

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

BY GRACE

ALONE

HOW THE GRACE OF GOD AMAZES ME



Endorsements

“This is a beautiful book—a providential confluence of two pastors’ hearts (separated by time and culture) on the theme of grace. First, there is the pulsing heart of an obscure African pastor, Emmanuel T. Sibomana, who, many years ago, penned the magnificent seven-stanza hymn ‘O How the Grace of God Amazes Me.’ Then there is the grateful and responsive heart of well-known pastor-theologian Sinclair Ferguson, who has taken the seven dazzling facets of the African hymn and held them up to the manifold light of God’s Word so that they further grace and enlighten our souls. *By Grace Alone* is a book that will fire your heart.”

—*Dr. R. Kent Hughes*

Senior pastor emeritus, College Church
Wheaton, Ill.

“Rich in biblical exposition and in theological depth, *By Grace Alone* is a series of great messages by one of today’s greatest preachers on some of the greatest Scripture texts—all on one of the greatest themes of the Bible: *amazing grace!* This book will excite your mind, stir your affection, convict your soul, win your heart, and move you to action. It will evangelize, disciple, and mature all kinds of readers. Dr. Ferguson has given us another feast, and there is food here for all—saved and unsaved, ministers and laypeople, young and old.”

—*Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary
Grand Rapids, Mich.

“Sinclair Ferguson’s biblically insightful and pastorally profound meditations on the manifold grace of God are strung like pearls on the stanzas of the African hymn ‘O How the Grace of God Amazes Me.’ Christ is at the very center, as He must be: in Him, our enslaved hearts find freedom, our guilty hearts find forgiveness, our troubled hearts find a Defender in the darkness, and our embattled hearts find strength to resist the enemy’s enticements. Thirsty hearts, come to Jesus and drink deeply from His fountain of amazing, life-giving, joy-imparting, hope-sustaining grace.”

—*Dr. Dennis E. Johnson*

Professor emeritus of practical theology, Westminster Seminary California
Escondido, Calif.

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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To
Murdo and Alison
Maclean

Once colleagues, always friends
With gratitude and affection

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FOREWORD

I met Sinclair Ferguson in July 2009 in Geneva, Switzerland, as a number of church leaders came together to celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Calvin, one of the renowned European Reformers and a preacher of divine grace. When Sinclair asked me to write the foreword for this book, I did not know what a surprise the grace of God had in store for me.

One midmorning on a Wednesday in September of this year, I went to visit a home in a suburb of Kampala City, Uganda. This is not an ordinary home, but a home that brings in orphans and needy children from the streets and offers the love of Jesus to them. We were met by about thirty smiling children whose faces were happy, healthy, and confident. Then they began to tell me their stories. One little girl had been picked up by the police when she was only three weeks old, abandoned and rejected. Another had been found out in the cold without food, shelter, or clothing. The stories continued on and on.

The children told us their stories in a song composed by the director of this ministry. This song was sad yet joyful, pessimistic yet with a note of victory. As I listened, the words and the melody undressed my dignified posture. I melted in my heart.

One of the children, a thirteen-year-old girl named Ana (not her real name), caught my attention. The Holy Spirit highlighted her face as I watched her singing. She looked beautiful, yet there was a trace of sadness in her face. She had lost both parents at an early age and had struggled alone in the streets of Kampala before arriving at this home of transition.

I knew this young girl would haunt me for the rest of my life if I did

not respond to her. Two weeks after this encounter, Ana became part of my family.

In his book, Sinclair reveals the amazing surprises of God that we call “grace.” He shows us how God stoops low to reach a longing lost soul, a soul that has walked a path of loneliness and darkness, a soul that, like Ana, would never consider that a change was possible. God comes because He watches with great love and moves with unspeakable tenderness. His desire is to rescue the broken and the bleeding, the lost and the lonely.

Sinclair provides a glimpse of this grace to the inquisitive mind and hungry soul. I commend his book to the one who is longing to know the truth of God searching for us. Your soul will be nourished and your faith strengthened.

