

Making the Best of a Bad Decision

How to put your regrets behind you,
embrace grace, and move toward
a better future

ERWIN W. LUTZER



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
Carol Stream, Illinois

Visit Tyndale's exciting website at www.tyndale.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Making the Best of a Bad Decision: How to Put Your Regrets behind You, Embrace Grace, and Move toward a Better Future

Copyright © 2011 by Erwin W. Lutzer. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of glass copyright © Andrew Pini/Photolibary. All rights reserved.

Cover photo of lemon copyright © FoodCollection/Photolibary. All rights reserved.

Designed by Ron Kaufmann

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® *NIV*.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2010 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com.

Scripture quotations marked *ESV* are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*® (*ESV*®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked *NASB* are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*,® copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked *PHI* are taken from *The New Testament in Modern English* by J. B. Phillips, copyright © J. B. Phillips, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1972. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Lutzer, Erwin W.

Making the best of a bad decision : how to put your regrets behind you, embrace grace, and move toward a better future / Erwin Lutzer.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-4143-1143-2 (sc)

1. Decision making—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Choice (Psychology)—Religious aspects—Christianity. 3. Adjustment (Psychology)—Religious aspects—Christianity. 4. Discernment (Christian theology) 5. Providence and government of God—Christianity. 6. Grace (Theology) 7. Encouragement—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4509.5.L88 2011

248.8'6—dc22

2011011326

Printed in the United States of America

17 16 15 14 13 12 11
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

INTRODUCTION

So You've Made a Bad Decision . . . v

You're in good company!

1. The Worst Decision Ever Made 1

Thankfully, it wasn't yours

2. When You've Chosen Second Best 21

Trusting God while traveling on the wrong path

3. When You've Married Trouble 41

You regret that foolish vow

4. When You've Crossed a Moral Boundary 67

Your secret is exposed

5. When You've Made a Bad Financial Decision 89

You didn't read the fine print

6. When You're in the Wrong Vocation 111

You hate going to work

7. When You've Hurt Others 135

Regrets you can't wish away

8. How to Make Wise Decisions 155

Wisdom for next time

9. The Worst Decision You Could Possibly Make 173

When you neglect to prepare for eternity

Discussion guide 181

Notes 189

About the Author 191

INTRODUCTION

SO YOU'VE MADE
A BAD DECISION . . .
You're in good company!

Smart people can make foolish decisions!

We've all known brilliant people who chose a dead-end career, married an incompatible mate, or were seduced by a get-rich-quick scheme. We've all made decisions we would rather forget, but sometimes we can't forget them because the consequences keep piling up.

The sum of our lives equals the sum of our decisions. Our character is best revealed by the decisions we've made and the impact of those decisions on ourselves and others. Who we *are* will determine what we decide to *do*—that is, our character will dictate the kind of decisions we make.

We are free to make our choices, but we are not free to choose the consequences. Even more sobering is this: One

bad choice can result in a lifetime of heartache and regret. One act of immorality, one drunken-driving episode, one hasty marriage—these and countless other foolish choices

We are free to make our choices, but we are not free to choose the consequences.

can alter the direction and trajectory of our lives for the worse. And having begun on the wrong road, you might find it difficult (and sometimes seemingly impossible) to turn around.

The decisions you've made in the past have affected where you are today on the journey of life. Likewise, the decisions you make today will to some extent determine your future. Wise choices can transform the bad decisions of the past into a foundation for a more productive life and ministry—starting right now.

Making good decisions under challenging circumstances is difficult, but not impossible. The Old Testament story about a young man named Joseph, who made a series of good choices despite being grossly betrayed by his jealous brothers, is a good example. Joseph turned away from the seductive advances of his boss's wife, endured several years of wrongful imprisonment as a result, and later refused to retaliate against his brothers when he had the chance. He chose humility over pride and forgiveness over bitterness. We honor him today because his wise choices had positive consequences far beyond his imagination.

Like Joseph, we wake up every morning with decisions to make about the day. We will choose either the best path or a

lesser one, but when the day is over, we never can return to where we started. Over time, the decisions we make—whether small or large—will become the legacy we leave behind.

I have a friend who bought some highly recommended mining stock and encouraged others to do the same. Every indication was that the company was poised for growth—unusual growth. But an explosion in a mine ended the upswing and investors lost about 80 percent of their money. Obviously, my friend had no legal obligation to help those to whom he had recommended the stock, but he felt he had a *moral* obligation to them. He decided to sell his house to raise the cash to restore their investments. After all, he reasoned, his friends had lost money because of his recommendation. Think of how that man and his wife will be remembered!

