heavy scent of evening jasmine in the air. I smiled and sniffed.

It was a gift sent straight from heaven. I could hardly sputter the words “thank you,” I was so overcome. Ken turned his guitar over in his hands to make certain it hadn’t changed. Yet as quickly as the enchantment had come, it left. Chris and Ken slapped each other on the back, we said our good-byes, and then my husband walked Chris out to his car.

While they were gone, I stared at Ken’s guitar sitting innocently on the couch. Was this the same instrument that had only known “Kum Ba Yah”? Yet it wasn’t the guitar that was filled with surprises. It was Chris.

That’s our friend—a package of surprises (like this book). I mean, how many world-class musicians are as comfortable in



freshwater waders as they are in a tuxedo? How many can tie a fly as easily as they can tune an instrument? Maybe a few. But none can match Chris's winsome personality, his exuberant love of God, and his incredible penchant for a good story.

Things *happen* to Chris. To head out to dinner with him and his wife, Theresa, is to head straight into an adventure. And I know before the evening's over, I will have laughed uproariously and talked much about the Lord we love.

That's my hope and prayer for you as you turn the pages of *Grace Like a River*. Maybe you picked up this book at the table after one of Chris's concerts. Perhaps you were browsing through a music store and there it was. Or better yet, a friend gave you a copy with the promise, "It's a *great* read!" Whatever the case, you have a few surprises in store from Mr. Parkening. Because you will not only enjoy great stories—and nobody tells a story quite like Chris—but you will discover why the supreme and massive grace of God happily rests on him.

Joni Eareckson Tada
Founder, Joni and Friends
Fall 2005

“Success”

1974

The center of a concert stage can be a lonely place. As I carried my guitar onto the stage at New York City’s Lincoln Center in March 1974, I felt as if I were stepping onto a tightrope over the Grand Canyon. A solitary black piano bench and a footstool had been placed under brilliant stage lights. Other than that, the stage was empty.

I couldn’t see the audience very well, but I knew it was a full house. I also knew that everyone out there expected something from me. Many had come hoping to enjoy the music and escape life’s pressures for a while. A few were critics, who knew every measure of every piece. They would notice any mistake, and they would listen for what might go wrong.



The pressure on a classical soloist to play perfectly in front of a demanding audience is daunting. This tour had been relentless, and I was exhausted. The pace, the pressure, and the schedule seemed unending. I'd been on the road since mid-January, performing at venues in California, Washington, Wyoming, Tennessee, New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. I had played fourteen concerts and had five more to go on the first U.S. leg of this tour. I hadn't seen my home for four and a half weeks and was emotionally and physically drained.

But this was New York. I had to reach inside myself and find the strength to give it my all. To the public in 1974, I may have appeared to be at the top of my career: sold-out concerts, record albums on the classical charts, and widespread critical acclaim. But inside, something was missing. Something important. As I sat down to play, I felt empty but had no choice but to grit my teeth and plow ahead with the performance.

Just two years before, I had made my Lincoln Center debut, a pivotal moment in any musician's career. The *New York Times* concert critic had been gracious to me then, saying, "Christopher Parkening's New York debut recital on Thursday proved the 24-year-old Californian to be an impeccable classic guitarist, perhaps the finest technician this country has yet produced on his instrument. Mr. Parkening . . . could well become one of his generation's concert heroes." Those kind words only increased the pressure I was feeling for this appearance. For this tour, I'd put together another difficult program, with compositions by Dowland, Handel, Bach, Ravel, and Poulenc. The last piece on the program was the challenging "Rumores de la Caleta," by Isaac Albéniz.

Although it felt as if I were simply going through the motions, the performance went exceptionally well. At the end of the concert, the usually reserved New York audience gave several standing



ovations, with one critic describing the performance as "incredible." It would have been a wonderful concert to end a tour with.

But it was not the end. I couldn't go home yet. I still had twenty-six performances to go.

My goal in those days was to retire at an early age. My father had retired at forty-seven, so I thought thirty would be a good age for me to retire. I was willing to work extremely hard to reach that goal. I endured the loneliness of hundreds of hotel rooms, the tension of endless, often nerve-racking airplane flights, the monotony and pressure of concert after concert after concert, persevering because I thought that if I could quit at thirty, I would finally be happy.

Knowing there was an escape route kept me going. If I just hung in there and took as many concert dates as I could get, then I could quit while on top, relax, and enjoy the "good life." It wasn't money, fame, or success that drove me back then. It was the dream of retiring to a Montana trout stream.



I grew up in a family that put anyone with great talent or ability on a pedestal. My mother's brother, Bill Marshall, married the famous actress Ginger Rogers in 1961. Ginger was greatly respected in our family, as elsewhere, for her talents as an actress and a dancer. The Marshall family also included Mom's cousin Jack, staff guitarist for the MGM movie studios, and his sons, Frank and Phil. Frank Marshall is a successful movie producer, married to fellow producer Kathleen Kennedy, and Phil Marshall is a well-known film composer.

We all knew that achievement requires hard work and discipline. My father's early retirement was a tribute to his tenacity and



perseverance. I also liked setting tough goals and working toward them, so I responded well to the challenges of mastering an instrument. As a young boy, I'd hear a piece of music and think, *With hard work, I'll be able to figure that out and play it.* It was exciting for me to learn a piece that had never before been performed on the classical guitar. Even more than that, I simply loved the music itself. It was thrilling to be the first classical guitarist to play Rick Foster's arrangement of Bach's "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" on the concert stage. I did not enjoy being onstage, though.

When I was about twenty, I heard my mom talking to Ginger Rogers, who was explaining that for her, to be onstage was almost a high. She just ate it up. She adored the applause, the atmosphere, and the electric tension of a live performance.

I had been playing concerts for five years and didn't feel that way at all. It was a high for me when I was *off* the stage. I never looked forward to performing for its own sake.

In 1974, after that sold-out concert at Lincoln Center, I traveled on to Lexington, Kentucky; Johnson City and Nashville, Tennessee; and then back to New York to catch an international flight. My manager at that time, Sam Niefeld of Columbia Artists Management, had booked me on an immediate European tour: Amsterdam; Cambridge, Folkestone, and London; Barcelona; and Paris. My London concert would be a debut at Queen Elizabeth Hall. After the tour, I would fly back to the United States for seventeen more concerts in seven weeks.

In the world of classical music, that was success.

