

PLAIN TRUTH®

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION®

Grace Is the Gospel of Christ

By Greg Albrecht

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.
—Galatians 1:6-7

The most fundamental meaning of the word *grace* flows out of the essence of God, who defines and reveals himself to us as love. **Grace is love and love is grace.** Beyond direct reference to the spiritual wonders of God's grace there are a wide variety of ways in which this multi-layered word *grace* is used in everyday life.

Gifted ballerinas, hockey players and ice skaters (among other talented artists and athletes) are said to move **gracefully** because, in

part, they seem to do so with uncommon ease and little apparent effort. Our usage in this regard correctly contrasts God's grace with human effort and toil.

Banks offer a **grace period** before the payments on a credit card will be assessed with additional interest charges. A **grace period** in our earthly economy explains a temporary exemption—but in this usage the bill or debt is still owed.

When we humans apply the word *grace* to our world, apart from God, it is diminished and watered down. Needless to say, there are no **grace periods** that God gives us after which we must pay in full.

We bow our heads before a meal and say *grace*. In the context of prayer, **grace** is our thanksgiving for all of God's gracious gifts.

When considerate, thoughtful and compassionate behavior and

communication is seen and experienced, both the message and the messenger are said to be **gracious**.

A **grace note** within the world of music is an embellishment or variation of a principle notation or theme. Once again, as with a *grace period*, the musical usage of *grace note* limits the totality and essence of grace.

A **grace note** in music is an extra embellishment not essential to the composition or arrangement.

God's grace is not just one note. God's grace is not merely one bean on a combination plate of Mexican food. **God's grace is the whole enchilada!**

God's Grace is a Way of Life

God's grace is a privilege given to us that springs from his love and mercy rather than a "right" we can expect or demand.

God's grace is receiving what we do not deserve...and it is failing to receive what we believe we do deserve. God's grace is mercy, not merit.

God's grace is intricately connected to his love. God does not *have* love—he *is* love. In a similar way, **God's grace** is not a facet nor is it a part of the whole, but rather grace is the divine essence of God revealed to us in and through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

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The Narrow Door

When hunters first started to trap monkeys, they knew that their prey wouldn't fall for just any trick—one hunter came up with an ingenious plan.

The hunter hollowed out a coconut and filled it with rice and nuts, and then tied the coconut to a tree. A monkey would discover the coconut tied to the tree and see the food at the bottom of the coconut.

But, as the monkey inserted its hand in the carefully crafted opening hole in the coconut it discovered that hole was barely big enough for an empty, flexible hand to enter.

Still, monkeys fell for the trap, trying to take the bait. Try as it might, the monkey, once it had closed its fist around the prize of the food at the bottom of the coconut, could not remove its hand.

Time after time the monkey refused to let go of the food it had in its hand—even when the hunter came up and put a net over its head.

In Luke 13:22-30 Jesus encouraged those who wished to be saved to “make every effort to enter through the narrow door.”

A narrow opening or path as a way to life and as a way of life is a figurative image that Jesus also spoke of in Matthew 7, where he also speaks of a narrow and small gate and a narrow road or path.

At first glance Jesus seems to be saying that it is difficult to be saved. That's great news for Christ-less religion—as soon

as difficulty and effort is mentioned, religious legalism starts grinding its axe.

The typical explanation of Luke 13:22-30 is a hellfire and damnation sermon—it's one of those classic ways in which religion dangles the feet of the slackers over the flames of hell, trying to shame and guilt them into being better people so God will save them.

But wait just a minute: let's take another look. Is that what Jesus is saying?

The narrow door is not at all about our effort, our performance or the religious prize Christless religion insists God owes us as a result of how hard we work.

Jesus is saying that letting go of the prizes we feel we deserve is the narrow door of grace.

The narrow door is not at all about our effort, our performance or the religious prize that Christless religion insists God owes us as a result of how hard we work.

In terms of the kingdom of God, hard work on the part of humans is the easy way—it's the way as Jesus says in Matthew 7 that is a wide gate and a broad road that leads to destruction.

The narrow door is grace—grace is narrow because most people choose to impress God and work their way into the kingdom of God rather than surrender their cherished virtues

and good deeds.

Many people try to carry all their spiritual trophies and diplomas and certificates and commendations through the door of God's kingdom but the door to God's kingdom only allows entrance to those who surrender all, whose hands are empty, who have no suitcases filled with their religious deeds and commendations.

