

Jacob Van der Velden

God's Grace in New Guinea

I made the decision to become a priest out of a deep conviction. I wanted to go as a missionary to the unexplored islands of the Papuas to bring them the message of God, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I thought that I was well acquainted with all the difficulties that were waiting there for me. With the slogan "I go because I must," I went to New Guinea, a former Dutch colony, only to find out after five years that even though I had started out enthusiastically, my mission had become a great disaster. I became aware of how my fellow workers and others completely ignored me, as if I were just air. Heavy was my burden because of that. Disappointed, angry, and wounded, I did not want to pray any more or to talk to God. There was absolutely no way for me to get out of facing my failure. I wanted nothing to do with God any more. I was a failure.

I Learned of My Sin Nature

Just when my spiritual crisis was at the lowest point, I met a Reformed missionary. I did not at all desire to talk with him, but I did and found out that the man was a truly joyful Christian. He listened to my story, and that alone was already a comfort and an encouragement to me. He could understand my disappointments and my anger. Out of my conversation with him, it became clear to me that I had listened to [...] my own foolish convictions. In my life there was no listening to the Word of God, no prayer to God, and no trust in God. Slowly, but surely, I began to see what a useless servant I was as long as I continued to lean upon my own strength, but that I could also be a useful instrument in God's hand when in all things I would let myself be led by Him. It was as if a new world opened to me. I learned from God's Word, came to see the greatness of God and the deep depravity of men because of sin.

I have often noticed that articles describing discussions with Roman Catholic priests regard their doctrine as scripturally sound. In reality, however, they are not scriptural at all; they cannot be, for that matter. That was also my difficulty before I became converted. In the course of conversion, however, I was often told, "What you say is unscriptural. The Word of the Lord speaks differently." After each discussion I became more and more insecure, for being directed to the Scripture I had to acknowledge again and again that my speaking was indeed unscriptural, that, in fact, I did not know His Word. Hard was that struggle to know the truth. I did not want to admit that I was wrong. Nothing is more humiliating than having to acknowledge that one's opinion of God, one's own conviction acquired by many years of study and experience esteemed to be beyond challenge, a conviction for which one would do anything...that all this was a false and unscriptural opinion. It made me feel like a failure, like one who is severely mutilated.

“...Dead in Trespasses and Sins” (Ephesians 2:1)

The Lord knows how I resisted the doctrine of total human corruption: man’s proneness to all evil, his inability to do any good thing—how severe is such a doctrine. It causes one to be pushed off one’s pedestal and become completely disgraced. Very slowly I learned to see that man had fallen from his pedestal centuries ago when he chose sin and turned against God. For years I, together with many others, desperately tried to keep that fallen man upright. We then spoke of the wounded man still willing to fight to improve the sick man, desiring to make himself right in the eyes of the Lord. I believed that ultimately the Lord would pay for those many good performances, or rather that He was obligated to make recompense. He would reward us with eternal salvation. The good works of our meritorious lives would even bring salvation to others. Against the one-sided Roman Catholic opinion of “a good God, full of love,” I was to become acquainted with Him as the Lord who pours out His wrath over sin and surely does not leave sin unpunished. The Lord who reveals Himself in the Old Covenant is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Catholic Funny Stories

This was the end of funny stories about “great saints” having secret back doors in heaven in order to smuggle special adorers inside. It meant the end of stories about smart sinners who sneak inside while naughtily winking at Peter, the strict keeper of the heavenly gate. Now it was, according to the Word of God, all by faith. “*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast*” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

God’s Rich Grace

When God in His infinite mercy had convinced me, I had no more claims. When His light was thus cast upon me, I understood the seriousness of Paul’s word: “*O wretched man that I am,*” and then I could understand Romans 3:9-20. The Lord held a perfectly focused picture in front of me and I knew it was me. I have to add in one breath that great was my joy for salvation in Jesus Christ. Then I was able to taste the richness and depth of that Scripture verse, “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*” (John 3:16).

So, I was able to call for help at the throne of the merciful Father in heaven who, in Jesus Christ, saved me, made me a new creature by the new birth, filled and renewed with the Holy Spirit. I could now live a life in thankfulness to my God and my Lord. I learned to know and to worship the God who calls and chooses. I was made to understand that one stands before God with empty hands, letting them be filled by Him alone. And all this has, by God’s grace, whereby I came to believe, allowed me to go forward in the power of that belief. I being a hopeless failure was unexpectedly made able to succeed. God led me in a wonderful way. It is

in His grace that I now openly boast, for He took me by the hand and I have become joyful in His service.