I just wanted to go home. I was so exhausted that I had nothing left to give. I stood alone that night in Kennedy Airport's cold international terminal, feeling completely burned out, discouraged, and empty. I did not want to go on, and those feelings were compounded by the fact that in Europe, I would be playing for a fraction of the



fee that I normally received in the United States. Sam told me this was acceptable because playing in Europe was essential to building an international career. He didn't realize that this didn't fit in with my goal at all. I was knocking myself out, saving up enough money to say good-bye to my career. I didn't care about London reviews or international celebrity.

I was so distraught about heading overseas that I found a pay phone, set down my guitar, and called Sam's home to cancel the European tour.

I got his answering machine.

There seemed to be no point in leaving a message, so I reluctantly walked down the long terminal, found the right gate, and boarded the all-night flight to Amsterdam. After a sleepless trip, I landed on the other side of the ocean and plodded through immigration. The concert presenter didn't send anyone to pick me up, so I had to get a taxi and then point to the hotel's name on my printed itinerary. My bags were so heavy that my hands and arms ached. Checking into the hotel meant one more round of unpacking my suitcase, hanging up my coat and tails, and ordering room service.

The clock said I should be awake, but all I wanted to do was sleep, so I lay down to take a "short nap."

I woke up in the middle of the night, facing a concert that day. There was nothing else for me to do, so I got my guitar out and started to practice.

At that point, I noticed that the fingernails on my right hand were a little too long. A classical guitarist's fingernails are essential tools that must be protected at all times. The left-hand nails are kept extremely short so they won't get in the way of pressing down the strings on the fingerboard. The right-hand nails pluck, strum, and "slice" across the strings, so they must be longer and perfectly

shaped, with their edges polished to remove any unevenness that might cause a scratchy, tinny sound or catch on a string instead of producing a smooth, beautiful tone.

When I wearily held up my right hand, I saw too much nail over my fingertips. I bent over and pulled my nail file out of the center compartment of my guitar case.

Then I clenched my jaw and looked at my nails again. *I'll file them all off*, I thought.

In what seemed like just a moment, it was over. I stared at my right hand in disbelief as the reality of what I had done swept over me. My right-hand nails were now as short as my left. That hadn't been the case since before I started to play the guitar fifteen years earlier.

I had chosen a devastating way to rebel against the pressures of the schedule, the expectations, the loneliness, and the disillusionment. What was done in a moment of frustration would greatly affect the next three weeks in Europe. With no nails to pluck the strings, I had set myself up for failure.

The tour was indeed disastrous, beset with technical struggles and memory lapses. Night after night, without adequate nails to pluck the strings, I felt as if I were trying to compete at Wimbledon with a Ping-Pong paddle. I was living a nightmare.

Each frustrating performance only added to my desire to be done with it all. I longed for peace and contentment, and I truly believed that if I could just make it to that cabin in Montana, I would be free. I couldn't have known at the time that God's hand was nudging me in another direction.

EPILOGUE: SOLI DEO GLORIA

I used to work very hard for worldly success. I still work hard for excellence, but there's a constant battle that takes place within me. I want to bring glory to God. *He* is the audience. But there's a side of me that still wants good reviews, strong record sales, critical acceptance. I tell myself, *If I don't succeed, it doesn't glorify God.*

I have come to believe that it is vital to pursue personal excellence based on your own God-given potential, rather than success. Success is external—how you have done in comparison to others. Excellence is internal—seeking satisfaction in having done your best in relation to your potential. It's the pursuit of quality in your work and effort, without regard to worldly recognition. I believe that you will always pay the full price for excellence; it is never discounted. Whenever I finish a concert or complete a recording, I feel a deep sense of satisfaction and gratitude that the guitar has become my platform to glorify God and share the gospel. Still, I continue to learn.

At the Hollywood Bowl in 2002, I played the Bernstein Concerto for Guitar and Orchestra, with the composer and my recording producer, David Thomas, in attendance. I practiced diligently, prayed for the concert, and played a very good rehearsal. During the concert, though, I missed the last note of a difficult descending run. Sometimes I feel that it might be nice to get a “second take,” and after the concert I complained to Dave, dissatisfied with the performance. I asked if the missed note was very noticeable.

He exhorted me, “Chris, we prayed that the Lord would be



glorified, and you played for Him. You tried your best, so thank Him and don't dwell on your mistake. Be grateful for the performance God gave you!"

Dave was absolutely right. Many people have asked if performing is easy for me now, after giving so many concerts. Sometimes I still feel as if I am walking out onto a tightrope. The only One I have to hold on to is the Lord. Every concert is difficult. When I walk out onstage, my confidence is in Him.

Over the years since I started playing the classical guitar, I've had many great teachers—Andrés Segovia, Gregor Piatigorsky, and my father, to name a few. Some truths I've learned on the concert stage, some on clear creeks in California and Montana; yet as I look back on my life, I can now see that I have always experienced grace, even before I consciously committed my life to Christ. Some readers may focus on what might have seemed to be successes, but I know the struggles that so often were overcome by divine mercy. I look back in wonder, grateful that God chose me and through His love overcame my shortcomings, personal and professional, to build a career that, more than anything else, I look upon as the foundation of my ministry.

On my music stand at home, I have taped a note that reads, "Chris, what are you here for?" Just as my touring guitar bears the scars of having been used to create music, I pray that my imperfect life will be an instrument in God's hands, for His purposes, and to His glory.



LETTER FROM ANDRÉS SEGOVIA

[Sent in response to *Parkening Plays Bach*]

Madrid 16, June 1, 1971

Dear Christopher:

I have listened to your record and am very pleased with it. The new compositions by Bach you have transcribed and my old ones sound beautifully. The only advice I may give you, for instance in the Prelude in D major, arranged by me, is not to make the retardando so early before the end. More than a retardando seems to be a change of tempo. However, you play it with excellent musicianship and clarity. Concerning “Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme” your transcription is skillfully made and the result is very nicely played by dividing yourself. Nevertheless I prefer the last transcription which ends the record. My principle has always been not to put in the guitar anything made for voice, unless for my own satisfaction and never for the public’s either on record or in concert programs. Your technique is extremely fluent and sure. Nobody, with the exception of John Williams, could equal it.

The use of the microphone is against my taste. It is true that we have to employ it for making records and playing for television and Radio but nobody expects the sound of the guitar to be true through those devices but playing directly in front of the public is different. We have to give the exact quality of the beautiful tone of the guitar, without adulterating it. Try to make your pulsation on the strings stronger but not harsh and reduce the body of instruments which will accompany you as well as their sound to the level of the guitar tone. No critics or musicians listening to you will expect that the volume of it may equal the robust and overwhelming sound of the piano. The beauty of the guitar resides in its soft and persuasive voice and its poetry cannot be equaled by



any other instrument. I am giving concerts in large halls since the beginning of my career and the public that continues to come to hear me never complains in its totality that it was hard to listen.

