

# A Strange Sight at the Altar

In an English church some years ago, the pastor was overcome by the sight at his altar.

An ex-convict was kneeling beside a judge who sat on the bench of England's highest court. In a strange twist of providence, this judge had been the one who handed down a seven-year prison sentence to the man now kneeling at his side.

In a conversation after the service, the judge asked the pastor if he had noticed who was praying next to him. The pastor acknowledged this remarkable sight.

The judge then stated, "What a miracle of grace!" The pastor agreed and made reference to the criminal's conversion.

"But I was not referring to him; I was thinking of myself," noted the judge.

He went on to explain, "That man knew how much he needed Christ to save him from his sins. But look at me. I was taught from childhood to live as a gentleman, to keep my word, to say my prayers, to go to church. I went through Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar and eventually became a judge."

The judge paused in a reflective moment. "Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on a level with that convict. It took much more grace to forgive me for my pride and self-righteousness, to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God than the convict whom I sent to prison."

It took humility for the judge to come to that conclusion about his life, and then to share it.

As I thought about his testimony, I considered my own life – raised in a Christian home, became a member of the church at age 9, member of the Royal Ambassadors (the church's version of Boy Scouts), director of the church's Training Union program in my late teens.

But I was – through all of that then and now – a sinner saved by the grace (there's that word again) of a merciful, loving, forgiving God. No one is perfect. The Bible makes that clear: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23 ESV).

Grace is the love and mercy given to us by God because He desires us to have it, not necessarily because of anything we have done to earn it. Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help God gives us to respond to His call to become children of God, adoptive sons and daughters, partakers of the divine nature and eternal life.

Grace is necessary for all sinners to find forgiveness, regardless of how they, or the world, picture their needs.

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:8-10 NKJV).*