

“Overflowing Grace”
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What image did you have of God when you were growing up? Can you think back to your younger self? Did you have some concept or image of the Divine? Maybe you grew up in church and had perceptions of God either shaped or reshaped from that experience? Maybe you were not in church as a youngster, but did you have some sense of the Holy/God/the Divine Presence—maybe even if you couldn’t articulate it.

I grew up in church. I didn’t grow up Presbyterian. My father was a pastor in a non-denominational church: the kind where women were not allowed to be ministers. They worked with the children. Occasionally, they might be a missionary but more than likely they were pastor’s wives, missionary wives, taught Sunday school, VBS, and sang on the praise team.

My image of God was incredibly shaped by my church environment. There were many rules about what made for a good, true Christian. There were steps that had to be taken. Words that had to be said. Certain toys I had received as gifts came to be seen as evil and of the devil and had to be confiscated from me. I was confused. Sad. Scared. . . .

As I’ve reflected over the years about how I understood God in my growing up years, I would characterize it as God as predominantly disappointed in me. God was the big male in charge. I could never be good enough or pleasing enough. I felt a lot of pressure to get it right.

When I went to college, I took a class required of all first year students called Christian Formation. One of the books my professor had us read was a piece of children’s fantasy literature written by a man named George MacDonald. MacDonald was a Scottish author, poet, and Christian minister. He was a pioneering figure in the field of modern fantasy literature and the mentor of fellow writer Lewis Carroll. The book we read was *The Princess and the Goblin*.

The book, which is full of symbolism, tells the story of 8-year-old Princess Irene who lives a lonely life in a castle in a wild, desolate, mountainous kingdom, with only her nursemaid, Lottie, for company. Her father, the king, is normally absent, and her mother is dead. Unknown to her, the nearby mines are inhabited by a race of goblins, long banished from the kingdom and now anxious to take revenge on their human neighbors. One rainy day, the princess explores the castle and discovers a beautiful, mysterious lady, who identifies herself as Irene’s namesake and great-great-grandmother. Irene is taken with her beautiful, great-great-grandmother, who ever so tenderly heals her injured hand, washes her, hugs

and kisses her and lets her sleep with her in her bed overnight. One night, a few weeks later, after being frightened by a strange cat and getting lost in the cold, rain, and dark, Irene manages to make her way back to the old woman's room, somewhere high up in the castle.

MacDonald writes, in the voice of the young Irene: "Oh, what a lovely haven to reach from the darkness and fear through which she had come! The soft light made her feel as if she were going into the heart of the milkiest pearl; while the blue walls and their silver stars for a moment perplexed her with the fancy that they were in reality the sky which she had left outside a minute ago covered with rainclouds. "Come," and she still held out her arms. "I've lighted a fire for you, Irene: you're cold and wet," said her grandmother. . . . Her grandmother was dressed in the loveliest pale-blue velvet, over which her hair, no longer white, but of a rich gold color, streamed like a cataract, here falling in dull gathered heaps, there rushing away in smooth shining falls. . . ."

MacDonald goes on to give a rich description of the beautiful old woman, with long, golden hair, and pearl-laden slippers. Then, he continues: "The princess was so bewildered with astonishment and admiration that she could hardly thank her, and drew nigh with timidity, feeling dirty and uncomfortable. The lady was seated on a low chair by the fire, with hands outstretched to take her, but the princess hung back with a troubled smile. "Why, what's the matter?" asked her grandmother. "You haven't been doing anything wrong—I know that by your face, though it is rather miserable. What's the matter, my dear?" And still she held out her arms. "Dear grandmother, said Irene, I'm not so sure that I haven't done something wrong. I ought to have run up to you at once when the long-legged cat came in at the window, instead of running out on the mountain, and making myself such a fright." "You were taken by surprise, my child, and are not so likely to do it again . . . Come." And still she held out her arms. "But, grandmother, you're so beautiful and grand with your crown on! And I am so dirty with mud and rain!—I should quite spoil your beautiful blue dress." With a merry little laugh, the lady sprang from her chair, more lightly far than Irene herself could, caught the child to her bosom, and kissing the tear-stained face over and over, sat down with her in her lap. "Oh, grandmother! You'll make yourself such a mess!" cried Irene, clinging to her. "You darling! Do you think I care more for my dress than for my little girl?"