—*The Most Rev. Henry Luke Orombi*
Archbishop, (Anglican) Church of Uganda
Kampala, Uganda
October 2009

PREFACE

The inspiration behind these pages is the remarkable hymn written by an African pastor, Emmanuel T. Sibomana. He was born around 1915 and lived near Musema, a Baptist mission in central Burundi. He became a Christian in his late teens or his early twenties, and later became a Baptist pastor. Then, in 1946, he published a hymn titled “*Umbuntu Bg Imana*.” Pastor Sibomana’s hymn was translated by an English missionary in Rwanda, Rosemary Guillebaud, as “O How the Grace of God Amazes Me.”

The hymn captures the rich contours and multisided character of the grace of God. Its easily sung tune, *Grace of God*, has often brought its words to my mind unprompted. Reflecting on the themes of its verses led me eventually to work through the biblical material that lies behind them. This book is the result.

Although different in format—the chapters are fewer but longer—*By Grace Alone* is a companion volume to *In Christ Alone: Living the Gospel-Centered Life* (Reformation Trust, 2007). These are among the great watchwords of biblical teaching and capture two great emphases in historical evangelical theology.

But why yet another book on the grace of God? Because, as Pastor Sibomana’s hymn reminds us, “the grace of God amazes me.” We can never reflect too much on God’s grace.

That theme is by no means unique to this particular hymn. The converted slave-trader John Newton’s most famous hymn, of course, opens with the words, “Amazing grace!— how sweet the sound—that saved a wretch like me!”¹ The great English hymn writers Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley

also wrote on this theme. Watts reflected on “Love so amazing, so divine.”² Wesley, who seems to have written virtually a hymn a day in his spare time, taught the church to sing the words: “Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God, should’st die for me?”³ Much later, Charles H. Gabriel confessed, “I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene.”⁴

Still, why a book on “How the grace of God *amazes* me”? For one reason: not all Christians find it so amazing.

Being amazed by God’s grace is a sign of spiritual vitality. It is a litmus test of how firm and real is our grasp of the Christian gospel and how close is our walk with Jesus Christ. The growing Christian finds that the grace of God astonishes and amazes.

Yet we frequently take the grace of God for granted. We think: “*Of course* God is gracious.” Or: “*Of course* we deserve His grace. After all, are we not His people?” We may never say these things. But when we think like this, the grace of God ceases to be amazing. Sadly, it also ceases to be grace.

A chief reason for the weakness of the Christian church in the West, for the poverty of our witness and any lack of vitality in our worship, probably lies here: we sing about “amazing grace” and speak of “amazing grace,” but far too often it has ceased to amaze us. Sadly, we might more truthfully sing of “accustomed grace.” We have lost the joy and energy that are experienced when grace seems truly amazing.

With the help of Pastor Sibomana’s hymn, these pages reflect on God’s grace from seven angles. Tasting the power of the grace of God can refresh the inner sanctuaries of our being, and banish the spiritual lethargy and indifference that take God’s goodness and love for granted. After all, if we are not amazed by God’s grace, can we really be living in it? By its very nature, God’s grace astonishes those who taste it and amazes those who receive it.

I am thankful for those who have encouraged me to prepare these studies for publication.

Eve Huffman, my secretary at First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, has again given her characteristically efficient and willing help in this task. I am also deeply grateful to our elders and deacons, and to our congregation, for

PREFACE

the encouragement they give their team of pastors to keep going in the work of the ministry.

Greg Bailey has once again served me as editor, friend, and literary Barnabas, and I want to express to him my real sense of appreciation for his ongoing help.

By Grace Alone celebrates the gospel by means of a hymn of the church in Africa. I am especially grateful, therefore, to Henry Orombi, archbishop of the Church of Uganda, for contributing the foreword. When Reformation Trust suggested the possibility of an African Christian doing this, Archbishop Orombi's name came immediately to mind. He is a kindred spirit to all men and women of grace, as I discovered one memorable Sunday when we shared the privilege of preaching in John Calvin's pulpit in the Cathedral Church of St. Peter in Geneva, Switzerland. In Calvin's day, the message of gospel grace spread throughout the Northern Hemisphere and to the West; today, it spreads like a flood throughout the Southern Hemisphere and to the East. Now North and South, East and West can rejoice together in the way grace reigns in many hearts among the nations. Truly "how the grace of God amazes me!"

My wife, Dorothy, and, with her, our whole family continue to provide a world of love and devotion that surrounds and supports me in ministry. Again, I want to express my own love and thanks for the sacrifices they have made over many years, and my gratitude for God's grace in their lives and families.