Making good decisions under challenging circumstances is difficult, but not impossible.

This book is about making the best of our bad decisions. It is written with the firm belief that God takes what we sometimes call our “second best” decisions and turns them into what we can call his “first best” decisions, if only we will invite him to walk alongside us. When we find ourselves on a wrong road, God is able to bring us to an intersection where we can choose a new path that will lead us to something better. It’s our failure to see God in the midst of our missteps that keeps us stumbling from one bad decision to another. God specializes in redirecting those who desire a better path.

In the pages that follow, you will inevitably arrive at a fork in the road—confronted by yet another decision: Will

Failure to see God in the midst of our missteps keeps us stumbling from one bad decision to another.

you continue to be defined by your bad decisions, or will you look beyond them to God, who can take what you give him and turn it into something productive and eternal? You can choose

a life of prolonged regret or a life of optimism and fulfillment. It's your call.

In this book, you will meet people who have made terrible decisions: criminals, sex addicts, and people who have destroyed their marriages and their families through immorality or some other form of self-absorption. You'll meet people who have made foolish promises; and others who have lost their livelihood through gambling or bad investments. In other words, if you've chosen the wrong path and are living with the consequences, you'll find yourself somewhere in these pages.

But this is ultimately a book of *hope*. The fact that you are alive is proof that there are still some wise decisions you can make! No matter how many wrong paths you've already walked, there is still a right one you can choose just up

God is bigger than the mistakes you've made.

ahead. God is bigger than your foolishness; bigger than the mistakes you've made; bigger than

your sins; and bigger than the messes you've left along the road you've chosen up till now.

My prayer is to offer you *encouragement*, despite all the choices you now wish had been different. I invite you to join me on a journey of expectation and hope. Along the way, we'll learn how God's forgiveness and power are able make a beautiful painting from the blotches we hand him.

1

THE WORST DECISION EVER MADE

Thankfully, it wasn't yours

What, in your opinion, was the worst decision ever made? No matter how badly you think you have blown it, I can assure you that others have made worse decisions. God was there to redeem their poor choices and set them on a different path, so we can be sure he is there for us when we take a wrong turn on the road of life.

Paradise Lost

In the Bible, we're told about a couple who made the worst decision of all time. Surrounded by the most perfect environment, they chose a path with incredibly far-reaching consequences. In fact, their decision has affected every generation since theirs, right up to today. No other decision has

so negatively affected so many people for so long a time—for eternity, to be exact. Of course, at the moment of truth, they didn't know that their decision would boomerang and give birth to all kinds of evil: violence, natural disasters, and even death. Yes, Adam and Eve win the prize for the worst decision ever made. But if we can recognize that God was both able and willing to make the best of their self-made tragedy, we can be confident that he stands ready to help us, too.

The Opportunities They Had

Visualize Adam and Eve in Paradise. They enjoyed a perfect environment, with no unfulfilled needs. They lived in a beautiful garden, surrounded by God's masterful handiwork, and their five senses were undiminished and uncorrupted. Were they hungry? There were many trees in the Garden from which they could freely eat. And if they had wanted something they didn't already have, they could've asked God, and I'm sure he would have created it for them.

Eve had no insecurities. She not only lived in a perfect environment, but she also had a perfect husband! I'm sure Adam faithfully carried out the garbage and helped with the dinner dishes. No doubt he was sensitive, caring, romantic, and all those other things so rightly prized by women. Eve didn't have to worry about the woman next door becoming too friendly with Adam. She didn't have to compete with supermodels and actresses on

**Adam and Eve win
the prize for the worst
decision ever made.**

every magazine cover. And she didn't have to lie awake at night wondering whether she had married the right man!

Adam and Eve also had the advantage of direct access to God. They walked with him in the cool of the day, evidently enjoying discussions and very likely having their questions answered. But one day they made a choice that ended their evening walks with the Almighty. Standing together by the one tree in the Garden they'd been told not to eat from, Adam and Eve made a decision that contaminated their relationship with God and with each other. In effect, by a single bite of a forbidden fruit, they became God's enemies, and their own beautiful relationship turned sour.

**Eve didn't lie awake
at night wondering
whether she had
married the right man!**

Now, if you ask why this couple chose to disobey God, even though they were in a perfect environment and had everything they wanted and needed, there's no good answer. The Bible doesn't give us a full explanation. What we do know is that, in our own day and age, people make bad decisions all the time, despite privileged circumstances and loving families. Like Adam and Eve, we often choose to do what we think is best for ourselves, and we disregard the warnings and wisdom of others, including God.

