



Responding to the River of God's Grace

by Ron
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The Tahquamenon River could knock you off your feet. I've enjoyed standing in the cold rushing water, and my kids have had fun attempting to stay on their feet against its flow. Going in wasn't the worst thing that could happen, at least not at the end of summer—it was refreshing. But in the spring, the swollen river is a different matter. It could take your breath away.

The Tahquamenon runs only 89 miles in the Eastern end of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, but it drains 820 square miles of territory, mostly cedar swamps, which makes the water a dark brown from the tannin. Cooling off in

the river is like splashing in cold brewed coffee. (*Do you want your river decaf, half-caf or fully loaded?*)

The most famous part of the

thing—knock people off their feet. At first, it may just be baby steps at the edge of the river, dipping the toes of our hearts into the coolness. But

*What keeps people from dipping their feet into the river?
What prevents people from accessing the free flow of grace?*

river is the falls—one “upper” and one “lower.” The lower falls are beautiful, but it's the upper falls that get the attention. During the spring run-off, the river sends 50,000 gallons of water *every second* over the 200 foot wide drop and down 45 feet to the rocks below. It's a spectacular sight, exhilarating and powerful.

When you come to the edge of the falls, you know you're somewhere.

I've seen grace do the same

then the dawning awareness of God's good news in Jesus can overwhelm, take us by surprise, and bring us to our knees. It's water from a fresh source, full of the evidence of God's love.

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lifeless wadis—ravines in the desert—that suddenly fill up with life-giving water during the spring rains. That water is a strong symbol of the blessing of God, rushing in on us and giving us the draft of grace that quenches our human thirst. But what is it that brings us there, to the edge of the river?



Wadi Rum desert, Jordan

track record for holy behavior, has an internal magnet that would draw them into the river of God's grace. We might also consider that a reprobate, rebellious sinner has already chosen to run as far away from the water as they can get. In both cases, though, we'd be wrong.

Which leaves the question: **what makes one person receptive to the good news while another person is not?**

Jesus addressed this issue head-on in one of his parables. In his story about

farming, he uses the picture of sowing seed—the word of God—in different soils. Each of the locations offers a different set of conditions which affect the viability of the seed.

Obstacles such as birds, thorns, rocky soil and scorching sun do their damage, and the seed does not take. The seed that falls on good soil, however, thrives and

multiplies. The simple conclusion of the story is that the same seed produces different results depending on where it falls. Receptivity depends on the condition of the soil.

Jesus' close followers were confused by the story, and they dogged him for answers to their questions. Jesus

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gives them some answers, but the conclusion is the same. Receptivity to the good news is a matter of the specific condition of the soil—the person who encounters the seed.

Another incident in the life of Jesus reveals more about the issue. Jesus sends his followers on a mission, telling them to go and deliver the good news through the towns and cities of Judea. He tells them before they even get on the road that they will encounter various reactions. Some will listen and be hospitable; others will reject them. Jesus doesn't say much about why, however. He simply assumes that some will be all thumbs-up, others clearly thumbs-down, and he tells his disciples that when rejection happens, they should shake the dust off their feet and move along.

The implication is that Jesus anticipates that some will be receptive and others won't. And that's what we'd expect, right? Except that Jesus is the



Tahquamenon Upper Falls

What provides the power that pushes us into the stream?

What makes us ready to jump?

Consider the flip side of that question: **What keeps people from dipping their feet into the river? What prevents people from accessing the free flow of grace? How is it that some seem more receptive to the Living Water than others?**

The issue of receptivity to the



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one sending, and the news his disciples take around the territory is the greatest news ever heard, and you'd think that Jesus would have made sure that everyone who heard it received it; that everyone was equally receptive.

But that's not the way it works. There are circumstances that seem to make some ready and others resistant.

If receptivity is based on circumstances, the next question is—under what circumstances are people more or less ready to accept the good news? **What makes one person more receptive to grace than another?**

If you and I were sitting across the table from one another, I think we could come up with a list of circumstances and situations of life that make a person ready to take the plunge into grace. Let's call them "receptivity enhancers." You've already thought about a few of these as you've been reading...

Life change. When big shake-ups occur in our lives, emotions and stress can set us up for reassessment. Sometimes we know about life changes ahead of us; sometimes they are a surprise, but big life events tend to bring us closer to the river's edge. Divorce, death, loss of employment, health issues—all of these can be watershed moments. But it doesn't have to be bad news. Getting married, giving birth to a child, having the kids move out, or reaching the magic land of retirement can get us to a place of receptivity where we are ready to hear and respond to the good news.

Felt needs. When we are needy, we are receptive. When we have longings—holes in our lives that demand filling—we

soften toward the gospel. Jesus talked about "hungering and thirsting" for the good things of God. That thirst is a built-in compass to get us to the river of grace.

