

“Of all sad words from tongue or pen, the saddest are: ‘what might have been.’”

I’m sure we’ve all heard this line before, and I’ll be we can all think of examples where this is true. Perhaps we picture a young person full of potential who squandered it all. Or a business prospect, lost because we didn’t strike while the iron was hot. Or even a ministry opportunity, wasted for lack of vision or resources. Ah, yes! “What might have been!”

But you know what? The reverse can also be true. There are cases where something negative “might have been,” but against all odds people turned out really well. For instance, one of the best parents I know grew up in a very dysfunctional home. One of the wisest pastors I know struggled for years with substance abuse. One of the strongest Christians I know was raised by two hard-nosed atheists. In each case, think “what might have been!” And there are many other examples I could mention. Starting out, the odds may have been stacked against these people, but in each case, they beat the odds! Whether that meant breaking the cycle, surmounting the obstacles, overcoming the prejudice, or what have you, instead of letting themselves be victims, they did something meaningful with their lives. And that has to make us ask: *How? What made the difference? Or more to the point: What makes the difference?*

And what does? Is it nature? Or nurture? Nowadays, people often debate which one makes the bigger difference, but in these cases, neither played the decisive role. What made the difference was something spiritual – a spiritual combination of divine power, working in a submissive heart that was guided by God’s Word. In short, what made the difference was **grace**. Each of these people could say with St. Paul, **“By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me has not been in vain!”**

So *how* did grace make the difference? First, it made the person aware: *My life can be better than this!* Then it inspired hope: *My life can be better than this!* Then it created faith: *My life can better than this!* **“By the grace of God”** *my life can be better!* And then? Grace never forces itself upon us. It must be allowed to work. So that means there’s a choice to be made – made not just once but countless times throughout life. Essentially, the choice is this: *Lord, I trust that my life can be better, and I trust You to do what it takes! If it means depending on Your power, not my own – so be it! If it means submitting to Your will, not my own – so be it! If it means following Your Word, living by Your priorities, not my own – so be it! So be it – for that’s what it takes to rise above my weaknesses. That’s what it takes to overcome my disadvantages. Depending on Your power, submitting to Your will, following Your Word. That’s what makes the difference!*

As we look back through history, we see many who made this choice, and there is much that we can learn from their example. In spite of “what might have been,” they chose a higher path through life – the path of committed discipleship. As a result, they not only

survived their circumstances, they thrived! In the end, they were able to say, “**By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me has not been in vain!**”

One excellent example is Saint Nicholas. No, not the jolly old resident of the North Pole. I mean the historic St. Nicholas, the fourth century bishop of Myra in modern Turkey. We Americans don't make much of him, but in the Lutheran heartland, his story is well known and treasured – especially by children. Today is his feast day, so parents there will be telling their children about his generosity toward the poor, his devotion to prayer, and his willingness to stand up for Jesus – the truth about Jesus – no matter what the cost. Actually, the historic St. Nicholas was quite a guy – quite a Christian example! But here is something even these parents may not know. Nicholas didn't have to turn out that way. In fact, it's pretty amazing that he did when you consider what he went through early in life and imagine “what might have been.”

For starters, Nicholas was born and baptized at a time when it was dangerous to be a Christian. He grew up during the worst days of Roman persecution. Fortunately, he and his parents survived that. And fortunately, his parents taught him well: *This is what it means to belong to Jesus. This is what it means to follow Jesus. This is what it means to have Jesus as the Lord of your life.* I say “fortunately,” because even though they survived persecution, his parents died when Nicholas was about twenty. A plague devastated his village, leaving him with no family at all. As a result, he inherited great wealth. He could do whatever he wanted, live any way he wanted. But what was that compared to losing his family? We can only imagine how terrible this must have been for Nicholas – and what temptations he must have faced! Someone else might have wallowed in self-pity. Someone else might have turned his back on God. Someone else might have eased his pain with self-indulgence. Yes, that's “what *might* have been!” And think how different his story would have turned out!

For instance, the most famous story is what Nicholas did when he learned that his father's friend had lost his fortune and could not provide dowries for his three daughters. Back then, no dowry meant no prospects of marriage. And back then, most unmarried women had no way of providing for themselves – meaning that once their parents were gone, they could wind up on the streets, forced into begging or even prostitution. So what was Nicholas' response? First, let's imagine what it might have been. Given his bitter experience in life, it “might have been” **indifference**. *Life's tough all over. At least they've still got their parents. Why should I worry about them?* Or it “might have been” **condescension** – going over to the house, humiliating the father by ostentatiously offering him help, and making sure the father knew he owed him.

Yes, that's “what *might* have been.” But it wasn't. And why? Nicholas had a choice to make: *Life robbed me of my parents. Will I let grief rob me of even more? Will I let it rob me of a meaningful life? Will I let it rob me of the faith my parents taught me? Will I let it rob me of decency and compassion? Will I?* Nicholas chose not to let that happen; chose not to let bitterness rule his heart. Instead, he chose to open His heart to God and allowed His grace to work.