Having become His property and re-created according to His image, I live in Him with a new heart. I was enabled to love God and my neighbor, and to keep God's commandments. I not only felt like another person, I really became a completely new creature, renewed in His image by His Spirit. The new creature only wants to be thankful to Him and to praise Him who has regarded our misery and has made us so rich.

When I hear that occasionally a converted Roman Catholic has returned to the bosom of the "mother-church," it makes me reflect in silence on the many things I have received, being called and seized by the Lord inescapably. I had to hear innumerable times "What a change, what an enormous transformation, from a Roman Catholic priest to a Reformed minister!" Yet I could not give a satisfactory answer to this remark, since it was a change, a transformation I had not brought to pass...rather quite the contrary! David was still able to thank God while singing, "*In my distress I called upon the Lord, and cried unto my God*" (Psalms 18:6). Such was my foolishness that I did not call upon the Lord at that time; no, I did not even ask Him for help, but He simply took what He wanted. He took and placed the unwilling one where He knew it was good: in His church, where His Word is soundly preached, His sacraments are administered faithfully, and His discipline is maintained.

The Roman Catholic Mindset

How is this possible? Ask the Lord, for He is so marvelous in all His doings. But when I read about some priest, "God would certainly have to reward his courageous act of leaving the Roman Catholic Church," then I know with great sadness that such a person has not understood anything at all of his own misery and of God's saving intervention by grace alone. This man keeps on carrying that miserable Roman hereditary taint: "It is I who has to do this; it is I who has to achieve something and then the Lord will be obligated to reward me." We can only pray for such a person that he also may truly be enlightened by the Lord, irrevocably seized by His Word, and at the same time, hear of God's mercy in our Lord Jesus Christ.

When someone writes against those who want to justify homosexuality, it is obvious that he will be criticized viciously. They will mark him as that former priest who was in such great need to get married but was not allowed to do so, who changed religions and kept on agitating against everything connected with Roman Catholicism. Such are the sounds of those who talk on a totally different wavelength. They have tuned in with the world and, therefore, do not want to recognize that man is conceived and born in sin. Such persons must first be convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit (John 16:9), then by God's grace accept salvation based on Christ's finished sacrifice, through faith alone.

Ecumenism Hurts

It hurts me much more, however, when Christians witness to Roman Catholics, while at the same time accepting Roman doctrine and practices. The practice of smoothing over Roman Catholic

sinful doctrines and practices should be another warning to us about the false ecumenical movement, which causes such great damage to the work of the Lord!

I was thankful to be chosen to experience the rich thoughts that are readily described in the Bible, God's own written Word. Through His written Word, we learn to understand what is our eternal peace. It is by the sound preaching of the Word through the operation of the Holy Spirit that the hardest hearts become soft. "*I will praise thee forever, because thou has done it...*" (Psalm 52:9).

Often while on the mission field in New Guinea, I had to meditate upon this Scripture: "*So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God*" (Romans 10:17). In the same way that I had been saved by God's grace alone, salvation has come also to others here. Heathen who did not have the slightest desire for righteousness have become righteous in Jesus Christ. He, the Lord, sent us to make the heathen His disciples through the preaching of His Word.

The Light Shines in the Darkness

God in His love and mercy and being full of forgiveness came into my life and a miracle happened. A Roman Catholic priest in his late fifties would never have naturally begun a conversation with a Reformed missionary. The priest that I was would surely not! I had never seen a Reformed missionary, had never spoken to one, and yet I somehow did talk to one. An invisible Hand intervened. At first I resisted, but when the Reformed missionary asked me to sit next to him by the river, the Spirit of God was at work. In that first conversation (and in many that followed), while together I found God's face, and we were among the most joyful people on earth. God's grace was victorious. My eyes were opened to the "*light that shineth in darkness*" (John 1:5), and I found the truth of the Scriptures. By this truth, I came from being a priest to being saved, from being a missionary to being a minister, from the busy do-it-yourself man to a servant who learned to ask his Lord to help him to be obedient to His Word. Since I came to see that salvation is by grace only (Ephesians 2:8-9), I am a different person, living because of God's grace in Christ, a witness that Jesus Christ is the only Savior. When I look back at my life, I can do nothing else but rejoice as a thankful, joyful man. I would let the whole world know, dear people, that I did not earn this, but God was merciful, and unexpectedly, He saved me by free grace alone.

May the Lord call you in His grace that you may know Christ and the power of His resurrection (Philippians 3:10). To God alone be the glory!