The flamenco. What you have learned from the best players of it, even if nice, is absolutely untrue. I am an Andalusian. I love the real folklore of my country and I know it very well. Myself, I sometimes used to play it for my own satisfaction or for my most intimate friends but never for the public. As an American you have not been forced to redeem the guitar from the ugly amusements to raise it to the concert stage. You have found already this operation done without struggling against the musicians who did not believe the guitar to be apt for serious music but only for flamenco. Thus you have no scruples for mixing both natures of the guitar. Remember that I always said that the guitar is like a hill with two sides that, naturally, coexist but they do not look at each other. Finally my last advice is that you may omit the flamenco from your concerts in order to give the guitar its true dignity. You don't need, as I have told you, the applauses of the ignorants who like more the noises of the "rasgueados" than the simple, moving and expressive "falsetas".

Enough of preaching to you the artistic morale of your conduct. Anything that you may play will be accepted with enthusiasm by every listener because you are talented and a nice boy who may increase incessantly the success.

I hope to see you next time in Los Angeles. I don't know yet the distribution of my concerts. The list given to me by Mr. Hurok before departing from New York has been lost and I am expecting the new one. But it will very easy for you to know the dates of my appearances in California.

My best regards to your family
and affectionately yours,
A. Segovia

REFLECTIONS

It was my desire to include this chapter that contains many of the principles that have encouraged, guided, and helped me to shape my life. I hope they are a blessing to you as well.

True Christianity

I asked one of my relatives if he was a Christian, and he said that when he was young he had been baptized and confirmed. He thought that made him a Christian. So I asked him another question, “If being a Christian were illegal, would there be enough evidence to convict you now?”

I went through a period of my life when I was coming to the conclusion that I wasn’t a true Christian, even though I believed the facts about Christ.

Here is one definition of true Christians: people “which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3).

Saving faith is believing in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ to the degree that you are completely satisfied with Him so as to commit your life to Him in loyalty, faithfulness, allegiance, submission, duty, fidelity, and obligation. It is not mere intellectual assent, though your conception of God will control your worship and your life.

For many American Christians, Jesus is only a part of their lives, instead of being the point of their lives. Matthew 7:20-23, to



me, is the scariest passage in all of the New Testament: “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”

The following poem is engraved in a cathedral in Lubeck, Germany:

*Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not the things I say?
You call me the Way and walk me not
You call me the Life and live me not
You call me Master and obey me not
If I condemn thee, blame me not.*

*You call me Bread and eat me not
You call me Truth and believe me not
Ye call me “Lord” and serve me not
If I condemn thee, blame me not.*

If you’re a Christian and you’re forgiven, is it okay to sin?

I remember hearing a young woman in a Bible study ask, “If you’re a Christian and you’re saved by God’s grace so you’ll be forgiven of any sin you commit, does that mean you can pretty much do whatever you want?”

I made a personal study on what happens when a Christian sins, and I came up with six points.

1. Jesus said, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15), so habitually sinning shows that you don’t love Him.
2. He disciplines us as children, as Hebrews 12:6 says. “Whom the

Lord loveth he chasteneth.” Life is tough enough without God disciplining us.

3. Our prayers are hindered (Psalm 66:18). He doesn’t listen to the prayer of the sinful person, apart from repentance. “If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.”
4. As Paul said in 1 Corinthians 6:15 (NASB), our bodies are members of Christ. “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!”
5. There will be a loss of reward in heaven, as the Bible states in 2 John 1:8: “Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward.”
6. This is almost the most devastating one of all, another illustration of God’s discipline. In the twentieth chapter of the book of Numbers, when the Israelites had no water, Moses was told to speak to a rock. Instead he lost his temper and struck it twice. Water flowed, but God told Moses he had sinned. After years of leading God’s people in the desert, Moses forfeited the tremendous privilege and honor of leading them into the Promised Land, although God graciously showed it to him from a mountain far away just before he died.

Here’s the principle: The forgiveness of sin does not always carry with it relief from the consequences of the sin. When I entertain the thought of sin, I think of the consequences—the damage to my testimony, the discipline I would undergo, the disappointment of those who know me, and most of all, the idea of disappointing my Lord. After that, maybe the most devastating thing is the loss of my service to Him. It takes a lifetime to build a reputation but only a moment to destroy it.

THE BIBLE AND DOCTRINE

The Bible's role in our lives

The Word of God is truth. I've heard it said that when you buy a car, you look at the owner's manual because the auto manufacturer knows how it runs best. I believe God is my creator, and I believe God wrote an "owner's manual" in the form of the Bible: a library of sixty-six books, written by more than thirty-five different authors, in a period of approximately 1,500 years. Those authors represent a cross section of humanity—both educated and uneducated—that includes fishermen, kings, public officials, farmers, teachers, and physicians. The Bible covers such subjects as religion, history, law, science, poetry, drama, biography, and prophecy. Its various parts go together as harmoniously as the parts that make up the human body.

For so many authors, with such varied backgrounds, to write on so many subjects over such a long period in absolute harmony seems to me an impossibility. It could not happen, except that—as 2 Peter 1:21 explains—"Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost."

The Bible reveals the mind of God, the state of man, the way of salvation, the doom of sinners, and the future happiness of believers. It is necessary to read it to be wise, safe, and holy. It is a light to direct my steps, food to sustain me, and comfort when my heart is sad. It's been called a map, a compass, a sword, and the Christian's charter. Christ is the majestic subject, and God's glory is its end. I am learning to memorize it, to let it rule my heart and guide my steps, and to read it frequently and prayerfully. It is, as I've been told, a wealth of treasure and a river of pleasure. I love that. It rewards those who labor with it, and it condemns any who trifle with its sacred contents. It is wisdom for those who trust it, and salvation and power to those who obey it.

The Bible is the Word of God. Believe it, honor it, obey it, love it, study it, proclaim it, and defend it.

Why does God allow suffering?

People who hear me talk about my faith often ask why there is so much suffering. If God is both good and all-powerful, as the Bible says, why does He sometimes permit the best of people to suffer the worst of calamities?

A whole book of Scripture is devoted to that complex problem. It's the story of Job, whom Scripture describes as "blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1, NKJV). God Himself said there was no one else like Job on the earth (v. 8).

Yet, a series of shattering calamities struck Job and his family all at once, leaving him physically wasted, emotionally spent, and crying out to God for answers. The answers Job finally received were not really answers to the "why" questions (although the Bible does give us a peek behind the scenes in heaven, where we get a small glimpse of why Job suffered). But the thrust of the book is primarily a reminder of two important, rock-solid truths about *God* that encourage us to trust Him through hard times.

