Chapter 3

Get Low and Stay Low

"Perfect humility implies perfect confidence in the power of God, before Whom no other power has any meaning and for Whom there is no such thing as an obstacle.
Humility is the surest sign of strength."
(Thomas Merton)\(^1\)

November 18, 2003, I bounced my way to the Maputo airport in the back of a Toyota 4X4 with Surpresa Sitole and Florinda Tanueque. Surpresa is the international co-director of Partners in Harvest-Iris Africa, and the national director of Iris South Africa. He has a passion to see churches planted from Mozambique to Jerusalem. Florinda is Pastor Antonio Tanueques’s wife, and they give pastoral care and direction to the sixty-nine churches in Nampula province, northern Mozambique.

I asked Florinda if she would be willing to answer a few of my questions. She smiled demurely and almost rolled her eyes. She knew what was coming next. I was not the first visitor to ask after details.

The Lord has used Florinda to raise the dead, three times.

The first was a little girl, three months old. She had died of dehydration, the terminal consequence of cholera. After she had been raised from the dead, the baby stayed with the Tanueques in their home for a week following the miracle, for the child’s mother was afraid that if they left, the baby would die again. After the week of loving care and prayer, she left, fear-free. The baby is still alive and is strong and healthy.

A few months later, Florinda was used of the Lord to raise a five-month-old girl who had died of malaria. Her mother
brought her body to the Tanueques’ house, knowing of their reputation.

The third raising was of a middle-aged woman, who also had died of malaria. She too was “stiff dead”.

Florinda was praying for each of the corpses while washing their bodies, in preparation for their funerals. Each time she prayed both in her mother tongue, Makua, and in tongues for twenty or thirty minutes, speaking life into the corpses. Each time, she noticed the body’s chest rise as breath returned. Then the corpses’ heads would move a little, side to side, as if saying “No” to death.

She didn’t want to give any more details, but to say that yes, it has changed things markedly. They have led over 4,300 Muslims to Jesus over the last two years and planted eighty churches, largely because of these miracles.

Florinda did mumble a bit of an aside – because of the reports that have gone throughout the town and surrounding villages, people come to their house, day and night, with the sick and dying.

I turned to Surpresa. I knew a bit of his miracle history, so I asked him, “How many dead has the Lord used you to raise?” His huge smile broke across his face and with a deep belly laugh, he answered, “Only one!”

Four days later, I was with Florinda, her husband Antonio, and his younger brother, Pastor Jorge. One hundred fifty adults are under his care, as well as the eight churches he planted in 2003. We had asked Jorge if he would tell me some of the details of the last year. He had been used of the Lord to raise seven people from the dead.

The first was a woman named Aida Lieda. Jorge was called to the family house to comfort the grieving. Aida had died of dysentery and was laid out, cold, stiff, no pulse, and no breath. Jorge said that he felt a tremendous surge of energy when he walked into the house. As he understood it to be an impartation of kingdom authority, his faith expectation was greatly raised. Together with the family, he and some of the church members
fasted food and water, praying round the clock for twenty-four hours. Towards the end of their vigil, they felt heat begin to return to Adoa’s feet. It spread up throughout her body and twenty minutes later, she was completely restored to health.

I asked if he and the gathered prayed more in Makua. their heart-language, or in tongues. He grinned sheepishly: “I cannot lie. I have never prayed in tongues.” Heidi and I roared with laughter – “That sure puts a dinger in the ‘initial evidence’ theology of the baptism of the Spirit!”

Another woman, Schuwani, was the second to be raised from the dead. Again, Jorge and his leaders were called to the house of the deceased. This time, heat was restored to her cold, stiff body in a much shorter time – ten minutes. Once raised, however, she was so very weak she could hardly walk. Jorge felt it essential to remove her from the house and the active presence of the gathered witch doctors. They took her to the church, where Jorge and members of the church family took turns staying with her for a week, fasting and praying until she was fully restored. Schuwani is alive and well. In fact, she was at the conference in Pemba. Unfortunately, I missed meeting her.

