

# STEPS<sup>®</sup>

A MAGAZINE OF HOPE AND HEALING  
FOR CHRISTIANS IN RECOVERY



GRACE

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Grace in Action  
by James Ryan  
Page 3

Grace for Dummies  
by Jeff VanVonderen  
Page 4

Letting Go and Letting God  
by Dale Ryan  
Page 9

Bill Wilson: Two Perspectives  
by Heidi Weston  
Page 15



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If you can earn it, it isn't a gift—it's wages. If you can deserve it, it isn't a gift—it's an honorarium. If you can negotiate terms for it, it isn't a gift—it's a contract. If you are obligated to comply with the accompanying terms and conditions, it isn't a gift—it's an incentive to get you to buy the package. Grace, however, is a gift. Pure gift. End of conversation. Becoming the kind of person who is capable of receiving really good gifts is part of the journey of recovery for most of us. Our prayer is that the articles in this issue of STEPS will encourage you to grow in your capacity to receive.

# BEYOND ANONYMOUS



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Gentlemen, let me just say that anonymity has never looked this good.



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# GRACE IN ACTION

BY JAMES RYAN

**T**he hard rule of grace is that there is nothing you can do to earn it. Anything we do to try to earn grace cuts us right off from The Source. We can't experience God's grace unless we are willing to let God give it to us—not an easy task.

Accepting grace means ceasing our efforts at control and putting an active faith in the Unseen. Most of us can't relax our control muscle longer than a second before we get too agitated to sit still. *Can't I just fiddle with things a little bit? Surely God could use a hand. Really, isn't this emphasis on receiving grace just an excuse to lie around, passively waiting for God to do all the work? After all, this world is in bad shape and there is plenty of stuff for me to do!*

Objections like these arise from our basic fear that God will not come through on his promise to us. Some part of us really believes that if we don't make grace happen in the world, then the world will be without grace. The truth is that if the world is depending on our efforts for its grace, then we live in a hopeless place indeed.

Of course, accepting grace does not mean that we are supposed to lie on the floor somewhere, waiting for God to move heaven and earth for us. Such behavior would constitute a pas-

sive-aggressive attempt to control God. There are things for us to do in the Christian life, but this does not mean that our actions place us in control of grace. One way to look at it is that when grace is really at work, we receive our activity from God, and our activity nurtures in us a receptive attitude toward God.

Consider the Twelve Steps. The Steps promise a saving experience of God's grace as a result of working through a list of twelve actions. Many people believe this to mean that the Twelve Steps are a formula for attaining some kind of spiritual experience—a magical recipe of sorts. They have all the tools they need to maintain their own spiritual condition and thus to keep themselves sane and sober. People who approach the Twelve Steps with this attitude often write inventory, make amends and help other addicts as a means of controlling their own recovery.

But what would our practice of the Twelve Steps look like if we *received* these twelve actions instead of "worked" them? When writing inventory, we would let God give us insight, rather than trying to figure ourselves out. When making amends, we would let God open us to the pain and need of people we've harmed, rather than use amends as a tool

to gain forgiveness for ourselves. When acting as sponsors, we would let God introduce us to our sponsees' needs and show us how to help them heal, rather than setting an agenda for our sponsees and expecting them to have the same experience we had. Further, we would not treat the Steps as a means of controlling our sobriety. We would understand each day of sobriety as a gift from God. The shift is subtle, perhaps, but it makes all the difference. We may be performing the same actions, but we do so with a whole new spirit. When we stop being in control, we let grace seep into our activity—grace in action.

In this issue we present two articles originally delivered as presentations at the STEPS 2005 conference. In "Grace for Dummies," Jeff VanVonderen speaks of the value of brokenness in receiving grace. Grace is the free gift of Christ alone, which we cannot expect to earn with the "Jesus plus" formula. In "Letting Go and Letting God," Dale Ryan examines the biblical basis for this well-known recovery principle and finds that the whole narrative of the Bible is interwoven with the theme of God's insistence that we receive our grace from him. Enjoy. ❧

# GRACE FOR DUMMIES

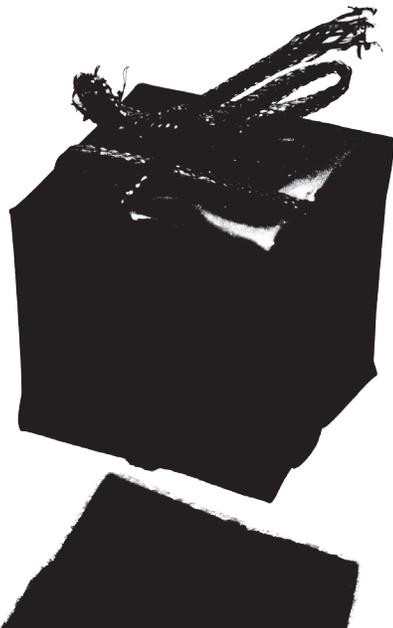
BY JEFF VANVONDEREN

It makes me nervous to talk about grace. The good news is *so* good that I can hardly believe it most of the time, and *so* big that I can hardly talk about it. The truth is that I feel worse about grace than I do about my sin. Knowing who I am and what I've done, I can look at my sin easily, but grace is hard for me to look at. It's hard to look at, so it's hard to talk about, and it's so big that it's hard to condense into words.

