



Preface

Reframing Life in God's Grace

Preface

I'm a mess. The highlights in my hair hide a pre-gray drab. One hip and one knee have been replaced and another knee should be. I'm overweight and under the illusion that I'm going to wake up one morning to a younger, skinnier self. On good days I whine and complain. On bad days I whine and complain more. I'm impatient whenever life has the audacity to thwart my plans. I get frustrated whenever life presents a detour or a hurdle. At one point I planned to live to 125. When I remembered that the Bible says Moses only lived to 120, I decided on 119. I can't imagine God needing me around longer than Moses.

Life has its challenges. Life is a challenge. I know my existence is about more than this body. I know it's not about gray hair, failing body parts, and excess pounds. I know the important stuff's on the inside, but honestly, I'm not so sure that the inside stuff's any prettier. Perhaps I've been expecting God to act as my own fairy godmother, ready to pop into the scene any moment now with a twinkle in His eye and a wand in His hand. I've been waiting to be tapped ever so gently on the forehead and magically transformed into a loving, joyous, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, self-controlled delight in His life, adorned in a nice white ensemble, cute shoes, and fresh nail polish. In thinking that, I've not only trivialized God's love and forgiveness, but I've missed the magnitude of His mercy that's been shared with me over and over again. I've overlooked the fruit of His Holy Spirit that's already a part of my own spirit in all that I do and all that I am.

So now what? Filled with His Holy Spirit, do I step back from life as I've known it? Do I need to tiptoe around the messiness of each day, avoiding the dirt and grime of my daily existence? If not wearing a white ensemble, something off-white? With His fruit, will I have this new aura about me that parts the seas and calms the storm within?

From an early age, I've been told that I am a child of God. I was brought up in the church. I went to Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. I attended youth group. In high school and college I worked part-time in the church office. I was active as a child, as a young person, and as an adult. That being said, I've still wondered at times about my

Fruit of My Spirit

place in God's family and God's place in mine. When the lights are turned out and I've left the church building, is there really a spot in God's heart for a defiant child? In His divine plans for a self-centered teenager? In His family for an adult who gets tired, impatient, frustrated, and distracted? Just having to ask tells me that I've truly failed to grasp the enormity of God's love and mercy. And today, I stumble through life trying to understand a gift that has no measure, picking myself up, only to trip on the very next hurdle. Bumped and bruised I've failed to see God's incredible ability to make the best out of the worst, the most out of the least, using forgotten moments, selfish intentions, and regrettable mistakes all for His glory.

I think I have a pretty good understanding of God's gift of unmerited love and complete forgiveness intellectually. Like any good Sunday School student, I could put together a well-worded essay on the tenets of faith; my head's got it. But my heart's not so sure. I realize now that I've rested in my intellect without finding comfort for my soul. I've reacted to life with the frustrations of a child, the hurts of a teen, and the failings of an adult. I have buckled under the weight of God's law and found it harder and harder to stand tall in the light of His love and grace. I've let my own plans and ambitions trump God's will for me in my life. I've ignored His blessings, focusing instead on life's challenges, and let the what-ifs consume my thoughts and energy. And now wrongdoings and shortcomings, imperfections and transgressions have become stone tablets amounting to fifty-six pounds of excess weight.

So here's where I find myself: I'm sitting in church on Sunday morning. We've just sung a couple uplifting songs of welcome. Next is the Confession of Sins (for all those wrongdoings, shortcomings, imperfections, and transgressions):

Most merciful God, we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned against You in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We justly deserve Your present and eternal punishment. For the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways to the glory of Your holy name. Amen.

Some Sundays we're more blunt: "I, a poor miserable sinner, confess unto Thee that I am by nature sinful and unclean." And with those words, I'm left in a poor, miserable place with no room to hide

behind the collective voice of the congregation. God has offered me errors and omissions insurance and I'm still opting to fight my own battles in court—day after day after day. I've not only returned His gift of forgiveness unopened, but I've left him waiting in the foyer of my life as I linger endlessly at the pity party for innumerable mistakes. God's patience has been undeniable and completely undeserved. He has waited when I couldn't be bothered, when I was determined to go it alone, when I had a "better" idea, an easier solution. As the failures amassed and life's struggles accumulated, He remained faithful, loving and caring for me, guiding and pushing me.

By focusing on the trials of this life, I've overlooked the forgiveness that comes immediately after my confession in the pew. I've missed the harvest that springs forth from seeds of grace. And in doing so, I've missed the fruit of God's Spirit described so eloquently in Paul's letter to the people of Galatia, a letter written in part to help new Christians who had lived under Old Testament law move forward in New Testament grace. He passionately encouraged them to live by the Spirit and to share in the fruit of the Spirit:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such there is no law.

—Galatians 5:22–23

With Paul's encouragement and God's blessing, I want to reframe my own life in God's love and grace. I want to take the memories, those pictures that have been hanging on the walls of my heart, and reframe them. I want to replace broken glass, bad matting, and damaged wood. Together with God, I want to redo each photo, this time concentrating on the beauty of each remembrance, this time surrounded by a frame of love and forgiveness. Through it all I want to focus on the hugeness of God's faithfulness. There won't be a tap on my forehead; there will be no magical moments. This is real life, not a cartoon recreation. God's holding my hand, not a wand. He's really there; He has been all along. He has loved me without hesitation every day, every moment, through the best and the worst. I've truly been a part of His most glorious plan and most wonderful purpose. The Divine Master has been using my life and my missteps in the creation of a beautiful masterpiece, a blessed work of art colored with love and hope, highlighted with mercy and joy, and signed by the Almighty Himself, my Lord, my Savior.

Fruit of My Spirit

As I go forth with God, my efforts to reframe life's experiences are not just redecorating projects; they're an opportunity to look back and see His love and forgiveness, to recognize the fruit of His Holy Spirit in my life. More importantly, they're the chance to see a bigger purpose, something that's been easy to overlook. God created me in His image. I was blessed to be a blessing. God picked me for a special purpose—one that would require the talents and experiences of a middle-aged woman, someone who had known both joy and heartache, someone who had lived life to its fullest, yet also known the regret and sorrow of a wasted moment and a neglected opportunity. He wanted my strengths and my weaknesses, my quirks and my flaws, my loves, my passions, and even my ditziness.

I'm not a child of God because people told me so; I'm His child because He made me so. He has loved and cared for me without fail through the best of times and during the most trying. When the lights were turned out and I left the church building, He left with me. And as part of His family, my growth in Him brought forth the fruit of my own spirit, imperfect, a little blemished, but delicious, sealed in His grace, fruit that has been a part of all that I do and all that I am. And now I look back with patience and understanding and look ahead with hope and joy. More importantly, I pause in gratitude for a God who was willing to include me in His unique and blessed plans for yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

And so I pray:

*May the God of hope fill me with all joy and peace as I trust in him,
so that I may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

—Romans 13:13

With God, it can be so. Today I plan for the harvest by planting seeds of hope and promise, wisdom and insight. Together with my Lord and Savior, I look back at life's struggles with new eyes, recognizing the work of the Holy Spirit in ways never before imagined or acknowledged. Those battered frames really do surround pictures of inestimable worth.

So, as the old hymn proclaims, "This is my story, this is my song!"

Blessed Assurance

Words by Fanny J. Crosby

Music by Phoebe P. Knapp

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.

Perfect submission, all is at rest!
I in my Savior am happy and blest,
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with his goodness, lost in His love.

This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long;
This is my story, this is my song,
Praising my Savior all the day long.