

Jonathan and his Grandfather

Once upon a time in a village near a big lake, a little boy was born. His parents called him Jonathan. They were conscientious parents who took good care of him and he grew up healthy and strong.

¹ The family shared their small cottage with grandfather who was happy to spend time with his little grandson while mommy and daddy were away working in the fields, or on market days when they went to the village.

Jonathan was an obedient little boy who always did his best to follow the demands of his parents, and later that of his teachers. But sometimes it was hard to please them. If he spilled his milk by accident, his mother would scold him:

"Now look what you have done!"

"I didn't do it on purpose, it was an accident," Jonathan would defend himself.

But mommy didn't listen: "You have to be more careful," she would insist.

Another time he came home from playing in the woods with a tear in his pants. Again he got a major reprimand. After he started school, his daddy would belittle him for every mistake on his schoolwork. Try as he might, Jonathan could not please his parents. So he grew up thinking he was no good because all his efforts were in vain.

Grandpa provided solace. Together they would often walk to their favorite spot on the hill behind the house, overlooking the lake. It was a beautiful spot, peaceful and serene. There they would sit together, sometimes in silence, sometimes talking. Grandpa said that that's how he imagined paradise. He would tell him about God's grace, and Jonathan would listen intently, forgetting the harsh words his parents were so free to dispense.

At bedtime grandpa would sit by his bed regaling him with stories about all his exploits when he was a young man. Not everything grandpa had done was good and grandpa was honest about it. He admitted his mistakes and expressed regret. But to little Jonathan grandpa remained a towering figure, a hero that he looked up to.

One day grandpa died. Jonathan was very sad, but his mommy and daddy told him that grandpa was now in heaven and that Jonathan should not cry since grandpa was happy. Jonathan tried to figure out how God's grace could make his grandpa happy - was it something you had to do to earn it? Was it always there for everyone? If he were to die, how would he know that he too would receive God's grace? He knew from the stories that not everything grandpa had done was good. Would that prevent him from going to heaven? These thoughts troubled him, but he was too afraid to ask his parents for an explanation.

He missed his grandpa, the one person he could talk to without fear of being criticized or reprimanded. He now had to keep his questions to himself. As he grew older he did his best to help with chores after school, preparing wood for kindling, feeding the chickens, or watering the vegetable garden. He didn't mind

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doing this as that gave him a sense of competence and the feeling that he was helping his parents who worked hard.

—² One day when he had a lot of homework for a school project, he forgot to feed the chickens. He was still working on his project when his parents came home after dark. They had put in a long day at the market where they went regularly to sell eggs and vegetables from their garden. He was so absorbed in his work that he didn't even notice the clucking of the hungry chickens. But his parents did.

"What's going on?" questioned his mama. "Why are the chickens making such a racket? Did you by any chance forget..." Jonathan remembered. Apologizing profusely, he quickly ran out to the chicken coop to give the hens their due. He expected the matter was now closed. Instead, when he walked back into the house, he was greeted with an angry outburst from his mother.

"Why can't you carry out the few chores we ask you to do? All you can do is sit at your books. Don't you know you need to help?" Then his father chimed in: "You'll never amount to anything. You can't even do simple tasks..." Jonathan stopped listening. He ran out, tears welling up in his eyes. Without thinking he ran up the hill behind the house and didn't stop until he reached the spot where he had so often sat with his grandpa. Boy did he miss his grandpa!

He sat there for a long time, confused, thoughts swirling in his head. He felt so worthless. He couldn't even remember simple chores, he berated himself. Was his father right that he would never amount to anything? He would never be able to join his grandfather in heaven. Would he receive the grace of God like grandpa? Jonathan began to cry again when he heard the gentle voice of his grandfather:

"Don't cry, Jonathan. You are alright. You don't have to listen to everything they say."

Jonathan turned around. There was his grandpa. Stunned, Jonathan stopped sobbing, while grandfather continued:

"Don't try to touch me. You know, I am really dead. But I just could not let you sit there all by yourself. I had to come and talk to you to help you set things straight. People often say mean things. That does not mean they are true. Nor do you have to believe everything people say. Your parents are not evil people. They are simple folk who say the first thing that comes into their head. They never learned to check their words. Of course they exaggerate, but that's just an expression of their emotions. It doesn't even mean that that's what they really think."

Jonathan was calm now and he felt that he could talk to his grandpa just as he had in the past.

"But what they said is true. I don't always do my chores right. I make a lot of mistakes in my school work and..." Grandfather interrupted him:

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"That does not make you a bad person. Only people who never do anything make no mistakes. Mistakes are one way we learn."

"OK, then what about grace? If I make a lot of mistakes, how can I expect to go to heaven?"

³ "I think you got it backwards. Grace is always there. It's there for everyone, the good, the bad, and those who make a lot of mistakes."

"Alright, replied Jonathan, then how come not everyone can go to heaven?"

"It's very simple," said grandfather. "The key is to repent. If you make a mistake, big or small, and you repent, if you truly regret it, if you learn from it and resolve not to repeat the same mistake, and if you make amends whenever possible, then grace is yours. Grace will not force your hand. You have to turn toward it and the power to turn toward grace is in your own hands."

"Is that why you were able to go to heaven in spite of all the mistakes you made?" Jonathan just assumed that his grandpa was in heaven. He couldn't imagine that his beloved, kind grandpa could be anywhere else.

"Well, you might say so. I am still learning because I can now see more clearly all the mistakes I made. My problem is that it is now harder for me to make amends and to set things right. And that hurts."

"Can I help?" Jonathan asked. He did not want his grandfather to hurt.

"The best thing you can do is learn from my mistakes and know that grace is yours for the asking. No amount of criticism can take that away from you if your heart is pure and your intentions good, a mistake is not the end of the world. Fix it if you can, or show kindness to someone else if you cannot, and heaven will be your reward."

Jonathan felt much better. His parents' harsh words had the power to make him feel small and worthless. But when he was with his grandfather he felt like a giant.

"I must go now," grandfather said.

"Please don't. Can't you stay longer? I'm so happy when I am with you."

"No," answered the old man. "You have to let me go. I have my own work to do. Just remember the lessons. Grace is yours for the asking. No one can take that away from you. All you need is to turn toward it."

His voice was getting fainter. Jonathan saw his grandfather's image disappear into thin air. But he still felt the warmth of his love and the peace that radiated from the old man. Quietly he walked back to the cottage, feeling strong and tall, as if he had grown two inches. He was confident that he would be able to let criticisms and put downs roll off his back like so much water. He had a

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clearer understanding of who he was, of his effort to do the right thing and of his faith in his own future.

October 19, 2007