

Judgement, Scattering, Redemption and Forgiveness – One Family’s Testimony of Grace

by Fagel Brooks

I will make one apology to you this morning – and that is for reading this presentation. It is not my preferred way to communicate. I usually work from bullet points and fill in as I go. But wise counsel from my husband pointed out that a lot of material in the confines of a time slot necessitated this approach, if I wanted to be sure to say all that I wanted to say.

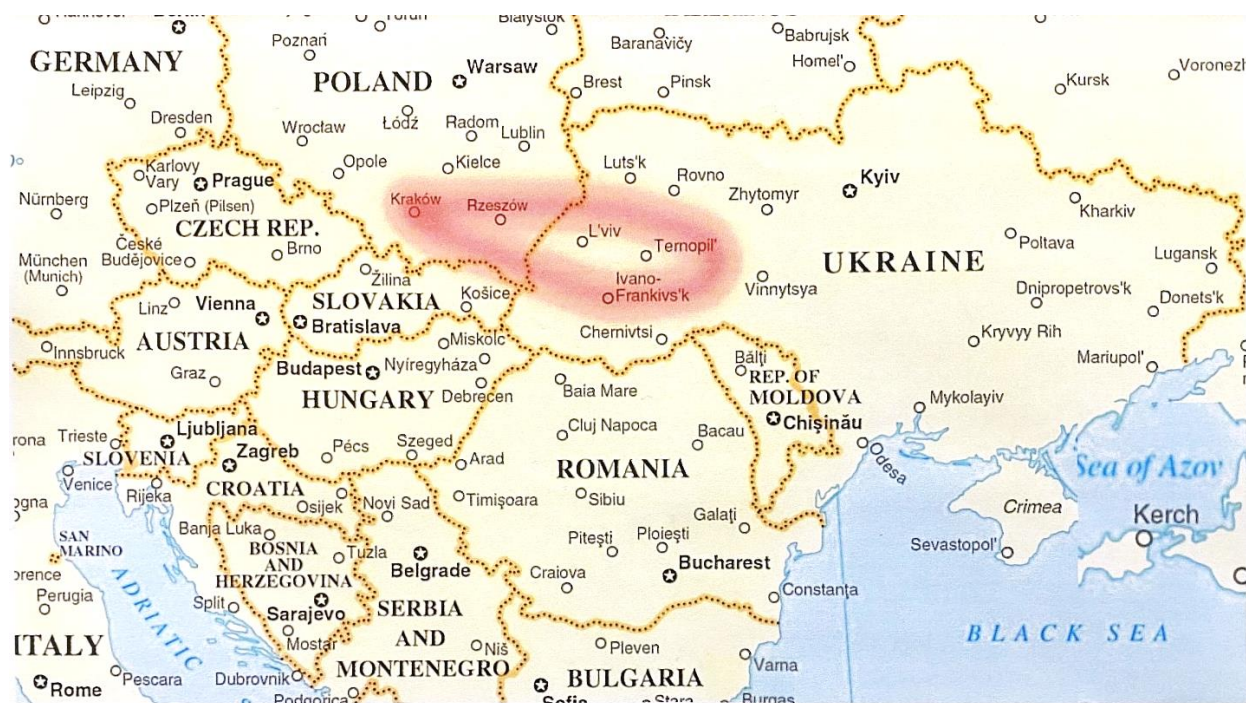
I hope to have time left over at the end for a little show and tell of things that are on this table, and maybe even some questions, but we shall see.

I wonder if any of you read the book of ***Deuteronomy*** carefully and repeatedly. And if you do, if you spend much time meditating on ***Chapter 28*** – the chapter with 68 verses – 14 verses of blessings on Israel for covenant-keeping, and 54 verses of cursings on Israel for covenant-breaking. Maybe you skip that bit. . . or read it quickly. Maybe you easily detach from that chapter because it concerns THEM, and not YOU. . . and anyway, they deserved it for forsaking God and rejecting their Messiah.

I sometimes wonder if we in Reformed circles are tempted to feel a little proud because we have the theological courage not to shrink from thoughts about God’s righteous judgment. We are right not to apologize for God’s vindication of His holy Justice. But I wonder if our affirmation of that truth should be so utterly devoid of sympathy for those on whom His full justice falls. I can only tell you that when I read ***Deuteronomy 28***, I do not think “THEM.” I think “US.” It is hard for me not to weep when I come to ***verses 64-67***: And the Lord will scatter you. . .

