

# Grace and Grievance

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British writer Aldous Huxley has written, “Man is an amphibian who lives simultaneously in two worlds--the given and the home-made, the world of matter, life and consciousness and the world of symbols.” That is, we are creatures of both flesh and spirit, citizens of our inner and outer worlds. Our experiences in these two domains are not synchronized so that one always duplicates the other. Often one sphere seems to complete the other in a yin/yang sort of way—a search for balance.

Jesus acknowledged this duality of life and death, now and then, grievance and grace in one of his parables. It is about a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. Found in Luke, it offers a sobering reflection on wealth, justice, and eternal destiny. The rich man is depicted as living in extravagance, clothed in purple and fine linen—symbols of luxury and status. Meanwhile, Lazarus, whose name means “God helps,” lies in misery at the rich man’s gate, longing for scraps and suffering neglect. The rich man’s sin is his indifference. Despite Lazarus’s presence at his very doorstep, he offers no compassion or assistance.

When both men die, their conditions reverse. Lazarus is carried to Abraham’s side, a place of honor and comfort, while the rich man suffers torment in Hades. The reversal reveals a central theme of Jesus’ teaching: God’s kingdom upends worldly expectations, lifting the lowly and humbling the powerful. It is not earthly wealth or suffering that determines destiny, but one’s relationship to God and others. The rich man asks Abraham to make Lazarus his servant but is refused. Lazarus’ new joyful status cannot be taken from him.

The parable warns against complacency and self-centeredness. To ignore the suffering at our gates is to risk eternal loss. Ultimately, this parable calls believers to examine how they use their resources and respond to human need. It challenges us to see the ““Lazaruses”” in our midst and extend compassion before it is too late. In God’s kingdom, love and mercy—not luxury—are the true measures of a life well lived. While this interpretation of the parable sees it stressing the importance of compassion and love of neighbor, a more traditional understanding of it is that heaven offers a kind of poetic justice. The spiritual world fixes the injustices of the material world, bringing about a proportional redress: the suffering is rewarded and the sins are punished—all in exactly the right amounts.

I find this theme of justice unsatisfying because it may be unrealistic. In life, our sense of injustice is often triggered by perceived slights. We believe we were wronged, and it is unjust. We deserve better. We have a grievance. According to Arthur Miller, what drives the tragic hero with whom we identify in drama is “the fear of being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world.” In other words, the hero dreads being displaced—losing their social position, respect, usefulness, or identity. This sense of displacement triggers feelings of grievance and injustice. We think we deserve better.

The problem is that our focus is on ourselves. The first reading of the parable says our focus in this world should be on the ““Lazaruses””—our neighbors. If our primary concern is their wellbeing, we are not easily pulled into a sense of grievance about our own situation. This is not to say that we should ignore injustice. Rather we

should abandon the notion that we are the ones who know what justice is, and it is our grievance. In the book of Job, when God finally responds out of the whirlwind to Job's complaints about his unjust treatment, God does not give Job a straightforward explanation for his suffering, nor does He directly affirm Job's sense of injustice. Instead, God challenges Job's perspective by highlighting the vastness of creation and the limits of human understanding.

So, what does all this have to do with Pink Sunday? My first wife died of cancer 18 months after she was diagnosed with it. No treatment ever worked for her, she just kept getting worse. She suffered from the disease, and she suffered from the cures. But in all that darkness, she was not depressed and never voiced any self-pity. Where did she find her strength?

One of her most special regular visitors was an Episcopal priest who suffered from cancer himself. They had a special bond because of it. He would sometimes ask her what she worried about most. She invariably answered that her greatest worry was for me. How would I cope with losing my soulmate and fellow traveler. How would I get on without the person I was closest to in the world? She worried about me! Not herself. I was her Lazarus.

She had many friends who visited her during these last months. I often heard them say that although they had come to cheer her up, they felt happier after their visit with her. She turned the conversations to them, eager to know what was going on in their lives. They were her "Lazaruses" too! She had the grace to keep her focus on others right up to the end. That was her strength and superpower.

The courage and faith that carried her through these difficult months was a model and an inspiration for me. I somehow lost my fear of death and of the adversities that life sometimes brings. This person closest to me inspired me to live a better life and to be a better version of myself. My wife was blessed with compassion and empathy, so that she became a blessing to others. She was the model of a grace-full person.

The life she led those last few months certainly took great effort, but it was not something she made a special effort to do; it was the person God had given her the grace to be. That grace was an invaluable gift to her and to all of us around her. It dissolved any egotism and accompanying sense of grievance she might have had. It tamped down the extra pain that comes with self-absorption and brought some light out of the darkness.

Cancer has visited our S.T.A.R. community recently, and we have all had an opportunity to see this same grace at work in our midst. Our friends suffering with cancer have turned their eyes toward us. They have fed us, ministered to us, focused on the sadness in our lives. They have been blessed and have been blessings to us all.

There is an ending to the Lazarus parable that often gets ignored. After the rich man's request to have Lazarus as his servant in Hades is denied by Abraham, this oligarch asks if he can go back to the land of the living to warn his rich friends against the lack of empathy that has damned him. He wants to be like Dickens' character Marley who returned as a ghost to warn Scrooge to change his ways in **A Christmas Carol**. Abraham answers, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them. . . If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." That is, these oligarchs lack the gift of grace

that enables them to blossom in adversity—maybe because they see empathy as a weakness and a distraction from the lives they have chosen to live.

The parable suggests to me that we should **not** think of Divine grace as a goal or some last minute project we undertake. Grace is a gift freely given to us, perhaps as part of a long life's spiritual journey. Maybe it comes when we grow in our empathy and compassion. However it works, we should think of it as a byproduct of our loving relationships with God and humanity. It is not something we can or should deliberately earn.

Grace, then, is not a transaction or a reward for our efforts, but a gift that reorients our hearts. Where grievance traps us in self-absorption, grace turns us outward toward others. My wife's life and death testified that grace was not a last-minute intervention but a way of being formed over time through love, empathy, and faith. Her strength lay not in defiance of suffering but in her refusal to let suffering narrow her concern to herself. Instead, she lived as a channel of blessing, embodying the very reversal the parable of Lazarus and the rich man proclaims.

The message of the parable is not only about future judgment but also about present transformation. To receive God's grace is to live differently now—to see the "Lazaruses" at our gates, to relinquish grievance, and to cultivate compassion. Grace loosens our grip on self-concern and equips us to face hardship without despair. It is the power that both sustains us in suffering and enables us to bless others even as we are being broken.

In the end, this grace is not earned, but given. It comes as a mystery, sometimes through the very people who appear weakest, and often in moments when we least expect it. To embrace this gift is to be drawn into Divine love, where the balance between the inner and outer worlds, the flesh and the spirit, is found not in grievance but in compassion, not in self-assertion but in self-giving. Grace, unlike grievance, endures beyond death, carrying us into the eternal embrace of the Numinous.

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