

Living
IN GOD'S GENEROUS DESIGN

Life
WITHOUT
RESERVATION

A person in a yellow jacket is sitting on the edge of a large, dark rock formation that juts out over a valley. The background shows a vast landscape with mountains and a river under a soft, golden light.

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Chapter 1

GENEROSITY IS GOD'S IDEA

Generosity seems to be popular today. Who doesn't remember Ty Pennington, ABC's *Extreme Home Makeover* host? He encouraged the participants of the show to cry out, "Bus driver, move that bus!" in order to reveal the rehabilitated house given to its owners after a wild week of hammering and painting. On CBS's *Undercover Boss*, employees are given by their boss, the means to achieve the aspirations they shared with a "new employee" – who turns out to have been their boss in disguise. There are philanthropic personalities, like Ellen DeGeneres, Oprah Winfrey, Bill and Melinda Gates, and thousands of others who give of their time and money to improve the lives of others.

Generosity actually dates to the beginning, not to the dawn of civilization but to the dawn of *Creation*. Do you remember Genesis, Chapter 1, verses 1 through 3?

Genesis 1:1-3 (NIV)

¹In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ²Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

³And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

God gave the heavens ... and the earth ... and ... light. What? Wait. Don't just read right on past that. He, the Creator of the universe, gave us LIGHT! How important is that? As far as we know, nothing, absolutely *nothing* in all of creation either on earth or in the heavens can live without it! Without light, plants don't grow, without plants, animals die with nothing to eat and there is no oxygen regenerated into the air to breath. Water freezes and nothing survives, including us!

God didn't just end the creation process with light. He also gave us an entire system of life – so complex, that we are only now beginning to unravel its intricacies. He called it CREATION. And He called it "very good."

Creation exists for us. He gave it to humankind to steward and enjoy. (Gen 1:26-30) He first placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, giving him one job, that of tending to the garden. (Gen 2:15) While Adam was tending the garden (which God created), God concluded that Adam had a need, something Adam never asked for, something he didn't even realize he needed. Why didn't Adam know? Because Adam was content, satisfied with his relationship – this as-yet, unchanged relationship with God. But,

being foreknowing (Isa 46:10), God could see his need. It was “not good for man to be alone.” (Gen 2:18a) So, He created Eve (Gen 2:21-23) to be a helpmate and companion for Adam. (Gen 2:18b) A gift. A gift Adam didn’t even know he needed.

Let’s stop here for a moment. If God is foreknowing (and He is), then He knew that giving Eve to Adam would break the pure and undisturbed relationship between just Adam and Himself. Did you read that? He knew where this gift would lead! Even so, He blessed Adam with the gift – which Adam had no inkling of how it would ultimately satisfy him. More so, God, being foreknowing, also knew the outcome with Eve and Adam in the Garden as they would face the temptation that evil would bring them and the consequences they would face because of yielding to it. Having created Adam and Eve with the power to choose between good and evil, He knew they would sin (Rom 8:29; 1 John 3:30; Isa 48:3-5), lose the power to choose good on their own, and now, really rupture that pure and undisturbed relationship with Him for which they were created. Even so, when that finally did happen, when they both ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and their relationship dramatically changed (Gen 3:1-7), He continued to be generous to them.

God’s Generous Heart

God is generous, and generosity is both His idea and part of His nature. You can see His generosity towards His creation even when you mess it up, sin, and misuse your relationship with Him.

FIRST EXAMPLE OF GOD’S GENEROSITY

The Substitution Principle

Let’s look back to what happened in the Garden of Eden after Adam and Eve sinned ...

Think about it:

- Adam and Eve had a complete, pure and undisturbed relationship with their Creator, signified by their walking together with God in the Garden (Gen 3:8),
- Adam was given one job, to tend God’s creation (Gen 2:15) – the Garden,
- Adam was given one rule: Don’t eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. (Gen 2:16-17)

Sounds perfect, right? They had no shame, no disappointments, and all their needs were met. Their need to feel acceptance was met by being uniquely created (“formed”) by God. (Gen 2:7) Their need for significance was met as they were created in His image. (Gen 1-26-27) Their need to be secure was met through God’s provision of the

Garden and His endless love. (Gen 22:44; John 3:16; Ps 78:102) The deepest needs of humankind were met by God and by God alone. Even when Adam had a need, one unknown by him, God met it.

