

# GRACE UNDER PRESSURE

Responding Faithfully to Stress

CHRISTOPHER M. KENNEDY

*With a Foreword by  
Paul L. Maier*

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*This book is dedicated with love to my son Ethan. Ethan, you have a heart of gold. You are one of the kindest, most thoughtful people I've ever met. I'm so proud of the person God has made you to be. Your kindness will be tested by stressful situations and challenges. With God's help, you will be up to the task. I pray for God to fill you with His Spirit so that you may show the grace of Jesus in good times and hard times. Your mom and I love you and are here to support you always.*



# Contents

Foreword.....	00
Preface.....	00
<b>PART 1: The Necessity of Grace.....</b>	<b>00</b>
1. Living Gracefully.....	00
2. God’s Perspective on Stress.....	00
3. Did Jesus Ever Crack under Pressure?.....	00
4. Unparalleled Pressure: The Cross.....	00
<b>PART 2: Grace from the Cross.....</b>	<b>00</b>
5. Father, Forgive Them.....	00
6. You Will Be with Me in Paradise.....	00
7. Behold, Your Son; Behold, Your Mother.....	00
8. Why Have You Forsaken Me?.....	00
9. I Thirst.....	00
10. It Is Finished.....	00
11. Into Your Hands.....	00
Conclusion: God’s Tools for Graceful Living.....	00
Leader Guide.....	00
Acknowledgments.....	00
Notes.....	00

# FOREWORD

Many books have titles that only vaguely suggest their contents. This is not one of them. Christopher Kennedy has written a book featuring Jesus' last statements on the Good Friday cross that could not have been better presented than *Grace under Pressure*. None better, because no better example of grace or pressure is possible. Grace covers the generous provenance of God and refers to the ultimate gifts of forgiveness and eternal life to believers, and pressure involves the horrendous circumstances of Jesus' crucifixion. Despite pressure from atoning for the incalculable mass of human sin since creation, our Lord testified to the grace of God to all humanity in His suffering and death: the most righteous individual who ever lived suffering the worst penalties conceivable—grace under pressure indeed!

In these pages, Kennedy, a Christian pastor in San Antonio, Texas, provides well-crafted material for a Lenten series of sermons, which indeed they were in his own congregation, and which prompted this book. It could also serve as a study for a class of adults, or near adults, since he has included a thought-provoking set of questions at the end of each chapter that would stimulate discussion.

The author shows his skills as a first-class homiletician. In these meditations, which are extremely appropriate as to doctrine and application in reporting on Jesus that fateful day, Kennedy regularly employs Scripture in support of his theological views without “stretching” any of his insights.

His book opens by discussing why the world needs God's grace today and one major cause of modern problems: stress. Very likely, the planet has witnessed more stress due to the demands of the

accelerated existence we have today, politically, economically, socially, and intellectually, which have robbed us of happiness and peace of mind. No one can quarrel with this statement as they sigh, “Where are the wonderful days of yesteryear?” On checking it out, however, one finds that sin is largely responsible for muddying the waters, in previous generations as well as now. Christ is the answer to our crying need for God’s grace and effective spiritual solutions.

The author provides sparkling illustrations based on Scripture and other appropriate sources: David and Solomon, for example, who lived gracefully until they succumbed to pressure and stresses that they themselves caused and ended their days gracelessly. Other historical figures up to the present day are also mentioned, such as the author himself or Dr. Robert Cade, a Lutheran and the inventor of Gatorade, in the chapter in which Jesus says, “I thirst.”

This book also ripples with brilliant illustrations of how this has worked in this pastor’s professional life and can work well also for others, clergy or laity. These are just a few examples from this well-written book in which there is not a dull line.

I found myself surprisingly in need of Kennedy’s suggestions while preparing for my own latest book on Jesus. During my dictation to my secretary, too much stress often led me to raise my voice whenever she wanted a sentence repeated. And I could not recall the *perfect way* I had presented it the first time (only then feeling like a worm for raising my voice rather than demonstrating Christian patience as I should have done). In this regard, I warmly endorse this book for all Christian leaders who may have had similar problems in failing to celebrate God’s grace as Jesus did, the model for us all.

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# PREFACE

In 1 Corinthians 11:1, the apostle Paul wrote, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

If you want to respond gracefully to the pressures of life, look to the cross. You’ll find no greater exhibition of love while under intense strain than Jesus. His conduct on the cross is the defining moment of grace in all of history.

We all face pressures. Appropriate levels of stress are necessary and healthy. Excessive stress, however, is more than God designed us to handle. When we’re stretched beyond our capacity, we’re overloading the system our Creator engineered. The purpose of this book is to help you live more gracefully when faced with *excessive stress*. The fuel for graceful living is God’s love that “has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5).