First, God is *sovereign*. He has not lost control, even if that's how it seems from our perspective.

Second, God is *good*, and His tender mercies are over all His works. Satan, not God, was the evil agent who devised all Job's suffering and personally afflicted him. God gave permission, but He had good reasons for doing so. He set careful boundaries on what the devil could do to Job. And he ultimately used all those trials for Job's eternal good and His own eternal glory.

God promises to use all things for good in the lives of *everyone* who loves Him (Romans 8:28). That means there is always a good

purpose in the bad things that happen to us, even if we can't yet see the good. I know this is true from personal experience (and perhaps you do, too). Some of the most difficult things I have ever suffered have reaped the richest rewards in my life, and as I look back on them, I can sometimes see clearly *how* God used them for good, and therefore I can even thank Him for my sufferings.

That was the perspective of Joseph, whose brothers sold him as a slave into Egypt. God brought Joseph through a lifetime of distress in order to raise him to a position of influence in Egypt. In the end, Joseph saved the lives of multitudes, including the brothers who betrayed him. Instead of being bitter and resentful against them, he told them, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50:20, NASB). That's the perspective we ought to have about all our trials (see James 1:2-4).

Some have asked me, "Why do bad things happen to God's people?" I came up with nine reasons:

1. To test the validity of our faith—to see if it is a lasting (saving) faith (2 Chronicles 32:31)
2. To wean us from the world (John 6:5-6)
3. To call us to heavenly hope (Romans 5:3)
4. To show us what we really love (Genesis 22)
5. To teach us obedience—sin has painful consequences (Hebrews 12:5-6)
6. To reveal God's compassion in our misery (Psalm 63:3)
7. To develop our spiritual strength for greater usefulness (James 1:2-4)
8. To enable us to help others in their trials (2 Corinthians 1:4-6)
9. To display God's astounding power (2 Corinthians 1:8-10)

God the creator

It's hard for me to imagine anything more difficult than the atheistic formula for the explanation of the universe: Nobody times nothing equals everything.

I believe God is creator not only because Scripture says so, but also because I can see the evidence of His handiwork in the design of creation itself. Paul says God's invisible attributes are on display in all that He has made (Romans 1:20). Paul suggests, for example, that the vastness of the universe testifies to His power. I would add that the beauty of creation testifies to God's goodness and His own love of beauty.

I can no more look at the glory of creation and imagine that it evolved from nothing by chance than I can hear a Bach partita and believe it's just a collection of random noises that fell together by accident.

What is true salvation?

Arthur W. Pink wrote this in 1937:

Salvation is by grace, by grace alone. . . . Nevertheless, divine grace is not exercised at the expense of holiness, for it never compromises with sin. It is also true that salvation is a free gift, but an empty hand must receive it, and not a hand which still tightly grasps the world! . . .

Something more than "believing" is necessary to salvation. A heart that is steeled in rebellion against God cannot savingly believe; it must first be broken. . . .

. . . Only those who are spiritually blind would declare that Christ will save any who despise His authority and refuse His yoke. . . . Those preachers who tell sinners that they may be saved without forsaking their idols, without repenting, without

surrendering to the Lordship of Christ, are as erroneous and dangerous as others who insist that salvation is by works and that heaven must be earned by our own efforts.⁴

Is Jesus God?

I used to wonder how Jesus could be both eternally God and the Son of God. After all, we naturally think of a son as subordinate to his father. If we call Jesus the Son of God, aren't we really saying He is something less than the eternal, self-sufficient, omnipotent God? That question troubled me.

At the same time, it was clear to me that certain texts of Scripture emphatically say that Jesus is God and fully equal to God the Father. For example, He is plainly called the eternal Word *and* "God" in John 1:1.

Then I learned that in Hebrew usage, the expression "son" denotes an absolute equality of essence, privilege, and right. A "son" was different from a "child" in exactly this way: the "son" was regarded as a full heir with all the adult privileges and power—not a subordinate, but an equal in every way (Galatians 4:1-6). That's why when Jesus referred to God as His Father, John 5:18 says His enemies "sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the sabbath, but had also said that God was his Father, *making Himself equal with God*" (emphasis added). Thomas said after seeing the resurrected Christ, "My LORD and my God" (John 20:28).

Who matters most to you?

A certain lady used to cut my hair. She was of Jewish heritage, and I remember her telling me that when her mother was sick, she prayed and prayed that God would heal her. He didn't, and she said, "I've resented God from that moment on. I want nothing to do with God at all, because He did not answer my prayer."



I told her the story of Job. God allowed Satan to put Job through some of the most severe trials man has ever encountered. Satan's claim was that if everything was taken away from Job, he would curse God. Then God told Satan that he could take everything from Job but his life. (See Job 1–2.) So that's exactly what Satan did. In the middle of it all, Job's response was, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (13:15). Job passed the test, proving that a true child of God worships Him regardless of his circumstances.

In a recent discussion with one of my friends, she said, "I will never put God first in my life. My children will always be first."

I told her, "The greatest example in Scripture is Abraham's attitude toward Isaac. He loved Isaac more than anything else, but he understood that even our children are not our own, but God's." I said, "You can't put your children first. God has to be first in your life. Your children belong to God. If God hadn't allowed Jesus Christ to suffer and die for us, we would still be in our sins."

She said, "Well, you wouldn't put your son, Luke, after God."

I said, "I believe I would."

She was almost shocked. She said, "That's nice to say, but when it came down to it, you wouldn't."

I understand why she had that perspective. Love for one's own children is one of the most powerful human affections. On the other hand, enmity with God is one of the inevitable effects of our fallenness (Romans 8:7-8). Conversion to Christ reorders our priorities—so much that Scripture likens spiritual regeneration to the implantation of a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26).

Shortly after my son was born, I had an experience that made it clearer to me what it meant that God allowed His Son to die for our sins.

When Luke was several months old, Theresa and I decided we

would let him learn to go to sleep on his own. This necessitated letting him cry for a few minutes before he fell asleep. We placed a blanket over his legs and stomach that night to keep him warm. Later, when he started to cry, we were in the other room, and it was breaking our hearts to listen. I went in after about five minutes just to make sure he was okay, but he kept crying. Fifteen minutes went by, and suddenly he started to wail, beyond crying—almost screaming. I said, “Theresa, we’ve got to hang in there and give it another five minutes. He’s bound to go to sleep by then.”