The third person raised from the dead remains a mystery. She was not a Christian when she died and had no church connections. Friends of her family had called on Pastor Jorge to pray for her. As he was telling this story, he was shaking his head. “Raised from the dead and she’s still not a believer. She’s always at the witch-doctors.”

Frantic parents brought their five-year-old daughter to Jorge’s house very early one morning. The girl had died during the night. Mom and dad had heard the reports of the other raisings: they pleaded with Jorge to pray for their little girl. Jorge said that at the time, he was so tired, he felt nothing whatsoever as he laid hands on the child. Nevertheless, the little girl was up and well within five minutes.

Mariana, an elderly woman, had come to Jorge’s church months earlier. She was a believer, but from an anti-charismatic church that didn’t believe in healing. As she was seriously ill with intestinal difficulties, she was open to revising her theological understanding of the Gospel. Regrettably, prayers
for her healing “failed”. The church had fasted and prayed faithfully for her, but to no avail. However, two days after her death, while her body was being prepared for the funeral, she was raised from the dead.

I could tell that Jorge had grown tired of retelling the stories, so I never found out about the sixth and seventh that had been raised. It certainly seemed that it was no big deal to this simple pastor. Quite the contrary, he seemed completely baffled as to why I, “the anointed man of God” was so interested in his stories.

Heidi was translating Jorge’s testimony for me. When he decided he’d had enough, she leaned over and said quietly, “These guys have been a bit of a problem for Iris. Though there’s no question of their anointing, they’ve had no education. Florinda found her third term of Bible college too difficult, and Jorge, well, he can hardly read, and he can’t write anything but his name. What are we going to do with them? We can’t very well fail them when they’re raising the dead!”

When we had stopped laughing, we asked if we could pray for Jorge, specifically for the release of the gift of tongues. The dear man is so tender in things of the Spirit, it wasn’t but minutes later that he had a glorious new prayer language.

Jorge’s beaming face is visual commentary on Ephesians 3:16–17, the Apostle Paul’s prayer “that out of the treasures of his [the Father’s] glory he may grant you inward strength and power through his Spirit, that through faith Christ may dwell in your hearts in love.”

Several years ago, I built this great prayer into my own personal prayers and worked through it day after day. As I meditated on it, one of the things that eluded me was that if there are “treasures of glory” and “inner strength and power” available to us in the Spirit, why did I feel so empty, hollow, and dead-dog tired so much of the time?

One day, it was as if the proverbial light bulb went on. The opening words to the prayer are the key: Paul says, “I kneel in
prayer to the Father.” For the Apostle, the issue is not doing something, but being somewhere, and most importantly, being with Someone. I heard the Spirit confirm this revelation with the simple two-part call: “Kneel and know.”

Humility, however, is not exactly flashy, and doesn’t often feature on the conference circuit. While I was in Europe a few years ago, one of the other preachers was a bit of a screaming, fist-pumping preacher. With excessive volume, he harangued the five hundred delegates: “You’re not praying enough! You’re not praying hard enough! You’re not praying long enough! There’s too much compromise in your lives! God won’t send revival to this nation until you get desperate!” Everyone conceded the grim realities of his address, but rather than rise to the call, I watched as the gathered sank lower and lower in their seats.

I was to preach the following session. During the break, a friend took me aside and with raised eyebrows asked what I was going to preach about. I took a deep breath and said slowly, “Well, it seems that first I have to raise five hundred from the dead.” My friend understood immediately that I wasn’t speaking literally. The dead-tired needed raising.

\[\]

I began by telling my own story of ministry exhaustion and its single cause. I had attempted to build on works. What works, usually somewhere else, for someone else’s church. I defined works as what we try to do for Jesus, our consecrated efforts, programs, and strategies. Sharing some of the grizzly details endeared me to the gathered, for they found that I gave their tired spirits voice. I went on to recognize that however grand, works are not supernatural. That’s why they leave us so exhausted.

