

foreword by Steven Curtis Chapman

searching for grace

*A Weary Leader, a Wise Mentor,
and Seven Healing Conversations
for a Parched Soul*

Scotty Smith
& Russ Masterson



Praise for *Searching for Grace*

Searching for Grace invites you into the kind of relationship we all long for deep in our hearts. The relationship between Scotty and Russ is scary, vulnerable, and painful, but gorgeously loving and drenched in grace. The transparency of their relationship will frighten, disarm, and attract you all at the same time. But what is genius about this book is that the relationship between these two men is more than a model—it is an invitation to the only relationship that can heal you, profoundly reorder you, and restore to you the shalom that was shattered in the Garden, which has seemed so elusive ever since. Every conversation in this book reminds us that it is God and the healing grace that comes through his Son that we all long for. I know of no other book like this one.

PAUL DAVID TRIPP, author of *New Morning Mercies: A Daily Gospel Devotional*

Scotty and Russ's story of faith friendship welcomes us into a journey of vulnerability, honest questions, and the gift of being shaped by God's grace. These healing conversations give me hope that we will one day know in full what we only now see in part.

SANDRA MCCRACKEN, singer/songwriter

Consume this labor of love as precious wisdom. Even if you are not a pastor, read this book. I couldn't help but wonder what levels of hell I might have avoided if I'd have taken this

in at a younger age. Scotty and Russ engage in a deeply honest, compelling, and life-changing conversation that we not only get to overhear but also partake in as co-laborers living out grace. This book will fortify you for your work, and far more for your joy in the gospel.

DAN B. ALLENDER, Ph.D., professor of counseling psychology and founding president of The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology; author of *Healing the Wounded Heart* and *Leading with a Limp*

Searching for Grace echoes so much of what I've enjoyed in my friendship with Scotty through the years. The best mentoring happens when leaders own their brokenness and weakness and invite others into the welcome of God's grace and the freedom of his transforming love. Scotty and Russ chronicle their shared growth in grace and invite us to risk more honesty, vulnerability, and openness to God's pursuing heart.

LAURA STORY, Grammy Award-winning artist

Years ago, feeling clueless and defeated and anxious and afraid, I picked up the phone and called the office of a highly esteemed pastor who didn't know me from Adam. Not only did Scotty Smith take the call and give me two full hours of his time, he also invited me to call him any time, and often. Since then, Scotty has been to me the most important kind of mentor—a shepherd of my heart in the grace I so often struggle to believe. After more than two decades of friendship, Scotty remains my gospel mentor. I am so thankful that younger ministers like Russ Masterson have also discovered the treasure that Scotty is.

For the joy of our souls, Scotty and Russ share their journey in grace together.

SCOTT SAULS, senior pastor of Christ Presbyterian Church in Nashville, Tennessee; author of several books, including *Jesus Outside the Lines* and *A Gentle Answer*

I've known Scotty for years, and every single time I talk to him, I feel seen, accepted, and loved. That's not because Scotty is so awesome but because the God who sees, accepts, and loves Scotty is so awesome. When we believe God loves us, we're free to love others. This book is a picture of Russ and Scotty's wonderful friendship—two men with plenty of pain and struggle in their lives, reminding one another (and us) of the great, inexhaustible love of the Father.

ANDREW PETERSON, singer/songwriter, author, and founder of the Rabbit Room

Where can we find peace? There's no formula, but thankfully Russ and Scotty show us how peace has found them, and continues to find them, in the restless flux of ordinary life. While never being prescriptive or burdensome, these two trustworthy guides narrate their experience with intimacy, candor, and grace, such that, by the time you put this book down, fear and burnout have dissipated and the reality of belovedness has burrowed into your heart afresh. Balm for the soul!

DAVID ZAHL, author of *Seculosity* and director of Mockingbird Ministries



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Foreword

SCOTTY AND RUSS'S BOOK is a new chapter in the story of God's relentless pursuit and fierce love that I've been living with my friend Scotty for nearly thirty-five years. When I look at the subtitle, I have to agree, because Scotty truly has been and continues to be a wise mentor in my life!