The genesis of this book was a Lenten sermon series. On Ash Wednesday, five Sundays in Lent, and Good Friday, I preached on the seven words of Jesus from the cross. The series resonated with my congregation, and I hope the messages will encourage you too.

This book is divided into two parts. Part 1 sets up the seven last statements by exploring themes of grace and stress in our world today, in the Bible, and in Jesus’ life. Part 1 ends by providing context for what Jesus experienced on the cross. Part 2 is a study of the seven last statements, highlighting Jesus’ graceful words and actions.



PREFACE

You may be suffering under excessive stress right now. I pray this book will help you navigate your challenges in a God-honoring way.

“Grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift” (Ephesians 4:7). God grant you a full measure of His gift of grace today and always.

CHRISTOPHER M. KENNEDY  
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS  
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# PART 1

## The Necessity of Grace

We wouldn't need to be graceful if life were easy. But life isn't easy. Stress is an inescapable reality. Sometimes we feel pushed to the limit by our circumstances. Pressure was just as unavoidable for people in the Bible, even for Jesus Himself. His earthly ministry was filled with demands, opposition, and situations that tested His resolve. The cross was the culmination of His pressure-packed ministry.

*But He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

2 CORINTHIANS 12:9–10

# LIVING GRACEFULLY

I saw the crash coming. The crushing of metal was painful to witness. The human reaction afterward was hard to watch too.

At their own peril, cars cross the intersection of Huebner and Fredericksburg Roads in San Antonio. For the second time in months, I witnessed an accident at the intersection. Two cars, coming from opposite directions, tried to occupy the same space at the same moment, a physical impossibility. The cars collided.

One woman emerged from her car looking dazed. Her body shook. Her face was ghostly white.

The other driver stormed out of her car like a rocket. Her face was tomato red. She didn't ask the other driver if she was all right. She didn't say, "It's okay. It was an accident. Things happen."

No, she stomped up to the driver and exploded in a tirade of expletives. I've forgotten most of her words, but I do remember one exclamation: "That car was my life!"

I've previously encountered people after auto accidents. Usually they're rattled, shaken, disoriented. I'd never seen a person go into attack mode like that in the immediate aftermath of an accident.

Let's give the woman the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps she was already having a bad day and was one more catastrophe away from blowing up. Maybe she had depleted her entire life savings to purchase the car. Maybe she'd owned the car for most of her adult life, and it was her most cherished possession. It's possible she grew up in a household where screaming was the norm for handling conflict.

I don't know her story. All I know is that she responded to a stressful situation loudly and aggressively.

I'm in no position to judge her. I've responded to situations poorly myself. Chief of sinners—that's me.

Like me, you've probably had your share of ungraceful moments. You've also probably observed others react in ways that were uncomfortable to watch. *Ungraceful* is hard to define with words. But you know it when you see it.

**Ungraceful behavior is losing your cool and screaming at your children.**

**Ungraceful behavior is belittling your spouse.**

**Ungraceful behavior is losing self-control over your eating, drinking, or spending.**

**Ungraceful behavior is road rage.**

**Ungraceful behavior is venting over social media.**

**Ungraceful behavior is political debaters verbally assaulting one another with low blows.**

**Ungraceful behavior is blaming others.**

**Ungraceful behavior is “woe is me” self-pity.**

You get the picture. No doubt, you can add to the list. Ungraceful behavior pervades our society and often our own homes.

## **The Root of Ungracefulness**

Where do our ungraceful reactions come from?

When we're under pressure, two factors collide: our sinful nature and difficult circumstances. We are broken people living in a broken world. The combination can be devastating.

Feeling stress is not a sin. Feelings aren't sins. God created us as emotional beings. How we respond to feelings can be sinful.

When we react to stress with pettiness, we're not honoring God. When we explode in anger, we're not treating others as God desires. In those moments, rather than the Holy Spirit having His way, our sinful nature dictates our behaviors.

The Bible traces our sinful nature to the dawn of history. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God in the Garden of Eden, sin invaded the human race: "Sin came into the world through one man" (Romans 5:12). Sin became a part of our DNA, transmitted through every generation. We're contaminated even before we're born, as it says in Psalm 51:5: "I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." Scripture describes us as "children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3) and says that "everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (John 8:34).

Our sinful nature means we're inclined toward wrongdoing. We're predisposed to lose our cool, blow up, and make a mess of things. We're volatile beings. We're storms brewing. The potential for sinful actions is always there. An alignment of wrong conditions stirs up the storm within. The result can be minimal damage or devastating destruction.