But I'm going to try doing that, and I'm going to start by looking at 1 Corinthians 1:18 and 19: "For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside,'" and then in verse 26 it says, "For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise." Basically what Paul's saying is, "You are all just a bunch of dummies, and dummies get it better." Dummies *get* grace better. Grace levels the playing field.

In Matthew chapter 3, we get a picture of Jesus as he's starting his ministry. He's preaching and he's healing people and he's making food out of thin air and feeding people who had nothing a minute ago. In doing all this, Jesus is drawing a big crowd. He's the best show in town. Then he gets to the Sermon on the Mount and he turns the crowd away. I think there are a lot of reasons why he wanted to turn the crowd away, but one reason is that he doesn't want us to get confused and think that the kingdom is about having a big crowd. He turns the crowd away by telling them what the kingdom is about. Here's what it's about: "Blessed are the broken. They shall have the kingdom." The kingdom comes to broken people. Now, there's some sarcasm here in the fact that everybody is a broken person. But the kingdom comes to those who are broken and know they are broken.

It helps to get a picture of Jesus' audience for the Sermon on the Mount. On one side are the broken people, meaning the poor people and the prostitutes and the sinners and the people who don't look so good. On the other side are the Pharisees and the people who think they're okay because they've got a lot of money; they are the wise, the noble, and the strong. The first group is feeling bad about being such a mess, and the second group is thanking God they're not like the broken people. Jesus says to all of them, "No, you don't get it. Blessed are the *broken*. Theirs is the kingdom." To the first group he says that it's okay to be broken. It's when you're broken that you get grace. It's when you're broken that the kingdom comes to you in your weakness and your brokenness. It's ok to



be a dummy. And to the second group he says, “Hey, you guys don’t get it either. Blessed are the broken. You guys are fine, right? Go be fine. Well people don’t need a doctor.” See why they didn’t like him?

When you’re trying to do recovery ministries for people in your churches, aren’t the people who object just like these people in the second group who think they are just fine and well? Instead of thanking God that they have somehow escaped all the stuff that we’ve gone through, and saying, “Good for you that you’re dealing with it,” they’re thanking God that they’re not like you, and they can’t understand why you have to rock the boat. Why can’t you just get over it or stop what you’re doing and be like them? But Jesus says it’s okay to be broken. Brokenness is where it’s at in the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” So here are the mourning people in the first group. Not only do they look bad, but they are mourning how bad they look. The guys in the second group are rejoicing in how good they look. So they need to understand that in the kingdom of God comfort comes to mourning people.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” That’s you guys in the first group, the broken ones. You’re not righteous and you know it. So you’re hungering and thirsting for righteousness, and it says that you shall be satisfied, says Jesus. The second group is already satisfied. So go be satisfied. They might feel sad, and they might feel alone, but they would never admit it. They would never mourn. There are nine Greek words for *mourn*. In this context, *mourn* means “to put on the outside what’s on the inside.” People who put themselves in the second group would never do that because that wouldn’t look good. If they did finally get to the place where they could get honest about what’s going on inside them, they’d lose the support of everyone else in that second group. So Jesus doesn’t argue with them. He tells them, “Go ahead. Just bottle it up. Look good, but you need to understand that the kingdom operates over here.”

Now, it’s not that these people are disqualified from grace; it’s just that they need to know they need it and accept it. When I do interventions, we have a person who needs help, doesn’t think they do, and won’t get it. And that’s an addict. That’s a cocaine or heroin addict, or somebody who’s living on the streets, or ripping their parents off for their prescriptions. They don’t look like they should be in the second group, but they sound like it. They need help, they don’t think they do, and they won’t get it. The level of denial is the same. During an intervention, we just want to move them to need help and get it. That’s all. As soon as that happens they move into the first group, and when you’re over here in group one, there’s all kinds of help that comes. Grace happens.

When Jesus said, “Therefore be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect,” do you think he was really offering that as a challenge for us to be perfect? Or was he offering us an opportunity to examine ourselves and realize not only are we not perfect, but that there is no way we could become perfect by ourselves and we need someone to help us? The folks in the first group are imperfect, and they can’t fix what is wrong with them.

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The folks who are with the Pharisees are imperfect and can't fix themselves either, except that they seem to think they can handle it on their own. That's the difference.

