Rethinking How Grace Works
Russell Moore, Christian Century 11.11.26

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God,
who are called according to his purpose. *Romans 8:28*

A few months ago, a younger Christian was talking to me about a traumatic situation he had been through. He worried because he expected his faith to make it easier to put it all behind him. "Why can't I just move on?" he asked. I gave him all kinds of theological and spiritual formation answers, but I wish I could redo the talk. Just this last week, another conversation may have forever changed the way I think about the matter. And it all had to do with stairs.

I had just finished speaking at an event about heaven, the new creation, and the resurrection life after death. One of the last people to come up to speak with me after the presentation was a woman who said she was almost 80 years old. She had lost her husband a couple of years ago, so I expected her questions to be along the lines of *will-we-see-each-other-again*. But, she had no questions at all; she just wanted to tell me about her stairs.

I'll call her "Ruth," she said that after her husband died, most people expected her to sell the house. After all, the house she was in was there for a family full of children. Now it was just her. She didn't need a house that big and probably would face the day when she couldn't take care of it. Ruth said, though, that she didn't want to move. She said she couldn't do without the stairs.

At first, I thought I'd heard her wrong. After all, I've dealt often with people who, as they get older, have to move because they want to get to a place without stairs. I'd never heard someone say the opposite. Ruth said, "I need those stairs. I need to remember how they changed my life."

Ruth is a recovering alcoholic. She hid her drinking problem — and denied that she had one — for many years. No one at her church or in her friend group knew. One night, she was so intoxicated that she fell down the stairs, hitting her head at the bottom, losing consciousness, and nearly bleeding out. She woke up in a hospital on a ventilator and thought, *What has happened to my life?*

She told me that, without that kind of alarm, she would never have seen herself as someone who needed help, as someone who could do anything other than the next right thing. Ruth is sober now, has been for many years. She teared up as she said how grateful she was that she could spend those last few years with full clarity, really present with her husband. "I can't imagine what it would be like if I had wasted that time," she said. "If I couldn't remember."

She not only found help for herself. She was leaving, right after she talked to me, to a meeting where she would mentor addicted young women who are starting the process of recovery. She was going to help them hold on for one more day.

Ruth couldn't do it though, she said, without the stairs. Every time she looked at them, they reminded her of just how bad things had become. The stairs were an ongoing warning of just how much she could hurt herself and other people. They were a constant signpost that she's not as invincible and invulnerable as she often thinks she is.

But they were more than a warning too. Those stairs reminded her that she had survived all of that. Her life did not end. With the grace of God and the love of her friends, she stood back up. And, in fact, there was a whole room of women waiting for her that she could never have helped if she had not fallen down that staircase. Or if she had not gotten back up.

The stairs reminded her, every time she saw them, that she was carried along by grace. And that she could carry grace along to others. The stairs showed her what was possible about her life changing and seeing them

We tell people not to quote Romans 8:28 — "*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose*" — to people who are suffering. A suffering person (often rightly) hears that as dismissal, a way of rewording "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." But once we come to feel the full context of Romans 8:28, in the midst of the rest of that amazing chapter, we need to both say it and hear it. To see that grace is at work, even in the middle of awful things, is not to make those things one bit less awful.

If someone asked Ruth, "How do I become, like you, a mentor who can change people's lives?" She would describe, as she did with me, with grief and regret what she had lived through. But the very fact that she could see the change in herself, have gratitude for each moment, reflect on how far she had fallen, and to help others is itself another sign of grace.

Sometimes you can see retrospectively how God was at work in you as Ruth did. But most of the time you cannot track it. I wish I could redo the conversation with the man who wanted to know how to move on. I understand what he means, about thinking faith would make things easier, and I often think that too. There are some ways, though, that I think we try to "move on" too soon. We want to look at something and "learn the lesson" or "see the grace" as though that were a one-time thing. In reality, the message that "*all things work together for good*" is not about reading the things. It's about trusting God even when the things don't make sense. Or when they seem final. Or hopeless.

Moving on is a good thing, if we mean moving on from being trapped in something, or being hurt by something. But we can "move on" too much if we forget either that we walked through the valley of the shadow of death — or if we forget that the Shepherd was there with us the whole time.

I can't relate personally to Ruth's struggle, in terms of the specifics. Maybe you can; but each of us has some set of metaphorical stairs in our lives — something that reminds us we are not as strong as we think we are, and that we are loved more than we think we could ever be. Those key moments happen that remind us that God is with us at the top of the stairs, at the bottom of the stairs, and on every step between the two. That's grace. We get used to it sometimes. But it's amazing all the same.