I then spoke on reformation and the radical return to the very foundations of our faith. It was there that I first spoke of our “theological habituations”, and the need to reconsider our basic assumptions, expectations and practices. We spent the balance of the morning working on grace. Or rather, letting grace work on us.

\[\]
“Grace” is at the very core of what it means to be a believer. If pressed for a definition, most of us would answer that grace means that “God treats us better than we deserve.” We might use the GRACE acronym: “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense”. If we looked to the theological dictionaries, we would read definitions like: “God’s undeserved, free, spontaneous love for sinful man, revealed and made effective in Jesus Christ.” Sometimes the contrast is struck: “Grace is God giving us what we don’t deserve. Mercy is God not giving us what we do deserve.” Most simply stated, grace is often defined as “God’s unmerited favor”.

However, when the tax-collector beats on his breast, and cries out, “God, have mercy on me, sinner that I am” (Luke 18:13), he knows that he’s undeserving, and unworthy. He’s asking for unmerited favor – but what he asks for is “mercy”, not grace. Similarly, blind Bartimeus cries out, “Have mercy on me” (Mark 10:46). But Bartimeus doesn’t deserve his blindness, for there is no indication that he has done anything wrong. He is certainly not asking that judgment be withheld, yet he too asks for “mercy”.

“Mercy” ought to be the word that defines who God is to us, for other than our sin, everything post-Adam is mercy. Every breath we take is a function of the undeserved, unmerited kindness of God. Definitions of mercy should stand as the summary of the very character of God, for mercy is one of the biggest, broadest, most diverse words in our theological vocabulary. Mercy is an aspect of God’s loving kindness and His unconditional acceptance. Mercy is His unearned, undeserved, tender and faithful compassion.

That God is merciful means that there is nothing I can do to make God love me any more, and there is nothing I can do to make Him love me any less.

There is something in us that makes us feel that we should have to do something to be accepted and acceptable. Mercy says, “Just as you are.” For mercy depends, not on our performance, but His.

If things haven’t turned yet, consider the parallel texts of 1 Peter 5:5 and James 4:6: “God opposes the arrogant and gives
It is unmerited favor, yet why is it that only the humble get it? And if nobody deserves grace, why are the proud denied it?

Further, how can one “fall from grace”, and how can one “forfeit the grace of God” if grace is unmerited? It doesn’t seem right that God should give us something we don’t deserve and then take it away when we blow it.

What follows are the gleanings from an extended study of grace. I am particularly indebted to James D.G. Dunn’s magnificent books, *Jesus and Spirit* and *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, as well as Gordon Fee’s *God’s Empowering Presence* and James Moffatt’s old chestnut, *Grace in the New Testament*. Thanks also go to James Ryle for a delicious dinner and a most engaging evening of discussion and reflection.

The sheer statistical occurrence of the word “grace” is instructive: in the Old Testament, references to mercy outnumber grace six to one. In the Greek New Testament, *charis* is not used at all in Matthew, Mark, 1 or 3 John, or Jude. Grace is found four times in John’s Gospel, all in the opening seventeen verses of the first chapter. Luke uses the word “grace” eight times in his Gospel and sixteen times in the Acts of the Apostles. Grace is found twelve times in Peter’s epistles, twice in the book of James, and twice in the Revelation.

In contrast, grace veritably abounds in the Apostle Paul’s writings. He speaks of it a hundred and ten times. If his usage were averaged out, it would mean that Paul couldn’t write three-quarters of a page without speaking of grace. In comparison, the other writers of the New Testament use the word once every six pages. To put this striking fact another way, the word “grace” makes a rare appearance in the Gospels, but is almost never absent in Paul’s letters.