Jesus said, "If your hand offends you, cut it off, and if your eye offends you, pluck it out. It's better to go into heaven with one hand than hell with two." In response to a statement like that, a really good Pharisee would start cutting off hands. "Okay, wow, okay, I'll do that. Just tell me what to do and I'll do it." Well, that's not the point. The point is that you need a new heart. So Jesus tells them they can cut stuff off and pluck stuff out as much as they want, and when they get all done cutting and plucking, they'll still have one thing they can't do anything about, which is that they need a new heart. God does new hearts. It's just that you have to know you need it and know you can't do it on your own.

Another thing about grace is that it assaults our mindset. I can feel that more than I can explain it, but I really do feel worse about grace. I want to show you something in Philippians. At the beginning of chapter 3 Paul says, "Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord." So now he's going to tell us what to rejoice in. Believers begin by rejoicing in the Lord, but then we start rejoicing in a whole list of other things. In verse 4, "I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more." Then in verses 5 and 6 he give us his list of things he can be proud of: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."

"The flesh" means not the spirit. So it isn't just the flesh; it's natural things. Paul says he is prone to put his confidence in natural things. I am prone to do that. I've been trained to do that. You know, for me to be introduced to the idea that God has a gift for me and it's life and salvation and all that kind of stuff, and all I have to do is accept it, and I don't have to earn it—that was not that hard at the beginning. But because I have a mind to put confidence in the flesh and because I happen to live in the flesh and there happens to be a lot of flesh around that I could put confidence in—accepting grace now is really hard.

If Satan isn't throwing stuff in my face and telling me to get my significance and meaning from all the nasty stuff, then he's throwing stuff in my face that's good. I wrote books and people like them. I'm on TV now, and that's cool. But that good stuff is not Jesus either. Grace is not Jesus plus anything. It's only God's grace that got me out of my addiction and into all this good stuff anyway, and yet Satan still has a way to put a spin on that and get me looking at something besides Jesus. "God's really lucky to have you on his side, isn't he, Jeff?" Wow! That's not about the cross.

"As to the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." You want to see a picture of someone who does it right? The guys in the Pharisees group do it right. Paul did it right, and that used to be what comforted him. He rejoiced in getting it right. "Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." So what he's saying is, "I have, like you, a lot of evidence that says that I'm okay, and I have a mind to put

confidence in that stuff, but I don't." I have a chance today to decide to put my confidence in Christ rather than in the flesh, and then tomorrow I'll get a chance to decide that again; then the next day I'll get a chance to decide that again, and that's how every day is.

Well, if you look at 1 Corinthians 15:8, you see a different story. Paul says that Jesus appeared to everyone else, and then "last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me also." Now "untimely born" doesn't mean born too late. When I first read that passage a long time ago I thought Paul was kind of bummed out that he was born too late, meaning that Peter and all those other guys got to actually see Jesus, but then Jesus got killed and Paul came on the scene too late. The "untimely born" doesn't mean too late; it means too early. He was a miscarriage. For him to say "last of all he appeared to me" is a negative thing in that culture, and for him to say that Jesus had come to him as somebody who was a spiritual miscarriage—a stillbirth—is a negative thing. "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." He's got a lot of negative evidence against himself. "But by the grace of God I am who I am, and his grace toward me did not prove vain." Paul doesn't hold the negative evidence against himself, and he doesn't revel in the positive evidence for himself. He is who he is because of Jesus.

We are who we are because of Jesus and Jesus alone. It's not Jesus plus anything. Sometimes we remember that. Then tomorrow we have to remember it again, and the next day again, and again, and again. The problem is that we stumble. In Romans 9:31 and 32 Paul talks about what it means to stumble. "Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone." Now, here's my question to you: In the last year of your recovery, have you had more opportunities to take your eyes off the finished work of Jesus by looking over at one of those nasty things you used to do, or because of people who are encouraging you to judge your relationship with God based on some good thing that you are doing or not doing? Both of those things are ways of stumbling. The Christians in my life were more aggressive in trying to get me to measure myself by Jesus plus something I did or didn't do than the drug users and alcohol users ever were about getting me to use or drink with them. What a coup that is for Satan. If Satan can't get you with the drug-using folks, he'll get you with the church.

A lot of the interventions I do get a yes answer very quickly. I don't think it's because I'm so skilled or that I have a magic wand or anything. The people tell me why on the plane on the way to treatment. They usually say something like this: "The reason I didn't ask for help is because I was ashamed. I've asked for help so many times and they've given it to me and it didn't work and I just felt too bad to ask again." Is that somebody who is in denial? No. That is somebody who can't believe that grace is for them.

Why don't people become Christians? In the church I grew up in, I was told that the reason that people don't become Christians is that they really like their sin. How many of you stopped liking your sin before you

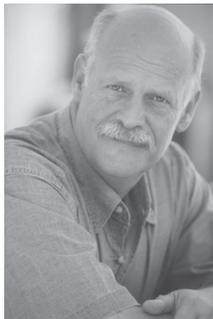
WE ARE WHO WE ARE  
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finally got help for it? You didn't like it, but you couldn't see a way to get out of it or you didn't think you deserved help. So you stayed in the sin. And then somehow God broke through that, and then you got grace, and now here you are. I think people who are sinning hate their sin. I used to wake up in the morning looking at an empty bottle of booze, feeling like crap, and say "I'm never doing that again." You know why? I hated that. I hated how it felt. But then a couple of days later I felt okay, and I did it again. I couldn't see anything else. That was one of the reasons why I was in denial and why I was so defensive about my drinking and using. I couldn't see any alternative. I didn't think grace was for me.

