

Burning the Couch

Some Stories of Grace

Robbie Taggart

One day when I was a snarling baffled holy teenager, four friends and I found a lonely-looking couch on the side of the road. It had a sign on it that said, “Free.” Our minds immediately began to scroll through the brilliant possibilities presented by such a couch, such a gift. Someone thought we could hike it to our favorite camping spot up the mountain and sit upon it amid the trees and weeds and clouds and bird-song and rejoice in the incongruity of it all. But the thought of mountain snails and mildew sharing our couch led us in different directions. We thought of hiking it up to the top of some cliff and hurling it off like an enormous brown baby bird that hasn’t yet learned the art of flight. Someone wisely interjected that we might perhaps unwittingly hit some unsuspecting hiker and spend the rest of our adolescence behind bars. Which was remarkable wisdom if you stop to consider that there wasn’t a fully developed prefrontal cortex among us. Finally, someone suggested driving it down by the lake, slicing it up with knives, dousing it in gasoline and setting it on fire. Of course, the sense and beauty of this idea descended on all of us in unison, like a shared revelation. Burning a couch and taking a baseball bat to a toilet were two dreams that had long been high on my bucket list, and here was a golden opportunity shining before our very faces. We borrowed my mother’s minivan, emptied it of the back seats, loaded the couch, and drove down toward the marshy land near the lake.

We sought a spot away from public eyes. We found a perfect little stand of cottonwood trees, dry with summer thirst. We took our knives to the couch with gusto. We slashed and laughed, wild with the joy of it.

We jumped and howled and threw pieces of couch stuffing into the air. It was like a scene from *Lord of the Flies*. Then we drenched the erstwhile couch in gasoline, lit a match, and stepped back smiling. The flames and smoke immediately ascended like the pillar that guided the Israelites through the wilderness. The couch crackled like some ancient burnt offering. One friend had the sagacious forethought to bring a fire extinguisher from home. When the flames were almost twenty feet high and licking the trees, my friend rushed forward with the extinguisher. He pressed down the lever and expected a spray. Instead, disappointment dripped out—a few meager droplets. Someone had broken the seal, and the extinguisher had no pressure. The couch sizzled and blazed in the dry summer heat, and I began to fear the trees would catch.

A school bus drove by on the road that was just visible through the trees. A few minutes later, it drove by again, this time more slowly. We began to scramble, looking for a way to put out the fire. We grabbed a towel from the van. We whipped at the flames, but this just served to fan them higher. We tripped over weedy plants ripe with burs, scooping up mud and flinging it at the couch. We dipped the towel in the little water we could find and tried to wring it out over the blaze. The fire grew hotter and angrier and higher and wilder. I began to feel the despair of powerlessness. Then we heard the sirens. My heart sank, imagining the angry face of the police officer as he cuffed me and threw me into the back of his car like some petty criminal. I pictured my father's frustration at finding his delinquent son on his doorstep accompanied by the police.

We waited in scared silence. The flames raged on. The sirens got closer and louder. We winced. But it wasn't a police car that hove into view. It was a fire engine—a single small red truck from the small local town. A burly fireman came trampling through the trees with an enormous fire extinguisher in his arms. He walked past us without speaking. For two minutes, he silently stood, spraying the couch, the trees, and the surrounding weeds with fire retardant until all that was left was a black, smoldering frame with some burnt springs sitting in a scorched field. The air hung heavy with smoke. The firefighter turned to look me full in the face and said, "So. What's going on here?" "I, uh," I stammered, "we were just being idiots." He smiled broadly and said, "Well, sometimes being an idiot catches up to you." And then he walked away. He got in his truck and drove off. We stood for a moment waiting for the fist to fall, for the police sirens, for the handcuffs and the condemnation. But they never came. We looked at each other for a moment, stunned. Then we jumped in the van and drove away at exactly the speed limit, my friends lying flat in the back, laughing and astonished.