The Decision They Made

God's command was clear: "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the

knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die” (Genesis 2:16-17).

When Satan, in the guise of a serpent, approached Eve, he focused—as he so often does—on the *one thing* that God had placed off limits. He diverted Eve’s attention from all the goodness surrounding her and Adam—the many trees from which they were free to eat—and called into question God’s wisdom and love. He tricked Eve into thinking she could do better by disregarding God’s clear command.

Adam, of course, doesn’t get a free pass here. He stood by while Eve was tempted and then joined in her bad decision to eat the forbidden fruit. And so they sinned, even while surrounded by innumerable blessings.

Maybe your own story is like that. Maybe you were brought up in a stable home, with loving parents and wonderful opportunities. Yet the allure of doing your own thing distracted you from what you knew was best. Maybe you followed your desires and ignored your best instincts.

Let’s look more closely at what drew Adam and Eve off track. It all began when Eve elevated her own desires above

Satan tricked Eve into thinking she could do better by disregarding God’s clear command.

God’s wisdom. The tree was desirable—it was pleasant to the eyes, and it appeared as if it would make her wise. At the moment of decision, that meant more to her than what God had said. She was deceived by her senses, and that gave her the courage to ignore God’s word. In essence what the serpent said to her

was, “Eve, *feel*, don’t *think*. It looks good—do it! It if feels good, how can it be bad?”

Of course, our emotions don’t always mislead us, but like Adam and Eve we are often tempted to take the path of least resistance when pursuing something we desire. The decisions we make can seem so simple, and yet the consequences can be devastating. God had warned Adam and Eve that they

We are often tempted to take the path of least resistance when pursuing something we desire.

would die if they ate the wrong fruit, but at that point they didn’t even know what death was! There was no example of death in Paradise. Perhaps Eve was curious: “I wonder what death really is? Maybe death will be a wonderful experience, better than life itself.” Then there was the added promise that, if they ate, they would be “like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

A Window into Our Hearts

Our minds can justify anything that our hearts really want to do. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are driven by our desires. We may think we make decisions based on rational considerations, but we are much more influenced by our passions and our appetites. Because we have to live with our consciences, we carefully rationalize what we really want to do—and continue to rationalize after we’ve done it. Our minds become enslaved to whatever our desires demand. We tell ourselves, *Nobody’s perfect, but I’m basically*

a good person. Besides, it isn't my fault things turned out the way they did.

Moments after Adam and Eve sinned, the finger-pointing began. Adam passed the blame to God and to Eve, and she

**We carefully rationalize
what we really want to do—
and continue to rationalize
after we've done it.**

passed it on to the serpent. Adam and Eve were incapable of seeing themselves as they really were, and so are we. Our rationalizations become deep and lasting, and we become entrenched until

we are shaken awake by a moment of reality—often it takes a crisis to awaken the conscience. You've heard it said that most people change only when they see the light, but it's more accurate to say that we change only when we *feel the heat!*

Eve gave birth to a son and they named him Cain. As Eve nursed him, she had no idea the consequences of sin that awaited their little family. When a second son was born, they named him Abel. He grew to be a godly young man who learned to bring the right kind of offering—a blood sacrifice—to God. Cain, the firstborn, also brought an offering, one from the fruit of the ground. But God rejected his offering even as he accepted Abel's. Jealousy now took root in Cain's heart, and in a fit of rage he killed his brother. Another terrible decision. Thus the long and sordid history of dysfunctional families began.

No Return to Paradise

Before Adam and Eve sinned, they were naked but not ashamed. Imagine having a relationship with God, and

with other people, without shame or guilt getting in the way. Imagine if your thoughts were so pure, so holy, that you would have no shame even if your most private musings were known to your spouse, your children, your parents, and your friends. Imagine the freedom this would bring to your relationships: no anger, lust, pride, or selfishness.

Despite their deep regret, Adam and Eve could not return to Paradise. God set up a barrier that forced them to stay away from the home they once enjoyed. Every morning when they awoke outside of Eden, they regretfully remembered that things were not as they once had been. Their innocence could not be restored; no amount of tears would grant them the privilege of spending so much as a night in the idyllic surroundings they had once enjoyed.

Sound familiar?

The young couple who have surrendered to temptation and slept together can never have their virginity restored. The man who has foolishly gambled away his savings or squandered it on a get-rich-quick scheme cannot recover what he has lost. The woman who has married against her parents' advice and now regrets having to live with an indifferent husband cannot retrace her steps and back out of her vows.