When you became a believer they didn't just come and open your jail cell and say, "You can leave now." There are consequences. Society might make you pay for your crime. And we might live in a society that God has set up where if you do the crime you do the time. You reap what you sew. But on a cosmic level, on a spiritual level, it is already paid for. There are sins that people have done that were paid for before people could even think them up. That's hard for me to accept.

I want to close with one little thing here in Colossians 2:5: "For even though I am absent in body, nevertheless I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good discipline and the stability of your faith in Christ." This is a really different letter from Galatians. In Galatians, Paul is hollering and confronting them because they started off by focusing on Christ, but then all of a sudden it's Christ plus circumcision, Christ plus festivals, Christ plus all this stuff you're supposed to do, and so he hollers at them like crazy. The Colossians, however, hadn't done that. So Paul is rejoicing in them that they are stable in their faith and they haven't lost track of what got them there in the first place. So the next verse says, "Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him." In other words, live the way you came to Jesus in the first place. How did you come to Jesus in the first place? With your big list of good stuff or hiding your list of bad stuff? No, you just came by faith. If there is a way out of this for us, God's going to have to do it. We've tried to do it and we can't do it on our own. Now we're broken and grace comes to us, and the kingdom comes to us, and that's how we got it in the first place. So Paul tells us to live that way now. Live, walk, and keep walking like that. The recovery principle in Paul's message is, Keep coming back, it really works. Keep coming back to the grace that got you here in the first place.

When you became a believer, the thing that was clear was that this was a God thing. It's something that God is going to have to do and we are going to have to accept it for free. Since then, the fight is to keep doing what got you here in the first place. And that's my encouragement to you: Keep coming back. It really works. ❖



*Jeff VanVonderen is a featured interventionist on the documentary series Intervention on the A&E network. Visit his web site at: [www.innervention.com](http://www.innervention.com)*

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# LETTING GO AND LETTING GOD

## RECOVERY PRINCIPLES AND BIBLICAL TRUTH

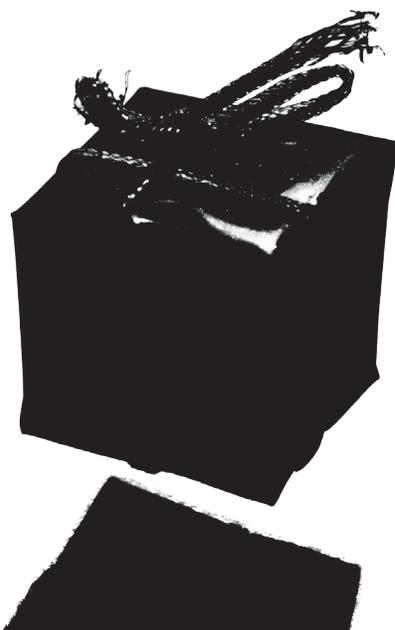
BY DALE RYAN

A couple of years ago I fell and broke my leg. When we got to the hospital, the doctor said, “Well, your leg is broken in three places. It’s a fairly common pattern. I’ll make some recommendations based on what has worked for other people who have had this kind of problem, and then you can decide what you want to do.” I did not need to think for very long. What was there to think about? Just fix it! If the suggestions worked for other people, that was all I needed to know. It did not occur to me to ask, “Is it biblical to put screws in your leg to hold some of the bones together?” I didn’t ask whether there was any spiritual significance to the suggested steps that the doctor listed. I just thought, *Well, this seems to work for other folks, so let’s give it a try.*

But what if we go to a Twelve Step program or to a counselor and we hear, “The trouble you’re having is a fairly common pattern. I’ll make some recommendations based on what has worked for other people who have had this kind of problem, and then you can decide what to do”? Well, things are a little more complicated for us. It does occur to many of us to ask, “Are these suggested steps consistent with the Bible?” This is an important question. Recovery is not like putting screws in your leg to fix a broken bone. Recovery is about *spiritual* change. For that reason it is perfectly legitimate for us to ask whether it is consistent with the spiritual resources we trust—and for many of us that includes the Bible.

So here’s a key question that we need to think about: Are the basic principles of recovery consistent with the principles we find in the Bible? My own conviction is that they are. It was from the Bible, for example, that the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous learned the principles that became structured into the Twelve Steps. This is much too short an article to look at all the fundamental principles of recovery and the biblical foundations for each of them, but we have space to look closely at one principle as an example of the connections between the Bible and basic recovery principles. Are the connections thin? Only a verse here and there that might apply? Or is the connection a significant one?