When I was younger, I thought of God as an austere figure waiting to catch me messing up, a god who never laughed. I imagined him as angry and eager to punish. I no longer picture him that way. My God sings and laughs and blesses and gives and forgives seventy times seven times and then some. Perhaps the reality that wickedness never was happiness is not a threat. It is simply an eternal truth. Sometimes we light our lives on fire. Sometimes being an idiot catches up to you. We scramble and worry. We get burned and scratched, and we lose hope. Then God shows up, like that firefighter that day by the lake, ready to help and wearing a smile. Into our desperation and anguish, grace arrives to put out the flames and then hands our lives back to us, somehow restored and shining, aflame with a new holy light that does not consume but only warms and illuminates. Grace is a gift, unmerited and always surprising.



I sense that grace arrives not only for our foolishness, but for our brokenness as well. Fires rage that we never started. Sometimes the world feels so broken, and my heart is broken, and I don't see how God's heart is not broken, except that he is God and even when his heart is broken, he knows it will not always be broken, because he heals all things and wipes away all tears from all eyes, personally and one by one, and yes, I believe that. But in the meantime, we live in the face of heartache and hurt, of meanness and menace. The world burns around us, and we stand powerless. For these reasons, we need grace.

One time a friend of mine called me, shaken and raging. He told me that his daughter had been raped by a boy who had been a friend of the family. I went over to his house to mourn with him, and he fell into my arms, sobbing. He said he had a fifty-cent solution, and he shook in rage and grief. He told me he was going to put a bullet in the boy. Then, without warning, he asked me for a blessing. He wanted to hear the words of God. I laid my hands on his head and waited. What do you say at such a time? Why do daughters get raped? Why do friends shake in our arms? How does such darkness exist in a world that has shown itself to me so often in so much splendor? How does one offer any real comfort, any real hope when you can't fix it, can't take it back, can't change the world? Into that moment, the voice of God came. Grace came. Peace came. Not a cheap peace, but the peace that passes understanding. A grace-given gift. After the blessing, we cried together and we ached and we hoped. And that hope tasted like grace. Grace can transfigure bitterness into a something shining with the subtle sweetness of hope.



Here is another grace story. My friend Brandon was born to drug-addicted parents. His mom was fourteen. His dad was fifteen. He had an older brother. You can do the math. By the time Brandon was three, he was smoking marijuana. By five, he was doing cocaine. He said that when he went to school, the other kids would make fun of him because he didn't have any underwear and he was dirty and hungry and smelled like cigarettes and drugs. He would eat maybe once a day, at the local food shelter or at the school. His parents were dealing to fuel their addictions. One day in first grade, he told his dad that he wasn't feeling well and didn't want to go to school. His father, an enormous, burly, bearded man, punched my friend in his sweet six-year-old face, breaking his nose and making him bleed and vomit. Then he told him to go to school. The little boy went. What else could he do?

As a small boy, Brandon watched one day as eight police officers attacked his father, trying to arrest him. His dad sent three of them to the hospital before they finally subdued him with tasers, batons, and a bean-bag round. One officer led Brandon away to another room so that he would not witness the brawl. He told me that by second grade he was so tired of life that he began to consider suicide. He wondered if he would always hurt, always be lonely, always be unloved. He felt worthless. No one cared about him. By second grade, he was stealing and doing heavy drugs, and his second-grade teacher pulled him aside and asked what was happening. Brandon refused to speak. His father had threatened to seriously hurt him if he ever told about home, and Brandon believed his dad. This teacher told him she wasn't going to let him leave the room until he told her what was going on. She told him that everything would be all right. She told him she cared about him and wanted to help him. For the first time in his life, he felt a faint glow of hope.

I love that second-grade teacher. I wonder if she knows what her career meant. If all it meant is that Brandon is okay, it is enough. Every morning that she woke up and got herself out of bed and walked into that school to wrangle the wild, holy, beautiful children before her was worth the effort. Sometimes grace is disguised as a second-grade teacher with her own problems and her own heartache, a teacher who is probably worried and weary over a thousand things, but who reaches out in love to a small, broken boy.

