

**THE CROSS-SHAPED LIFE**  
**“Not Deserved, but Needed”**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

On Sunday morning, October 2, 1988, Seth Hubbard went to church, worshiped, spoke to his fellow church members and pastor, and left. In retrospect, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Then he drove out into the countryside to some land he owned and hanged himself from a sycamore tree.

The next morning attorney Jake Brigrance received an envelope in his office, postmarked October 1 at the local post office. The envelope contained a letter from Seth Hubbard (whom Jake Brigrance had never met) hiring him to be the attorney for the estate and instructing him to defend the will at all costs. His letter included these instructions, “Enclosed herein you will find my last will and testament, every word written by me and signed and dated by me. I’ve checked the law of Mississippi and am satisfied that it is a proper holographic will, thus entitled to full enforcement under the law. No one witnessed me signing this will because, as you know, witnesses are not required for holographic wills. A year ago I signed a thicker version in the offices of the Rush law firm in Tupelo, but I have renounced that document.”

In renouncing his previous last will and testament, Seth Hubbard cut out his two adult children, their children, and his two ex-wives from inheriting anything. Instead, he left 90% of his \$24 million estate (worth about \$60 million in 2022) to Lettie Lang, who had served as his housekeeper for the past couple of years.

And so, the drama begins in John Grisham’s 2013 novel, *Sycamore Row*. Don’t worry, I’m not going to spoil the story for you! But you can imagine the battle that ensued for the estate of the late Seth Hubbard, as his son and daughter and their spouses challenged the legitimacy of the holographic will that “cheated” them out of their inheritance.

No, it’s not hard at all to imagine heirs challenging a last will and testament, because we hear about it all the time. What is hard to imagine is an heir challenging an outright gift (especially one as large as \$60 million) by petitioning the court to intervene, amend the original will that includes no legal requirements, and add more stringent conditions for the inheritance. What rightful heir would do that? **Why** would any rightful heir do that?

That’s exactly the point Paul is making in this part of his letter to the Galatians when he talks about God’s covenant with Abraham. Darleen read part of God’s covenant with Abraham from Genesis 15, in which God promised Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the night sky. A couple of chapters later, we read the rest of the terms of God’s covenant with Abram in Genesis 17:1-8: “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to

him, ‘I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.’ Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, ‘As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.’”

In Paul’s letters, some synonyms for “covenant” are “will” and “testament.” Obviously, our eternal God has no need to write a “last will and testament,” but the bedrock of our faith in God is the covenant promise – the will and testament – God has made to God’s people. If you will, God’s covenant is the inheritance we have as God’s children and heirs.

Let’s go back to that unimaginable scenario and apply it to God’s covenant relationship with us. Why would we ask God to add any more stringent requirements to his free offer of grace and mercy in Jesus Christ? Or, more accurately, why do *we* persist in adding more stringent conditions to God’s free offer of grace and mercy in Jesus Christ and require them of other people (and, in the process, pervert the gospel)?

Obviously, Paul was upset with the Galatian believers because, in his opinion, they were doing exactly that – yielding to the pressure to add more conditions to the gospel of God’s grace before the Gentiles could be considered full-fledged Christians. So, Paul decided to use an everyday example: “Once a person’s will has been ratified, no one adds to it or annuls it.” Here’s how *The Message* explains the same idea: “Friends, let me give you an example from everyday affairs of the free life I am talking about. Once a person’s will has been signed, no one else can annul it or add to it. Now, the promises were made to Abraham and to his descendant. This is the way I interpret this: A will, earlier signed by God, is not annulled by an addendum attached 430 years later, thereby negating the promise of the will. No, this addendum, with its instructions and regulations, has nothing to do with the promised inheritance in the will.”

The margin note next to the Unison Prayer of Confession in today’s bulletin is attributed to the great Protestant reformer, Martin Luther: “Every week I preach justification by faith to my people, because every week they forget it.” Various people have tried to find that exact quote in Luther’s writings and sermons. The closest they have come is this statement in one of Luther’s sermons on the passion of Christ: “Thus it is an urgent necessity that the preaching of the Gospel continue among us, that we may hear and retain it, otherwise we would soon forget our Lord.” But Luther also wrote these thoughts about God’s grace and the gospel in his influential commentary on Paul’s letter to the Galatians: “I must hearken to the gospel, which teacheth me, not what I ought to do, (for that is the proper office of the law,) but what Jesus Christ the Son of God hath done for me: to wit, that He suffered and died to deliver me from sin and death. The gospel willeth me to receive this, and to believe it. And this is the truth of the gospel. It is also the principal article of all Christian doctrine, wherein the

knowledge of all godliness consisteth. Most necessary it is, therefore, that we should know this article well, teach it unto others, and beat it into their heads continually, for as it is very tender, so it is soon hurt.”