The reason is a simple one. Paul, “the Apostle of grace”, was the one to whom the revelation was given. For instance, his letter to the Galatians is considered to be the earliest of Paul’s letters and the opening chapter is in part biography. In verses 13–14, the Apostle speaks of his religious works and
his zeal as a Jew. In the following verse, he contrasts all of his accomplishments:

“*But then in his good pleasure God, who from my birth had set me apart, and who had called me through his grace, chose to reveal His Son in and through me …*”

“*From my birth …*” Why does he include that phrase? Paul wants his readers to know that God had chosen him before he had anything to do with it. There was nothing of merit, nothing deserved, nothing accomplished. It was all and only God’s grace. As Dunn states, Paul’s initial and continuing experience of grace “is so much the heart and foundation of his theology and religion that we will never understand him unless we give full weight to its contribution.” For Paul, grace is not something just to be believed in. It is foremost something continuously experienced.

Another biographical passage reveals more of Paul’s experience and subsequent understanding of grace. In chapters 11 and 12 of 2 Corinthians he again rehearses his Jewish heritage, and concludes with a guarded reference to a “thorn in the flesh”. While the Damascus Road experience marked his conversion, this season of anguish set him apart as the Apostle of grace.

This “messenger of Satan” tormented him; the word *kolaphidzæ* literally means to strike with the fist. It is the same word used of the physical abuse Jesus endured at the hands of the Temple guards as they spat in His face and punched him. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, the Lord’s answer to Paul’s anguished requests for relief seems almost callous: “*My grace is all you need.*” The usual definition of grace certainly doesn’t make any sense here, given all that the Apostle was facing: “Paul, isn’t My unmerited favor enough? Isn’t it enough to know that I no longer hold your sin against you?”

We need to keep reading, for the Lord spoke both grace and power into the Apostle’s need: “*My power is made perfect in weakness.*” Especially in the context of Paul’s Jewish background, grace and power are declared as synonymous, and it is here that things turn.
Even more than “grace”, there is a distinctive phrase that characterizes Paul’s writings. A believer is one who is “in Christ”. The Apostle uses the phrase eighty-three times in his letters, and the variant, “in the Lord” forty-seven times, as well as “in Him”, “with Him”, “through Him” and “in whom”.

In Colossians 1:27, Paul turns the phrase around and speaks of “Christ in us.” For years I wondered, “Which is it – are we in Christ, or is He in us? Is there a significant difference, or is this just grammatical latitude on Paul’s part?” Not long ago, I was meditating on several of these passages and felt frustrated, because it seemed as if there was something of consequence that I was missing. I happened to sigh deeply, and suddenly I understood! Try it. Take a deep breath. Are you in the air, or is the air in you? Does it matter much as long as you keep breathing?

Once the numbers are tallied, the Apostle declares intimate, life-giving, life-sustaining union with Christ a minimum of two hundred and fifty times. It is especially striking to note that outside of Paul’s writings, only Peter uses the phrase “in Christ” and then but three times.

This understanding of union with Christ is foundational to all that Paul writes, and is especially the case in 2 Corinthians 12. In verses 9 and 11, he tells of the consequence of this revelation of grace:

“I am therefore happy to boast of my weaknesses, because then the power of Christ will rest upon me ... for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

This sounds a lot like “grace to the humble”. And we never hear about his thorn in the flesh ever again. There is no indication that he was physically healed or delivered from whatever or whoever it was that was tormenting him. Rather, something shifted spiritually.

Through this season of suffering, Paul came to understand through experience that he had been given strength, power, and resilience far beyond his own inability to cope. He understood these resources as nothing less than the power of God at work.
in him and discovered that as he drew closer to Christ, two things happened.

First, he discovered the Lord’s “sufficiency”. Paul uses the same word in Philippians 4:11–13, and as the passage is also autobiographical, it serves to amplify his comments in 2 Corinthians 12:

“I have learned to be content [find sufficiency] whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation . . . I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”

(NIV)

The same word is also used in Hebrews 13:5:

“Be content [find sufficiency] with what you have, because God says, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’”

(NIV)

Paul named this experienced presence of the Lord in the midst of suffering “grace” and he discovered that as he looked beyond himself and his needs, he received an impartation of resources, indeed, “immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20, NIV).