The principle I would like to look at is captured well in the com-



monly heard slogan, “Let go and let God.” The principle is this: recovery is not just something that we do. Recovery is something that God does for us and in us. It is something we *receive* from God. We let go of our attempts to do what we cannot do by ourselves and we let God do what needs to be done. We *receive* the healing, growth and serenity that God longs to give us.

Unfortunately, receiving is not something that most of us are particularly good at. I’ve been watching my grandson recently. Receiving seems to come easy for him. If you give him a present in a box, it is like giving him two presents, because there’s the box, and then there’s the present in the box. You give him something and he just lights up with eagerness and enthusiasm. Somewhere between early childhood and adulthood, however, most of us lose that. We don’t receive like that anymore. That eagerness and enthusiasm are replaced by other things. If someone gives something to us, we may find ourselves thinking, *Does this mean I am obligated to give them something in return?* Or, *Is this some kind of attempt to control my behavior?* Or maybe we just respond with, “No, you shouldn’t, really. There’s somebody that needs this more than me. I should be giving *you* things.” By adulthood most of us have acquired many different layers of resistance to receiving.

I don’t think the Christian community as it exists today helps us very much here. I have spent most of my life in churches that emphasized that the very beginning of the Christian life is about receiving—receiving salvation—but from day two on it tends to be about giving. We get very quickly locked into a giving-priority mode. Now, there is nothing wrong with giving. It is clearly good to give. But what “Let go and let God” suggests is that there is a kind of spiritual priority to receiving. In part, this is because receiving is a necessary prerequisite to giving. You can’t give away what you haven’t received—at least not without very significant negative consequences. Let’s look at the biblical evidence for the spiritual priority of receiving.

The Bible begins with an account of Creation. What is the main point of the biblical account of Creation? It is a description of the basic structure of existence on this planet. Life on this planet works like this: God gives life, we receive life. It’s also very clear that the text means not only that God *gave* life and we *received* life, but that God continually *gives* life and we continually *receive* it. The Creator didn’t stop being the Creator after he created. God is still the Creator. God is still giving life, and we are still receiving life. None of us can guarantee the next beat of our heart. We cannot guarantee we will be alive at the end of the hour. Every beat of our hearts is a gift from the Creator God. It is a gift of love and grace to you and me. It’s very hard to stay in conscious contact with the fact of this gift as we live through a day. It is too much to pay attention to somehow, but it is the most fundamental truth that we find at the very beginning of the Bible. God is giving life to us all day long, and our task is to receive—to let go of our anxious attempts to be the author of our own lives and to

LIFE ON THIS PLANET  
WORKS LIKE THIS:  
GOD GIVES LIFE,  
WE RECEIVE LIFE.

let God give our life to us.

Now let's fast-forward to Abraham. God comes out of nowhere to Abraham and says, "I'm going to give to *you*. I'm going to give you a land. I'm going to give you lots of children. And I'm going to give you the role of being a blessing." Notice that God comes to Abraham and insists on being the one who gives. God says, "I'm going to give to you." God gives. Abraham receives. It is important to remember that Abraham's world was a very religious world. There were all kinds of religious faiths in the ancient world, but the dominant instinct of all those religious faiths was that it was our responsibility to give to God. Maybe God was hungry and our job was to give God food. Maybe God was angry and we needed to give God something so he wouldn't be so angry. The only religious instinct available in Abraham's world was that people were supposed to give to God. So it must have been a real shock to have God come and say just the opposite. Nothing in Abraham's world could have prepared him to understand this God-who-gives. It was turning his world upside down. How can you serve a God-who-gives when the only God you have ever known is a God-who-needs-to-receive?

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It is clear in the biblical text that Abraham doesn't get it right away. He is a bit slow, Abraham. God says to him, "I'm going to give you land. I'm going to give you lots of kids. I'm going to make you to be a blessing." There is stuff here for Abraham to do—the arrangement is not about Abraham being passive. God is giving Abraham land, so Abraham needs to go to the land. I probably do not need to explain what Abraham has to do to have lots of kids, but he has to be a consistent husband and father. And Abraham has to be about the business of being a blessing. God is going to give Abraham land, children and blessing, but Abraham needs to go to the land, have lots of kids, and do whatever it takes so that all his neighbors, after a period of time, will say to him: "You know, it's a blessing to have you in the neighborhood. We're all better off having you here." That's God's plan.

Abraham has a different plan. He doesn't understand the God-who-gives. So Abraham devises his own alternative—plan B. God's plan A was to go to the land; Abraham's plan B is to go to Egypt. Bad choice. God's plan A was to have lots of kids; Abraham's plan B is that when he gets to Egypt and Pharaoh thinks his wife is hot, Abraham says, "She's my sister. You can have her." God's plan for Abraham was to be a blessing, but before long the Pharaoh is tired of his lies and throws him out. Abraham gets it all wrong. He wants to be in control, he wants to be in charge, he thinks he is smart enough, good enough, clever enough to make it all work. Like many of us, he doesn't want to be the one to receive.