We don’t need to rehearse the whole terrible history today. You know it well, from the antisemitic writings of the early church fathers, through the medieval church and society, the Crusades, Martin Luther, the Pogroms, and, really, all of European history. When there were times or places where there was relative peace, it was short lived. The suspicion of, and hatred of, and the discomfort with, the Jews has been uniquely perpetual, and universal. In light of this, we can see that the Holocaust was not an aberration, but a culmination. It was not merely the fact, but the scale of that decimation, that tends to grip us.

If you look at the map in your hands, you will see what is now Ukraine and Poland with a red oval spanning parts of each. What you would see there, if we could go back a hundred years, was the area known as Galicia, or Galitzia, as it is pronounced in Yiddish. The Jewish population in that area, for hundreds of years, was unusually dense – perhaps as high as 10-15%, with some villages being closer to 80-90%. Both of my grandmothers came from this area.



For further reading:

<https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/ukraine-holocaust>

<https://www.geshergalicia.org/about-galicia/>

One grandfather came to America from Romania, but the family had moved to Romania from Odessa. So ¾ of my blood line wound up in the area that is now Ukraine, before coming to America, as part of the great diaspora. The family history of my remaining grandfather is sketchy, for a number of reasons I will explain later. But the sum of it all is to point out the hand of Providence that brought three of my four grandparents to this country just before the outbreak of WWI. If they had stayed in that Ukrainian/Polish/Russian land with the families they left behind, they would have likely perished in what is known as the “Holocaust of Bullets.”

Before the concentration camps became physical icons of Hitler’s attempts to wipe every Jew from the face of the earth, the method employed in eastern Poland and western Russia was to

move from village to village, shooting men, women and children in front of large ravines, layer upon layer, and burying them in a mass grave, after stripping the bodies of valuables – including teeth with gold fillings. The most famous, perhaps, was Baba Yar – a ravine outside of Kyev, where 33,000 were murdered in two days of continuous killing. That was a record until the Odessa Massacre. There they tried shooting them at first, but had them packed-in too closely to be effective. So they doused them all with gasoline and burned them alive. It is estimated that in the days that followed the Nazis killed 100,000 of Odessa's Jewish community. All in all, of the 6 million deaths that we associate with the gas chambers and crematoriums, 1.5 million actually died in the villages and forests of Ukraine where my grandparents and their families lived. It has been said that the camps were the monstrous solution to the problem of the trauma and demoralization of the German soldiers who carried out these mass murders. God, as R.C. Sproul said, knows all contingencies. . . but when I recently put the pieces of this genealogical puzzle together, I had a very definite and weighty sense of being a brand plucked from the fire.

I want to say here that I am not recounting this history to vie for a seat at the identity politics table, nor am I hoping to make you feel some sort of perverse corporate guilt for things done in history. Please don't come to me afterwards to apologize for that. What Moses says in ***Deuteronomy 24:16*** is reiterated by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. We do not bear guilt for our ancestor's sins, and we cannot atone for them. (Simon Weisenthal's assertion.)

I will tell my story in two parts today, and leave my personal story to the end. I want first to pay tribute to my parents' faith, and to the power of God to interrupt the endless cycle of sin and degradation for those under His curse, to the praise of His glorious grace, and as a prelude to what Scripture plainly says He will yet do for His ancient people in the fullness of time.

My father's parents, Louis Glassberg and Anna Krakower, had an arranged marriage, which (despite producing four children) was unhappy, to say the least. They settled in Philadelphia, where my father's siblings pursued educational and professional achievement, while he walked his own path of unconventional intellectual inquiry: rationalism, agnosticism, Zionism, and Marxism. He skipped grades in school and spent at least one summer in a Zionist youth camp as part of his plan to emigrate and fight in Israel's impending war of independence. WWII derailed that plan: he lied about his age, joined the navy and served as an engineer on a destroyer in the Pacific – but not before eloping with my mother at age 18 the week before he shipped out. When he returned after the war, he came to my mother and 18-month old oldest

sister and became a tool and die maker. Eventually there were three little girls and a sickly, unstable wife to care for. He worked long hours to provide for us, and found solace in his chair in the evenings, reading books on philosophy and social theory, and always asking Big Questions with his probing and keen intellect.

