

How This Unlikely Worship Song Impacted Millions for the Kingdom

When I wrote “Reckless Love,” I had no idea it would go on to be one of the most popular Christian songs in recent history. I had no idea it would go viral in a matter of hours after hitting YouTube. I had no idea it would break *Billboard* records and receive numerous Dove Awards and even a Grammy nomination. I had no idea it would become the most frequently sung worship song in the church worldwide—and certainly no idea its theology would be so hotly debated. I just knew those lyrics were exactly what my heart needed to sing to the Father in that particular season of my life.

When I sent the demo to my (now) manager at Bethel Music, I included the note, “I think I just penned my opus.” While I had no idea my “opus” would be so widely received, I knew it was born from the depths of my being, from the very core of my raw, imperfect but beautiful walk with the Father.

At that point in my life, I was so hyper acquainted with my own brokenness that the reality of God’s desire and love for me even in that vulnerable place was absolutely wrecking me (in the best way possible). He kept showing up at the doorstep of my heart when I least expected it: after another loss in the battle against lust, after blowing up at my kids (undoubtedly over something inconsequential), after yet another fight with my wife (in which I was undeniably in the wrong). It seemed as if I just couldn’t outrun His grace, and I couldn’t “outfall” His kindness.

In that place of surrender to His goodness, the refrain of the chorus was born: “Oh, the overwhelming, never-ending, reckless love of God.” These words were the banner over my very

existence. Isn't it just like God to use a season like mine to birth a song that heals a multitude? Isn't it just like God to turn disappointments into dance floors? He really is better than we've imagined. I'm constantly overwhelmed by His tenderness in my life.

I've received tens of thousands of emails and messages about how the song has touched people's lives. One of my favorite testimonies came on the day Justin Bieber sang the song on his social media platforms. Boy, did my phone blow up that day. I was inundated with messages from friend and foe alike excitedly telling me that Bieber had sung my song. To be honest with you, I completely freaked out too. I didn't expect to be so giddy and starstruck, but I was.

That day, I received thousands of messages from random people who had heard the song because of Bieber's posts. The one that impacted me the most came from a young man who was planning to commit suicide that very night. When he heard Bieber singing the words to my song, the Father came close and spoke sonship and belonging over him. He gave his life to God that same day and was saved. It's amazing what Jesus can do with just a little tune, huh?

I've been asked countless times how and why I would choose to use a word like "reckless" to describe the love of God. Some critics have been gracious, and some have been less than gracious (to put it lightly). While I understand that my choice of words is undoubtedly bold, I believe in a God whose love is infinitely beyond the bounds of our English Rolodex of descriptors, a God who lives so far outside the confines of human language that words fail to describe even the edges of His complexity.

At the height of the controversy surrounding the song in 2018, it seemed as if its opponents made it their goal to disprove the idea of God's reckless love. I can't tell you how many internet blogs, news articles and social media posts tagged me

in their publications. Looking at it in retrospect, I believe most people who took offense at the word fall into two main camps.

Intentionally Reckless

People in the first camp hold the notion that nothing can happen outside God's foreknowledge (since He's omniscient); therefore, none of His actions could ever be deemed reckless. These people would call Jesus' death on the cross "calculated" and "intentional." I would offer this rebuttal: Jesus knew Lazarus would rise again in John 11, yet He still wept for Him. Why? Because omniscience (or precognition) doesn't negate the pain of the foreseen event. In other words, just because you know something painful is going to happen in the future doesn't mean it's not going to hurt when it does.

We must remember: Jesus was fully God and fully man, which means, like us, He carried the capacity for deep emotion—empathy, sadness, sorrow and suffering. Describing the cross as calculated because it was always part of His plan doesn't make it any less grueling. It would be like knowing you are going to the dentist tomorrow to get a root canal—without anesthesia. Just because you've got it on the calendar doesn't mean it's not going to hurt like crazy. So while the adjectives "calculated" and "intentional" are certainly true of our Savior's work at Calvary, they don't intrinsically preclude the application of the word "reckless."

In other words, someone could be "intentionally reckless." Allow me to illustrate this idea in two analogies.

In the first, a father named Richard plans to surprise his son, Jesse, with the gift of a lifetime: a brand-new car for his 16th birthday. For the sake of making this illustration more relatable (and more dramatic), let's say this car is a red Lamborghini Aventador S. This model retails for almost half a million dollars, but hey, Richard really loves his son,

you know?

At first glance, do you as an outside observer think it is wise of Richard to give his son such an expensive vehicle at such a young age? Do you think it's a sensible thing to do?

I suggest that, in light of what we know about the general temperament of most teenagers, it is not sensible. Plus, the latest data tells us the leading cause of teen death is accidental injuries, such as car-crash injuries. Perhaps the 740-horsepower engine of the Lamborghini might tempt Jesse to drive a little faster than the speed limit one night. What if he gets careless with his friends and loses his life in a tragic accident? Was the car a wasted gift? Was it just a foolish gesture? Again, I'd like to suggest that it was not.

You see, God doesn't give gifts according to our ability to steward them perfectly or on our worthiness to receive them. Neither did the father in this story. God gives according to one criterion—His ridiculous kindness. He hands out good gifts left and right like it is Christmas morning all year round because it's just who He is. It's His nature; He cannot be any other way. His character is overflow. There's no caution in His kindness; there's only lavishness.