But then it happened ... man was disobedient against God and suffered the consequences of that action. (Gen 3: 1-7a)

This single action impacts us even to this day. For the first time, humankind had a real rupture in that pure, undisturbed relationship with God. Adam and Eve immediately felt the impact of this disharmony at the moment of their rebellious act: they felt shame (Gen 3:7) and, as a result, they hid from God. (Gen 3:8-10 Gen 3:8-10) Confronted, they quickly shifted responsibility for their disobedient action (Gen 3:12-13) – Adam to Eve, Eve to the serpent. The serpent even pushed blame onto God! In their shame, they tried to cover themselves – their sin – as signified by donning the leaves. (Gen 3:15)

Sound familiar? I know it does for me. I can't count the times I tried to hide from the consequences of my sin, cast blame elsewhere, and develop an elaborate cover-up. As if the God of the universe can't see through my self-justification ... God saw through Adam's, as well.

The Bible says God went looking for them. (Gen 3:9) This wasn't because God lost them, rather, it was because God felt the disharmony a – the breach – in the pure relationship they had jointly experienced up to the point of their disobedience. Now, they were no longer walking together. Due to the broken relationship, the fulfillment of mankind's deepest needs for significance, acceptance, and security were no longer being sought through a relationship with God. Imagine how this broke God's heart. He created this man and this woman specifically to love and to be loved by Him. He wanted to give us so much yet, because of this one act, we – man and God – experienced disharmony with one another.

I can't comprehend how it must have felt for God, but oh, how this must have broken God's heart! I can remember the brokenness I felt as an earthly father when my sons made willful, frustrating decisions that strained our relationship!

God, being rich in mercy and full of love (Eph 2:4-5) for His children, wanted to restore that pure relationship. He began by providing a more permanent covering for Adam and Eve, but it wasn't cheap. It took the sacrifice of an animal to make clothes for them (Gen 3:21), as the cover for their shame and as payment for their sin. What man could not do for himself, God would provide.

Let's look at this payment thing a bit. Imagine the scene. Here's this little lamb (though the Bible doesn't specify, I imagine a lamb – to be consistent with the imagery we find throughout the rest of scripture). Imagine this lamb peacefully grazing on a grassy meadow within the garden. It's a pleasant day, no predators with which to be concerned. Heck, there hasn't ever been a bad day in the Garden of Eden until this point! Then out of nowhere, a lightning bolt! The Power of God – the Voice of God ...

ZAP... turns this peaceful lamb into two pairs of pants and shirts. Wow! Really?! What did the lamb do to deserve this? It was Adam and Eve who broke the one rule. (Gen 3:1-7) It was Adam and Eve who hid and played the blame game in their feeble attempt at covering up their sin. (Gen 3:1-13) Who got the bad end of this deal? That poor little lamb, that's who! It was the lamb:

- who paid the price of someone else's sin with its life!
- who took on the wrath of God in these two sinner's places.
- and foreshadowed the one:
- who would become the substitute-payer for the sin of mankind.
- who would take on the wrath of God in mankind's sinful place.

Remember, God had given Adam only one rule. He had told Adam that if he ate from that tree he would surely die. (Gen 2:16-17) But instead of immediately taking Adam and Eve's lives in payment for their sin, He gave them a substitute for this payment (at least for the time being) so they could bear their shame in the form of clothing to cover their nakedness. Then, he did even more. He made them a promise while talking to the evil one who had led them to their sin: "(her offspring) will crush your head." (Gen 3:15) It is the final victory over evil that we see in the Son of God's death and resurrection – the final resolution for the sin of humankind when Jesus dies as the payment proffered for humankind's sin – a salvation from that sin that is offered to all humankind – for this original sin and for all of their subsequent sin. He did that so the pure undisturbed fellowship could be restored between God and those who rely on Jesus' sacrifice for their salvation from sin.