Grace is not a "thing." It is not a substance that can be measured or a commodity to be distributed. It is "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 13:14). In essence, it is Jesus Himself. For that reason alone, there surely could be no better companion volume to *In Christ Alone* than *By Grace Alone*.

—Sinclair B. Ferguson

The First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, South Carolina
September 2009

“O How the Grace of God Amazes Me”

*O how the grace of God
Amazes me!
It loosed me from my bonds
And set me free!
What made it happen so?
His own will, this much I know,
Set me, as now I show,
At liberty.*

*My God has chosen me,
Though one of nought,
To sit beside my King
In heaven's court.
Hear what my Lord has done
O, the love that made him run
To meet his erring son!
This has God wrought.*

*Not for my righteousness,
For I have none,
But for his mercy's sake,
Jesus, God's Son,
Suffered on Calvary's tree—
Crucified with thieves was he—
Great was his grace to me,
His wayward one.*

*And when I think of how,
At Calvary,
He bore sin's penalty
Instead of me,
Amazed, I wonder why
He, the sinless One, should die
For one so vile as I;
My Saviour he!*

*Now all my heart's desire
Is to abide
In him, my Saviour dear,
In him to hide.
My shield and buckler he,
Covering and protecting me;
From Satan's darts I'll be
Safe at his side.*

*Lord Jesus, hear my prayer,
Your grace impart;
When evil thoughts arise
Through Satan's art,
O, drive them all away
And do you, from day to day,
Keep me beneath your sway,
King of my heart.*

*Come now, the whole of me,
Eyes, ears, and voice.
Join me, creation all,
With joyful noise:
Praise him who broke the chain
Holding me in sin's domain
And set me free again!
Sing and rejoice!*

—EMMANUEL T. SIBOMANA

1

*O how the grace of God
Amazes me!
It loosed me from my bonds
And set me free!
What made it happen so?
His own will, this much I know,
Set me, as now I show,
At liberty.*

Chapter One

MY CHAINS FELL OFF

Grace “loosed me from my bonds and set me free!” These simple words express the experience of the typical Christian, in every place, age, and language.

The grace of God in Jesus Christ brings freedom. To experience this grace is liberation. Our chains, shackles, burdens—describe them how we will—are broken. We are delivered from a guilty conscience. We come to trust in Christ and are immediately released. Then we progressively enjoy that freedom. We are no longer in bondage. Instead, we are free men and women in Jesus Christ.

E. T. Sibomana begins his hymn “O How the Grace of God Amazes Me” at the point of personal experience.

Of course, our experience is not actually where the grace of God itself begins. It goes back much farther than our individual experience of it. But this hymn begins with our experience because this is where we take our first conscious steps into the sea of grace. Then we discover that it is in fact a boundless ocean that seems to have no bottom. As we sink into it, we begin to realize that its origins lie in God Himself in eternity.

This is the grace that “loosed me from my bonds.”

*His own will, this much I know,
Set me, as now I show,
At liberty.*

Charles Wesley earlier expressed the same thought. If you know anything about the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, you know that before they came to faith in Jesus Christ, they lived outwardly impeccable lives. Charles was a clergyman in the Church of England. No chains were visible. He had no apparent addictions. In his student days at the University of Oxford, he was marked by rigorous moral rectitude and energetic service. Few imagined they could match his holiness. One of his favorite books was titled *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.⁵ That summed him up.

Yet as God worked in Wesley's life, he realized he was in spiritual bondage, "fast bound in sin and nature's night,"⁶ as he would later write. But when he was brought to faith in Jesus Christ, this was the song he wanted to sing again and again on the anniversary of his conversion:

*My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth and followed thee.⁷*

Such freedom is not limited to a select group of famous Christians. The gospel promises the same to everyone who trusts in Christ.

Freedom from bondage is a central theme in the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. He told the Jews of His day that only the gospel could release them: "The truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). But what truth? He explained: "If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Here are two basic lessons.

LESSON ONE – BONDAGE

Jesus taught that we are all by nature in spiritual bondage. He had to be cruel to be kind.

The Jews to whom Jesus spoke—much like us—believed that they were

certainly not in bondage to anything. But their response to Jesus' words revealed the deep spiritual bondage in which they were held. His words riled and angered them.