Let's fast-forward again to a point much later. Gideon is a military commander during a time when the tribes of Israel are kind of a loose confederation. There is a military threat from the east, and Gideon put together an army of 32,000 men. For the time, this is enough for

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BEING THE PEOPLE  
WHOSE JOB IS TO  
RECEIVE.

a “shock and awe” strategy. Gideon comes to God after raising this big army, and he says to God, “I think we can give you the victory.” God says, “This does not feel right to me—you giving me the victory. I want to give *you* the victory. If you go out with this army and win, people will say that you had the power and the state-of-the-art military hardware, and you won because you were stronger than the other guy.” God said, “I’m going to feel much more comfortable about this if you send a bunch of these people home and go out to fight this battle with less impressive military forces.” So Gideon sends half of his men home. There are two or three cycles of this as God keeps telling Gideon to send people home. Finally, Gideon comes to God and says something like, “I do not think that I can give you the victory.” And God says, “Perfect. I think we’re ready to get something done.”

The principle is clear enough. We can try to do recovery out of our own strength. We can raise up 32,000 men. We can go out to battle. But it doesn’t work very well. I don’t know how many of you have tried to stay sober by just *doing* sobriety instead of *receiving* sobriety, but it’s a hard path. I’ve known people who have been able to walk that path for some period of time, but they often just get tired and grouchy. The quality of the sobriety suffers because in order to do your own recovery, you have to work hard, and work harder, and work your hardest, and eventually you get very tired. That’s what would have been Gideon’s fate if God hadn’t come to him and said, “We’re going to have to do this from a position of weakness or I just don’t know how I can help you.”

The good news is that God can do for us what we can’t really do for ourselves. But there is some bad news. In Gideon’s story you certainly get a sense of the terror that comes with being the people whose job is to receive. Our part in God’s plan can be pretty scary. It means going out against an enemy who we know we cannot beat on our own strength. We will be afraid. We will feel vulnerable. We will ask: “How is this going to work if I can’t make it work?” “How is this going to happen if I’m not powerful enough to make it happen?” Some of the scariest work we do in the recovery process is facing our weaknesses, bringing them to God, and being shocked again and again by God’s insistence that it is precisely our weaknesses that make it possible for God to do what needs to be done.

Let’s fast-forward to Jesus, who put it very simply: “All you who labor and are burdened, I will give you rest.” “I’ll give,” he says. “You receive.” You will find rest for your soul. What is rest for the soul? If we didn’t have the word *serenity*, we might decide to call it *soul-rest*. God wants to give us that. “I’ll give you soul-rest,” Jesus says. When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, it was, “Give us this day.” You, God, you be the one to give. We will be the ones to receive.

You see this emphasis repeatedly in Jesus’ teaching. Let’s look at one parable. If you take an introductory course on parables, one of the first things you’ll learn is that parables tend to have one point. They are rarely five-point sermons. With the parable of the waiting

father, unfortunately, people often focus only on part of the story. They talk only about the prodigal son, who left and spent all his money on cocaine and prostitutes—that’s just my guess about how he spent his money, but it’s probably not a bad guess. But there are two sons. So, what is the one point that is the same for both sons? What do these two sons have in common? The younger son went off and spent all his money on drugs and prostitutes, and the other stayed home acquiring a bunch of resentments. In that sense they are quite different. But what do they have in common? The text is very clear about this. Both of these sons have essentially the same strategy for how they are going to be a part of the father’s family. The prodigal son—what is his strategy? In the parable we see him walking home, and he is practicing his speech. He is going to say to his father, “I will be your servant.” That’s his strategy for how to get back into the father’s family. He will be a servant. What does a servant do? A servant gives, and gives, and gives. If a servant stops giving—well, that’s a big problem. So, what happens? When the son gets home, he doesn’t get his whole speech out before the father says, “That’s not the deal. I’m the one who gives. You be the one who receives.” And the father proceeds to give. This must have been profoundly confusing to this young man, who was convinced that the only way to get back in the good graces of his father was to give.

Now, how about the older son—what was his strategy? When it becomes apparent that the older son has some resentments, his father has a conversation with him, and what does the older brother say? He says, “I have served you all this time, and now my brother gets honored. It doesn’t seem right.” So the older son has the same basic strategy as the younger son. He thinks he gets to be part of the father’s family because he is giving so much—serving so much. The father says to him, “Everything I have is yours. I am the one who gives. Your job is to be the one who receives.”

What do both sons need? They need to learn to receive from their gracious father. They need to let go of their plans for being good-enough givers to be part of the family, and they need to let their father love them. The spiritual principle is very clear: Let go and let God.