Like the monkey who was trapped by the seduction of food at the bottom of a hollowed out coconut (and refused to let go of all the prizes it had in its grasp, even when it could save itself by doing so) so too, many people refuse to humble themselves and realize that salvation is by *faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone*.

Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9 we are saved by grace, not by works so that no one can boast before God of their accomplishments.

Grace is the key that unlocks the doors of religious prisons and salt mines—grace rips off the blindfolds that deceive—grace is the cool drink of living water for the thirsty and parched soul of those who are blinded and deceived.

Monkeys (or humans) who are saved are those who are willing to let go of all the religious stuff they have crammed into their greedy little hands. □

—Greg Albrecht

Join us for “The Narrow Door” at the audio teaching ministry of Christianity Without the Religion, the week of May 3, 2020.

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God's grace is not a measuring stick that determines where we stand with God. We either stand before God on the basis of law, or we stand before him on the basis of grace.

If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.—Galatians 2:17-20

Either we are justified—that is made right in terms of our relationship to and with God—by Jesus Christ, or we are made right in terms of our relationship to and with God by law. We are either justified to and with God by law—or by Jesus Christ—it must be one or the other—it cannot be a combination.

Paul had visited the Galatians, proclaimed the gracious gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and then after he left, he found out that other teachers arrived and completely confused the Galatians. That's the background and backstory of Galatians.

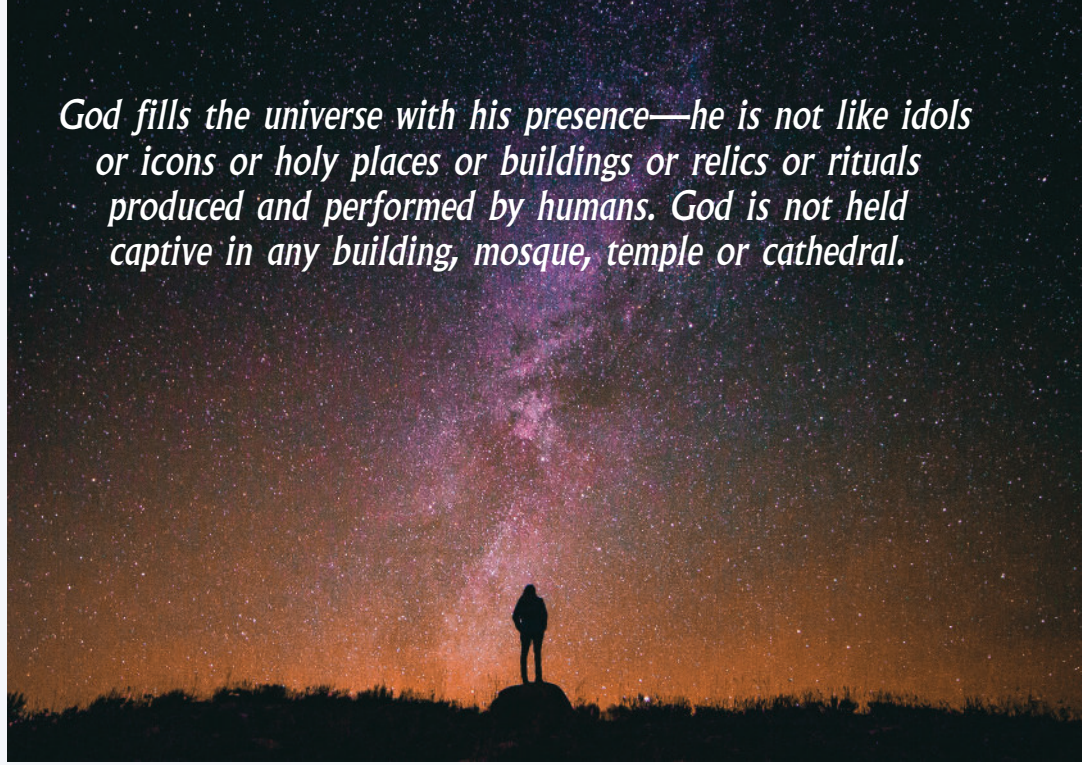
Galatians is a blunt and absolute testimonial detailing Paul's beef with the false teachers who were perverting the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul insists they were changing Moses into Jesus, and Jesus into Moses.

The false teachers were putting the law in place of Christ—they were removing Jesus from the throne and replacing him with law so that law became the focus—lord and savior.

