

Restored By Radical Grace

I BELIEVED THAT GOD COULD TRANSFORM THE WORST SITUATIONS. BUT WHEN I WAS RAPED IN MY OWN HOME, I HAD TO RELEARN ALL I THOUGHT I KNEW ABOUT REDEMPTION.

When I opened my eyes and saw the dark shape of a strange man in my bedroom, I didn't scream. Rape happens to other people; surely it couldn't be happening to me.

But later, when I discovered I was pregnant, I didn't spend even a moment in denial. I believed the worst and expected more pain to come.

"You don't have to go through with this pregnancy, Heather," a well-meaning friend advised me. But hope eluded me.

"I can't have an abortion," I answered flatly. "It's wrong."

My friend didn't agree. "It's not a black-and-white issue. You have to think about your family."

During the last few years, people had often felt compelled to advise my husband and me about our family: Get out of the inner city; don't force your white kids to live as a minority; get a gun to protect yourself.

We had ignored them, sure that we were obeying God by pursuing peace, racial reconciliation and community development in the city.

And then this happened.

"Besides," my friend continued, "he was black." She fell silent, sure that no more words were needed.

If you believe, as I used to, that racism doesn't exist in America anymore, I'm sorry to be the one to shock you into reality.

When I wrote my memoir (Startling Beauty, Cook Communications), I had no idea how offensive my radical message of grace would be to those with hardened hearts. I didn't clue in until I was bombarded with vicious hate mail:

"Heather Gemmen, we hate you and everything you stand for."

"Being raped by a nigger and getting pregnant by the rapist is hardly a blessing. After reading your disgusting story, I just about stopped going to church."

"I would expect your husband to stand up to you and end this nonsense. But, NO, he helps you! What a fool!! You're both fools!!"

"It is obvious that the writer is not a real Christian, but uses the cloak of Christianity to cover for her own perverse lust of Negro men. Her cuckold husband is also titillated by the inter-racial aspect of the whole thing."

"What would Jesus do if He walked in on his mother, Mary, being raped by a crack-smoking Negro?...He would have grabbed a rope and looked for the nearest tree to hang the Negro by."

"It will be a godsend when their whole family is murdered."

This mild sample of slime that was slung at me reveals how deep racism goes even today. Some people actually believe that it is wrong to repress racist tendencies, that racist feelings are natural and God-given.

COULD I BE A RACIST?

I know that racism is a current phenomenon and that many people don't recognize it in themselves, but I used to assume that once they saw it they would strive to remove it. I believed this because of my own experience, which I depicted in this section taken from my book:

"I don't think I can handle this whole marriage thing, Tasha!" I wailed as we watched my kids play on the swings. Simon's

eyes were bright with delight, and Chad was asking him if he wanted to go higher. Each time Simon swung back, their blonde heads would align, and their smiles looked identical.

"Steve's gettin' under your skin, is he?"

"Well, no. I don't know why I'm frustrated with him. He's so wonderful, really."

"Mmm-hmm." Tasha nodded. "He sure do help out a heap around the house."

"Yeah. And he's so good with the kids."

"What's wrong then? You been fighting?"

"No. It's not that." I sighed heavily. "It's just that it feels like we're not even together." I raised my hands dramatically in the air. "Is it too much to ask him to treat me like a woman instead of a roommate?"

"Romance ain't everything, Honey."

"I know. But love is."

"All right. Try single parenting and see if you like that."

"I don't want to be single, that's for sure." I shuddered. "I really don't think I could do it on my own. Especially living here."

I saw a black man walking toward us and wished I had a car door to lock. Instead, I got up to help Simon out of the swing.

Tasha folded her arms over the silver hoop piercing her belly button and slowly rocked side to side, humming. Her slim, chestnut shoulders moved easily under the strings of her halter-top.

Chad and Simon ran off to join a group of boys in the sandbox.

It seemed apparent that they, at ages 4 and 2, hadn't yet noticed how different they were from their neighbors.

I wandered back to Tasha. "Did you know that we bought our house in the winter? We didn't even realize we were in the 'hood until spring, when suddenly the whole tribe swarmed outside and beat their bass drums on their car stereos until winter came again." I laughed.