In five minutes, it was quiet. I walked from our bedroom into his room and was horrified to see the blanket covering his face, which was why he had been wailing. When I looked at my son and saw that he had been crying out for me to come to him—and I did not come—I was crushed to the core. I could only for a moment imagine Christ on the cross when he said, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). The separation that took place between the Father and the Son and the suffering the Father allowed the Son to undergo—because of His great love for us—suddenly was more clear to me than ever before. When I thought about my little boy crying out for me and my saying “No, I’m not coming to you,” I was truly grieved.

Is it unfair that God bestows saving grace on some and not on others?

I was told a story years ago that helped me understand this question from a better perspective.

There was a man walking down the street. Two young robbers assaulted him, beat him up, stripped him of his clothes, took all his money, and left him for dead. They were shortly thereafter caught and put in prison.

When the man who had been robbed was asked to press



charges, he chose to forgive and bestow grace on one of the two robbers. He bailed him out of jail, took him in as a guest in his home, paid for his schooling, and eventually adopted him as a member of his family. He forgave him for everything he had done.

He left the other robber in prison.

He showed grace—unmerited favor—to the one he'd bailed out of jail. But the question is, "Was he unjust, or unfair, to the other robber?" The answer is no. That man got what he deserved. The other one just got undeserved grace.

I've heard our pastor put it this way: "Don't say, 'I just want what I deserve.' You don't want what you deserve. We all deserve hell because of our sin. Whatever good things we have, especially our salvation, we have by grace alone." Many people say, "It's not fair that God would punish some people but not others"—but it is! We all deserve hell! It's just that by His sovereign will, He has chosen to bestow grace upon some people, not for anything they have done.

In damnation, God acts in response to human choice. In salvation, man acts in response to divine choice. God has chosen us to be His children and has showered us with His grace.

Have you kept your first love?

I really want to get personal here. My greatest fear for my own spiritual life is not that I will fall into some worldly temptation. I have been blessed to grow spiritually in a church that teaches sound doctrine, emphasizes bearing fruit and laboring for God, stands against sin and unrighteousness, and desires the glory of God and the advancement of His Kingdom. But in Revelation 2, the apostle John, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, records that although the Ephesian church believed strong doctrine, labored to produce good works, exhibited patience, struggled against evil for the sake of Christ, and "fainted not," Christ had



something against that church. Those believers had left their first love. Their worship of Christ was mechanical. Their service was heartless. If a church can do that, so can an individual. That is my greatest fear.

I also thought about a comparison in music. You can practice hard, develop a great technique, and study music theory and history. You can discipline yourself and work hard at all aspects of playing the guitar; you can even study with great teachers and play the finest music ever written, but if it's without *heart* and a true love for the music, it's empty. Mechanical. Soulless. Lifeless.

Now that I have been a Christian for many years, I don't want to forget my first love, Christ—how excited I first was about praying to Him and serving Him and reading the Word to learn more about Him. I'm still a long way from where I want to be. But now that I'm a longer-time Christian, hopefully a little more mature in the faith and in doctrine, I still want to know Christ. First John 2:13 says that we start as babies in Christ, then mature to young men, and aim to become spiritual fathers, knowing Christ.

Why pray if God is in control?

Prayer is acknowledging that God is sovereign. We say, "Lord, here is what's on my heart. I don't know what Your will is, but this is what I ask of You in my humbleness." Prayer becomes presumption when it doesn't acknowledge the will of God and the sovereignty of God. Prayer is a mysterious thing; it's possible to ask, "If God is in charge, why bother?" The answer is, "He tells us to pray." Why does He tell us to pray? If for no other reason than to commune with Him, to learn to submit to Him and line up with His will, and to rejoice in that process. Prayer becomes presump-

tion if we don't have the attitude of, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done—whatever will give You the greatest glory, whatever will advance Your name, whatever will give You honor, that's what I want You to do."

An old poem by Marshall Broomhall says it this way:

*With peaceful mind thy path of duty run:
God nothing does, nor suffers to be done,
But thou wouldst do the same if thou couldst see
The end of all events as well as He.⁵*

What is wisdom?

Fearing God is the beginning of wisdom, and wisdom is the understanding needed to live life to the glory of God. (See Proverbs 1:7.)

How can we balance truth and love with sound doctrine?

The foundation of Christian unity is sound doctrine. Truth prevents love from becoming sappy sentimentalism, and love prevents truth from becoming rigid dogmatism. The main teaching of the short book of 2 John is walking in truth by ordering one's life by the Word of God. According to 2 John 1:6, "This is love, that we walk after his commandments."

What is saving faith?

The Holy Spirit is the One who confirms saving faith. An evangelist might say, "Now I welcome you into the Kingdom of God," to someone who prayed a prayer and walked an aisle, but in fact he doesn't know if that person is a true believer or not at that point. Only the Holy Spirit can confirm whether or not faith is genuine.

A Bible passage that perfectly illustrates this point is the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-23; Luke 8:5-15). A seed may sprout and look like it's a Christian. But too many people have



come down the aisle, prayed the prayer, and then walked away from Christ. They didn't count the cost, and the cares and the worries of the world choked their faith. When persecution arose, it was too much, and they walked away.

A simple principle of Biblical interpretation

Never generate a doctrine out of an obscure text when no other text in the Bible teaches that same doctrine.

Choosing a church

The primary criterion for choosing a church is biblical preaching. Martin Luther said that the pinnacle of public worship is the preaching of God's word. Worship is acknowledging God for who He is and what He has done. A congregation cannot honor God more than by listening reverently to the preaching of His Word with an obedient heart.

One of the sermons I heard shortly after I became a Christian defined biblical Christianity as teaching and preaching

1. the supremacy of the Holy Scriptures
2. the total corruption of human nature
3. Christ's death upon the cross as the only satisfaction for humanity's sin
4. the doctrine of justification by faith alone
5. the universal necessity of heart conversion and new creation by the Holy Spirit
6. God's eternal hatred of sin and God's love of sinners
7. the inseparable connection between true faith and personal holiness. (Church membership or religious profession is not proof that a person is a genuine Christian if he or she lives an ungodly life.)



CHRISTIAN LIVING

A simple guideline for prayer

At a recent Bible study, I learned a helpful format for praying. The acronym ACTS stands for adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. I've started to follow that pattern when I pray.

How should we live as Christians?

The Christian life should be characterized by love, excellence, integrity, good works, and a dedication to God's glory.

What is the role of works if salvation is by faith alone?

I have always known that we are saved by grace, through faith alone, not by good deeds. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." But then what about James 2:17? "Faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone."

I love this comparison: Faith and works are like a two-coupon ticket to heaven. The coupon of works is not good for passage, but the coupon of faith is not valid if detached from works. Unproductive faith can't save, because it isn't genuine. Do you have to work your way to heaven? No way! You're saved by grace alone, through faith alone. But if your faith is genuine, there will be some evidence or fruit in your life—your works and deeds.