“Who do you think you are, saying that we need to be set free? How dare you! We are Abraham's children, his freeborn descendents.” They claimed spiritual freedom as their birthright, but they were in spiritual bondage.

“Most assuredly, I say to you,” Jesus said, “whoever commits sins is a slave of sin” (John 8:34).

Does this really need to be underlined? Jesus thought it did, and perhaps someone reading these pages may need a little help to understand what Jesus was saying here:

- We do not become sinners by committing specific acts.
- We commit specific acts of sin because we are sinners.

In short, my problem is not the isolated actions that I see as *aberrations* from what I really am. I am deceiving myself if I think that way. These actions are not *aberrations* but *revelations* of what is in my heart. They show that I commit sin because I am in bondage to it.

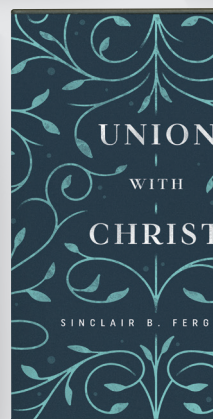
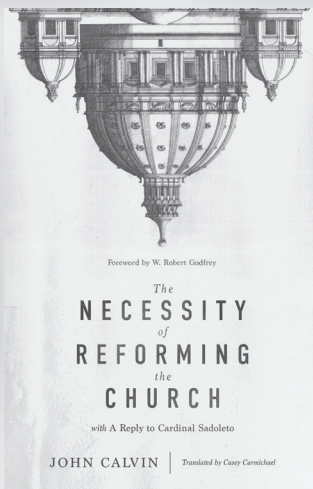
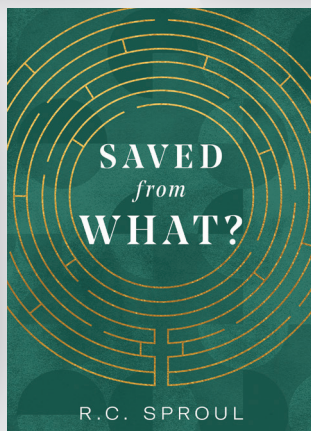
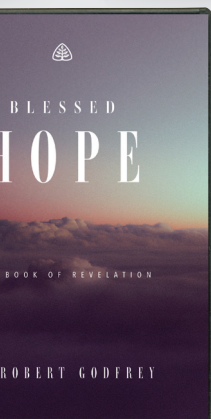
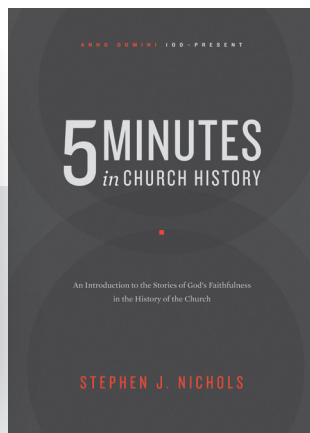
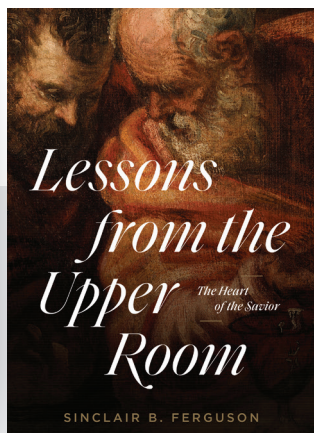
Paul develops this theme in Ephesians 2. Both the apostle and his readers (v. 3) were by nature bound in sin: “dead in trespasses and sins” (v. 1). When they heard the name of God and of His grace in Jesus Christ, their hearts remained cold. Like dead men and women, they were always flowing with the stream, following “the course of this world” (v. 2).

By nature, we usually deny that we are in spiritual bondage. We go out of our way to show our freedom by being different. But we tend, in one way or another, to become clones. That is a manifestation of our bondage. According to Ray Davies' satirical lyrics in The Kinks' hit song,

*This pleasure-seeking individual always looks his best
'Cause he's a dedicated follower of fashion.*⁸

Of course, there is a darker side to this in the sinister influence of “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience” (v. 2). We will say much more about him later.

We want to see men and women around the world connect the deep truths of the Christian faith to everyday life.



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