Second, Paul realized how profoundly everything had shifted once he found himself “in Christ”. Before, he had boasted of his lineage, his heritage, his zeal and his achievements. Now, there was only One worthy of praise. In the resplendent light of the Lord Jesus, Paul is no longer frustrated by his inabilities for he had come to the place where he understood that his weaknesses were in no way a liability. Rather, God’s grace and power could fully rest upon him and manifest themselves through him, only when he yielded every attempt to manipulate, control or even direct the power of God in any way.

This whole section, 2 Corinthians 12:1–10, is a single autobiographical account, dating fourteen years prior to Paul’s
writing about it. This would be consistent with his apostolic “apology” in Galatians 1:11:

“The Gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin. I did not take it over from anyone; no one taught it to me; I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

If the writings we know as 2 Corinthians were dated at 56 AD, this grace revelation would have been given around 42 AD and was the defining moment for his ministry, such that this revelation launched Paul into the ministry of grace, roughly eight years before the earliest of his canonized writings.

In another autobiographical fragment, Paul waxes almost poetic:

“We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body . . . Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”

(2 Corinthians 4:7–11, 16, NIV)

When some circumstantial content fills the rhetoric, one is left wondering how it was that Paul was able to do all that he did, given all that he faced. Just as it can rightly be said that Jesus was either on His way to heal someone, was healing, or had just come from healing someone, the same can be said of the Apostle Paul, but with a twist. Paul was either heading to prison, was in prison, or had just come from one. He says himself that he had been in jail more frequently than anyone the Corinthian church knew, and St Clement of Rome maintained that Paul was imprisoned at least seven times. I’ve often thought that along with the maps of his missionary travels, we should have a visual record of the jails with which Paul was intimately familiar.
His sufferings and deprivations certainly extended beyond his times behind bars – he lists severe beatings and five lashings, “forty minus one”.\(^19\) The expression “thrashed within an inch of your life” is appropriately used here by way of explanation, for it was held that forty lashes were enough to kill a man;\(^20\) “forty minus one” was the maximum penalty for something less than a capital crime requiring death.

Three times, Paul was beaten with rods and once he was left for dead after being stoned while in Lystra.\(^21\) Given his first-hand experience, Paul is not speaking metaphorically when he writes in Galatians 2:20:

> “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” \(^{\text{(NIV)}}\)

Throughout his writings, Paul consistently declares his source:

> “By God’s grace I am what I am, and his grace to me has not proved vain; in my labors I have outdone them all . . . not I, indeed, but the grace of God working with me.”

(1 Corinthians 15:10)

This source is most definitely not unmerited favor – the mercy of God, but grace – the empowering presence of Jesus, dwelling within him.

It’s not just the biographical passages that contribute to this understanding of grace. A single text will stand as representative of Paul’s theological reflections. In Romans 5:20–21 he writes:

> “Where sin was multiplied, grace immeasurably exceeded it, in order that, as sin established its reign by way of death, so God’s grace might establish its reign in righteousness . . .”

Sin is a power, a pull to temptation. Sometimes temptation seems so strong, it threatens to take one’s breath away. The good news is that grace – not God’s kindness – but His empowering presence – is a stronger power, “the love of God
in action.” Christ draws our hearts, and our hearts’ affections, ever deeper into His heart. And this is the power of repentance. It is not so much turning from sin with clenched teeth, but seeing things differently and turning to Christ with open arms, embracing His embrace. As sin – abandoning the presence of God – established its reign by way of death, so God’s grace – the life of Christ in us – establishes a greater, more encompassing reign in righteousness. Paul makes it clear that grace more than out-weighs the power of sin, and Peterson does an admirable job in paraphrasing this passage:

“All sin can do is threaten us with death, and that’s the end of it. Grace, because God is putting everything together again through the Messiah, invites us into life – a life that goes on and on and on, world without end.”

(Romans 5:21, The Message)

I have come to understand that grace is nothing less than all that God has done, is doing, will yet do – for us, in us, and through us. I concede that this is a messy definition, but then, grace is too big to be tidy. Grace is even more than power – grace is a Person. Grace is nothing less than Christ living His life in us.