In his *Commentary on Galatians* written in 1535, Martin Luther summarizes the spiritually toxic problem Paul was combating:

Men fast, pray, watch, suffer. They intend to appease the wrath of God

God fills the universe with his presence—he is not like idols or icons or holy places or buildings or relics or rituals produced and performed by humans. God is not held captive in any building, mosque, temple or cathedral.



and to deserve God's grace by their exertions. But there is no glory in it for God, because by their exertions these workers pronounce God an unmerciful slave driver, an unfaithful and angry Judge. They despise God, make a liar of him, snub Christ and all his benefits, in short they pull God from his throne and perch themselves on it.

God's Grace is Greater Than Law

Paul says that the law of Moses, the old covenant, condemned him (and us) BUT he now has another law, the law of grace and liberty which liberates him from the bondage of the old covenant law (Galatians 3:1-3, 5:1).

Paul talks about prisoners of the law and that the law results in bondage. Whereas, says Paul, when faith is revealed in and through Jesus Christ, those who trust, accept and embrace him are *no longer under the supervision of the law* (Galatians 3:25).

Paul says he has died to the law. He is a new man, a new creation of God, and by the grace of God he is free from the law, free in Christ. In Galatians 2:20 Paul says that he has been crucified with Christ. That is, for Paul as a Christ-follower, Jesus is Lord over all, including the law. For those who are prisoners of the law and held in its clutches, this is an amazing statement—and a

statement their religious beliefs cause them to reject.

People who are imprisoned by the law (Galatians 3:23)—any law, particularly within the world of religion—cannot imagine that God loves anything or anyone more than he does his law. But the gospel of Jesus Christ insists that he does love you and me more than any law!!!

Jesus was crucified by the law and by those who worshipped the law instead of Jesus, God in the flesh. Paul says as he embraces and trusts in Jesus—he joins Jesus in his death and resurrection.

With Paul, you and I continue to live in the flesh, so of course our crucifixion with Christ is a spiritual metaphor. But Paul says the life he now leads is a radically different life than the one he lived before, when he lived trying to please and appease God by the law.

Galatians 2:17-20 lays the groundwork for the great argument of this magnificent book of Galatians—that if someone seeks to please and appease God by their works and deeds, they are in fact rejecting the grace of God. Martin Luther offers these thoughts about this passage in his *Commentary on the book of Galatians*:

Let us be warned. Everyone who seeks righteousness without Christ,

either by works, merits, satisfactions, actions, or by the law, rejects the grace of God and despises the death of Christ.

God's Grace is Greater Than Karma

Join me now as we focus carefully on God's grace, hovering over it like a drone or a helicopter—examining and contemplating God's amazing grace:

Grace is not like winning the lottery, because winning the lottery is luck, not an intentional gift. When grace is received and experienced it is never capricious or coincidental. Just as grace is never earned or deserved grace is always an intentional gift that can (and should) be traced back to God.

Grace is the economy of God—grace is the way he works and he is always at work in our world. Because we humans think we and others earn our own way and “get what we deserve,” we often don't perceive God's grace in action. God's grace flies under (perhaps over is more precise) our radar. God's grace is mysterious and “out

of this world” and is an economy we do not prefer.

We are engineered to work and earn, and thus we do not prefer the manner and means and way in which God works, and the ways in which he seems, from our perspective, to be silent and fails to perform to our expectations.

Grace is abundant, immeasurable and without restrictions. The supply of God's grace is limitless. We never need worry that God will run out of grace. *Grace is not* only something we receive, but once grace is given to us, we are empowered to pass it on to others. By definition, grace is dynamic and does not reside in one place, but is always moving forward, touching lives in many ways and places.

Karma is the opposite of grace—the idea behind *karma* is that the chickens will always come home to roost. *Karma* teaches cause and effect as a moral principle—*karma* believes good and virtuous actions lead to rewards and evil actions lead to trouble and torment.

Karma attempts to reduce God to the lowest possible human denominator, so that we humans can understand, manage and control him. *Karma* presents God as altogether predictable, and because he is predictable, *karma* suggests that we can steer, handle and even manipulate and influence God.

Grace however, is far bigger and transcends the temporal world of *karma*.

Grace means that God and the way he works is mysterious to the human capacity to comprehend and understand.

Grace means that

God gives good things to bad people—which is precisely what Jesus, in speaking of the heavenly Father, teaches us in Matthew 5:45: *He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.*

God does not need to be appeased—he is not angry or upset or filled with wrath, contrary to some well-meaning folks who think he is.