Intellectual shift. We like to think that we are resolute in our thinking, and some of us are. But we sometimes come to a place where we need to re-think the things we believe. I'm not suggesting that intellectual pursuit alone can bring receptivity to the good news. But a dramatic shift in the way we think about life and death and God can set us up to be more willing to dip our feet into the water.

Parental Influence. We can't deny that "growing up Christian" could impact how receptive we are to God's grace. Conscientious parents, who love God and live authentic Christian lives can certainly impact their children and encourage the reception of grace. On the other hand, the same environment of faith in our families often produces just the opposite: a resistant and stubborn heart.

Guilt. When the full weight of our human and personal rebellion comes crashing in on us, it is prime time for the gospel of grace. In fact, we would say that coming to grips with our sin is one of the essential components of coming to Christ. When our lostness forces us to look for a map, or when our "brokenness" leads us to find a fix, we are eager for good news. We're ready to jump into the river without hesitation.

All of these and more can put us into the position of

receptivity. Look over the list again. What do you notice about each of the points? Ask this: How do each of these "receptivity enhancers" come into our lives? How is it that each of these things occur?

Here's the thing: we don't get close to the river because we've steered the flow to ourselves. We are not the ones who direct the course of the waters into our lives. We do not create the conditions under which grace is close and accessible and flowing. The conditions that set us up to be receptive to the grace of God are not controlled by us.

Who then?

This is the thrilling, exhilarating part! It is God himself who brings the river of grace close to us. It is the activity of his grace that brings grace close. The good news is that God is the master of the good news.

Picture the Tahquamenon River. What is it that controls and directs the flow? What is it that creates the Falls? It is gravity.

Think of gravity as the spiritual direction of God's control. He moves and shapes and directs the flow of grace into our lives, using the conditions and circumstances to bring the good news close at those times when we are receptive to him.

Remember the account of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. It's not just a story about a wanton woman getting water and being offered the ethereal Living Water instead, although that's critical. Added to that is



the event itself. The whole account is an example of how God orchestrates our lives to encounter grace in Jesus. Living Water is under his control, and he purposes and plots to steer the river where he wills.

That's not to say that we can't get in the way. We do. But in ways you may not have considered.

First, even though God steers the path of grace into our lives, we have this thing called "self will" which allows rejection and indifference. Any of the receptivity triggers listed above can be thwarted by our strong will to do things our own way. Each of us can name people who have experienced those circumstances, but yet did not respond to grace. The river is offered, but it is never forced. We can get close—close enough to hear the pounding water, even feel the mist created, but we can still turn our backs on the offer.

In addition to our own personal rejection, the gravity of the grace of God can be preempted and interrupted. Grace flows best from high places (God) to low places (our circumstances). But along the way, the flow of grace can be impeded. Consider these possible ways that receptivity can be diminished:

Cultural Aqueducts. The flow of grace can be diverted and diluted as the culture around us wins our attention.

When our lives begin to be governed by our culture's definition of success and worthiness and we get busy with all that, grace is channeled away as unnecessary and ineffectual.

Legalistic Dams. Nothing can clog up the flow of grace better than dams constructed by religion. It is the nature of legalism to consider grace too "free" and dangerously out of control. In order to keep grace under supervision, religious systems create dams that stop the flow. When legalism says we need to "do this" and "not do that," in order to earn grace, it's putting obstacles into the flow of grace that were never intended.

Religious Pumping Stations.

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Taking the dam metaphor one step further, religion believes that grace needs help. So it constructs vast and often expensive delivery systems to pump up the flow. This results in not only channeling the power of grace away, but giving it an artificial propulsion it was never designed to need.

Programmatic Bottled Water. Added to the above measures to control and monitor grace, religious systems want to put the good news into handy-dandy containers so that grace won't be so wild. So religion creates programs and strategies and campaigns. According to religion, grace bottled up is more convenient and sanitary and under control.

God's grace flows according to his gravity and the flow comes from him to us. In spite of attempts to control it, package it, divert it, or dam it up, God's grace enters our lives and urges us to take a dip.

How do we respond to the river of God's grace?

When the river beckons, we move closer. When the circumstances in our lives draw us to grace, we want to move to the edge. When we are thirsty, we dip our faces into the stream.

We acknowledge God's direction of the flow of grace. We thrill to his plans and his timing. We participate



in the gravity of grace, rather than fight it or resist it.

And we jump in. We get wet. We respond to the call of the good news by immersing ourselves in the provision of grace in Christ Jesus.

When you come to the edge of grace, you know you're somewhere. The Falls are waiting. Grace is wild and wooly and ready. Time to jump. □

Ron Benson jumped, and keeps jumping. He enjoys helping people jump into the river of grace and encourages them to splash around at Grace Christian Fellowship in Bay City, Michigan. You can find more of Ron's writing at www.ronbenson.net and connect with him on Facebook at www.facebook.com/ron.benson.16.