Brandon got taken into foster care, and he began to believe that life could change. He had more teachers who encouraged him, especially in his artwork. He became a sterling scholar in art with a 2.3 GPA. He has

become a teacher and an artist. He teaches ceramics and makes pots with his feet and does one-handed pull-ups and wins rock-climbing championships and changes lives. And his students love him because he loves them and he has a catching laugh and a lot of joy. And he knows that love matters and love saves us. That love, even human love, is one of the faces of grace.

As a teenager, once his life had been reclaimed by astonishing grace and he had been adopted into a real family, he saw his mom one day on the side of the road. He said her face was melting away from meth abuse. The friends he was with made some offhand comment about this ragged and shabby woman, and he told them it was his mother. He stopped to pick her up, and after a painful conversation, he dropped her off in government custody, hoping against hope for an outpouring of grace for his mom.

After not seeing his father for years, Brandon went to the mental hospital where his dad was staying. He had destroyed his mind with drugs. "He was like a three-year-old," Brandon says. After a few minutes of helping his dad remember who he was, his father brought him a worn t-shirt and a small bag of beans. "I've been saving these for you," he said, "for five years. I wanted to give them to you for Christmas." Brandon said that his heart cracked and he felt grace heal his hatred for this man who had destroyed his childhood.

There are many flavors of grace. Its light shines everywhere, on every anguish and in every heart.



Bruce R. McConkie understood the ubiquity of grace. He wrote, "All things that exist are manifestations of the grace of God."¹ Everything is grace. Every single thing. This world is riddled with grace, shot through with God's mercy and love and light. A child's eyes staring back at you in the mostly-darkness of the morning. Leaves and leaflessness. Clouds and clear skies. Hope and light and joy and forgiveness and peace and strength. The air we breathe and the lungs that drink the air. These are all gifts of grace. Grace stands at the door and knocks, leans in the doorway and smiles, sits at the dinner table after the meal has been finished, pushes back the chair and roars with laughter. Grace makes the meal. Grace is the meal. The requirement for the reception of grace is ultimately simply the acceptance

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1966), 338.

of grace. It is always already there, like a gift waiting to be opened. We cannot earn it, but we might put ourselves in the pathways of grace. Acknowledgment of brokenness and need, hunger and thirst, the realization that our lives are on fire and we need help—these open the floodgates of grace. The requirement is open eyes and an open heart. It is open arms and an embrace. To see grace is to experience grace.

I am reminded that one day the air will begin to shimmer and shake and hum with a music that is not of this world. And a light will come from the east, growing in intensity and brightness, causing the air to shake, to undulate and roll, to swell and to sing, causing the grass to reach and to sing and the trees to shiver with music. And I will feel myself becoming lighter, sorrow and heaviness melting away like snow in spring, will feel the joy I have always known myself capable of, will look around to see others, to find ourselves soaring through the air. To meet the Lord in the clouds, the scripture says. A new song. We will come singing a new song. A song beyond words but created with human voices. And the voices of others, of angels and gods. I will know the words or the nonwords, the motions of the mouth and the movement of lungs, even though I have never heard it, yet I know somehow that I have heard it, have known it. I was born from this song, brought forth from this light. And the Lord will wipe away all tears from off all eyes. There will be no more sorrow and no more death. I will know as I am known. I will rise. The earth will become new. Grace will triumph. All things will be new. All things. All things.

One of my favorite scriptural passages is found in Zephaniah 3:17: “The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.” I love the image of God resting from the anguish of watching his children hurt, sighing in gratitude when his grace has finally accomplished its full work. God will rejoice over redeemed Creation with joy, his relief will burst forth as music, and he will sing. What will that song sound like? What is the sound of grace? When sirens turn to symphonies, when the only cries are rapture, when the fire only sanctifies and heals, when God opens his mouth to sing, I want to be there.

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