God is grace, and he gives us good things—should good things be dependent on humans deserving them, then humans would never receive anything good from God.

God's Grace is Everywhere for Everyone

God fills the universe with his presence—he is not like idols or icons or holy places or buildings or relics or rituals produced and performed by humans. God is not held captive in any church building, any mosque, temple or cathedral.

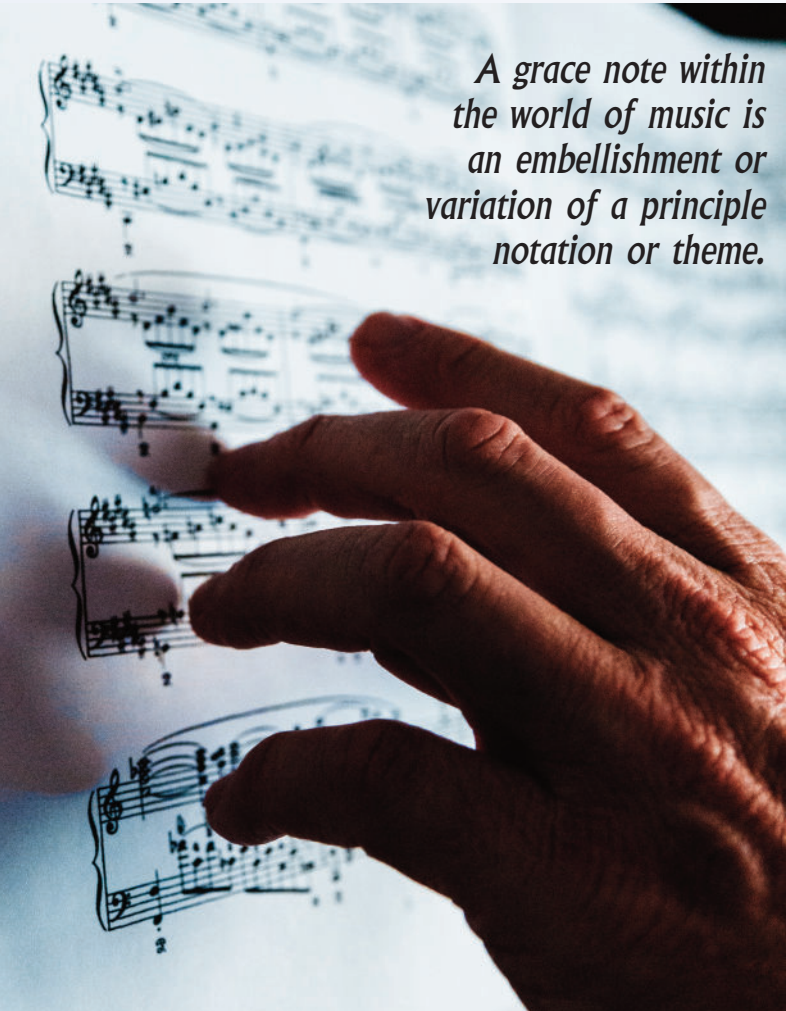
God defies denominational boundaries—it is impossible to place God within a religious or doctrinal strait jacket, though religions historically have attempted to do so, and still do. No one has the right to claim that they and their organization may “dispense” God's grace.

God's grace obliterates human claims about having an exclusive right to own God or exclusive franchise to speak for him. **God's grace** bulldozes religious country clubs where people band together, “protected” and “safe” from outsiders who are sinful, undesirable, unqualified spiritual scum, while the insiders in their holy huddle celebrate their own righteousness.

Grace demolishes the human idea of success. *Grace* is not about getting and keeping and controlling and being gratified. *Grace* is about serving, pleasing and giving to another.

Grace demolishes claims of human superiority, of greater virtue and righteousness, of unique status before God. *God's grace* demolishes Christless religion, nationalism and racism (see Galatians 3:28).

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound! □



A grace note within the world of music is an embellishment or variation of a principle notation or theme.

Want to Hear a Good Story?

By Steve Brown

A number of years ago, I participated in a brown bag lunch for students at a seminary. They asked questions and were disturbed by some of the things I said in my talk. A professor (who loves me and was trying to help) stood and said, “Now, let me explain what Steve is talking about in terms that are a bit less radical.”

He then proceeded to soften what I had said, and in fact softened it to the point that it wasn’t what I had taught at all. I thought I might correct him, but I decided to let it pass and remained silent.