Our second illustration examines one of God's greatest gifts to humanity: the gift of children. In this scenario, a newly married young couple, James and Rachel, just found out they're pregnant with their first child—a little boy. Sadly, James isn't as excited as he should be at the news. You see, he was sexually abused as a child and still hasn't found the courage to tell his wife. The shame of his prior experience clouds his ability to feel the hope and joy that should accompany such a mountaintop moment. He's scared, and rightly so. Bringing a child into this world is a weighty thing. James worries that he's going to fall into the unfortunate patterns of his childhood and end up hurting his son.

Now let's ponder something. Is it foolish for God to allow James—a broken, sinful human being with a less than perfect past—to bring a child into this world? Probably. I mean, if anyone is acquainted with humanity's propensity for darkness, it's Almighty God. Yet He affords James the gift of a child anyway because He's just that good.

Is there not a strong possibility that James might affect the life of his little boy in a negative way? Absolutely. But what if God in His infinite wisdom knows this is a divine opportunity for healing and redemption? What if God knows this is where the power of the cross can purify James' past and send his shame packing once and for all? What if becoming a dad could somehow heal the scars of his childhood? Did God think through the vast number of outcomes for this father-son relationship? Has He predestined it, or does James have a choice in the matter?

I believe James has a choice, and his choice is the canvas on which to display his gratitude for God's "foolish" gift, His intentionally reckless display of love. Therein lies the beauty of the entire equation of life: God lets us choose how we'll respond to His preposterous mercy, to His scandalous grace. Almost overlooked amid all the trappings of the Father's generosity, our free will might be the greatest and most reckless gift of all.

Positively Reckless

This leads to our second camp of opponents: those who say God's love can't be reckless because their associations with the word "reckless" are negative. In other words, since the word typically carries negative connotations, it can't be ascribed to God because He's altogether positive. Consider this: Scripture says that God is a jealous God, yet "Thou shalt not covet" (Ex. 20:17a, KJV) is one of the Ten Commandments. How can this "paradox" be?

The answer is that word association does not equal word definition. Preconceived notions of a word—positive or negative—do not determine that word's function or meaning.

The idea that God could be reckless in His pursuit of humanity also threw many people off. They felt it implied that He needed our affection in return—and obviously the God who has everything doesn't need anything. In their estimation, this notion painted God as weak, whiny, whimpering and love-scorned. It made Him look needy, and most Christians—especially those only outwardly familiar with the Jesus of the Bible—prickle at this notion, because to them, God is only ever big, strong and barrel-chested.

But God—the same God who created heaven and earth—gives Himself away in desperate hopes that we'll return His love. He is that vulnerable and humble, and His heart is that tender.

It's not weakness as many misperceive. God's longing to be loved isn't a suspension of His power; it's evidence of the incomprehensible fury of His love. A. W. Tozer says it like this: “[God] waits to be wanted.” He's not a sad schoolgirl wallowing like a wallflower at the high school dance; He's a Father, fierce in love, coming after His sons and daughters with reckless abandon.

To support the second camp's position that a negative word can't characterize God, a lot of articles and blog posts cited synonyms for “reckless” in an attempt to discredit the song. They cherry-picked the words that served their purpose while neglecting the others. The inexactness of this logic is quite shocking. It reminds me of arguments I often see on social media—usually between Christians and non-Christians—in which the debaters pick and choose which Scriptures they want to use as ammunition for their empty squabbles, regardless of the actual context of the verses.

Just for fun, here are a few synonyms for “reckless” using the

same (dubious) method: audacious, carefree, daring, adventurous, headlong, wild, adventuresome. And here are a few antonyms: afraid, careful, cautious, reserved, shy, discreet, timid, wary, fearful.

I don't know about you, but I don't serve a God who's anything close to afraid, fearful, shy, timid or reserved. My God is wild, full of life and much more like a lion than a domesticated cat.

This exercise demonstrates that our vocabulary is too limited to describe an ineffable God, a mysterious God who lives outside of time and space. The God who created the cosmos and its languages cannot be contained within their constructs. We seek words that fall infinitely short of the Creator of the universe. Yet as writers and artists, we still have a responsibility to make Him known, both as descriptively and as precisely as possible. Our language is too feeble, yet we must try.

We find ourselves smack-dab in the middle of a glorious quandary. God is too wonderful for prose, too beautiful for poetry and too brilliant for love songs. He is altogether indescribable. Lifetimes could be wasted trying to create something worthy of His incomparable splendor, and they would be wasted most nobly.

My friend, Glenn Packiam, said it best: "The point of using the word 'reckless' is that it shows us that by all accounts, God's loving us was not what we'd call a wise investment. We were a risk, even a waste. Yet He loved us anyway. New Testament scholar John Barclay calls this 'the incongruity of grace'—God's love for us is not congruent with our worth or our state. From conventional wisdom, it is reckless. A reckless use of money is to give an inheritance to someone who squanders it; it's to give a feast to someone who deserves to starve; it's to give a robe and a ring to someone who should be wearing a ball and chain. But the wisdom of God is

foolishness to the world. And the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of the world. Thanks be to God!" {eoa}

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