

The Grace Walk

by

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Stress and anxiety consumed me as I ran across the parking lot. Even though it was a cold Mississippi morning, sweat trickled down my face. Several emotions overwhelmed me. I felt the need to be inside that church, but couldn't bring myself to face the people. Despite my strife and struggles, their opinions meant more than my need to seek God. I didn't want to be known as that person who only went to church during Christmastime.

By the time I made to my truck, I was mentally drained. Seeing my grandmother standing there only added to my stress. We called her Mama Hazel. She raised me and my sister after our parents died in a car accident. I thought she was still in the hospital.

I hugged her. "Hey, what are you doing here? When did you get out?"

She smiled. "I'm all better now. God is good! How are you, baby?"

"I'm just going through so much stuff, Mama Hazel—"

"Where are you going then? The church is the other way."

I sighed. "I can't go in there today. I don't want those people judging me. I don't want them saying I'm only coming to church because Christmas is almost here. I can't do it. Besides, the service is almost over."

Mama Hazel smiled. "Don't worry about what folks say. Go on in there and get your house in order. It's not too late. Walk in grace and surrender to Him. He's waiting."

"But—"

Mama Hazel's cold hand embraced mine. "It's okay. You can do it. Go on. I'll be in there."

I spotted an empty seat near the back and quickly walked over and sat. Although none of the parishioners had noticed my presence, I still felt like a circus attraction on display for them to judge.

When the choir sang "I Surrender All," I felt anxious. I knew what I had to do. I wanted it bad. It wasn't too late either.

I closed my eyes and released my will. "Have Your way, Lord. Have Your way."

When my eyes opened, I stood in the middle aisle of the church. My attention focused on the altar. It seemed so far away, but I knew I was about to go there. I needed to connect with God.

Mama Hazel once told me my life would flash before my eyes when I was about to die. That didn't bother me at that moment. Although the old Keith Norris was about to perish, I expected to receive new life once I made it to the altar.

As I walked towards the platform, my mind revealed an image of a baby in the arms of a woman. They were in a church, surrounded by several people. A man dabbed oil on the baby's forehead. The baby's white gown contained my name on it.

While I continued walking, my mind displayed another scene from my childhood. I stood with a group of kids by a river as the pastor prepared to baptize us. The water frightened me, and I didn't want to drown. God kept me safe.

As I continued walking, my mind revealed another scene from my childhood. I stood alone in a church, staring at my parents' beautiful, white coffins. I kissed them and placed red, long-stemmed roses on top of them. I sat on the pew, buried my face into my hands, and cried.

While I continued walking, my mind revealed a scene from my adolescent years. I sat alone on the sofa in the den. As the tears poured from eyes, I gripped the revolver tighter. I was overwhelmed with grief and loneliness. I felt no one understood my pain. Someone knocked on the front door. It was a pizza delivery guy who had accidentally come to the wrong address. He recognized my despair and prayed with me.

As I continued walking, my mind revealed a scene from my young adult years. I stood with several people at a Christian music concert in a crowded coliseum. After the promoters did an altar call, we went to a room with several pastors. They prayed over us, and I accepted God. I never realized the significance of that life-changing moment.

I felt overwhelmed suddenly, so I stopped walking. As I stood there, I reflected on the journey into my past. Despite the painful times I experienced, I had lived a good life. I hadn't been perfect but had always remained a child of God. He had delivered me from the miry clay and put me on the solid path towards righteousness. He had given His son's life for me, and I was ready to give my life to Him.

My legs buckled, and I dropped to my knees and closed my eyes. "Dear Heavenly Father, I'm so overwhelmed by the love You have for me. God, I can feel it, and I thank You for it.

Lord, I apologize for not being the person You desire me to be. I recommit my life to You. Please come into my heart, clean it, and make it pure as snow. Forgive me for my sins. Amen.”

I opened my eyes and stood. The choir continued singing before the congregation. They all seemed oblivious to my journey.

When I looked at the altar, a distinct voice whispered in my ear, “Keep going, my child.”

I complied with the command and resumed walking. When I did, I recalled past conversations with Mama Hazel. She would often mention I would eventually see family and friends again one day in heaven. Although I wasn’t in heaven at that moment, God still gave me a glimpse into His greatness.

As I continued walking to the altar, my mind revealed a scene of my friend Allen strolling through a green pasture. He looked so happy and peaceful. He had died from cancer during our senior year of high school.

While I continued walking, my mind revealed a scene of my Uncle Jeff standing in a beautiful forest. He appeared jovial. He was a rich man who had acquired his wealth from his automotive dealerships. He had died from a heart attack.

As I continued walking, my mind revealed a scene of my cousin, Gwen sitting in a swing at a playground. She had passed away from injuries received in a car accident.

While I continued walking, my mind revealed a scene of my parents holding hands and strolling along a beach. The sight of them comforted me. They were such a beautiful couple. I wanted to speak to them and let them know I had turned out decent. I wanted to tell them how much I missed them and loved them.

Just as I made it to the altar, my mind revealed a scene of Mama Hazel strolling along a tree-lined street. My subconscious could not rationalize her presence though. I had just conversed with her in the parking lot, and she was alive and well then. She wasn’t deceased. I no longer felt dead either.

Consumed by several emotions, I dropped to my knees again and closed my eyes. “Dear God, I feel You heard my prayers and gave me new life. I am overjoyed. Lord, please give me the strength to walk this walk of grace for the rest of my days. Your love and support give me the confidence to handle the painful challenges I will face. Thank You so much. Amen.”

Just as I finished praying, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I wondered if it was Him. As strange as it was, I wondered if God's hand was on me. I opened my eyes to find my sister Toya standing there though. Tears flowed from her eyes. No one else was in the church.

I stood up. "Hey, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

She wiped away the tears. "I've been trying to reach you. I've called you a million times. Then I saw your truck when I passed by the church."

I pulled out my phone and looked at it. There were several missed calls from Toya.

"My bad." I put the phone in my pocket. "What is it? What's going on?"

Toya sighed. "It's about Mama Hazel. I stayed with her at the hospital last night."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I couldn't sleep on that uncomfortable couch though. When I looked over at Mama Hazel, I noticed she was awake. Anyway, we had a good conversation. Then she stopped talking. She stopped breathing too."

"When was this?"

"It was close to midnight. That was when she died. I didn't call you because it was too late."

"But—"

"Mama Hazel is gone!"

Tears rolled down my face. "I don't understand, Toya. When I was in the parking lot, I saw and talked to—"

"I know it's hard. Before she passed, she mentioned she was proud of you for finishing the grace walk. She said you would make sure I completed it too. I wasn't sure what she was talking about though."

I wiped the tears and smiled. "Everything will be okay, Toya. We will walk this thing out together. Mama Hazel will be with us every step of the way."