That's how it works. Circumstances press upon our sinful nature and push us over the edge. We express God-given feelings in ungodly ways. Under pressure, we have a hard time containing our discomfort. Others bear the brunt of our reactivity.

## With God's Help

How do we break the cycle of ungraceful words and actions? I aspire to be a more graceful person, and you probably do too.

One of the most encouraging notes I've ever received was attached to a birthday present a few years ago. The note said, in part, "I know this is a tough season, and I admire the grace, poise, and leadership you continue to show. May God continue to give you the wisdom and guidance to shepherd His people."

Those three words meant the world to me: grace, poise, and leadership. I keep the note in my desk as a reminder of those

ideals. At the time the note was given to me, I didn't feel like the words applied. But knowing that someone else saw those qualities in me instilled confidence, and it cultivated gratitude in my heart. The gratitude was partly toward my friend for such a generous attribution. The bulk of the gratitude, however, was toward God.

During a tough season, whatever grace, poise, and leadership I showed was to God's credit alone. None of us are at our best under stress. Left to our own devices under pressure, we're more likely to exhibit the characteristics of ungraceful living. With God's help, we can respond differently. We can be graceful people.

I want to emphasize that point: *with God's help*. On our own, we struggle to resist our impulses. We lose our composure and become overly reactive. Left to ourselves, we inflict pain on others and ourselves.

By faith in Jesus, we have help. Jesus promised His followers, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever" (John 14:16). The Helper, whom Jesus identifies as "the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17), brings us to faith and enables us to live holy lives. Even when we're under stress, the Holy Spirit is active in us and can produce godliness.

Romans 8 teaches us about life in the Spirit. Believers "walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (v. 4). Walking according to the Spirit has a tangible effect on how we live. Galatians 5:22–23 lists the fruit of the Spirit, the byproduct of Jesus dwelling in your heart by faith: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

The items in that list are exactly what we need! With God's help, we can live gracefully, even when trials and troubles press down on us.



## God's Grace and Our Grace

*Grace* is one of the most wonderful words in the English language and one of the most beautiful concepts in the Bible. “By grace you have been saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8). It doesn’t get any better than that!

The overwhelming majority of references to *grace* in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, refer to God’s grace, the source of our salvation. Some will distinguish between different kinds of grace, in an effort to explore the magnitude of God’s love—its “breadth and length and height and depth” (Ephesians 3:18). Consider these possible dimensions of grace:

- ◆ **Common grace, the gifts God gives to all people as Creator; “He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matthew 5:45).**
- ◆ **Saving grace, God’s gift of forgiveness and eternal life through Jesus.**
- ◆ **Sanctifying grace, the Holy Spirit’s work in us to produce spiritual fruit and godly living.**
- ◆ **Sustaining grace, the strength God provides us to withstand trials; “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).**

Thinking in these categories, the grace we exhibit under pressure could be considered sanctifying grace or sustaining grace. In the midst of trials, God sustains us and empowers us to bear spiritual fruit, even under adverse conditions. As our Creator, Savior, and Helper, God is the source of all grace. Empowered by His grace, we strive to live graciously and gracefully.

We live gracefully by persevering through struggles with uncompromised integrity. “If when you do good and suffer for it

you endure, this is a *gracious* thing in the sight of God” (1 Peter 2:20, emphasis added).

We live gracefully when our tone reinforces our faith. “Let your speech always be *gracious*, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person” (Colossians 4:6, emphasis added).

We live gracefully when we encourage others. “Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give *grace* to those who hear” (Ephesians 4:29, emphasis added).

We live gracefully when we give. The apostle Paul advocated generosity when he wrote, “As you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all earnestness, and in our love for you—see that you excel in this act of *grace* also” (2 Corinthians 8:7, emphasis added).

God’s grace alone saves. A Christian’s graceful living gives concrete expression to God’s sanctifying and sustaining work in us.

## People of Grace in the Bible

Search the pages of Scripture and you’ll find examples of people responding gracefully to pressure-packed situations. These heroes of the faith reflect the God they served. The Bible describes God as “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 145:8). God is the author of grace. No one can “out-grace” God. You can’t be more graceful than sacrificing Your beloved Son for sinful humanity.

Many times in the Bible, believers faced a crossroads. They could act ungracefully—compromising their convictions, caving in to pressure, holding a grudge, exacting revenge, or repaying hate with hate. Or they could act gracefully—standing firm in their beliefs, showing respect, forgiving, persevering through obstacles, and choosing kindness. On many wonderful occasions, with the help of the Holy Spirit, God’s people acted gracefully.

Consider David. King Saul was determined to kill David. On the run, David and his men hid in a cave when the king himself entered, distracted and unsuspecting. The opportunity presented itself. David's men encouraged him to seize the moment and kill the murderous king. David resisted. He sliced off a corner of the king's robe and no more. By rejecting temptation and showing mercy, David exhibited grace under pressure. (See 1 Samuel 24.)