Ever since the days of Adam and Eve, we have been deceived by the attractiveness of sin just like they were. In fact, we're often eager to believe the lies that tell us we can

Imagine having a relationship with God, and with other people, without shame or guilt getting in the way.

do whatever our sinful desires dictate. It's as if we long to be deceived. We live with regrets, just as they did, and we wish we could undo our foolish decisions, but all those bad decisions create a barrier that keeps us from ever going back to the way things were.

But even as the door to Paradise was closing to Adam and Eve (and to us), the door of hope swung wide open. God assures us that something good can still be made from the pieces of our broken lives.

Hope amid Regret and Loss

After Adam and Eve sinned, they hid themselves among the trees of the Garden. They who had felt no shame were now crushed by its powerful effects.

We're often eager to believe the lies that tell us we can do whatever our sinful desires dictate.

The trees that had once been a pleasant backdrop to fellowship with their Creator now became a wall to hide themselves from him and from one another. From then on, much psychological energy and ingenuity would be expended to keep hiding. Adam and Eve had reason to feel ashamed.

Shame is a powerful emotion. I'm told that in Japan, if a man is fired from his job, he often will not tell his family; and if he continues to be out of work, he will not go home. This has contributed to the rise of a street culture in Japanese cities. Suicide is on the rise. We so desire acceptance that we will be emotionally destroyed if we don't get it.

Albert Camus, in *The Fall*, writes, “Each of us insists on being innocent at all cost, even if he has to accuse the whole human race and heaven itself.”¹

Some people, filled with narcissistic obsessions, are psychologically incapable of taking responsibility for anything, no matter how

unjust, corrupt, or abusive their behavior. They appear incapable of entering into the pain of others, but interpret such misfortunes only in relationship to themselves. They will go to their graves without uttering the words, “I have sinned” or “I’m sorry.”

Adam and Eve both admitted to what they had done, but they wouldn’t take responsibility for it. As the saying goes, the man blamed the woman, the woman blamed the serpent, and the serpent didn’t have a leg to stand on! We have clearly followed in their footsteps, stoutly resisting our own responsibility; blaming others; shaping the facts to protect our selfish egos; and if necessary, destroying those around us in order to preserve our own sense of self-worth.

After the Fall, Adam and Eve weren’t trying to find their way back to God; they simply hid from him. It was God who initiated the search (as he always does), walking in the Garden and calling out to the disgraced couple. If anything, they sought to become their own gods, so that they wouldn’t have to be

**We so desire acceptance
that we will be emotionally
destroyed if we don’t get it.**

**Adam and Eve weren’t
trying to find their way
back to God; they
simply hid from him.**

exposed to the holiness of the one whom they had wronged. But thankfully, the true God wouldn't let them go. His search among the trees of the Garden was the beginning of their redemption—and ours.

Into the middle of this mess, God came to inject a healthy dose of grace. He cursed the serpent, to be sure, but in doing so he gave a wonderful promise of hope to humanity. In *Paradise Lost*, John Milton speaks of it as “the fortunate fall,” because when we are brought back to God there is glory in our restoration. Sin has no glory, but reconciliation does.

The Promise

When God confronted Adam and Eve about their sin, he also spoke to the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Genesis 3:15).

What does this promise mean?

A Redeemer committed to rescuing humanity from their sin and folly was on his way! The woman's offspring—a reference to Jesus Christ—would crush the head of the serpent, even as the serpent would bite him on the heel. In other words, the heel of the Redeemer would grind the head of the serpent into the dust. The Redeemer would win the battle decisively. No contest.

This story is familiar to anyone who has studied the Bible, but I recount it here because it is central to God's plan for making the best of our bad decisions. Bad decisions cannot be undone, but they can be redeemed. And Jesus Christ is the key.

Centuries later, when Jesus died on the cross, the serpent deceived himself by thinking, *Now that I've killed him, I've destroyed my opposition!* But three days later, Jesus rose from the grave; and a few weeks later, he went to heaven in undisputed triumph. His wound was light and temporary; the serpent's wound was fatal, decisive, and permanent. It's in the power of the Redeemer that we're able to make the best of our bad decisions.

Bad decisions cannot be undone, but they can be redeemed.

“Through your faith in the working of God, . . . [he] made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Colossians 2:12-15). Jesus disarmed Satan, exposing the devil as a shimmering fraud.