My mother's mother, Mary Piltz, came to the US in 1912 with her mother, Chavah, and her brother Samuel. The little village of Schumsk where they came from has a page dedicated to it on the Yad Vashem (the Holocaust Museum in Israel) website, listed under "Murder Sites of the Jews." Every one of the ~ 2,400 Jews who still lived there were murdered thirty years later, in August 1942. Mary became my grandfather's third wife. . . and the two before her "overlapped," if you get my drift. That was a big family secret. My mother didn't know until she was in her 30s that she had a half-sister from each of those former marriages.

Her father, Edward Kroman, changed his name to Hugo Darling, and put *his* formidable intellect to work learning multiple languages, faking a medical degree, traveling the world as a US government researcher, and doing ground-breaking work in the relatively new field of radiology. I used to have (but got rid of) a picture of him with President Harry Truman and other dignitaries as a founding member of the World Health Organization. He lived in terror of being "found out," but, in truth, these were the least of his crimes. In the spiraling descent of the dehumanizing and dreadful effects of the curses pronounced in ***Deuteronomy 28***, we read with horror that parents will even cannibalize the flesh of their own children – but there is more than one way to perpetrate such unspeakable predation, and my mother became a victim of her father's sexual appetites. And not only his, but her mother's brother, my great Uncle Sam, who was a sexual predator of such magnitude that not one female in his life escaped – including a daughter who bore him son, presumably another daughter who committed suicide, three granddaughters, and who knows who else. This abuse, my mother buried for many years, but the resulting trauma could not be mitigated – either by counseling, or endless medications, or three months in a state hospital when I was eight years old. She was an artist and poet, sensitive and gifted, but very damaged, very fragile, and **very** self-absorbed. But God. . .

When my mother was a young mother of three, she stood at her kitchen sink one day and she prayed a prayer to the unknown God: God, if you exist, if you speak to people, tell me who you are. Not long after, on a rainy Saturday, she went into a crowded luncheonette to escape the downpour, and had to share a table with three strangers. One of them began to try to tell her

about Jesus, but my mother put her hand up and said, "I am Jewish, and Jesus is NOT for us." After a moment of silence, my mother quietly added, "But I have always been a little curious about who He was and if it should mean anything to me." The lady asked if my mother would trust her with her name and address, and my mother took a chance that changed the course of our lives. The gentle, elderly lady with sparkling blue eyes, as my mother later learned, had started her day on her knees, asking the Lord to send her someone to witness to. After the lunch encounter, she returned home and got on her knees again and said "But Lord! I don't know what to do with a Jewish person!" Then she saw in her mind's eye, the face of a woman who had spoken at her church about her mission work among her own people.

One afternoon in the weeks that followed, there was a knock at the door. When my mother opened it, there stood a middle-aged woman with a pillbox hat on her head and a Bible tucked under her arm. Fanny Miller, arrived to study the Scriptures with my mother. This she did every week for a year, while my father was at work, and while my mother crunched on potato chips and blew cigarette smoke into her face. They spent the year studying many Scriptures together. But when they got to the end of **John 3**, my mother read "He who hath the Son hath life; and who hath not the Son, hath not life, but the wrath of God abideth on him." If you were to ask me what would be the least likely verse to convince a Jewish woman, who had been so cruelly victimized in her youth, and so miserably dismissed by her intellectually proud and fierce in-laws, that she needed a Savior, this would NOT be it. But for all of the abuse and rejection she had endured, the Spirit of God made her know that she did not stand at the foot of the cross as a fellow victim – she, too, was a perpetrator, and she, too, was in desperate need of forgiveness. This truth she grasped so completely, that when her parents both fell ill from cancer at the same time, she brought both of them into our home to care for them. Yes, THEM – her mother AND her father. And she led them both to faith in Messiah in their last months. One of my favorite stories was her description of her mother, hospitalized in the women's cancer ward of Philadelphia Jewish Hospital, going from bed to bed, saying in Yiddish to the other women "Did you know that Jesus is OUR Messiah???"