He's been that to many of us, precisely because he's been honest about his own seasons of overwhelming weariness and his parched-soul reality. That has freed me to do the same with Scotty. We've shared platforms, written two books, and fished some remarkable water together, but what has marked our relationship more than anything else is that we are two needy men who are so thankful God is the God of all grace.

Our friendship began at the intersection of our shared love for words, our thirsty hearts, and a new church Scotty had planted in Franklin, Tennessee. Christ Community Church was unique in many ways, but what captured my heart and the heart of my bride, Mary Beth, was the message of grace that we were hearing for the first time. I still remember driving home after a service one Sunday morning and hearing Mary Beth say as she shook her

head, “If what Scotty is saying about God’s grace is true, this really is Good News!”

Like many of our friends who ended up at the church, we came from more of a performance-based, do-more, try-harder version of the faith. There’s no doubt we knew Jesus, but there was so much more to the gospel than we realized. (There still is . . . as I’m continuing to learn!) The gospel was being presented in ways that made Jesus the focus and the hero of the whole Bible.

Grace wasn’t described as something, but as someone—Jesus himself. So many of Scotty’s teachings and our conversations around them became the inspiration for songs that I’ve written and recorded over the years. “Magnificent Obsession,” “God Is God,” “Not Home Yet,” “Dive,” “Lord of the Dance” (which Scotty actually cowrote with me), “All Things New,” “See the Glory,” and “Speechless” are just a few of the songs that sprouted from the seeds of truth that God used Scotty to plant in my heart.

Scotty didn’t preach like he was trying to fix anybody or to prove he was smarter or more right than others. It was obvious he was just as needy, hungry, and excited about what we were learning as anybody in the room, and that made what he was talking about all the more irresistible. People from all kinds of backgrounds crammed into an old sanctuary in downtown Franklin, with orangish pews and clashing orange shag carpet. It didn’t matter.

All of us were, as Russ and Scotty’s title says, searching for grace. But even more so, grace was searching for—and finding—us. That journey continues. Though I’ve yet to meet Russ, his questions and interactions with Scotty are so familiar. I got to

walk with Scotty through many of the pain-into-grace stories he shares in this book.

I'll add a story of my own to the mix. When I was writing and recording my album *Speechless*, Scotty began working on our first book, also titled *Speechless*. He called one day suggesting a subtitle that he was really excited about: *Living in Awe of God's Disruptive Grace*.

I had a ringside seat when God decided to make that subtitle a reality in Scotty's life. The record and book came out, and we hit the road in the summer of 1999 on a promotion tour. All went really well until we led a final event in downtown Cincinnati. It was for the great youth ministry organization Youth Specialties. By now, we could have done our presentation on cruise control. I shared a few songs off the *Speechless* record, then Scotty came out and shared a few thoughts about the wonders of God's grace.

But something about that afternoon was different. I finished my miniset, but when Scotty came to the mic, I could tell something was going on. My brother, whose words usually flow freely, was struggling. After finishing his seven minutes, which he later told me felt like seven hours, he closed with prayer and came off the stage. I asked him if he was okay, and he didn't really have much to say, which was unusual for him. This wasn't exhaustion. It was a work of God's Spirit and kindness.

Perhaps Scotty had been a bit prophetic with the phrase "disruptive grace." For the next few years, I watched my brother, friend, and pastor begin the healing journey that runs through much of this book. As Scotty puts it, God's grace will disrupt us

before it delights us. Theoretical grace is only good for theoretical needs. Jesus has come to set actual prisoners free.

My friend's willingness to enter his burnout, process his heart wounds, get the help he needed, and start becoming a healthier man have graced the past twenty years of our friendship. These patterns have taken both of us deeper into the heart of God—at times gladly and at times reluctantly.

Scotty's vulnerability has helped me embrace mine. His stories and his journey of loss didn't make burying our daughter Maria any easier. But his fierce and faithful friendship has made me feel so much less alone and freer to risk bringing my anguish, anger, and fear to the throne of grace. Scotty and I continue to own our weakness together, because that's where the sweetness and aroma of grace are most likely to be found.

And we continue to dream, fish, play, ache, and serve Jesus together . . . longing for the day of all things new to get here, more confident than ever that it's actually coming!