Apparently influenced by Luther’s writings, Charles Spurgeon, the 19<sup>th</sup> century English Baptist minister who was known as the “Prince of Preachers,” said this in his April 22, 1855 sermon: “the whole Bible tells us, from beginning to end, that salvation is not by the works of the law, but by the deeds of grace. Martin Luther declared that he constantly preached justification by faith alone, ‘because,’ said he, ‘the people would forget it; so that I was obliged almost to knock my Bible against their heads, to send it into their hearts.’ So it is true; we constantly forget that salvation is by grace alone.”

Since we’re using Philippians 2:5-11 as our Affirmation of Faith on the Sundays I am preaching through Galatians, by the same principle I suppose we could have sung “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound” each Sunday – “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” I read an interesting quote this week that describes well what Paul was trying to get across to the Galatian believers. It said, “We like to sing about Amazing Grace that saves us, but we once we’re saved we like to sing Follow The Rules and Act like Me. The message of Galatians is difficult for many to accept because it cuts against the grain of what most have embraced all their life without ever questioning the validity of the rules for Christian behavior.”<sup>1</sup>

Mark Twain described the same “adding to the will” with a humorous story. He said he put a dog and a cat in a cage together to see if they could learn to get along. It took a little while, but eventually the dog and the cat figured it out. Then, Twain said, he tried the same experiment with a bird, a pig, and a goat, and got even quicker results of cooperation. Finally, Twain figured if the animals could figure out how to get along, certainly people could. So he put a Baptist, a Methodist, and a Presbyterian in a cage, and in less than two days there was nothing left of any of them!<sup>2</sup>

The dictionary definition of “grace” is “unmerited divine assistance given to humans for their regeneration or sanctification,” which is exactly what Paul is writing about throughout his letter to the Galatians. In Jesus Christ, we receive unmerited assistance from God so that we can live the new life of freedom in Christ and love and serve our God and our neighbor. Notice the order (which is the same order as the covenant with Abraham, the same order as the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, the same order as the Sermon on the Mount, the same order as Paul’s teaching in his letters) – God puts us in a right relationship with God, because of who God is, not because of what we have done; and **then** God says, “This is what it means to live as my people who are saved and redeemed by my grace.” The margin note next to the Scripture lessons and sermon today puts it this way: “What God said to Abraham was not, ‘Obey this law and I will bless you,’ but ‘I will bless you; believe my promise.’” And, **then**, live the cross-shaped life, because God has **already** blessed you in Jesus Christ.

It’s one thing to sing, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me,” and to be grateful. It’s something else to extend that same kind of grace to other people. I mentioned Charles Spurgeon earlier. Congregationalist minister Joseph Parker was Spurgeon’s contemporary in London. He was just as renowned a preacher as Spurgeon. In fact, they were close friends. Spurgeon’s church had opened an

orphanage for boys and Spurgeon dedicated much of his effort and own money to that ministry. One day Rev. Parker commented to some of his church members, “We ought to help Spurgeon with his orphanage, for there are times when the boys don’t have proper clothes, and I am sure they could use some food.”

Unfortunately, someone told Spurgeon that Parker had criticized the work of the orphanage and said that “the boys in your orphanage don’t have enough clothes to wear or sufficient food to eat.” Spurgeon, who was known for his fiery temper, publicly lambasted his friend the next Sunday from the pulpit. Because Spurgeon was so well known, his sermons were printed in the weekly newspaper. When his comments about his friend were printed, reporters asked Rev. Parker if he would respond from the pulpit the following Sunday. Rev. Parker said, “Yes.”

As you can imagine, the sanctuary of Rev. Parker’s church was packed the following Sunday. The atmosphere was tense as people waited to hear Parker’s response. He slowly climbed into the pulpit, cleared his throat, and said, “Brother Spurgeon is sick today and cannot preach. This is the day when he takes up an offering for his orphans. May I suggest that we take up that offering for him in our church, for he’s doing a great work, and I know all of us would like to have a part in it.” It is said that the deacons had to empty the offering plates three times. After the service, the deacons delivered the money to Rev. Spurgeon and said, “This is a gift from Joseph Parker. He really promoted your program in church today.”

Two days later, Spurgeon knocked on Parker’s study door. When Parker opened the door, Spurgeon threw his arms around him and said, “You have more of the spirit of Jesus Christ than any man I know. You know, Parker, you have practiced grace on me. You have given me not what I deserved, you have given me what I needed.”<sup>3</sup>

. . . which is exactly what God has given us in his covenant/promise/will and testament in Jesus Christ! Why in the world do we keep on adding to it?

***Let us pray: Gracious God, by your mercy, help us now to trust your goodness and claim your promise of life everlasting. Grant us the sure joy of your salvation, through Jesus Christ our Lord, that we may live with the assurance of being in a right relationship with you, through Jesus Christ the Lord of life. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Steve Andrews, “Deserting Grace – Galatians 1, 2,” January 1, 2014 at [www.lifeway.com](http://www.lifeway.com).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>August 24, 2015, “Speaking with Grace: Parker versus Spurgeon and the Outrageous Orphanage Incident,” [www.regenerationandrepentance.wordpress.com](http://www.regenerationandrepentance.wordpress.com).