My mother carried her instability and neediness through the rest of her life. My sisters and I were all impacted by it, each in our own way. We came by our mental health struggles honestly, by both heredity and environment. My parents' marriage bore the scars as well, and home life was perpetually full of emotional upheaval. After I became a believer, I repeatedly wondered how my mother could really be a believer, with all of her besetting sins and mess and self-

absorption. I was greatly comforted towards the end of her life by two John Owen sermons on **Romans 4:20-21**: No distrust. . . Owen makes the case that weak faith is not the same as false faith, and that faith may be true, even when weak, and that weak faith will carry a soul to heaven as surely as strong faith, but not so comfortably. I realized that my mother “got” the main thing. If you have not seen the movie put out last year by Voice of the Martyrs called “Sabina” I urge you to do so. The subtitle of that movie is “The heart of the Gospel is forgiveness.” So thoroughly did my mother believe this, that when she told me the truth of what my grandfather had done to her, she immediately said, “But don’t hate him. The Lord has forgiven him, and I have forgiven him, and you must forgive him, too.” I do not think that my mother ever had “closure” in the sense of discussing any of this with her father, or having him ASK her for forgiveness. Maybe this won’t sit well with some of you, but her forgiveness of him was unilateral, unqualified, and free – and to me, a thing of beauty. She who had been forgiven much, loved much, and knew that she must forgive much as well. Just last year I connected with one of my great Uncle Sam’s granddaughters, who was one of his victims, and I could hear in her story the wreckage the abuse left in her family – fractured, broken relationships, bitterness, and hatred. It was sobering to realize that my mother’s simple obedience to the command to forgive her abusers broke the chain of rage and despair that continues down the other lines of the family.

The change in my mother’s life was initially so compelling, that my father made a profession of faith as well, and for a number of years we were part of the First Hebrew Christian Congregation in Philadelphia. During my mother’s psychiatric hospitalization, my father renounced his faith, as did both of my sisters. The family plunged back into chaos and disorder. But at age 49, my father laid all of his intellectual and cultural objections at the foot of the cross and embraced Yeshua as his Messiah and King. He could rarely say the name of Jesus in English. He told me once that it stuck like a bone in his throat because of all that was done to the Jewish people in that name. But the person of Jesus, he loved and rested in, for full salvation. His favorite New Testament passage is found in the closing verses of **2 Corinthians 3**: [read or quote.] When he was dying of cancer 12 years later, and I brought my guitar to the hospital to sing for him, he requested his favorite little chorus: Oh, how he loves you and me . . . Jesus to Calvary did go, his love for mankind to show; what He did there, brought hope from despair, oh how he loves you. . . “ And the postscript to my parents’ decades of strife and separation can be summed up in the words of the prophet Joel: “I will restore to you the years that the locusts have eaten.” I have put the card that my father wrote to my mother on her last birthday before he died in the

album up front, next to the picture of them at our last Passover Seder together, so you can see for yourself.

I want to end this part with some Scriptures that have become very precious to me as I ponder both the story of my family, and the story of God's faithful love to Israel that I believe He is still unfolding. You can jot them down to look up later, if you are so inclined.

In **Deuteronomy 10** Moses tells the people to circumcise their hearts, but in **chapter 30** God tells them that HE will circumcise their hearts. In **Ezekiel 34**, He tells them 24 times in 13 verses what HE WILL do. . . he will rescue, bring them out, feed them, be their shepherd, seek them, bring them back, judge them, make them a blessing, and provide for them, etc., etc. He will do it all. In **Jeremiah 31: 33-37** he says [read it.] I would urge you to read all of Hosea, and take special note of **chapters 3 and 14**. Read **Romans 9, 10 & 11**, and pause over the words in **11:25**, – in part. . . until. . . “ And finally, read and reread the whole book of **Zechariah**, but especially **chapter 8:13**: and **chapter 10:6**, and **10:8-10**: and **chapter 12:10**: And **chapter 13:1**.

So ends part one of my talk this morning. But in **Exodus 13**, the Lord instructs His people to tell the story of His deliverance to each succeeding generation in the first person – this is what the Lord did for ME. So now I will tell you my story, and some of my ongoing reflections as “a brand plucked from the fire.”

I made reference earlier to the dysfunction of our household when I was growing up, but nothing happens in a vacuum. I came of age in the 1960s, and the collision of my home life with the deconstruction of the surrounding culture had a devastating effect on my ability to make sense of life. I was nothing, if not my father's daughter, and began asking the big existential questions when I was 12 or 13. Answers did not seem to be forthcoming from any quarter, so I concluded that life was meaningless. I sank into a dreadful nihilism and despair that my agnostic father sensed – and was frightened by. I suspect that he would have been far more frightened if he had any clue how often I thought about taking my life. . . and how seductive the pull of death had become. I had no center, and no fixed point of reference. But, agnostic though he was, his instinct was to reach out for spiritual help for me. A phone call to the elderly Jewish pastor he knew in Philadelphia led to a drive one November evening in 1968 to a house in Overbrook Park, where a young Jewish-believing couple hosted meetings for evangelizing and discipling