A SECOND EXAMPLE OF GOD'S GENEROSITY

The Lamb of God

Another example of God's generosity toward mankind is found in the story of Israel's deliverance from 400 years bondage in Egypt. (Exo 3:7-10)

Even if you have never read the account in the Bible, you may have seen the movie, *The Ten Commandments*. In the story, Moses returned from Midian to Egypt (Exo 4:19-20) in order to follow God's command to tell Pharaoh to: "Let my people go!" (Exo 7:16, Exo 5:1) Moses confronts his brother, the Pharaoh. (Exo 2:10) (Moses had been adopted into the royal family by this Pharaoh's mother when, as a young girl, she had found him in the basket in the river. (Exo 2:3-10) Now in his brother's Egyptian court, Moses gives Pharaoh God's command to release the Israelites.

Pharaoh has an arrogant heart and scoffs at Moses. (Remember, too, the Pharaohs believed they were gods.)¹ As a result, different plagues were unleashed upon Egypt – one each time Moses demanded Pharaoh release God’s people. (Exo 7:14; 12:32) But each time Pharaoh’s heart is further hardened, and he refuses. (Exo 7:13; 14; 8:15; 19,32; 9:7; 37) With each refused demand, God sends a plague to demonstrate HIS power against the false gods of Egypt. In fact, each of the plagues came in direct opposition to one of the many false gods of Egypt. They worshipped the Nile River: God turned it to blood. (Exo 7:14-25) They worshipped the sun: God turned the day into night (Exo 10:21-29) and so forth. Arguably, each plague was more destructive than the previous one.

The last plague was the most devastating of all: the death of the first born of every family in Egypt. (Exo 11:1-10) But God made a provision for His people, as found in Exodus 12. Each Israelite family was to take a spotless lamb, sacrifice it and drain its blood. With the blood, they were to mark the doorframe of the entrance to their home. (Exo 12:1-7) God had instructed Moses that if the blood of the lamb, a perfect lamb, were painted across the doorpost, then all those within that home would be saved. (Exo 12:1-13) This act becomes known as the Passover (Exo 12:14-28), because God promised to “pass His wrath over” (Exo 12:27) each house – including the first-born – sealed with the blood. What they couldn’t do to save themselves, God did for them.

If you saw the movie *The Ten Commandments*, you can recall and visualize this particular scene. In the night’s sky, fingers of a misty green fog descended from heaven and settled on the ground. Then the fog – representing the death Angel – slowly crept across the ground and seeped under the unmarked doors of each home, those without the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. Across the city, you could hear the rising screams of grief as one first-born after another succumbed to God’s wrath. It is sobering to think about the pain of such an experience. (Exo 12:29-30) It is why, even today, Jews celebrate the Passover (Exo 12:14) and their deliverance from God’s wrath by the blood of one perfect lamb. (Exo 12:5-8; 11-13)

Now fast-forward in time to the Jordan River. Here is a man, a locust-eating and camel-hair-wearing, crazy man, disheveled and unkempt, by most accounts – named John the Baptist. (Mark 1:1-11; Matt 3:1-13) Jesus approaches him and wants to be baptized. What does John say – knowing that the religious elite, the Pharisees, are watching, listening, and ridiculing? He declares: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” (John 1:29) Why would he say that, using those words and unnecessarily offending these religious leaders? Unless, of course, he was making the boldest of statements.

John knew that in Jesus, mankind would be reconciled to God. (Rom 5:10-16) Only through Jesus, and no other, the wrath of God would be quenched and the harmony of a pure relationship with God the Father would be restored once and for all. (Rom 5:10-19;

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/pharaoh>

Heb 9:26; 10:12-14) We could now have through Christ, the same relationship with God that Adam and Eve had before their disobedience. (Rom 5:17-21) John was declaring that Jesus was our final, complete substitution. There need be – there can be – no other. Through Jesus Christ, the old covenant would pass; the New Covenant of Grace would be established (Heb 8:13). Through Christ, we all could be adopted as children of God. (Rom 8:15; Eph 1:5)