Let’s fast-forward to the early church. The Christian church doesn’t have a golden age. We don’t look back to a time when everything was just the way it was supposed to be. If you go back and read the New Testament, you’ll find very troubled, broken people trying to find some way to be faithful to Jesus. In Paul’s letters you find that one of the things that started to go wrong in the very beginning was that people really wanted the Christian life to be about being right. They wanted to make the movement be about us being the good people who give to God. Paul keeps coming back in a variety of ways, depending on the context, and saying, “That’s not the deal. Not even close. God gives. We receive. It’s about *grace*.” And what does grace look like? It is always a narrative about a God who gives and gives and gives, and about a people who receive and receive and receive.

Now, I know that some people will experience this emphasis on

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receiving as unbalanced—that giving must have its place. Let me just suggest that if you want to balance this teaching with an emphasis on giving to God, that you start by giving to God the things God has asked for. Give God your burdens. Consider Jesus’ clear teaching on this: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

If your spiritual life is about you doing the heavy lifting, something has gone very wrong. Paul is equally clear about this. He saw Christians who started their spiritual journey by receiving grace from God but then got caught up in a being-good-enough, trying-hard-enough, being-dedicated-enough kind of faith, and he warned them about all such performance-based spiritualities: “Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” (Gal. 5:1)

Nothing is more debilitating to our spiritual lives than the illusion that we are in charge, that we are in control, that we are the ones who are going to make this work. We’re going to be the ones who are good enough, strong enough, wise enough, biblical enough, Christian enough, Jesus enough, to make this whole thing work. All that this kind of spirituality does for us is make us burdened and tired.

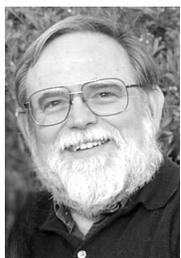
Another biblical theme that makes the same point is the theme of God feeding his people. If you are hungry, if you are thirsty, God wants to feed you. I don’t think that this comes instinctively to us. I do think the Judeo-Christian religion is unique in the history of world religions in having a God that feeds his people. Most religious instincts in the history of our species have been that we need to feed God. But think about God’s provision of manna in the wilderness. Think about God setting a table for us in the presence of our enemies. Think about the loaves and fishes. Think of the Eucharist—God feeding us with spiritual food. God loves to feed his people. God loves to give nourishment to us. Our task is to receive.

Since I started in the first chapter of Genesis, maybe I should end in the last chapter of Revelation. The book of Revelation in most English translations ends with a section that does not appear in the best early manuscripts. The original ending appears to be Revelation 22:17: “Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.”

The best one-word description I can think of for people who are impacted by the addictive process is *thirsty*. We are thirsty people—people to whom God wants to give, freely, the water of life. Too good to be true? It might feel like that at times. We might resist it for this and a long list of other reasons. But God is a patient God. From the beginning of the Bible to the very end you get a clear and consistent image of God. God wants to be the One-who-gives. The invitation is still there: Come and drink.

May God grant you the courage, wisdom and strength you need to receive the free gift of the water of life. ❖

*Dale Ryan is the executive director of the National Association for Christian Recovery.*



# BILL WILSON: TWO PERSPECTIVES

BY HEIDI WESTON

**My Name is Bill**

by Susan Cheever  
Simon & Schuster,  
257 pp. \$24.00, cloth

**Bill W.**

by Francis Hartigan  
Thomas Dunne Books,  
212 pp., \$14.95, paperback

Several biographies have been written about Bill Wilson. The two most recent, *My Name is Bill* by Susan Cheever and *Bill W.* by Francis Hartigan, are an excellent way to learn more about the man whom Aldous Huxley once described as the greatest social architect of the twentieth century.

Both authors carefully trace Wilson's small-town beginnings in East Dorset, Vermont through his nomadic years as a miserable alcoholic to his rise in the recovery movement as one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. Though both Cheever and Hartigan have thoroughly researched their subject, their books could not be more dif-

ferent. This difference not only shapes the audience that will and will not find each of the books useful, but also reveals the intentions that propelled Cheever and Hartigan toward documenting Bill Wilson's life.

On her web site, Susan Cheever offers insight into how she came to write her biography of Bill Wilson: "About five years ago Time Magazine asked me to write a profile of Wilson . . . I was amazed to find that although there had been some books about Wilson including his own and his wife Lois' autobiographies, there had never been a proper, fully documented biography. Bill Wilson is one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century, a man who founded a movement which changed all of our lives. I felt he deserved the best biography I could write. I began the book respecting him as a teacher and a writer. By the time I finished that respect had doubled and redoubled. I hope that my book does justice to this extraordinary man and gives some sense of his amazing

life story."<sup>1</sup> With a deep respect for Wilson, reinforced by her own experience of alcoholism and recovery, Cheever set out to write a biography that not only celebrates Bill Wilson's life and work, but also introduces him to individuals outside the recovery movement.

