

FURNACE GRACE

Revised Edition



TIM HILL

FOREWORD BY DR. MARK RUTLAND

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FOREWORD



It is the bitter fruit of our self-absorbed carnality to believe the times in which we live are the hardest ever. I am confident that in the War of 1812, when England invaded the all too new United States of America, many said, "It has never been so dark and dangerous." I am also certain veterans of the Revolution murmured, "You were not at Valley Forge." Those living through the nightmare of the Civil War must have wailed, "The nation's very existence has never hung by so frail a thread." It is just as likely that veterans of the War of 1812, protested, "You do not remember 1814, when the British burned down the White House."

Those who remember the terror of 9/11 are not nearly so likely to remember Pearl Harbor. Many who stare in horror at the riots going on in our cities today cannot remember when Watts was a raging conflagration. It is the human condition to see the troubles of our age as incomparable and unbearable.

These are hard times. Who can dispute it? Yet, as hard as they are, they are not incomparable. Washington is divided and its denizens are polarized. We see congressmen and senators daily denouncing each other in the most undignified and even vulgar ways. It makes us think it has never been like this before. Yet that fails to take into account when, on May 22, 1856, Rep. Preston Brooks beat Sen. Sumner nearly to death with his cane, right on the floor of the Senate.

Remembering the past is not to make light of this, our own winter of discontent. We live in troubled times in a troubled land, and the clouds looming on the horizon are foreboding to be sure. It is rather to say the Republic and the Church have been through hard times before and, by God's grace, we shall get through these dark days as well. To say that God's grace will see us through these harsh times is no mere platitude. God is with us. He knows what we are enduring. He sees the end from the beginning. He will not let go of us.

Not the least of His gifts is His willingness to raise up voices of encouragement just when we need them the most. He knows that amidst the hysteria we need voices of calm and mature faith. Such a voice is that of Bishop Tim Hill. For a church longing for unruffled faith, Hill's message in this book is medicine for the soul. In evil times, it is a temptation to be the hope-denying, faith-quenching prophet of gloom and despair. Hysteria tends to draw a crowd. Hill has taken a different tack. He calls on us to remember who we are in Christ and who He is in us. This is not a book of platitudes. Nor is it mere palliative care for a dying church. Bishop Hill summons us up higher to where the view beyond our suffering and hardship is unobstructed by the panic-stricken mob below.

Come up here, he says, where faith lives and thrives. The Bishop never asks us to deny our current sobering history nor does he dismiss our suffering. He does, however, show us where to stand that we might see a broader landscape beyond, and the sun-splashed mountains ahead.

—*Mark Rutland*
2021

INTRODUCTION

It was the final day of my last pastorate in Danville, Virginia. I gathered all my dedicated staff for one last supper together at the finest restaurant in town. During our final moments, we reminisced over eight years of ministry together, grateful for God's grace that had empowered us to overcome challenges and make a positive impact on our community. We had become a close-knit, missions-driven family, determined to love others, and reach them with the Gospel. Needless to say, the room was filled with much laughter and many tears. These precious people had seen me at my best and my worst, and I loved them deeply.

As our time together drew to a close, I prayed for each person and gave each one a copy of Max Lucado's newest book at that time, *In the Grip of Grace*. Along with focusing on God's unending love and His willingness to save all who come to Him in repentance, it describes God's ability to firmly hold us in His caring and protective hands—hence, the title, *In the Grip of Grace*. Holding back my tears, I referenced the title and applied it to their lives and future ministries. After one last hug, we said goodbye to one another.

It's been over twenty-five years since that Monday afternoon in Danville. Since then, two of those amazing people are now in heaven—one precious lady in that room died of a sudden heart attack, and the man who oversaw our Counseling and Visitation Ministry passed away after a prolonged illness. While all who were present that day have experienced many blessings

for which we are truly grateful, we have also endured a number of life's difficulties, losses, and fiery trials. If it were not for the grip of God's grace on our lives, we would have never made it out of the furnace.

Now there are two words you might not expect to see coupled together—*furnace* and *grace*. Most of us can comprehend either of these words when they're independent of each other. For example, the word *grace* describes favor, kindness, or blessing. In Scripture, *grace* often refers to *the unmerited favor and assistance of God*.

The word *furnace*, on the other hand, describes a place of intense fire and heat. It can not only melt the hardest metals, but also scorch and incinerate objects if left uncontrolled. On the surface, the words *furnace* and *grace* seem worlds apart and even diametrically opposite in their function. One can damage and even take life, while the other produces life. Does one ever overpower the other?

Interestingly, the most frequently used adjective in the Bible attached to the word “furnace” is the word “fiery,” which seems to intensify the terror of something already very intimidating. Daniel 3:23 says that after Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were bound, they fell into the “burning fiery furnace.” Clearly, it was a furnace built to consume and show no mercy to its victims. How did these three men survive this horrific test of their faith?