Who is your captain?

I heard about a mean, crusty old sea captain who was merciless with his crew. After months on the high seas, the crew mutinied, threw him into the bowels of the ship, and appointed a new leader.

One day a crew member was walking past the prison cell when the former captain yelled out an order. Out of habit and routine,

the crewman started to obey. Then he said, “Wait a minute. You aren’t my captain anymore, and you don’t control me. I have a new leader, and I only serve him.”

The point is that we don’t need to listen to the old, sinful, fallen self anymore. We have a new captain: Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

Ultimate human forgiveness

The brother-in-law of a friend of mine had a seventeen-year-old son who was shot and killed when he was working in a convenience store. The murderer was caught, convicted, and put in prison, and the father of the boy requested the opportunity to see his son’s killer. Through the thick Plexiglas window, he told him face-to-face that he forgave him for killing his son and that he wanted him to hear the precious gospel of Jesus Christ so he could believe and be saved and so they could meet again in heaven.

I’ve never heard of a more extreme example of human forgiveness, and I can only imagine the peace this father received when he forgave someone else in the way God forgives us. It seems humanly impossible to forgive such a man, but God gives grace at exactly the time it’s needed.

When someone wrongs me, shall I not forgive that person? How much less is that than what this man forgave? Luke 6:37 says, “Judge not, and ye shall not be judged: condemn not, and ye shall not be condemned: forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.”

A story of faithfulness

Billy Kim, an interpreter for Billy Graham on a Tokyo crusade, told this story a few years ago.

Some North Korean soldiers overran a village. They rounded up two hundred Christians and took them into a church where they

nailed a picture of Jesus to the front door. “You are going to go out in single file,” they said, “and you are going to spit in your Messiah’s face. If you don’t spit in His face, you’ll be shot in the head.”

The first man went up to the picture, spit in Christ’s face, and walked out. The second spit on the picture of Christ and also walked out. So did the third and the fourth.

The fifth, a young girl, walked up to the picture, took her dress, and wiped the spit away, saying, “Jesus, I love you, and I’m willing to die for you.”

The girl’s actions so flabbergasted the soldiers that they said, “Get out. Everybody get out.” Then they went outside, took the four men who had spit on the picture of Jesus, shot *them* dead, and let the others go. They said that to be a communist, one has to have great commitment, which these four men did not.

God used the courage of one little girl to save most of this church.

Our eternal glory—which is our capacity to serve God, to serve Christ, to glorify Him, and to praise Him in heaven—is measured out in relation to our willingness to suffer for Christ’s sake. The cross, then, is the greatest illustration of how suffering is related to glory. The greatest suffering that ever occurred in the universe occurred on the cross, and the greatest glory that has ever been given was given in response to that suffering. God is not overcome by evil, and neither are His people.

True happiness

Christian joy is an experience that springs from the deep confidence that Christ is sufficient and that God is in perfect control of everything, bringing it all together for our good and for His glory, in time and eternity. True happiness comes from devoting one’s life to a great purpose, and what greater purpose could there be than the glory of God and the gospel of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ?

With Christ, there is blessing, purpose, and joy. I've heard it said that if you find your deepest joy in anything in this life, you are destined for a life of discontentment. Ultimately, we live to glorify God and advance His Kingdom.

Thy will for my life

Sometimes I think of this prayer of consecration, written by Betty Scott Stam, a missionary to China who died there in the 1930s. She wrote it when she was eighteen years old, and it is one of my favorites.

*Lord, I give up all my own plans and purposes,
All my own desires and hopes,
And accept Thy will for my life.
I give myself, my life, my all
Utterly to Thee to be Thine forever.
Fill me and seal me with Thy Holy Spirit,
Use me as Thou wilt,
Send me where Thou wilt,
And work out Thy whole will in my life
At any cost, now and forever.*

How can we withstand criticism for doing what is right?

Here is a quote I love from an unknown author.

Being About the Father's Business

Keep about your work. Do not flinch because the lion roars; do not stop to stone the devil's dogs; do not fool away your time chasing the devil's rabbits. Do your work. Let liars lie, let sectarians quarrel, let the devil do his worst; but see to it nothing hinders you from fulfilling the work God has given you. He has not commanded you to be rich, he has never bidden



you defend your character, he has not set you at work to contradict falsehood about yourself, which Satan and his servants may start to peddle. If you do those things, you will do nothing else; you will be at work for yourself and not for the Lord. Keep at work, let your aim be as steady as a star. You may be assaulted, wronged, insulted, slandered, wounded, and rejected; you may be abused by foes, forsaken by friends, and despised and rejected of men. But see to it, with steadfast determination, with unflinching zeal, that you pursue the great purpose of your life and object of your being, until at last you can say, "I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do."

The pleasure principle

When you live in the light of eternity, your focus changes from "How much pleasure am I getting out of life?" to "How much pleasure is God getting out of my life?"

I had to learn the hard way that the pleasures of sin are but for a season (Hebrews 11:25). When that season is over, you pay dearly. "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap" (Galatians 6:17).

Perfecting in weakness

As I mentioned earlier, I heard a sermon based on 2 Corinthians 12:9 (NASB), on the night before my Hollywood Bowl performance when I had a lacerated finger. The text of this passage includes, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." So the suffering that humbles us, the suffering that forces us to God in prayer, the suffering that makes us cry out for grace to endure, is the very source of power in our lives. It is when the Christian has lost all human ability to deal with his difficulty, when he is weak, destitute, without resources, and left totally to trust in



God's power through grace to sustain him that he becomes a channel through which God's power can flow. The trials in our physical lives are what lead us to spiritual strength.

For a Christian, endurance equals the tenacity of spirit that holds on under pressure, while awaiting God's time to remove, dismiss, and reward when the trial is done.

Running to win

Because I needed to protect my hands and fingernails, my high school athletic career was limited to track and field. I went to a small school, where the track coach knew how much I had to practice the guitar, so he allowed me a minimum amount of workout time with the team. I ran events that required speed instead of endurance: the 100-yard dash, the 220, the 440 relay, and the long jump.

One time my school competed against several big-city high schools in the area, and I placed so poorly in the 100 that I figured I had nothing to lose in the 220. I was loose and warmed up, with a "go for broke, don't expect anything" attitude.

When we rounded the first bend, to my surprise I saw that I was in the lead. I kept leading. I saw the finish line just ahead and thought, *I don't believe this. I am going to win!* I focused my eyes on the tape . . . and just a few steps before I crossed it, two guys whooshed past me.