With these words, John declared that there was nothing we could do to make ourselves acceptable to God. Through His death and burial, this Lamb paid our sin debt. It was only what someone else – the perfect and sinless one – did that made us acceptable to God for fellowship with Him. Jesus, the Son of God (Eph 2:4-22), through His death, burial, and resurrection, finished the work of the Father (John 17:1-5), so that we could be reconciled to God. (1 Pet 1:3-9; 1 John 4:8-10)

THE FIRST EXAMPLE — REVISITED

Let's go back to the Nation of Israel as recorded in Exodus 19. Remember when Moses went up Mount Sinai to meet with God and receive the Law? He was gone 40 days. (Exo 32; 34:28) In his absence, the people in the camp became restless, filled with worry, and even frightened. Why? They had become accustomed to being led by the Pillar and the Cloud. (Exo 13:21-22) They relied on Moses to be their intermediary (Exo 20:18-22; 33:7-11), to tell them God's will every step of the way. (Exo 20:22) God had become accessible, not just to the Jewish patriarchs and matriarchs; but, to every member of the nation. The Almighty Creator God had softened His voice, hid His glory within a cloud, and made His very infinite nature finite, to be seen, felt, and heard by His people in the desert. (Exo 20:18-22) This was majestic and mysterious stuff. Imagine being delivered out of bondage, out of the hands of the mightiest power in the world, then being led and fed by the very Hand of God. (Exo 16:35; Exo 13:21-22) Now suddenly, God and Moses are missing. Can you relate? I can.

There are times when I have those 'mountaintop experiences' where the Holy Spirit feels tangibly involved in every detail of my life. Then, other times he's distant, seemingly abandoning me on a cold winter's day, His presence nowhere to be found. It's during those times – the more difficult times – that I need to know and believe by faith that He will return to me. But, how do I experience God's presence in the mountains *and* in the valleys – during the spiritually warm summers and spiritually cold winters of life? I think that we, in part, find the answer at the foot of Mount Sinai. There, in the Tent of Meeting, just outside of the camp of the Nation of Israel, God said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to take for Me a contribution. You are to receive the contribution for Me from everyone whose heart prompts them to give." So, Moses did. (Exo 35:4-29)

One of the best ways to enjoy your salvation here on earth and to return to God's presence and live a life without reservation is to give. You know the wonderful feeling you get when you give? The very act of giving comes from, or leads us to, the understanding that all is God's anyway, including us, ourselves. (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19-20) Think about how counter-intuitive this idea is.

When things are the hardest, when our resources seem to be drying up, when God seems the furthest from us, we should give! (Mark 12:44; Luke 21:3-4) We should not isolate, not hold on tighter, not guard our savings, and not become more self-sufficient and self-absorbed. Instead, God says to give thanks with an act of gratitude (Phil 4:1-20), knowing that He gave us life, the very air we breathe, our very next breath, and all of creation. (Ps 8:3; 24:1-2) He is the artist and we are His canvas, from which He intends to make a masterpiece. That is what we have to be thankful for!

Consider this: In Exodus 25, God instructed the Israelites to build a sanctuary for Him. (Exo 25; 27:19) He gave them specific, detailed instructions on how this structure would be built, where His very presence could rest. (Exo 25-27:19) The blueprints seemed extremely elaborate and, to the common man, might appear that God required grandiose surroundings in which to dwell.

But, that's not the idea here. You see, it wasn't merely the quality of the wood, metals, or drapes. Nor was it simply the sparkle or clarity or carats of the jewels on the breastplate of the high priest, nor the purity or rare value of the gold overlaid upon the ark. It wasn't the brilliant architectural design with the aroma of sacrifices and frankincense to create the aura and ambiance to draw God's presence. (Exo 28 - Exo 30) But here, with even more significance than those truths, is the wonderful revelation:

... that God's house was built
out of the "GIFTS"
of "everyone whose HEART
prompted them to GIVE."
(Exo 35:5, 21, 22, 29; 25:2)

God's people voluntarily returned to God those things that were His anyway, out of a heart of gratitude, giving to one another and to this Holiest of causes. Now that's a place where God's presence can rest. Although God doesn't dwell any longer in houses of wood and stone (Acts 17:24-31); nevertheless, His presence today continues to live on in those whose hearts are generous towards Him – as we read in Jeremiah, Chapter 31, verses 31 to 33.