MacDonald's fantastical, tender, and surprising image for God in Irene's great-great-grandmother was absolutely transformative for me and has stayed with me ever since. It is an image of God that baptized me as its hearer.

The writer of Ephesians, in our text for this morning, and George MacDonald have something in common—both are working to flood their hearers with poetry of God's love, God's goodness, and God's rich blessings. MacDonald works with fantasy images that surprise and delight. The writer of Ephesians overflows with one very long sentence—all of the verses read today are actually one long sentence in the Greek. Can you imagine? It is one very long sentence filled to the brim with images and promises and challenges that we may barely know where to enter the text.

How do we enter this filled to the brim poetry of Ephesians? It is like one of those streams that looks easy to wade in but sweeps us off our feet by its sheer flowing power. Yet it is worth trying to enter this stream for these verses set the tone of our lives in Christ the beloved one.

Here is one suggestion: if this poetic passage is like a rushing stream, remember that most streams and creeks, while often clear and swift and, hopefully, sparkling, have stepping stones by which we might find a path.

As a kid, heck, even now, I love finding the stepping stones that I can connect, hopping from one to another, in order to cross to the other side. Now, it isn't an altogether bad thing when you slip and fall in—especially on a hot day—or if the stones end and you have to get wet. But this Ephesians stream has some special stones in it.

Listen again to verse 5: “God predestined us through Christ Jesus to be adopted children—such was God’s pleasure and will
And now verse 9: “God has taken pleasure in revealing the mystery of the plan through Christ.”

These verses are the stepping stones that communicate something radical to us: God--takes *pleasure* in something. The triune God, creator of all things, experiences and acts out of a place of pleasure. The pleasure of God gets worked out, expressed, in what we could call a kind of long-range planning to impart good gifts to us. God’s plan and interactions with us all come from this overflowing fount of the pleasure of God to bless us with goodness and grace.

Over and over again, in verse after verse, energy is poured into helping us imagine that the coming of Jesus, the one beloved by God, was all according to the will of God, which is synonymous with God’s pleasure. And, on top of that, God’s good purposes have always included us—we’ve been in God’s pleasurable plans and purposes from the very foundations of creation.

I’ve been trying with metaphors of creeks and stepping stones, but we’re here at the beach. Let’s think of it this way: on a hot summer day in July, with wave after refreshing wave, we are being washed over by God’s plans which have always included Jesus, the beloved of God, and us, God’s beloved, adopted children.

Maybe you’d take a lush garden instead of the beach. In the middle of summer, when gardens are overflowing with good food and beautiful flowers, this is such a present and powerful symbol of God’s abundant love.

Here is yet another way to think of the poetry pouring from Ephesians as expressed by theologian Kathryn Tanner: “God is the giver of all good gifts, their fount, luminous source, and fecund treasury and store house. . . . In establishing the world in relationship to Godself, God’s intent is to communicate such gifts to us. . . . God, who is already abundant fullness, freely wishes to replicate to every degree possible this fulness of life, light and love outward in what is not God.”

All of this is leading to the central declarative statements of the text: It is in Christ and through the blood of Christ that we have been redeemed and our sins forgiven, so immeasurable generous is God's favor given to us with perfect wisdom and understanding. Here, we know quite directly that our great stepping stone, the wave to end all waves, is that we redemption and forgiveness through a grace that has been poured out on us to overflowing.

The love of God that is given to us in such overflowing measure is given for the express purpose of our salvation—which is that we might praise God. In other words, God's love is that we would be redeemed, protected, brought near, so that we can give God praise. There is, in this picture, no punishment. There is no God shaking God's finger at us. There is only pure love, giving itself away as our very life, giving all these good gifts so that we might live in love and live in God.

There is so much freedom and calling in this sacred word for us to revel in the nearly inexpressible joy of God's generosity. Indeed, the harsh realities of our lives, our utter need for God's abundant love and grace are what make God's long-planned good gifts and intentions for us such a remarkable source of joy.

The only question that remains is: what is the art of our praise? If this passage in Ephesians is, in fact, a very instance of the praise for which it calls, what about ours?