My coach told me later, "Chris, you made one big mistake. You didn't run through the finish line. You ran to it, and your entire stride changed the last few steps. You always must run through the finish line, toward a distance beyond where you're actually running to."

I liken that to practicing a piece of music faster than you'll need to play it in concert. For a fast allegro movement, you don't



set concert tempo as your practicing goal. You practice beyond that so that you can comfortably play the concert tempo onstage. Or, to make a spiritual connection, I compare it to looking past your circumstances to Christ as you run life's race.

Hebrews 12:1-2 says, "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience [endurance] the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."

Finish well

I pray that God gives me the grace to finish well. I live under a kind of tension, lest I default, so I stay accountable. As Paul put it, "having done all, to stand" (Ephesians 6:13). I also think of 1 Corinthians 9:27: "I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway." So many have "done it all," yet in the end have fallen to sin and disqualification, bringing shame on the very Lord they represented. Though I am keenly aware of my own sinfulness and need for God's grace, I know that God's grace is greater than our sin.

The king and the charioteers

There's a famous story about a king who was testing his country's finest drivers to see who would become his personal charioteer. He took them to a treacherous, winding mountain road and told them, "If you can't drive with confidence and skill on this road, you cannot be my charioteer."

The first man drove his chariot at breakneck speed around all



the twists and turns, coming within inches of the edge. All were amazed at the man's skill and daring.

The second driver, thinking he needed to outdo the first man, drove even faster, steered the chariot's wheels closer to the edge of the road, and brought the chariot back in record time.

A third driver drove very slowly and stayed as far away as possible from every steep edge. As soon as he finished the test course, the king met him and said, "You are my new chariot driver. I want a man whose instincts tell him to stay as far away from danger as possible."

I desire to stay well inside the circle of obedience and not be the kind of person that constantly pushes the boundaries.

Dying to ourselves

Humility is a demonstration of a Christian's spiritual maturity. Self-denial, then, becomes a pattern for life.

When someone holds a grudge against you or you're neglected or purposely set aside, although you sting and hurt with the insult or oversight, your heart is happy and you're content to be counted worthy to suffer for Christ, that is dying to self.

When your good is spoken of as evil, your wishes are crossed, your advice is disregarded, and your opinions are ridiculed, and when you refuse to let anger rise in your heart or to even defend yourself but take it all in patient, loyal silence, that is dying to self.

When you lovingly and patiently bear any disorder, any irregularity, or any annoyance; when you can stand face-to-face with foolishness, extravagance, or spiritual insensitivity and endure it as Jesus endured it, that is dying to self.

When you're content with any food, any offering, any clothes, any climate, any society, any solitude, any interruption by the will of God, that is dying to self.

When you never care to refer to yourself or to record your own good works or to seek commendation; when you can truly love to be unknown, that is dying to self.

When you see another brother prosper and have his or her needs met and you can honestly rejoice with this person in spirit and feel no envy, nor even question God while your own needs are far greater or your circumstances more desperate, that is dying to self.

When you can receive correction and reproof from one of less worldly stature than yourself and you can humbly submit inwardly, as well as outwardly, finding no rebellion or resentment rising up within your heart, that is dying to self.

So you come to Christ with an attitude of self-denial, and you grow from there. Our self-denial isn't perfect; we resurrect our own egos and our own wills, thrust them out, and intrude into the will of God. We have to seek His grace and His forgiveness when we do that. Coming to Christ with an attitude of self-denial is the deepest, and purest, and truest aspiration of our redeemed hearts, even though it's far short of what we would want it to be.

Poverty, prosperity, and suffering

John MacArthur has said this: "In poverty, the heart is easily distracted. In prosperity, the heart is easily divided. Suffering drives out the world and sends us singularly to God."

SERVING OTHERS

A servant's heart

At my elementary school, we always had a class monitor who wore a gold badge and emptied the wastepaper baskets, erased the blackboards, put new chalk on the blackboard tray, and clapped the erasers outside.

One day my third-grade teacher, Miss Carey, asked, “Who would like to be class monitor?” Everybody but me had a hand raised, but I didn’t think I had a chance. I was sitting in the back row, just listening and looking up, when suddenly Miss Carey said, “Chris, would you like to be class monitor?”

“Yes,” I said, in a tiny voice that wasn’t much more than a peep.

She had me walk up to the front and pinned the little gold-colored class monitor badge on my shirt. I felt so wonderful, so happy, that I was going to be the class monitor and wear a badge.

That afternoon, I rushed home to my mom and said, “Mom, I’m class monitor! I get to empty the wastepaper basket, erase the blackboard, and put out the chalk every morning for the teacher!”

In my childlike enthusiasm, I was excited about being given the opportunity to serve. It reminds me that the Lord asks this of all of us in Matthew 20:27-28: “And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

There was a very shy man with a withered arm who faithfully worked as a volunteer at my church year after year, putting tapes into albums. No one particularly knew his name, and he didn’t get any awards; he wasn’t standing up in front of the church preaching or performing, and I never saw anyone give him any special privileges. He had no earthly reward or commendation that I saw, and yet I believe that when he stands before Christ, the Lord will say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” I believe that man will be rewarded more than many well-known Christians.

I also heard about a man in a poor village in India whose heart’s desire was to win his neighbors to the Lord. He was so poor that he didn’t own a car, just a bicycle. After a long day of hard work, he would ride his bicycle ten miles into the big city and literally sell his

blood for money. With the money he earned, he bought a screen, a projector, a portable battery, and a video in his native language on the life of Christ. He would take this equipment to the shore at night and show the film, which would attract nearly all the people in the village. Hundreds came to know Christ through the effort of this humble servant. What a reward he will have in heaven!

How effective are you?

Your effectiveness as a Christian is directly related to one thing: the proximity in which you live in intimate fellowship with Jesus Christ. I believe that the initial attraction of Christianity is the life of the Christian.

What can't we do in heaven?

The book of Matthew closes with the great commission of Christ: “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (28:19-20).

Some people go to church for the music, some because their friends are there, some to study the Bible, and some for a higher priority—to worship and praise God. But all of those things you can do better in heaven. The one thing you cannot do in heaven is make disciples for Christ. *So, Christian, if you are not actively involved in making disciples for Christ, in whatever sphere the Lord has placed you, the Lord could take you to heaven tonight, and you wouldn't be missed.* We will have the greatest music in heaven, we will have perfect fellowship, we will have all knowledge (so we won't need to study the Bible), and we will be in a much better state—our glorified state—where we can worship and praise God.



So ask yourself, *Am I advancing His Kingdom? Am I making disciples for Christ?* That concept changed my life and my ministry with the guitar.