If the word “grace” were to be replaced with a phrase that declares Christ’s indwelling, the Scriptures under consideration take on very suggestive meaning. For instance, 1 Peter 5:5 would read: “God resists the proud, but Christ lives ever-more of His life in the humble.” Humility can be defined as “a heart disposition that desires God’s terms, God’s way, and God’s timing”. The humble demand nothing, have nothing to prove and nothing to protect. They have but one desire: “He must grow greater; I must become less” (John 3:30).

Another text, Hebrews 4:16, would read that we are “bold in our approach to the throne of grace, that we might obtain mercy – the unmerited, extravagant kindness of God – and find the timely help that only comes as we know the life of Christ living in us, His strength, His wisdom, His love – in us.”

As “grace is multiplied to us”, as more and more of Christ is
formed in us, there comes a growing sense of Christ abiding in us and us abiding in Him. This is the promised fulfillment of His words in John 14:20, “You in Me, and I in you.” There also comes a growing sense of the corollary to abiding and Jesus’ warning: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

We cannot accomplish anything of the kingdom of heaven apart from Jesus. A review of any daily newspaper is proof enough that sin, we can manage all on our own. The theologian Reinhold Niebuhr puts the matter succinctly:

“Every facet of Christian revelation points to the impossibility of man fulfilling the true meaning of his life, and reveals sin to be primarily derived from his abortive efforts to do so.” 24

“Apart from me, you can do nothing.” How seriously do we take this word?

∞

Neville Green has become one of my closest friends and I ask him to travel with me several times a year. He is the worship leader at the Gathering Place, in Blandford Forum, Dorset, England. Nev sings many of the same songs that are being sung around the world, but they come from a very different place. This is what instantly drew me to Nev, for his is a most uncommon commitment to spend his weekday mornings alone with the Lord, worshiping.

At the end of our third ministry tour together, Nev said, “I’ve heard you preach at least fifteen different messages now and they all end up at the same place – with a call to worship.” It was evident that this was something that surprised him. I asked, “What have all those messages been about?”

“Grace and humility.”

I asked, “Where else could we end up? If it’s a call that rallies the troops, then you’d be a cheerleader. If it’s all and only grace, then it’s all and only worship.”

Shortly after this time with Nev, I had a most disorienting experience while visiting a local church on a Sunday. It
happened to be a special “men’s morning” and the message was unapologetically blatant “Jock Theology”. The title of the “sermon” might as well have been Super Bowl Sunday, because the preacher was certainly putting it to us like a coach trying to motivate his sorry team at half-time.

“Look around – we’re getting beat bad – we’re losing this game – don’t you understand that our first-stringers are all exhausted? Will you carry the ball? Will you go the distance? Will you take the hits? Jesus has done all that He can do – He said, ‘It is finished.’ He’s done His part; now it’s up to us. He can’t do it all; He can’t do it alone. It’s your turn. Get out there and bury the opposition, ‘in the name of Jesus.’”

All of this was delivered most passionately and sincerely, so much so that the gathered almost believed that Jesus was pacing the sidelines, nervously checking the count-down clock, hoping against hope that we don’t fumble the ball yet again.

The message ended with an invitation. The strong and the vital jumped up and gave a rousing victory shout.

I was sitting at the back of the church, and from my vantage point found it easy to survey the congregation. It was so very evident that there is no place in jock theology for the weak, the wounded, or the wasted.

♫

It is a sad concession that the Church is not quite what she should be. Nor are our personal lives quite what they should be. One of the reasons for our corporate and private malaise is the fundamental misunderstanding and misappropriation of such a foundational experience as “grace to the humble”. It may well be the single greatest reason why things are presently unsustainable.

Notes
3. Both are quotations of Proverbs 3:34.
14. See also Romans 8:10; 2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 2:20; 4:19; Ephesians 3:17.
16. 2 Corinthians 12:2.
17. 2 Corinthians 11:23.
19. 2 Corinthians 11:24.
23. 1 Peter 1:2, RSV.