Her prose is rich with tribute. Her first and foremost desire seems to be to bring Wilson to life in her work. In the beginning of her book, Cheever tries to awaken the Wilson household in East Dorset by imagining some of Emily Wilson's (Bill's mother's) internal thought-life and feeling. "...Mrs. Emily Griffith Wilson, twenty-five years old, very confused and very pregnant, might have been found in the Wilson House hotel kitchen as the afternoon cold settled in outside and the steam formed on the windowpanes. She was preparing to bake an apple pie, cutting the apples and then rolling out the crust, and keeping an eye on the popcorn just warming up in a cast-iron pan over the woodstove. The big north-

facing room where she worked smelled of cooking: of flour and the sweetness of apples, of a batch of sugar cookies and the sausage frying for the stuffing. Usually, she found these smells delicious, but this afternoon they were nauseating. Pregnancy ruins everything, she thought.”<sup>2</sup>

Along with these creative, speculative insights into the Wilsons’ possible thoughts, Cheever provides a detailed backdrop for her biography. She offers up a vivid and readable history of East Dorset and the surrounding landscape of Vermont. We finish her book feeling as familiar with the place as with our own neighborhood. She also creates a wider historical context for Bill Wilson’s story. She cleverly includes the top news stories of his youth, summarizes the temperance movement and explains the social mores of the time period. This helps the reader to fully integrate Bill Wilson’s story into the larger fabric of history.

Though the book is an absorbing read, some people may find her prose out of accord with that of a biography. By creating a biography that offers insight into Bill Wilson’s thought-life, Cheever has stepped into the realm of historical fiction. Readers looking for an academic biography of Bill Wilson may not find her book well suited for their purposes. Her book may be more useful for those who are unfamiliar with Wilson and the recovery movement and who have not already read extensively

on the history of the subject.

Francis Hartigan, in contrast, writes in a style that is unadorned and conservative. Having acted as a secretary and confidante to Bill Wilson’s wife in the five years before her death, Hartigan has the advantage of having known Lois Wilson and being privy to her and Bill’s private papers, including his letters and manuscripts. These papers offered information that helped validate and strengthen the many stories Lois had told Hartigan over their years of confidence. Bringing together his research and the memories of his conversations with Lois, Hartigan was able to write Bill Wilson’s biography.

*Bill W.* is an informative read. The book gives a complete account of Wilson’s recovery, his struggles, his sins and his accomplishments. While previous biographers were reluctant to document some of Bill’s failings (his notorious womanizing, postrecovery bouts of depression and his experimentation with LSD), Hartigan takes on these subjects with unrelenting veracity. “Even though he stopped drinking, Wilson had a number of personal problems, and he regarded as moral failings his inability to deal with them successfully. His financial situation never truly righted itself, his womanizing continued, and no matter how severely it was affecting his health, he could never manage to quit smoking. There was also the fact that he could not find any

effective means of dealing with his crippling depression.”<sup>3</sup>

Shedding light on these failings, Hartigan works very hard to humanize Bill Wilson and his accomplishments. Upon reading his book, one not only has a more thorough understanding of Bill Wilson’s contributions to the recovery movement, but also the depth of effort and the personal cost of these contributions.

Some readers who might not find *Bill W.* humanizing, but may instead find the biography to be sensationalistic, reminiscent of a tabloid. They may feel that the book is an indignity to Bill’s memory, or a brand on Alcoholics Anonymous. Hartigan does not spare his readers from the details of Bill’s sometimes troubling actions and lifestyle. But knowing the truth about the lifelong struggles of one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous provides a powerful reminder that recovery is about principles and not personalities—no matter how prominent a personality might be. It is also a helpful reminder that the only people available to manifest Grace are troubled, struggling, damaged people. People just like us. ❧

<sup>1</sup> www.susannecheever.com

<sup>2</sup> Cheever, page 3.

<sup>3</sup> Hartigan, page 2.

*Bill needs a pastor  
who knows something  
about addictions*



*Beth is looking for  
a church that understands  
about childhood trauma*



*John is hoping the church  
has some resources  
for families of addicts*



*Mary is praying her  
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### Bible Study Guides

The *Letting God Be God* series of Bible study guides which were originally published by InterVarsity Press, are now out of print. That's the bad news. The good news is that we have reformatted them in photocopy-ready form and you can download them for FREE from the library at the NACR web site. If you do not have the capability to download and print a PDF file, you can order a printed version of any of these studies from the NACR online store (\$10.00 plus shipping and handling).

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# 1

## An Invitation to Become a Financial Partner with the NACR

Did you know that membership fees cover only a small percentage of the costs of running the NACR? Without the regular, faithful economic support of many NACR members, we would have closed our doors a long time ago. The last year has been particularly challenging financially for us, and we would be grateful if you would consider including the NACR in your regular giving. The NACR is a ministry of Christian Recovery International, which is a 501.c.3 tax-exempt corporation. All donations from U.S. or Canadian taxpayers are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law. The Christian community desperately needs what the NACR has to offer. Help us make it more available! Thanks.

*Practice makes progress.*

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