What a difference *that* made! Do you know how the story really goes? Nicholas could easily afford to give money for the girls' dowries. The problem was how to do it without humiliating their father. Nicholas had been taught that when you give to the poor, don't even let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. So, to preserve the man's dignity, Nicholas decided to give the money anonymously. When the eldest daughter got old enough to marry, Nicholas filled a bag full of gold, attached an explanatory note (unsigned!), then went over to their house in the dead of night. Making sure no one was around, he tossed the bag of gold through a window and took off. Mission accomplished! When the second daughter got old enough to marry, he did the same thing. Mission accomplished! Then the third daughter got old enough to marry. Nicholas started to do the same thing, but when he snuck over in the dead of night, they caught him. Busted! For anonymous charity! And what could he say? Well, this is not what he would say. He would consider it bragging. But we could say it about him, because it was definitely true in his case: **“By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me has not been in vain!”**

Here's another story. Nicholas had always wanted to make a pilgrimage to the holy land, and traveling by ship from Myra to Palestine was relatively easy – provided the weather cooperated. The trip there was great. The trip back was not. Nicholas got caught in a terrible storm. Monstrous waves! Violent wind! Even the hardy sailors were terrified! So what happened next?

First, let's think “what might have been.” Going way, way back, you remember how Nicholas watched his parents suffer from the plague. Do you suppose he prayed for them? Sure. As they grew sicker, do you suppose he prayed and prayed and prayed? Sure. And yet, they still died. What *might* have been his reaction to that? *Prayer doesn't work.* And what *might* have been his response? *I'm not praying any more.* These days, that's a lot of people's response: *God didn't answer my prayer the way I wanted, so obviously prayer doesn't work, and I'm not wasting my time praying any more!* So here, too, Nicholas had a choice to make. And let's be clear: this wasn't just a choice about prayer. It was about faith; about trusting God without any conditions. It was about depending on God's power, submitting to His will, following His Word come what may. It was about allowing grace to work on God's terms, not his own. That was the choice, and if Nicholas had given up on prayer – well, he'd have been sunk, wouldn't he? Literally sunk. Nicholas, the ship, all aboard. That's “what might have been.”

But when Nicholas chose not to let *bitterness* rule his heart and let the Spirit rule instead, that also applied to prayer. In fact, he devoted himself all the more to prayer; he became known as a man of prayer. So what happened in the midst of that storm? He prayed. Nicholas turned to God, depended on God, and prayed. Legend has it, the storm stopped like that! And maybe it did. But whether or not it was “like that,” the storm stopped. The prayer was answered. The ship was spared. Everyone got home safely. After that, many gave him credit for the miracle. But he wouldn't accept it. He knew the truth: **“By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me has not been in vain!”**

There are other stories we could also tell. For instance, did you know that Nicholas was at the Council where our Nicene Creed was adopted? He was a lot older then, but no less passionate about the Lord, and no less willing to stand up for Jesus – the truth about Jesus – no matter what the cost. The Nicene Creed is part of his legacy, too – which, again, is pretty amazing when you think “what might have been!” But God is an amazing God. Given the chance, He is **“able to do abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.”** Nicholas *gave* him the chance. He *allowed* God’s grace to work in his life. That was the key – for him, for Paul, for many before and after: **“By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me has not been in vain!”**

That is still what makes the difference today. Not circumstances. I doubt there is single person here whose life has been absolutely perfect and pleasant and positive. We’ve all had negative circumstances to deal with. Some more, some less, but we’ve all had them, which means we could all come up with reasons why our lives cannot be better; reasons to think that we are what we are and we’re just stuck with it. Yes, we all could. *And* we’d all know better than that. For there is no reason why a Christian must be a victim of circumstances. That is a choice. And so is the way to rise above our circumstances. It is a choice – a choice made once, then renewed countless times, step by step throughout life.

Why, this very day chances are we’ll face something difficult we’ll really have trouble handling. What will make the difference? Making the choice: *Lord, I’m depending on Your power, not my own.* Chances are there will be things we don’t want to do – don’t want to do, but know that we really *should*. What will make the difference? Making the choice: *Lord, I’m submitting to Your will, not my own.* And chances are we’ll face conflicting demands on our time, more expectations than we can manage. And that doesn’t include the things we want to do! So yet again, what will make the difference? Making the choice: *Lord, I’m living by Your priorities. No one else’s. Not my own. Your priorities, Lord.*

That kind of choice is what will allow grace to work in us and make the difference in our lives. Really, it’s an unbeatable combination: divine power working in a submissive heart that’s guided by God’s Word. And especially at a busy time like this, it helps to remind ourselves of this fact. We don’t have to be victims of our circumstances. God is here for us, His grace is sufficient, and He invites us to make the most of it. Let’s do just that! We’ll have less cause to look back on “what might have been,” and much more reason to say, **“By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me has not been in vain!”**