Steven Curtis Chapman

Authors' Note

THIS BOOK GREW OUT of the mentoring relationship and conversations between Scotty and Russ. The book is primarily written in Russ's voice, with Scotty contributing his own narratives throughout. All writing by Scotty is entitled "From Scotty." Both authors played key roles in developing and editing the content of the entire book.



THE PORCH CONVERSATION

RUNNING ON EMPTY

How Did I Get Here?

MY FIRST CONVERSATION with Scotty was on a long, narrow porch in the North Georgia mountains. The porch was filled with rocking chairs and swings and was attached to a barn. Men sat scattered around, talking about SEC football, theology, and the life they had retreated from to take in some rare moments of quiet.

Just inside was a two-story vaulted great room, a kitchen, and a hallway lined with several bedrooms. Beyond the living quarters was a simple structure with a dirt floor, filled with stalls, hay, and horses. Just thirty minutes before, I'd perched high in the loft of the barn listening to Scotty teach the group of men sitting in camp chairs and hammocks while a fresh breeze filled the loft from the outside twilight.

Fifty men had come here to sleep under the stars, to cast a fishing line or fire a gun, to listen and learn, to make a friend and share a conversation. I was there as one of the leaders, the pastor of twenty men attending from our young church. I was also there as a participant.

I was a thirty-five-year-old pastor attempting to keep my life under control.

Physically I was a whole person sitting in that barn, but my interior life was frazzled, and I was unsure if I could put myself together—or be put back together at all. Two questions were pulsing in me: *How did I get here?* and *How does this get better?*

Just a year earlier, I had started a church with a handful of people, hoping our small start-up would survive and make a difference in our community. Before that, I had been an associate pastor at a large church in Atlanta, and the departure from that haven of establishment and safety left me feeling exposed and anxious. As we moved out on our own, my wife and children were content and adjusting, but I was a mess inside.

That night, Scotty's words pierced my soul. He spoke of loss, avoidance, abuse, religious performance, and finally grace and peace. I had heard him speak once before, at a huge conference in southern Florida, where he stood onstage in front of thousands of people. Scotty was familiar with such settings: he had started and led a church in Nashville that grew to four thousand people. He'd written books and taught as an adjunct professor at several seminaries around the country. I had been sitting in the back of the room at that conference, and I never had the nerve to approach him. But now, at the retreat, I could sense a growing urgency in my spirit.

Scotty told us about coming out from behind the curtain of running, avoiding people, and performing for approval. The curtain had kept him from simply being *with* people. He said his life's theme song had been "Running on Empty" by Jackson Browne: "Running on empty, running blind."

I knew the feeling.

Scotty said, “*Who we are* matters to God more than *what we do*. Our calling is to be worshipers, not workers; present, not impressive. Our truest identity is found in being God’s beloved sons and daughters.” Scotty bared his past and shared his present fears. He told the story of his own imperfection and how he now rests in the arc of God’s story for him. He didn’t speak as one perfect and completely healed but as one in the process of healing and growing in the awareness of the lavish love of God.

As I sat there looking out at the stars, I felt as if he had made a leap my soul knew I needed to make. This wasn’t the first time I’d sensed this longing for a more abundant life. But it did feel like a calling into deeper waters.

Barbecue was served, and I watched as Scotty found a place on the porch. He had on brown leather Birkenstocks, gray hiking pants, and a casual, plaid button-down shirt with a zipped-up fleece vest. Even though he had just spoken of trauma and weakness—vulnerabilities that would have sent me into hiding for weeks—he comfortably shared a meal and chatted with guys about fly-fishing for trout.

As dinner concluded, I tossed my plate in the trash and waited nearby, hoping for a moment to begin a conversation. Scotty stood against the rail of the porch, his six-foot frame leaning slightly backward. I don’t remember what I said, but I know my intention: *What does he know that I don’t know yet?*

Scotty told me, almost a decade later, that I was “redemptively pestering him” on that porch. A year and a half passed after that conversation before I reached out to him with an email, asking if he would mentor me.