Consider Daniel. The law was fixed: no praying to anyone except the king. The penalty was clear: a no-return trip to the lions' den. Daniel could have capitulated and conformed. But he held his ground and trusted in God. The king's servants threw Daniel into the lions' den. The man of faith emerged unscathed. By refusing to compromise his beliefs, Daniel exhibited grace under pressure. (See Daniel 6.)

Consider Queen Esther. Her cousin Mordecai revealed to her a plot to exterminate the Jews. Although it would violate decorum, Esther knew what she had to do: interrupt the king's schedule and alert him. To save her people, she was willing to take the risk. She said, "Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). By risking her life to save others, Esther demonstrated courage and resolve. (See Esther 4.)

Consider Stephen. He was murdered for proclaiming salvation in Jesus. Enraged men hurled stones at him. He could have hurled insults at them. He could have protested. Instead, in his dying breaths, he forgave, saying, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). By loving his enemies, Stephen exhibited grace under pressure. (See Acts 7.)

## The Graceful Savior

Stephen's words echo Jesus' words from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). That is where our journey will lead us in this book. The Christian life always leads back to the cross. Without Jesus' death on the

cross and His resurrection, we have nothing. By His death and risen life, we have everything. In all of Scripture, the greatest example of gracefulness is our Savior.

On the cross, Jesus was the ultimate example of grace. He didn't lash out at His tormentors. He showed compassion. He *forgave* them. The Bible tells us that Jesus hung on the cross for six hours, from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. on that fateful Friday (Mark 15:25, 33–37). Those six hours featured the greatest display of grace ever shown. The majority of this book will explore Jesus' graciousness on the cross, specifically His seven last statements.

On the cross, Jesus was the true source of grace. God's Word teaches that we are "justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). Through the cross, God saves us by grace. Jesus paid the price for our sins. He suffered in our place. By faith in Him, His righteousness is credited to us. That's grace, the most wonderful grace ever shown!

Empowered by the grace of Christ, we seek to live gracefully. Not only does His cross grant us justification through faith, but His cross also leads us to sanctification—that is, holy living inspired by the Savior who lived in perfect holiness for us. Being graceful under pressure is living out our sanctification.

In Jesus, we have access to an unlimited source of grace. He saves us from our sins. He saves us for holy living. His salvation changes our lives. Even in our hardest moments, He is our strength and our guide. By faith, we have a divine companion in every situation, including the moments that push us to the limit.

## Keeping Your Eyes on Jesus

For a modern-day example of being cool under pressure, look no further than Nik Wallenda. Nik is the seventh generation of a family of stunt daredevils and circus performers. He has walked on a steel cable between two skyscrapers in downtown Chicago, across Times Square in New York City, and most famously across Niagara Falls from the United States side to the Canadian side.

In 2020, he topped all his previous stunts by walking on a cable over an active volcano in Nicaragua. It took him thirty minutes to go from one side to the other, crossing over a boiling lake of lava spewing toxic gases.

In addition to being an amazing daredevil, Nik is a Christian. In interviews, Nik confesses that he is saved by grace through faith through the cross of Jesus. He says that his faith in God gives him peace in the middle of his death-defying stunts. He could easily be distracted by the danger he's facing. He said he keeps his mind focused on the Lord throughout His stunts, thinking about his faith in God from one end to the other.

The danger around you and me may not be a volcano underneath us. It may be bad news all around us. Or the threat of illness hanging over our heads. Or difficult decisions in front of us. Our mounting stress within us.

The purpose of this book is to help you fix your eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:2 NIV) so that when you face the heat of pressure-packed situations, you can emulate the grace of our Savior. We'll fix our eyes on Jesus by beholding Him on the cross, where He exhibited grace beyond our comprehension. Daily, we face situations that challenge our spiritual composure. You will make it to the other side of your trials. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you can get there gracefully.

## Discussion Questions

1. Complete this sentence from your own observations or experiences: Ungraceful behavior is . . .
2. Now complete this sentence: We live gracefully when . . .
3. How can a person be graceful and still be raw and honest about his or her struggles?
4. Choose one of the character studies referenced: David, Daniel, Esther, or Stephen. Read that person's story, as listed in the chapter. Discuss how that story demonstrates graceful behavior.
5. Why do we need the Holy Spirit's help to live gracefully? What does He do that we can't do for ourselves?
6. Review the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23. Which of the fruit do you most desire for yourself right now?
7. If you were to live more gracefully, what effect might that have on the people around you?
8. What do you hope to gain from reading this book?