How does this life compare to heaven and hell?

For a nonbeliever, this life is the closest thing to heaven he'll ever experience. For a believer, this life is the closest thing to hell he'll ever experience.

A definition of love

Love is sacrificial service without a motive for yourself.

What are your priorities?

Many wonderful ministry opportunities are offered to me as a musician and performer, but sometimes to honor the Lord, I must turn down something in order to spend time with my family. I have had to learn to prioritize my time and not sacrifice my family on the altar of my ministry. The correct priority is this: God first, family second, and ministry third.

CHRISTI'S STORY

Why should you go to heaven?

One day I had the opportunity to share with my eleven-year-old niece, Christi, what it means to be a Christian. I said, "Christi, if you were to die tonight and stand before God and He were to say to you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' what would you say?"

"Well," she replied, "I would say, 'Because I've been a good girl.'"

"How good have you been?" I asked. "Have you been perfect?"

"No," she admitted, "I haven't been perfect."

“That’s true,” I said. “No one is perfect. In fact, the Bible says, ‘All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23). But God requires us to be perfect (James 2:10), and who can be perfect? Nobody, right? Nobody can be perfect.”

I told her that salvation is a free gift received by faith. Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” I said, “You’re not saved by your good deeds; you are saved by grace, and grace means God is freely giving you something you don’t deserve.”

I also told her the Bible says that God is holy and just. Hebrews 10:31 says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” And Exodus 34:7 says that God “will by no means clear the guilty.” Since God is just, He will judge those who sin. I went on to say that God is also a loving God. My favorite Bible verse, John 3:16, says, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” God judges those who sin, but in love He gave His Son to die on a cross to bear our sin and judgment.

How can God judge sinners and yet love them? To illustrate the answer, I told Christi a story about a king who was a wise and just ruler of his people.

Someone was embezzling from the king’s treasury, so the king issued an edict throughout all the land, saying, “Whoever is guilty, come forward and receive a just punishment of ten public lashings.” But no one came forward.

The second week someone was continuing to steal from the king’s treasury, so the king set the punishment at twenty public lashings. But still no one came forward.

The third and fourth weeks went by, and the thievery continued.

On the fifth week the king set the punishment at fifty public lashings.

Finally, the guilty person was discovered. The one embezzling from the king's treasury turned out to be the king's own mother! The whole kingdom turned out to see what the king was going to do because they knew that this was a real dilemma: On the one hand, he loved his mother, and he knew that fifty lashes would very likely kill her. On the other hand, he had a reputation for being a just king who would certainly punish the crime.

On the day for the sentencing to be carried out, the king's mother was tied to a stake and a big man was preparing to flog her with a whip. Then the king gave the order: "Render the punishment!" But as he spoke, he took off his own robe, bared his own back, and put his arms around his mother. He then took the lashes she deserved, thereby satisfying the demand for justice.

As I told Christi, that's exactly what Jesus Christ did for us. The Bible says: "He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:5-6).

"Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

Jesus Christ, by His death and physical resurrection, paid for our sins and purchased a place in heaven for us, which He offers as a gift that may be received by faith. I told Christi, "You have a choice: You can stand before God when you die and say, 'I've been a good girl,' but you will fall short. You could say, 'The good I've done outweighs the bad,' but you will still fall short. You could even invent your own standard for heaven and achieve that,



but God's standard is perfect righteousness! Or you can humble yourself and receive the gift that God has described in the Bible: 'Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved' (Acts 4:12). Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me' (John 14:6).

"Apart from the death of Christ on the cross for our sins, no one has access to the Father, no one has access to heaven. That's what the Bible says. True saving faith, then, is trusting in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation—and the response to true faith will be an overwhelming desire to be obedient to the Lord. Jesus said in Luke 6:46, 'Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?' That's what it means to make Him Lord and Savior."

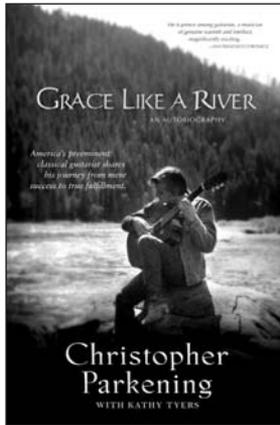
I'm thankful I had the opportunity that day to share with Christi what the Bible says about true salvation. But what about you? Are you willing to humble yourself before God and confess to Him that you are a sinner? Are you willing now to repent, turn from your sins, and receive Christ as your Savior and Lord? If so, you might wish to pray the following prayer from your heart:

Lord Jesus, I know that I'm a sinner. I've been trusting in my own good deeds to save me, but now I'm putting my trust in You. I accept You as my personal Savior. I believe You died for me. I receive You as Lord and Master over my life. Help me to turn from my sins and follow You. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.



ENDNOTES

1. Walter Arlen, *Los Angeles Times*, January 9, 1966.
2. Luke 6:38: “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again.”
3. Liner notes, *The Magic of Horowitz*, edited by Thomas Frost, Deutsche Grammophon DG-474334-2, quoted by permission.
4. Arthur W. Pink, “Signs of the Times,” *Studies in the Scriptures*, December 1937.
5. Marshall Broomhall, *The Man Who Believed God* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1929).



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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Christopher Parkening is one of the world's preeminent virtuosos of the classical guitar. He has performed throughout the world, and has amassed an extensive discography for which he has received two Grammy nominations. For more than forty years, his concerts and recordings have received the highest worldwide acclaim. The *Washington Post* cited his stature as the "leading guitar virtuoso of our day, combining profound musical insight with complete technical mastery of his instrument." The *Los Angeles Times* noted, "Parkening is considered America's reigning classical guitarist, carrying the torch of his mentor, the late Andrés Segovia."

Christopher is Distinguished Professor of Music at Pepperdine University in Malibu, California, where he chairs the Guitar Department. He has received an honorary doctorate of music from Montana State University as well as the Outstanding Alumnus Award from the University of Southern California "in recognition of his outstanding international achievement and in tribute to his stature throughout the world as America's preeminent virtuoso of the classical guitar." The most prestigious guitar competition in the world has been named in his honor. The Parkening International Guitar Competition will be held every four years, commencing in 2006 at Pepperdine University. Christopher has authored *The Christopher Parkening Guitar Method, Volumes I and II*, which, along with his collection of guitar transcriptions and arrangements, are published by Hal Leonard Corporation. At the heart of his dedication to performing, recording, and teaching is a deep commitment to the Christian faith.

Christopher is also a world-class fly-fishing champion who has won the International Gold Cup Tarpon Tournament (the Wimbledon of fly-fishing).

