

Introduction

Exactly one week before my world collapsed in April 2015, my wife and I were out to dinner with a couple from our church that we had never been out with before. We were eating at a steakhouse on Ft. Lauderdale beach. In order to get to know me better, the husband turned to me and asked, "Tullian, what do you do for fun?" I thought about it for a minute and then I said, "You know, that's actually not an easy question to answer, not because I don't know how to have fun, but because life is going so amazingly well right now that I can't think of anything in my life that I have to get away from in order to have fun. My whole life is fun. I love my family, I get to work with my best friends, I know so many amazing people around the world, I love the opportunities I get to travel and speak and write. I love our church. I love preaching every Sunday. I love where I live. In fact, life is so fun and going so well right now that sometimes I get scared something really bad is right around the corner." Little did I know in that moment how prophetic that was going to be.

2014 had been a hard year. We had some fairly serious struggles with my oldest son and I had faced some challenges personally. But I was on the other side of that now. My son was now married to his sweet wife Jamie and they were expecting their first child. And with some tender pastoral care from some good friends, my difficulties from the previous year were behind me. I felt like I was on top of the world. Everything in my life was grooving. Besides the normal challenges and struggles of being a broken person living with other broken people in a broken world, life was good. In fact, I couldn't imagine it being any better.

Two things I had come to believe were secure forever (apart from my relationship to God) were my 21 year marriage to my teenage sweetheart Kim and my calling as the senior pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Both came crumbling down during the spring and early summer of 2015. First my marriage. Then my position at the church. Losing both came as a complete shock to me. I didn't see either coming. I was blindsided. And with those two losses came a thousand other losses. The loss of close friendships, the loss of financial stability, the loss of purpose, the loss of confidence in God's goodness, the loss of hope, the loss of joy, the loss of opportunity, the loss of life as I knew it. It went from feeling like a fairy tale to feeling like a violent tragedy. But as shocking and painful as all these losses were, my instinctive response shocked me even more: the rage, the blame-shifting, the thirst for revenge, the bitter arrogance, the self-justified resentment, the dark self-righteousness, the control-hungry manipulation, the deluded rationalization, the deep selfishness, the perverted sense of entitlement. Maybe these disgusting things which flowed from my depths with such natural ease shouldn't have shocked me. After all, I was well known for talking about my own messed-upness, talking openly about my sin and selfishness, my faults and fears, my pride and pains. I never pretended to have it all together. In fact one of the reasons people listened to my sermons and read my books and came out to hear me speak when I was traveling is because I was honest about my brokenness and the amazing grace of God that covers us at our worst. I was known for saying that God loves bad people because bad people are all that there are. So I

knew I was bad. I just didn't know I was THAT bad. It's one thing to admit that we are bad in general. It's a whole other thing to know we are bad in particular. I was finding out just how particularly bad I was. It's one thing, in other words, to say "I know I'm not perfect; I'm a sinner and I'm not as good as I should be. I make mistakes and do things I shouldn't." For some reason that's more emotionally digestible. But it's quite another thing to admit that we are dark, perverse, unavoidably and instinctively selfish, self-protective, and self-righteous. That we (not him or her) are the greatest threat to our relationships, that we are driven by selfish ambition and vain conceit, that we are addicted to being right (aka, justification by works) and securing our own "salvation" regardless of who we hurt along the way. That admission takes suffering, crashing and burning, collapsing, a running out of our own steam. It takes being exposed—a real confrontation with ourselves that we fight to avoid, delay, push back, and mitigate at all costs. As one of my counselors told me early on, circumstances don't create the condition of the heart. Rather, circumstances reveal the condition of the heart. And what was revealed to me about my heart in the fiery hotness of dire circumstances was scary and destructive. As Winston Churchill once said, "The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart."

Ironically, I was known as the "grace" guy. The guy who spoke about grace, wrote about grace, went on TV and radio and championed grace. My favorite people in the world have always been strugglers and sufferers and losers and rejects and outcasts and misfits. I love being around people like that because they tend to be more honest about their desperation and more grateful for grace. And I have always believed that I was that way too. But, the self-righteous, self-centered Pharisee that lurked just beneath the surface emerged with a vengeance. The grace guy proved to be a legalist when push came to shove. The truth is, we are very good lawyers for our own mistakes, but very good judges for the mistakes of others.

What I see now that I couldn't see then is that this explosion had been building for a few years. How could this collapse have happened just at the time when everything seemed to be running on all cylinders? How could I have been so blind to the apparent brewing of disaster? While it is true that one moment can change your life forever, that one moment is preceded by lots of smaller (seemingly insignificant) moments that culminate in one big "life-changing" moment. Such was the case for me.

Success and ease and comfort and the "good life" can be dangerous because you're more likely to be deluded about yourself when things are going well than when everything falls apart. Consequences awaken you. Paradoxically, it took being stripped of my opportunities to preach freedom in order for me to experience the freedom that I preached. The amazingly good news of God's unconditional love and mercy and grace rang true to me at a time when there was no escaping the fact that my life had fallen apart.

This is a book about sin and grace, desperation and deliverance. This is a book about brokenness and the glorious fact that God's grace runs downhill and meets us at the bottom in ways that we simply cannot know or experience when we're at the top. This is a book about

finding grace in a hopeless place.