I remember driving home that day, feeling dirty. I told God it would never happen again. I would never allow what he had clearly taught in Scripture to be ameliorated by anyone—not even someone who loved me and meant well.

There’s a cartoon in my office that shows a pastor standing before a traumatized, shocked congregation with the caption/disclaimer, “Now Steve didn’t mean exactly what you think he meant.” Actually, yes, I do.

I mean exactly what I teach and, no matter how shocking, heretical

and radical it sounds, it’s exactly what the Bible teaches about grace. In fact, it is the essence of the Christian faith.

In our efforts to be religious, right and righteous, we sometimes forget how shocking and counterintuitive the gospel message really is.

Telling Christians that God will never be angry at them no matter what they do, where they go or how badly they screw up can be disconcerting. But it can also be exciting to watch as students start to understand, knowing that they will then teach it to others.

I sometimes think that I have finally gone too far to be brought home. There are places in my life where I struggle to hold on, where I have my doubts about God’s love for me, and where I think, *nothing could be this good*.

But when I teach others, something happens to me and I find myself dancing again. So I don’t go to the seminary to teach or a pulpit to preach or a conference to speak...for them. I do it for me.

But wait, there’s more. I’m not without compassion for others. I

know people—people are my business and I am “people.”

It’s so easy to get discouraged. All my life I’ve been around people with broken hearts who have secrets they can’t share and sins they can’t shake.

I’ve listened to a lot of confessions and I’ve felt what Jesus felt. You hang out with him long enough, and you start feeling what he feels and caring the way he cares.

Matthew wrote, “When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36).

Harassed and helpless without a shepherd. I see a lot of that. I’ve often prayed that I would see what Jesus sees, feel what Jesus feels, and think his thoughts after him. When I do, I tell people about the real God who is kind, merciful and gracious.

During a break yesterday in a class I was teaching, one of my students asked, “Mr. Brown, do you want to hear a good story?” I told him I would sell my soul for a good story.

He told me about his little sister who had written him a letter for his birthday. She wrote about how much she admired him and how he was so good and kind and followed Jesus so closely.

"I realized that she thinks I'm perfect and I knew that I needed to tell her the truth. So I went to her room and began to confess my sins to her. She asked why I was doing it and I told her I was afraid she would think God loved us because we're good and I didn't want her to think that."

Then this young man said his sister began to cry. "I just held her and let her cry," he said.

"I asked if she thought she had to be perfect in order for God to love her. She nodded her head and I told her she didn't have to do anything—that God loves her just her way she is."

She asked through her tears, "Why?" I said, "He loves you because you're his. That's all."

The story of God's love is a story that needs to be told. When we tell it to one another, all sorts of good things happen. When we don't, Jesus still loves us, but we miss the power of the story in our own lives. □

Steve Brown has graced our pages for many years. Steve is a professor, author and radio personality and the president of Key Life Network.

BREAKING NEWS—CWRpress and Brad Jersak receive second Gold Medal!

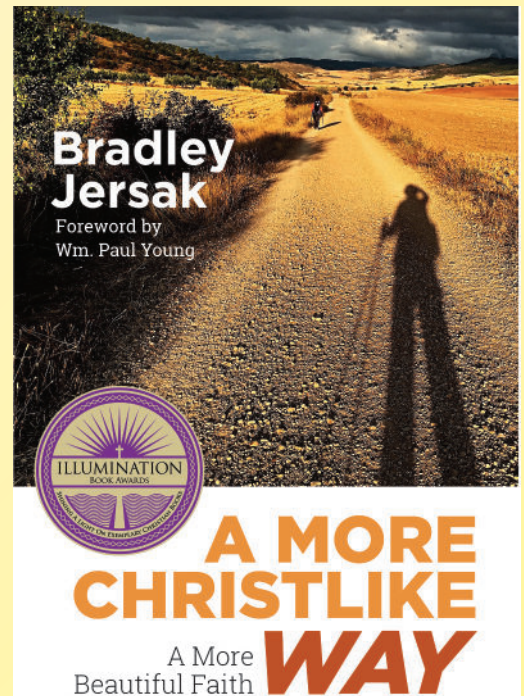
In 2016 *A More Christlike God*, by Brad Jersak, published by CWRpress in 2015, received the Enduring Light Gold Medal from Illumination Book Awards.