young Jewish people. I was a very cool hippie girl, and this was a gathering of the most uncool people I could imagine. But they were kind, and showed interest in me, so I agreed to return in December for a Hanukkah party. It was then that I met Dr. William Graff, a professor of electrical engineering at Drexel, who had recently discovered the speaking and writing ministry of Dr. Francis Schaeffer. When I went to their home the day after Christmas, he was ready for me and my Big Questions – and stayed up until 2 AM, engaging with my confusion and hopelessness. He sent me home with a copy of The God Who Is There. . . and my transfer from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light began. *Began*, but with some essential pieces missing. I don't want to minimize the value of all that the Graffs gave me, but looking back, I think that I did not come to Christ primarily as a sinner looking for forgiveness, but as a lost soul looking for meaning and significance. I learned to parrot the evangelical language, but awareness of my sin was minimal, and often overshadowed by the continuing struggle with the darkness.

By the time I was 30, I had been married for 11 years and had two young children. I was well loved, and well cared for (as I have been for 50 years on the 29th of this month,) but I could not make sense of my life with any consistency – and in truth, I had no little bitterness about the banality of it all. As I passed that landmark birthday, the idea of suicide, always at the fringes of my thinking, asserted itself with an insistence that was impossible to resist. I planned, I plotted, I tried, I chicken out – over and over again. I began a terrifying slide into atheism. In October of that year, I was driving to pick up our children from a library program and had this thought: “I may not like how God dishes life out to me, but I do hold the final card: I can always choose not to be.” In that moment of time, I saw suicide not as the act of ultimate despair, but of ultimate rebellion, self-will, and unbelief. In that moment of time, there began a profound shift in my thinking. I no longer collected books on depression and psychology, but theology. A friend providentially loaned me a copy of R.C. Sproul's The Holiness of God. When I finished it I knew that Lee's diagnosis was right: I didn't know what grace was. I didn't know, because I didn't know what sin was. And I didn't know that because I had no concept of God's holiness. By the mercy of God, another mentor was put into my life – our pastor's wife, Flossie Merritt, who spent a year teaching me to THINK according to Scripture. She gave me a theme verse that year that has served as a banner for me to stand under for nearly 40 years: **2 Corinthians 10:3-5**: For though we live in the world. . . .

I had a theme hymn for that year, too. It was “Immortal, Invisible,” including the verse that our hymnal leaves out. I can guess why the editors found it problematic, with a line that could be construed as mildly pantheistic, but it is a beautiful verse, nonetheless: [To all life thou givest. . .]

I would like to tell you that from that moment on, I was on my way to a life of victory and peace, but that would be a lie. I did spend decades reading the Puritans and the reformers, and ultimately committing myself to serious Scripture memory, as well as old hymns. And there *has* been a cumulative effect on my thinking and stability – relative to what *I* was, not what *you* might be. It is still hard work, and I am still sometimes tempted to give up. But if my life has a theme, and it does, it boils down to three important questions that I have to ask myself in some form or another on nearly a daily basis. Maybe someone here will find them helpful:

1. On what basis do I judge/discern reality? Is it based on my subjective impressions and emotions? Or is it based on the objective, unchanging, all-sufficient word of God? I think you can guess how I answer that, but I will give you a clue as to how this works. When my emotions are screaming one thing, and the Word of God declares the opposite, I remind myself that one of us is a liar – and I know which one!
2. What is the goal/purpose of life? Is it to avoid or at least to minimize pain and to maximize my pleasure, happiness, and personal satisfaction? Every page of Scripture tells me otherwise. . . I am not my own, I am bought with a price. . . take up my cross and follow. . . nevertheless not my will but thine. . . do nothing from selfishness or conceit. . . you get the picture. Here is where we need to restore a theology of suffering, or go mad. We need to be able to say with John Newton: “everything is needful. . . “ And we need desperately to walk through the stuff of this life with one eye fixed on an eternal horizon, and on the beauty and glory we will see, when we see Him face to face on that Day.
3. Who is my master, and who or what will I obey? Every time I am tempted to choose strictly according to what I feel or what I want, the choice before me is nothing more or less than whether or not I will betray all that God did to preserve my family in order to bring me into existence, and all that He did to save me as a brand plucked from the fire. Don’t watch me too closely. You will likely be disappointed. But as I sang to my dad in his last hours, 34 years ago this Wednesday, “Turn your eyes upon Jesus. . . “