Tasha didn't. It really was a stupid joke.

"I don't mean you when I talk like that, Tash. You're different."

"Am I?"

"Yeah. I don't even think of you as black."

"Just like Steve don't think of you as a woman." Tasha batted her lashes at me and then turned her head to hum some more.

I don't even think of you as black. That wasn't just a bad joke. That was a revelation of my true self.

I hushed and watched the kids for a little while, letting my friend's words sink in. The splinters in my throat from that morning's confrontation with Steve gathered to form a giant lump. My paradigm was shifting.

The man I had dodged stood patiently behind a 2-year-old girl wearing Winnie-the-Pooh overalls as she painstakingly climbed the ladder to the top of the slide. I watched him hold up his hand protectively as he moved to the foot of the slide and then murmur encouraging words to the delighted child, who wouldn't budge.

A 16-year-old boy bounced a basketball to a younger boy with the same toothy grin. "You all dat, Boy," the older one hollered out. "Yeah, Buddy."

The younger one dribbled the ball, glanced at his brother, and missed the hoop. The older boy caught the ball and tossed it back.

"Try again." The younger boy stuck his tongue between his lips in concentration as he aimed.

This time the ball swished through the hoop. They both hooted with pleasure while they ran their hands in a quick succession of motions that ended in a handshake.

I felt a sickening twist in my stomach as the implosion that had started that morning continued. Something needs to change, God. Is it me?

Tasha broke the silence. "So, what started all this trouble with your man?"

She laughed, and it surprised me. It surprised me even more when she scooted closer to me and gave me a sideways hug. "You is stupid, Girl, but I still love ya."

I looked at the ebony fingers of her right hand intertwined with the white ones of my left hand. "Look how black you are."

Tasha's voice seemed to vibrate from deep within her chest when she laughed. Usually I have to laugh with her when I hear it. This time I wanted to cry. Shame overwhelmed me.

"Oh, Tash, I can hardly bear myself. I am , Tasha, I'm so racist, aren't I?" Tasha kept her left arm around me while I pulled my hands to my face and curled my shoulders down.

"When I was in college I lived with a girl from Nigeria, and I loved feeling cosmopolitan. I thought that meant I wasn't racist." I laughed sourly. "I really didn't get to know her that well."

Chad was driving a matchbox car around the shoulders and head of his playmate, making wonderful motor noises. His new friend

laughed jubilantly as he pressed Chad's nose with a muddy finger. At 4 years old, they didn't care about their differences.

"I thought that since you're my friend I wasn't racist." I laid my head on her shoulder and let myself cry.

Tasha pulled a tissue out of her purse and dabbed my cheeks. "I know, Sister. But that's all right. You a changed woman now."

THE REAL TEST OF GRACE

Yes, I was changed. I had come face to face with the Holy Spirit in an encounter that freed me to become a new person. I was elated to know that God could use even me to show His power and love; all I had to do was love my neighbor as myself.

And then I was raped.

By a black man.

The man did not attack just my body; he also attacked my dream for racial reconciliation. I do not believe the assault was mere coincidence.

Satan thought an attack would scare us away. But he was wrong.

Instead it caused us to stand stronger than ever before. I realize how difficult and scary this vision is to hold; my fears are real, both in terms of physical safety and in terms of possible failure and disillusionment. But I am convinced that we can't retreat, that we can't ignore the injustice of racism.

We have to feel the seriousness of the war that is brewing in us and around us, and we have to bring peace and harmony to the streets of our cities. If Christians will not work for this vision, who will? Who can?

Paul the apostle wrote: “For [Christ] Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility” (Eph. 2:14-16, NIV).

Whether or not to abort the child inside me was a black-and-white issue. And just as God placed on my heart the passion for racial reconciliation, He freed me to fall in love with this baby. My husband, too, began to anticipate the arrival of the child God had picked out for us. And our daughter, who is now 9 years old, continually startles us with beauty, for she is a tangible reminder of God’s promise to redeem every ugly situation.

Read a companion devotional.

Heather Gemmen is the author of *Startling Beauty*, published by Cook Communications, from which portions of this article were taken. She is also an editor and the author of several children’s books, including the best-selling *Learn-to-Read Bible* (Cook Communications).