Generous Grace

Another gift of grace (Rom 5:12-16) from a generous God gives us victory in this life over the power of sin. (Rom 5:12-6:11) This gift – through Jesus' resurrection – was nothing we earned or deserved. (Eph 2:8-9)

John 3:16 (NIV)

For God so loved the world that He GAVE His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.

Through this gift of grace, you have been saved! (Eph 2:8-9) Not because of anything you did, it was a gift from a generous God. (Eph 1:18)

Generosity – as part of living a life without reservation – was God's idea! Often, we confuse mercy and grace. I find it easy to define them this way:

- Mercy is *not* getting something bad that you deserve.
- Grace is getting something good you don't deserve or ever earned. (Eph 2:8-9)

I enjoy telling this next story, which illustrates the differences mercy and grace: Years ago, I worked for a company located about 30 miles north of my home. One of the unbreakable policies of working there was that you be at your desk ready to work at 8:00 am sharp. I was a young man, with a young family who was just learning how to juggle all my responsibilities. Particularly challenging was budgeting enough time in the morning to be at work on time.

One specific week was especially hectic. On Monday, I didn't leave my house until 7:30 am. Of course, I tried to make up time by speeding up the freeway. Taking the off-ramp to exit, I took the right corner way too fast and immediately found that I had entered a school zone with a 15-mph limit. On my right, was the middle school and on my left, was a police sub-station. I glanced down at my speedometer; I was doing 35-mph! I held my breath and maintained that speed through the school zone and the remaining miles to my workplace. After parking quickly, I ran through the lot and burst into the office where I threw myself into my chair, only five minutes late. My boss was on the phone and I seemed to make it without notice. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Tuesday morning was worse. My son had missed his ride and was about to miss the school bus if I didn't get him to the bus stop. The race was on! With a lot of scrambling and vocal encouragement (otherwise known as yelling), I dropped my son at the bus and hit the freeway at 7:35 am. As I sped along the freeway toward work, I kept checking my rearview mirror watching for the Highway Patrol. As I approached my exit, I was so busy looking behind me I misjudged the exit, my speed, and the curve – completely forgetting the school zone. This time I was doing 40-mph and a shiny police car was just turning out of the parking lot on my left and into the lane next to me.

I knew I was in trouble as I sped past the patrol car. There was nothing I could do but throw up a “help me” prayer, as I knew what would happen next.

Sure enough, he lit up his light bar and moved in right behind me. Next, I did something amusing. I slowed down, turned on my blinker, and slowly pulled over to the right. All of a sudden, I was “Mr. Safe Driver.” The entire process took me another quarter of a mile. There I sat, waiting, as the officer took his time to step out of his car and walk forward to mine. I rolled down my window as this large, professional officer, exuding authority said, “License and registration, please.” I handed him my papers and he walked back to his car. The whole time I’m praying, “Don’t take me to jail, don’t take me to jail.” Finally, with what felt like forever, he walked back up to my window. He bent down and said, “Mr. Stickler, do you know why I stopped you today?” But, before I could respond, his radio crackled and I heard a woman’s voice and a bunch of gibberish. The officer became immediately distracted while listening, then he tossed my license and registration through the window and onto my lap. “Don’t do it again,” he said sternly and briskly walked back to his car, started the engine and drove off with his lights flashing and siren blaring. Stunned, I sat there in silence! I arrived at my desk twenty minutes late. My boss asked me why I was late and I told him what had just happened.

He did not find it humorous.

Wednesday morning rolls along and, as I was reaching to turn the knob of the front door (and on time), my beloved wife began a conversation with me. It was one of those conversations you don’t want to have at all, let alone when you are about to leave on time. But I could tell it was something she needed to discuss, right now, at this moment. It was emotionally charged and of deep importance to her. My other son was failing a class! Patiently I listened and tried to produce a swift resolution without appearing too distracted. It didn’t work. She could see that I wasn’t really listening. Along with not listening, I was not validating her concern. Of course, she wanted to know why I was distracted and not enthusiastically listening, which led her to ask some probing questions. I had to disclose about being late to work and my boss’ concern. That led to the question, “Why were you 20 minutes late?” Oh gosh, now I needed to divulge all of the prior day’s events. My son missing his ride, more questions; my choosing to speed, more concerned questions; my being pulled over by the police, more deeply concerning questions and a few remarks like “through a school zone? Really Mike!” I followed up by a sheepish, “I know, I know.” All this burned up time and the more it went on, the more I felt like I was sinking in quicksand. Finally, I left the house at 7:40 am. Yep, you see where this is going.