When I decided to start our church with my wife, Kristy, and two other couples, it felt like I might as well have been trying to start a mutual fund. I didn't know where to begin, nor did I know the steps to take after beginning. I immediately became overwhelmed by questions about bylaws, vision, values, financial accountability, caring for people, and leadership structures. Out of desperation, I began attending a monthly gathering in Atlanta led by experienced pastors who coached younger pastors about how to launch and lead a church. Through that gathering, I was paired with a pastor named Jake, and he became my coach as we formed our church of three families.

Jake was around fifty years old and was the founding pastor of a small bilingual church in a neighboring town. Jake held my hand as I raised support money for the first time in my life, formed a core group of parishioners, began a Bible study in the lobby of a dentist's office, and eventually launched a church with thirty adults and a herd of children in a preschool cafeteria.

Just eight months after our church launched, our community was shattered when a dear friend from our tight-knit group took his own life. The morning of the funeral, when I was still reeling from shock and grief, Jake showed up at my house, dressed in his finest suit. Without waiting for me to ask, he drove me to the funeral in his Honda Accord.

When I walked into the church, Jake was with me. When the sound tech helped me put on my microphone, Jake was with me. When I found the family and prayed with them, Jake was with

me. When I sat quietly and prepared to officiate my first funeral, Jake was sitting beside me. When I stood in front of six hundred people and talked about my friend and the God who loves him, I looked out to my left, and Jake was right there, in the front row.

During this season our church was growing slowly and steadily. The ministries of teaching and caring for people were developing. As our numbers and ministries increased, the need for administrative processes increased too. Then we bought a building, which meant we needed to raise even more money to renovate it.

“Russ, you’re beginning to ask me questions I don’t know the answers to,” Jake said to me as we sat in my home office above the garage. We could hear the laughter of my three girls and a few of their neighborhood friends from the backyard below.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re asking me about organizational development, about running a building, and I haven’t walked this path,” Jake said.

“I understand.” I nodded. “Okay.”

Even as I said the words, I was sad for what this meant. The truth was, I’d noticed this trend over the past few months too. I would throw questions Jake’s way, but he was unable to answer to the degree that satisfied either of us.

“It’s time for you to find another coach,” he said.

Where Can I Find Peace?

MONTHS PASSED after recognizing my need for a new coach. My questions and anxiety stacked up. I found myself unable to transform my heart and mind from anxiety and volatility to a place of peace. One Tuesday I yelled at the woman working at the post office, daydreamed the afternoon away, called the post office to apologize, and then came home in a general angst, harping on my young daughters who were creating a mess throughout our home.

Kristy dispensed grace to me. She was patient while I was emotionally erratic. We both knew something had to change. This wasn't just a bad day; this was a bad new normal. I needed more than a coach to help me lead our church; I needed a mentor to help me with the entirety of my life.

I emailed Scotty at a point when my anxiety was dismantling me. Asking Scotty to mentor me was a long shot at best; it was a half-court shot at the buzzer. But Scotty prayerfully considered my request and eventually said yes. I laid out our relationship plan like a long-distance bromance. We would video chat monthly

for an hour and a half, we would visit each other often, and we would call and text without reservation.

I began to keep a special page in my journal reserved for questions for Scotty:

How are you present with someone when everything in you is swirling?

What do you do when you feel like you're about to tip over?

What do you say to a man who found out his wife is cheating on him?

What do you say to a woman lying in hospice, about to die?

How do you develop a fellowship structure for the church?

Why am I so anxious? Were you anxious?

What causes fear?

I would ask these questions during our monthly conversations, and as Scotty and I talked, it was as if time stood still. These were holy moments for me. It was like growing up again—receiving an education in the grace and peace of God. By the end of our chats, Scotty always turned the tables and asked me questions.

How is your marriage?

How are you doing as a dad?

How is your soul?

What would a healthier and freer you look like?

I told Scotty the truth, not the half-truths I was accustomed to giving out, because I felt safe with him.

“A family is leaving our church,” I told Scotty.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said. “How does that make you feel?”

“It’s just a disappointing thing. I mean, I know they should go to church wherever they want to. I want them to find the place that’s right for them. But for some reason I’m still sort of upset.”