The Covering

After they sinned, Adam and Eve clothed themselves with fig leaves. No doubt if they'd had enough of them, they might have been able to make dresses and shirts. But even though the fig leaves enabled them to hide from one another, their self-styled clothing did not hide them from God. Fig leaves might make a dress, but they soon wither. God knew they needed a more permanent covering; an expensive covering that only he could supply.

“The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them” (Genesis 3:21). Where did God get the skins? Evidently, he killed one of the animals of the field. With this sacrificial provision, God began teaching a basic principle: Blood must be shed for the forgiveness and covering of our sin. *There could be no cheap covering for sin.*

God dressed Adam and Eve so that their fellowship with him could be restored and their sin and shame covered. Those animal skins had no intrinsic value, but they symbolized what would become clear later: that sin must be not only forgiven but covered. Throughout history, many animals were sacrificed, pointing to the future coming of Jesus, “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Withering fig leaves wouldn't do. Centuries after Adam and Eve, God himself had to suffer on the cross so that we

God began teaching a basic principle: Blood must be shed for the forgiveness and covering of our sin.

might be forgiven. His forgiveness, though costly to him, is given freely to us. “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). That truth doesn't change just because we make some bad decisions.

What God Does with Our Sin

Many people today have a neurotic preoccupation with their sin. Sometimes they confess their sins to one another, which

brings them temporary relief. Most often, they resolve to do better, trying to find within themselves a reason why God should forgive them. Even when they confess their sins to God, there is no permanent relief from the feeling that they have messed up and are condemned to mess up again in the future.

The first step toward breaking out of this trap is to understand that nothing within us merits God's forgiveness. Minimizing our sin does not make us worthy before God; magnifying our sin does not give us reason to think

we are beyond forgiveness. *Forgiveness and reconciliation with God are given freely, apart from what we have done or who we are.*

Forgiveness and reconciliation with God are given freely, apart from what we have done or who we are.

We are pardoned because of the death of another—the promised Redeemer sent by God. We have been justified by his blood (Romans 5:9); we have our consciences cleansed by his blood (Hebrews 9:14); and the serpent—our accuser—has been defeated by his blood (Revelation 12:11). The work of Christ is the one and only basis of our forgiveness. Neither our goodness nor our badness affects this objective fact.

God provides something better and more permanent than fig leaves or the skins of animals to cover our guilt and shame. We are credited with the righteousness of Jesus Christ. David, whose sins of adultery and murder are well known, writes, “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered!” (Psalm 32:1, NASB). God himself puts it this

way: “I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist” (Isaiah 44:22).

God provides something better and more permanent than fig leaves or the skins of animals to cover our guilt and shame.

A man who wrote me from prison confessed to raping four women; he asked if he, too, could be forgiven. In my response, I used the following analogy: Imagine two roads; one is clean and well traveled, the other has deep ruts that veer off into the ditch. When a blanket of snow comes, it covers each one equally. Just so, our sins—big or small—are equally covered by God. “‘Come now, let us settle the matter,’ says the LORD. ‘Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool’” (Isaiah 1:18).

Yes, even horrendous crimes can be forgiven by God; the worst evil can be covered.

The God of the Second Chance

Read this story of redemption.

A minister who committed immorality and had to resign in disgrace told me, “Just think of peeling an onion, and as you do, layer after layer comes off, but there is nothing in the center. There was nothing left, just me and God. Because of shame, I retreated from every friend who ever knew me. I was despised, spoken about—and I deserved whatever was said about me. I wondered how I could keep getting up every morning and put one foot ahead of another.”

As we drove together in his car, he put a CD in the stereo and wept as we heard these words:

*Calvary covers it all,
My past with its sin and stain [read, shame];
My guilt and despair
Jesus took on Him there,
And Calvary covers it all.²*

Calvary meant there was a new beginning available for him. Much had been lost that could never be regained, but not all was lost. He had been restored to fellowship with God and was beginning to form new friendships. Small blessings along his path reminded him that God had not cast him aside. And as time rolled on, more and more grace was there for him.

**Even horrendous crimes
can be forgiven by God;
the worst evil can be
covered.**

You say, “But nothing will ever be the same for him again.” That is true; it won’t. His sin destroyed his marriage and affected his children. But neither was life the same for Adam and Eve; yet God gave them garments to wear—restoring their relationship with him through sacrifice. And he does the same for us. All we can do is give him the broken pieces of our bad decisions and trust him to heal our souls.