Late again, I raced up the freeway, took the off-ramp on two wheels, and hit the school zone at 45 miles per hour. And, yes, encountered the *same* cop on the *same* stretch of road, all just a few hundred feet from my office parking lot.

He stopped me. "Aren't you the same guy from yesterday?" he exclaimed. "Give me your license and registration." As I did, I kept my mouth shut.

A few minutes later, I had a \$500 ticket in my hand. Not much else was exchanged between us, but I could feel his regret that he hadn't cited me the day before. By the time I was free to go, I was 30 minutes late to work. My boss called me into his office. After a short, but direct, reprimand, I returned to my work with a written warning in my personnel file.

Waking up early Thursday morning, I had no intention of being late again. The night before we had attended church and the family potluck. Because of that outing, I didn't have a chance to talk to my wife about what happened Wednesday morning. After a quick shower, I settled in at the breakfast table with my coffee and the newspaper. The house was awake. I could hear my boys rustling around, as they readied for school. My wife came to sit with me for her coffee and morning cereal. Then came the question I dreaded; "How's it going at work? Any added fallout from being late?" With that question, I answered with the tale of the previous mornings' events.

She just sat in stunned silence as I recounted the details including the citation and reprimand. All she could say was, "You know we can't afford \$500 for your ticket. We certainly can't afford for you to lose your job either." With empathy in her eyes, she took my hand and prayed. I wiped my eyes, feeling very defeated, mumbled my good-byes and headed to the car.

As I started the engine, the digital clock lit up: 7:45 am. "No, that can't be right! I woke up early!" I had lost track of time. Off to the races I went, heading up the freeway at more than 80 mph. This time I was determined not to be late, my resolve rooted more in fear of the consequences than in reality. If I hadn't let fear override my common sense, I would have accepted I was already too late to be on time for work. Approaching my off-ramp, I pushed the limit of my car's cornering ability and was a mere blur as I sped through the school zone at 50+ mph.

Just as happened previously, the same policeman was entering into the left lane. I hit the brakes hard almost skidding. It didn't matter. He pulled in right behind me and turned on his lights. This time the siren came on. I made it safely to the right shoulder and waited, dreading what was going to happen next. This time the officer moved swiftly with much more purpose. "Three days in a row?? Out of the car!" he ordered. He moved me to the front of my car and, with a painful thud, pushed my upper body and face on to the hood. "Put your hands behind your back," he ordered. Humiliated, I said nothing as the cold steel of the handcuffs unbearably tightened around my wrists. With a tug I was off the hood, stumbling as he pushed me over to the police car. As I

was stuffed into the back seat, he declared, "You are under arrest." The door slammed shut.

Even though the distance was short, the drive to the courthouse was long. All I could think about was my job. My head was swimming with a myriad of thoughts. I would lose my job. My wife would be angry and disappointed. My car would be impounded. My bank account would be drained. My life was about to change.

Deeply ashamed, I was escorted into the courtroom. I couldn't help but notice that as the court was called to order it even seemed everyone was waiting on me. The bailiff took my arm, walked me to a chair and sat me down. The judge acknowledged the officer who brought me in.

"Good morning, son," the judge said warmly.

The officer nodded his head. I thought to myself, the cop is the judge's son? This isn't going to go well.

The judge: "What's the charge?"

The officer: "Mr. Stickler here was clocked going 35 miles per hour over the speed limit in a school zone."

The judge: "Anything else?"

The officer: "Your honor, in the two previous days, Tuesday and Wednesday, Mr. Stickler was stopped for speeding in the same school zone, traveling in excess of 20 miles per hour over the limit. Yesterday, I issued him a citation."