“Feeling rejected is always hard. And it’s sad to see friends leave. All of us react differently to feeling rejected or being disappointed. Our insecurity kicks in pretty quickly.”

“What should I do?” I asked.

“Know that God loves you no matter what,” he said. “Call them. Pursue them in love. Then send them away in love.”

It occurred to me maybe the pain of having this family leave wasn’t just about that particular situation but about an ongoing fear that ran in my heart about being second place, about being overlooked, about not being good enough. God was using Scotty’s words to heal a wound I didn’t even know was festering inside me. He was reminding me of something I needed to grasp about my true worth—not just as a pastor, but as a person.

His words were full of compassion rather than judgment. He offered a listening ear and passed on wisdom from his own experience, but he never gave me an “I’m going to fix you” lecture. He talked, and I took notes, and at the end of our conversations, he always told me he loved me. I don’t remember the first time he said those powerful words, but I remember feeling like it was about five years too early for my guarded and resistant heart. I wondered if there was a “but” coming at the end of those words: “I love you, *but you need to . . .*” or “I love you, *but you should . . .*”

Scotty never put conditions on his love. So I started saying, “I love you” in return.

Ever so slowly, I was learning to give—and, with difficulty, learning to receive.



After Scotty and I had been talking for two months, I was taking a road trip with Kristy and my three daughters, ages two, four, and seven. We were headed from our home outside of Atlanta to my in-laws’ in Orlando. As the highway stretched before me for seven hours, I found myself reflecting on the conversation Scotty and I had just had about peace and identity.

“I’m always on edge on the inside. I just want more peace,” I said to Kristy—partly questioning and partly just musing out loud. “How can I be more secure in my belovedness—my identity as someone deeply loved by God?”

After talking for an hour, I noticed that Kristy wasn’t responding anymore. I glanced over to the passenger seat and saw that her head was nodding about and she was fast asleep. I continued to contemplate the lessons inside my own head and heart. I found myself wishing my conversations with Scotty were recorded so I could go back to them, so I could share them directly with Kristy instead of constantly saying, “Well, you know, Scotty says . . .”

As I replayed Scotty’s words in my head, I wondered, *Could I refine these lessons to the vital principles of grace that bring peace to a human soul?*

I wasn’t sure, but it was worth a shot.

So after we talked the next time, I pulled out a little black

journal and began jotting down the lessons he shared with me. That journal became my constant companion and prized possession. The lessons became more than static principles; they provided life-giving nourishment to my soul in a world of stress and responsibility and worry. The lessons became flowing grace, mountain streams to be caught up in and carried along by.

The next week I told Scotty about the lessons of grace. “What do you think?” I asked. “Can we study them and flesh them out together?”

I wanted my wife, my daughters, and the people I counseled every week to experience what I was experiencing. I wanted them to live more peaceful lives too. “My dream is for people to hear what I get to hear,” I said to him.

This book exists because Scotty said yes.



We all want to navigate life with a sense of meaning and inner calm. The reality is that some days are like flowing streams, welcoming us to wade and float, while others seem to be barely a trickle, with nothing but mud to travel upon. As we move through this spectrum of days that range from dry to overflowing, it can be easy to ignore the immense interior life driving us the entire time.

That’s what this book is about: your inner life.

When Scotty and I began our conversations, I desperately needed to pay attention to what was happening inside of me, or soon enough I may have broken apart. And I should note that this doesn’t just happen to pastors. It happens to all of us—it’s part of being human. And we all need guides along the way.

It turns out that what's going on inside of us is what fuels our decisions, activity, and peace while on this earth. What I've learned over the last decade of working with people is that the soul is often restless. As a pastor, I've had hundreds of conversations in counseling sessions, and most of them have something to do with the person, at any age or stage or situation of life, lacking peace. The details change: sometimes the catalyst is a relationship or marriage issue; other times it's a job problem or money constraints. Sometimes the person is wrestling with loneliness or anxiety, or perhaps they're struggling through something more philosophical, such as finding their meaning or purpose or value. But at the core, it's always about resisting grace while desiring peace.