Yes, God had to kill animals to give Adam and Eve proper clothing. And Jesus had to be killed so that our sin might be properly covered. Remember, the purpose of the Cross is to

repair the irreparable; it is God's answer when it seems that the fragments of our lives can never be put back together. That's why we read in Romans 10:11 that those who put their trust in God will never be put to shame—they can never be finally and wholly destroyed.

In Eden, God became God of the second chance.

More Sin, More Grace

Adam and Eve were the first but obviously not the last people who took a wrong turn on the road of life. Thanks to them,

**Much had been lost that
could never be regained,
but not all was lost.**

we're all born on the wrong road and stand in need of God's grace.

Fortunately, the greater our sin, the greater God's grace toward us. "Where sin increased, grace

increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5:20-21). God promises to turn curses into blessings and failures into stepping-stones.

Though Adam and Eve were properly clothed and their fellowship with God restored, the cruel consequences of their sin have continued throughout history. We all bear the marks of the Fall. Nevertheless, God picked them up where they were and set them on a new journey. They would no longer walk with God in the Garden, but they—and their descendants—would still maintain fellowship with him because their sin was covered. The effect of their bad decision would

not be reversed, but they could continue to serve God by working the soil and populating the earth. *The serpent could not stop God from granting forgiveness and grace.*

In the wake of Adam and Eve's bad decision, sin and grace now always exist together. With curses there are blessings; with crimes there is also mercy. There is hatred, but also love; and despair is offset by hope.

Thanks to Adam and Eve, we're all born on the wrong road and stand in need of God's grace.

Although this grace is offered to everyone, however, it is not enjoyed by everyone. Grace abounds to those who have the humility to receive it. Those who cling to their fig leaves—that is, their own goodness—will continue to be frustrated, making decisions that appear right but always lead to a dead end. They might enjoy their temporal successes, but in the end they will find nothing to take with them into the life beyond.

Jesus told a story about two men, both of whom believed in grace—yet only one experienced the miracle of God's acceptance; the other, good man though he was, was rejected.

The story, from the Gospel of Luke, is a familiar one in which an upstanding Pharisee and a despised tax collector went into the Temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed, "God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:11-12, NASB).

Grace abounds to those who have the humility to receive it.

If we think he was bragging, let's remember that he believed in grace. In thanking God that he was not like other men, he was, in effect, saying, "There, but for the grace of God, go I." He knew that his good works were done because of God's goodness. If he was better than others, God deserved the credit.

In contrast, the tax collector was so overwhelmed by his sin that he would not even lift his face to heaven, but pounded his chest and said, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" (Luke 18:13, NASB).

Referring to the tax collector, Jesus added, "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 18:14, NASB).

Yes, both men believed in God's grace. The self-righteous Pharisee thought that God's grace was needed only to do good deeds. God's grace, he thought, helps us do better. The tax gatherer knew that if he was to be saved, it would take a miracle that only God could do. He didn't just need help; he

The crushing experience of having to admit total helplessness apart from God's grace is not easy for anyone.

needed the gift of forgiveness, the gift of reconciliation. Only God could do what needed to be done.

Was it difficult for this sinner, this tax gatherer, to receive grace? Depends. On the one hand, no, for he was relieved to discover that

there was grace for the needy. On the other hand, the grace of God was very difficult to accept. The crushing experience

of having to admit total helplessness apart from God's grace is not easy for anyone. And that is why the road that leads to life is narrow and only a few find it (Matthew 7:14).

No wonder John Newton, a former slave trader who understood grace, knew that neither our life on earth nor our stay in heaven will exhaust our wonder at God's provision.

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise
Than when we'd first begun.*³

When sin entered the world, grace was there to meet it. For those who will accept it, grace is available to restore our broken fellowship with our Creator and to redeem even the worst of our bad decisions.

A Prayer

God, I thank you that there is more grace in your heart than there is sin in my past. Although I have made my share of bad decisions, I know that you can forgive my past and cover my sin so that it will no longer separate me from your fellowship and holiness.

Thank you that Jesus died in my place so that I can inherit his righteousness. I bring nothing but my great need; I count on your grace to give me what I don't have.

About the Author

Erwin W. Lutzer is senior pastor of The Moody Church in Chicago. A graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary and Loyola University, he is the author of numerous books, including the Gold Medallion Award winner *Hitler's Cross* and the bestseller *One Minute After You Die*. He is also a teacher on radio programs heard on more than seven hundred stations throughout the United States and the world, including *Songs in the Night*, *The Moody Church Hour*, and the daily feature *Running to Win*. He and his wife, Rebecca, live in the Chicago area and have three married children and seven grandchildren.