The judge: Raising his eyes over the papers he was reading. "Mr. Stickler, is this true?"

Me: "Don't I get a lawyer or something?"

The judge: "Yes, you do. Officer, I am appointing you Mr. Stickler's attorney."

The officer/now attorney: "Your honor, Mr. Stickler pleads guilty, because he is guilty."

The judge: "Is that true, Mr. Stickler?"

Me (meekly), "Yes."

The judge: "Then, as the law requires, I sentence you to one year in jail and a \$10,000 fine."

The sound of the gavel slamming down was all I heard next.

The officer/attorney: "Your honor, respectfully, that is an extremely harsh sentence."

The judge: "Maybe so, but justice demands it. As a righteous judge, I must punish those who break the law."

After a long contemplative pause, the officer/attorney: "Your honor, how about I take the penalty for Mr. Stickler? I will pay his fine and serve his one-year sentence."

The judge: "Son, are you sure you want to do that?"

The officer/attorney: "Well, I would prefer if something else be worked out, but I am willing."

The judge: "Unfortunately, there is nothing else I can do. My law is perfect and demands justice. Mr. Stickler, are you willing to accept this generous offer?"

Me: "Why would he do that? ... I am guilty ... who would do such a thing?"

The judge, with authority: "Mr. Stickler! Do you accept his paying your penalty for your crime?"

Me (muttering and still not understanding), "I do." I was quite astonished.

The judge: "Then I sentence the officer to pay the just penalty owed by Michael Stickler, to serve one year in jail and pay \$10,000 fine forthwith. Bailiff, remand the officer to jail. The Court is adjourned and justice is served."

The bailiff walked over to me and removed my handcuffs. Then, he walked over to the officer/attorney, placed the cuffs on his wrists and guided him across the courtroom and through a door. As they entered together, the officer/attorney looked at me one last time and smiled.

Let me ask you the same questions as if that had happened to you: How would you feel about the officer? What would you do?

I have shared this story to several hundred people over the years. Here are some of the more common and memorable responses:

"I would be profoundly grateful."

"I would go to the jail every day to visit him."

"Stunned at first, then I would mow his lawn and wash his car every day for the rest of his life."

A prisoner in California said, "I would put money on his books," referring to his jail commissary account, which allows an inmate to buy a few extras while incarcerated.

One young man said, "I wouldn't be a chump and forget about him. I would be there to pick him up the day he was released. I would care for him, let him live with me, whatever he needed or required."

This story, though fictional, does tell of God's gift of grace for you and me. Take a moment to read these verses:

Ephesians 2:1-10 (NIV)

¹⁻³As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.

⁴⁻⁷But, because of His great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages He might show the incomparable riches of His grace, expressed in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

⁸⁻¹⁰For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

The *fictional* story of the speeding ticket is another demonstration of what Jesus ACTUALLY DID for you and me. Let’s see how it lines up — and review the week’s activities in the story.

Monday: I was lost in my own selfish desires. (Eph 2:1-3)

Tuesday: I am not given a ticket, which I deserve. Mercy. I remain free. (Eph 2:4)

Wednesday: With the promise of justice, instead of going to jail, I am given something I don’t deserve: Grace instead of justice. Though the law demanded justice, I was given the gift of grace through the offering of the officer/attorney who paid the penalty of my crime. (Eph 2:7)

Thursday and following: Notice the responses people have given me over the years as well as your own response. When we experience such grace, grace that humbles, and atones, it produces generosity and gratitude! This is something God created before the beginning of time. (Eph 2:8-10)

Grace *doesn’t* breed license to sin, to be greedy, or to be indulgent of our desires. This gift of grace produces amazing, extraordinary generosity in ordinary people. Do you see it?

God’s profound generosity is what sets Christianity apart from all other religions or belief systems. It’s a realization that you and I are in deep need of acceptance, significance, and security with our Creator God. Being as just as He is, He responds to our need by giving us this incredible and extravagantly generous grace to restore us – to fulfill our need – and to have eternal fellowship with Him. He has already paid the way for it not because we deserve it but because of His infinite love for us.