When our souls are out of rhythm, life becomes a song turned to chaos. It's a reality everyone knows: we all want to be at peace, but from time to time—or perhaps most of the time—it eludes us. We want that refreshing stream, but we can't find it. Or we find a stream, but when we try to grasp it, it passes through our fingers and rushes away.

The ancient Hebrews used the word *shalom* for peace. This rich word also means wholeness, health, and blessing. This idea of shalom reflects the idea of perfect harmony with God, nature, and ourselves—something human beings have craved since the beginning of Creation. It's a completeness—an inner stillness. It's green pastures, with a stream running through, for the soul.

Shalom.

We wonder where it went, why it's so elusive, and how we can find it.

The question we all ask is, *Where can I find peace?*

Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). Yet even if we know in our heads that God wants us to live in peace, we don’t always experience that peace as a reality in our day-to-day lives. Instead, our souls are filled with the hum of inner discontent.

But Jesus said shalom is something he gives; it’s not something we work hard to accomplish on our own. And if peace is of divine origin, then we know it does, in fact, exist. Of course, we will not obtain perfect peace while in this imperfect world. But perhaps the gift being offered is a sublime song to guide our souls along the way until that day when our deepest longings for peace are fulfilled.

We all share the same struggle for peace. The stories are different, but we are all saying the same thing. We are toiling for shalom, but it’s not something we can earn. It’s not something we can produce. We can only receive it, sit in it, bask in it. This is what Scotty and I call living in the peace of God, and that’s what this book is all about. If you find yourself longing for peace, come and join me in the loft of the barn and receive what God has for you: grace and peace.



From Scotty

The Soul

It proved to be the right setting for Russ’s and my relationship to begin, this barn with campfires and wooden rocking chairs. I was sharing from the book of Jonah—a portion of Scripture God had

been using in my own life to reveal the disconnect between my head and my heart. Like Jonah, I had a far better theology of grace than experience of it.

After twenty-six years of being a senior pastor, I was four years into a new season of life and ministry. Having been freed from the responsibilities of senior pastor, I was given the title pastor for preaching, teaching, and worship. But the burnout from which I had never fully recovered was screaming for attention. Ministry-generated burnout is deceptive. We spin it as though we're "sacrificing for God." But in reality, with few boundaries and little accountability, vocational idolatry is a genuine threat. I was spent—emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually. As with Jonah, the God of all grace was beckoning me onto a healing path. There's no evidence Jonah responded to that call of grace well, and I didn't want to be that guy.

Ever since I became a Christian as a senior in high school, I'd never doubted having peace *with* God. But my inner experience of the peace *of* God ebbed and flowed between the crosscurrents of shame and grace, fear and acceptance. I was more certain about going to heaven when I died than getting healthy and free while I lived. These were some of the ideas I was musing about with the group of guys who had gathered for the retreat.

As Russ hung around me on that porch, it became obvious he didn't just want to banter theology, ministry, or sports. He had questions about my story, my heart, and some of the things I'd shared in my talks. His inner world needed attending.

Jesus summarized the Scriptures as a call to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind (see Luke 10:27). In essence,

God created us to live in a vital relationship with himself—to love, worship, and enjoy him with everything we have and are. As the biblical story unfolds, we discover that we love God in response to his great love for us in Jesus. God’s love for us is the meaning, motivation, and means of our love for him. The more alive we are to the love of God, the more deeply and consistently we will experience his peace.

The Hebrew culture into which Jesus was born viewed people holistically—an integrated being (soul) with multiple capacities. As image bearers of God, we are created to reflect God’s beauty with our whole being. According to Scripture, God views us as whole, integrated beings—worshiping, feeling, thinking, choosing beings. In a profound sense, our soul is not something we have; it’s who we are, inhabiting a body that God has graciously given us.

Because of sin and death, we live as restless strangers and foolish rebels, resisting the love of God. No wonder we experience so little lasting peace. Our thinking has been darkened. Our hearts have been seduced by a multitude of God-substitutes—what the Bible calls idols. We keep running to things that will never give us the peace we long for. We are insatiably thirsty and hungry, yet we binge on things that will never slake our thirst or satisfy our deepest hunger. It’s our very desperation that makes us prime candidates for the disruptive, liberating, transforming grace of God.