Now, in 2020, *A More Christlike Way*, also by Brad Jersak, published by CWRpress in 2019, once again received the Enduring Light Gold Medal from Illumination Book Awards.

Dr. Jersak's *A More Christlike God* has been published in three languages so far, with enthusiastic readers all over the world regarding it as a lifechanging book. *A More Christlike Way*, the highly anticipated follow up to *A More Christlike God*, is already receiving high praise, and it promises to impact the lives of readers in a similar way.

Students and seekers of Jesus will be thrilled with the transforming insights in both of these Gold Medal Award winning books.

Both volumes are available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) in hard copy and digital formats, as well as audio.



Matthew wrote, "When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).



Franny and Bonnie

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

Frances J. Worst. I Googled her name and selected the top entry. For a fee, a background check (including all arrest records) was only a click away. Even for free, however, I wouldn't have wasted my time. The file would be empty. I didn't check my own name, assuming my criminal record had been wiped clean. My lawless spate caught up with me back in 1965 out in the plains of western South Dakota.

Franny, my mother-in-law, never knew the tremors of being ordered to stand straight for a mug shot or the blackening for finger prints. She didn't know the fright of being pushed into a cell, the door clanging shut and the click of a lock. She was a good woman.

My shame has followed me for more than a half century. She would have never knowingly been involved in illegal activities. I was arrested for breaking a Green River ordinance: selling encyclopedias door-to-door without a license.

Franny was honest. She wouldn't have hid a briefcase in the bushes on seeing a patrol car in the distance. Caught empty-handed and red-faced, I went back and retrieved my briefcase, got in the back seat and was on the way to jail.

Born in 1915, Franny was just five years younger than Bonnie Parker. Like Franny, Bonnie was smart, pretty, a good student, and lived with her widowed mother. Franny went on to secretarial school, worked in a doctor's office and teamed up with Bill, who would own small grocery stores, later an insurance agency.

Bonnie dropped out of high school, married before age sixteen, separated from her husband, worked as a waitress and at age 19 teamed up with Clyde. On a May morning in 1934, Bonnie, 23, was shot dead (along with Clyde) on a country road in Bienville Parish, Louisiana.

Bonnie's is a household name. Not so Franny's. The few online records offer no more than her age and an outdated address.

Franny is now incarcerated at Edison Manor, surely not on death row, rather hospice. She's a trooper and just might make it to her next birthday on July 7.

But back in the day, Franny was an independent woman who wouldn't have put up with all the care and attention she's getting now. She is the mother of five children, one having died in infancy, the rest alive and well. My husband, the oldest, will be 80 on his next birthday.

Franny has been widowed since Bill died at 87 in 2003. Theirs was a traditional marriage in many ways, very different from ours. No fussin' and fightin' over every little thing from pronouncing a word or constructing a birdhouse to how to operate a vehicle (I'm a good driver; he is not).

But from John's memories, we laugh a lot harder and more frequently than they did, and we work and play much harder in our old age. Two very good and very different marriages.

But Franny and Bill (like John and I) had their carved-out roles. Bill was the breadwinner; she a stay-at-home mom who spent her spare hours in volunteer work. She was an adult Sunday school teacher while Bill headed home after the morning service to prepare a big dinner, all six seated around the noontime table. He served on the city council, she on the Ladies Aid Society.

Franny can still quote Bible verses and sing hymns by heart. And she has long been known for her quips and sense of humor, even in the throes of dementia. Recently, when John visited her, he came up behind her, holding his hands over her eyes:

Who is this? Must be the second person of the Trinity—my son! How they laughed. Tender mercies at age 104. □

—Ruth Tucker



Quotes & Connections



“One of the hardest parts of being human is other humans. It’s true, because life is hard; but people get to show up for one another, as God told us to, and we remember we are loved and seen and God is here and we are not alone. We don’t deliver people from their pits, but we can sure get in there with them until God does.” Jen Hatmaker, *For the Love: Fighting for Grace in a World of Impossible Standards*

“A mother’s arms are made of tenderness and children sleep soundly in them.”—Victor Hugo

“Making the decision to have a child is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.”—Elizabeth Stone

“When you look into your mother’s eyes, you know that is the purest love you can find on this earth.”—Mitch Albom

“Life doesn’t come with a manual; it comes with a mother.”—Unknown

“Before you were conceived, I wanted you. Before you were born, I loved you. Before you were an hour old, I would die for you. This is the miracle of life.”—Maureen Hawkins

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