In some ways, Nebuchadnezzar's furnace reminds me of the year 2020, which the *New York Post* described as the year from hell. I think for most people, 2020 was a blazing inferno of fear and anxiety that seemed to have no end. The onset of a global pandemic quickly merged with the red-hot embers of racial tension, political division, and a series of sudden natural disasters. Consider these gripping statements of just a few of the people who lived through this “furnace year”:

- “There is evil in this world, and evil took two of my dear friends. Not a bullet from a gun—evil. Not ideology—evil.”

—**Brit Farmer**, a Church of Christ minister who spoke at a prayer service for his grieving church after a gunman killed two beloved members in White Settlement, Texas.

- “It’s stressful. You’re wondering: *Am I bringing it home to my family? Am I protecting myself enough at the hospital?* There are just so many things at play.”

—**Miranda Lee**, a Christian nurse who treated COVID-19 patients in her hospital’s ICU.

- “I sat there and I prayed, and I wished that he would get his knee off that man’s neck so he could breathe. There was no sense of humanity.”

—**Warren G. Blakney Sr.**, a minister and civil rights leader who responded to the video of a police officer ignoring George Floyd’s plea of, “I can’t breathe.”

- “All of those deaths were real people. They were all someone’s loved one.”

—**Eric Beasley**, a Christian who survived a brutal battle with COVID-19 while dozens of fellow patients admitted the same day did not.

Indeed, every death was real, as was the heartbreak that came with each new day on the calendar. To top things off, 2020 was a leap year—as if we needed an extra day. One commentator summed up his feelings about the year saying, “The year 2020 was a unique leap year. It had 29 days in February, 300 days in March, and five years in April.”

Without question, the heat has been turned up like no other time in modern history. Thankfully, so has God’s grace!

Paul wrote about the expansive dynamic of grace in difficult, sin-saturated times, saying, “...Where sin

increased [abounded], grace increased [abounded] all the more” (Romans 5:20 NIV, words in brackets added for clarity). The J.B. Phillips version of this verse is even stronger, declaring, “...Though sin is shown to be wide and deep, thank God his *grace* is wider and deeper still!”

As we noted, the common definition of *grace* found in most Bible dictionaries speaks of “unmerited divine favor and assistance from God.” It typically refers to God’s desire and willingness to save us from sin and make us His children. Yet grace is so much more. In the original rendering, the Greek word for “grace” is *charis*, and it describes *a divine impartation that enables, empowers, and strengthens us to do what we could never do on our own.*

Grace is never inadequate. The supply of grace always meets the demand of your crises.

When Paul was struggling to survive an incredibly painful trial, he prayed and pleaded with God to take it away. But God’s answer to him was, “...My grace is *sufficient* for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9 NIV). *Sufficient* grace means having enough grace for any need or any task that is in front of us.

The truth is, we have all experienced a rich supply of God’s grace, even if we did not realize it in the moment. He gives us as much grace as we need for every situation and fiery trial we face. Whether it is grace for facing personal illness, supporting a loved one in a hard season, navigating financial need, loving difficult people, receiving divine wisdom, dealing with rebellious children, or caring for aging parents, you and I can rest in knowing that God’s grace is sufficient for everything we lack and everything lacking in us.

His grace always and in all ways overcomes our deficiency of strength. That’s the way God’s kingdom works. The more grace you need, the more grace you

get. Thus, God's sufficient grace is actually superabundant, never-ending, and inexhaustible!

In many ways, *Furnace Grace* is the testimony of a leader who discovered that self-navigating through a crisis is impossible. Just as the three young Hebrews were guided by the fourth man in the fire, the Lord helped me—and so many others—find our way through the flames of 2020, and even 2021. Each chapter is a message the Holy Spirit placed in my heart as I encountered various crises in a season like no other.

In these pages, I'll unpack how grace infuses us with patience and teaches us how to endure and even dance in the fires of life. We'll learn how friendships are forged in the flames of trials and take a closer look at the stories of people like David, Paul, and Job. You'll also meet individuals who survived and overcame the pain of traumatic events like losing everything to a house fire, experiencing the death of one's entire family, and being tortured for months at the hands of tormentors in a concentration camp.

My prayer is that *Furnace Grace* will help you better understand God's refining process and how even the hottest fires of tragedy, trauma, and loss purify our lives, allowing us to emerge from the heat as pure gold. When we feel hopeless in the middle of a fire, God sees the beauty on the other side. While we see the flames, God sees the transformation. Rest assured that the never-ending supply of God's grace—even in the furnace—will enable us to come out unsinged and shining with the brilliance of our Father's reflection.

Let's walk through the fire together and learn how to live victoriously, even when the pressure is intense, and the heat is turned up.

—Tim Hill