

Witness to Grace

WITNESS *to* GRACE

A TESTIMONY OF FAVOR

W. FRANKLYN RICHARDSON

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Witness to Grace: A Testimony of Favor

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For Inez, my gift of grace.

“...By the grace of God, I am what I am...”

I Corinthians 15:10

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W. Franklyn Richardson

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Content

	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xi
	FOREWORD	xv
	PROLOGUE	xix
1	Mad at God	1
2	A Fork in the Road	15
3	Pathway to Hope	21
	The Function of Legacy	31
4	A Saturday Night Call	39
5	A Long Shot	53
6	Birth of Global Consciousness	77
7	Aspirations	89
8	Pathway to Opportunity	101
9	Remaining Grounded	109
	Divine Value	121
10	Losing to Win	127
11	We Are Not Saved	143
	And We Are Not Saved	153
12	How Do You Say Thanks	159
13	Ecumenism	173
14	The Strange Ways of God	189
15	Hope, Justice, and Reconciliation	195
	A Voiceless Ministry	205
	EPILOGUE	ccxi
	APPENDIX	ccxvii
	INDEX	ccxxiii
	ABOUT THE AUTHOR	ccxxxv

Foreword

I OFTEN STAND IN THE PULPIT OF THE ALFRED STREET Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, where I serve as pastoral servant, look out over the amazing people that come to worship, listen to the melodious songs of praise, hear testimony of the many ways we seek to touch people with the transformative love of Jesus, become aware of the tremendous growth in Spirit and resources that God has given, and ask the question, “Lord, how did I get here?” How did God choose and then place me in such a wonderful situation of which I know I am not worthy? That is a question we all are humbled to ask at some point in our life’s journey: how could someone so unworthy be the recipient of something so amazing? W. Franklyn Richardson knows the answer that is universally valid for each and every one of us—*grace*.

To me, W. Franklyn Richardson is more than a pastor, more than a civic and community leader, more than a denominational and religious icon, more than a scholar, more than a preacher. He is part of God's grace that has been operating in my life for more than 30 years. When I was called to preach at the age of seventeen under the pastoral leadership of my father, the late Rev. Dr. Alvin J. Wesley, his small church in Chicago was the only model of ministry I had ever seen. I was blessed to have a father who saw and dreamed of more for me than I did for myself. He believed, long before I did, that God had something special in store and planned for me as a fourth-generation Baptist preacher, and he wanted me to see what God was able to do.

He reached out to his friend, W. Franklyn Richardson, and asked a tremendous favor. My senior year in high school required a month-long internship in our anticipated career field, and my father asked Dr. Richardson if I could come to Mt. Vernon for a month and shadow him at Grace Baptist Church to see what excellence in ministry was and what grace could do.

As a child of the National Baptist Convention, I was awed and intimidated by his presence. He was the general secretary of the largest Black Baptist religious body in the world and I had watched him from a distance, never thinking or dreaming that I would meet him personally. Imagine my amazement when he said, "Yes" to my father's request. He flew me to Mt. Vernon, moved me into his home with his family, took me everywhere with him for a month, and provided me with an intimate exposure to his life and his ministry. When you realize that you have been the recipient

of grace, you have no hesitation in being a conduit of grace for others. My first vision of grace at work in ministry and pastoral life was provided by W. Franklyn Richardson, and from that time in 1990 until today he has been my model and my mentor. When my father died in 2006, I began calling Dr. Richardson "Dad," and when I see what God has done in my own life and how God has used me in ministry and wonder how, "Dad" is part of that answer.

Witness to Grace is the world's opportunity to get a glimpse and insight into the life that has blessed me and has been a conduit of grace to countless others. Hear the eye-witness testimony of a life that has paused in meditative reflection and has come to the conclusion that grace is sufficient. Listen to the humble beginnings of inherited generational slavery and racism. Hear the stories of disappointment and perceived failure. See the personal struggle and even anger with God. Share in the wonder of the plans God had and has revealed in this life. And ultimately be amazed at all the various dimensions of grace and how God operates.

In 1994, I witnessed Dr. Richardson's heart break as he lost the election and bid to become president of the National Baptist Convention. I heard the rumoring and prophetic predictions of his demise and the inescapable stain of failure. Yet here he stands more than 25 years later, with an unequalled tenure of service to the universal and ecumenical body of Christ, unparalleled leadership in national economic initiatives, recognized scholarship and homiletical integrity as one of the greatest preachers of our time, and more than four decades of pastoral leadership at the providentially and appropriately named, Grace Baptist Church in Mt. Vernon, New York. His life is a witness to grace.

But *Witness to Grace* is much more than one man's story. This is not simply another autobiography. This is not some self-aggrandizing testimony. This is much more than a walk down memory lane. This is a theological and inspirational life lesson about God's presence and God's promises and God's provisions for all who read it.

I recently took my sons to see a movie that was offered in 3D. We were given our glasses and sat down to watch the movie. When the movie began, I noticed that my youngest son did not have his glasses on. I encouraged him to put them on. When he asked why, I responded "Because there's so much you'll miss without them." Likewise, in *Witness to Grace*, Dr. Richardson encourages us to put on our glasses and view our own lives through the prism of grace and see the amazing things grace has done and is doing for us. He broadens our understanding of grace and reveals grace at work in unexpected people and painful places of our lives.

He shows us the generational grace that was at work in our lives before we breathed our first breath. He destroys the narrow constraints of grace that too many of us have employed that have caused us to miss how wonderful God truly is. And most importantly, he teaches us how to take true inventory of grace at work in our lives to recognize that no matter what your station or situation of life, you are the product of grace and therefore have a reason to hope and a foundation for faith. Journey into these pages that bear *Witness to Grace* and allow W. Franklyn Richardson to be for you what he is for me: a conduit of God's grace in your own life.

Dr. Howard John Wesley

Prologue

I DECLARE, HERE AND NOW, THAT I AM A WITNESS TO GRACE!

When someone declares they are a Witness to Grace, they are declaring they have had a firsthand encounter with God. There are times when I am overwhelmed by the notion of grace—times when feelings of immense gratitude flood my soul. I have longed to place these thoughts on paper. The swift movement of time, the burden of responsibility, and the hesitancy to revisit the pain of some of my experiences have delayed the initiation and completion of this work. However, I must say that the writing process has mellowed the pain and deepened my understanding of how God's purpose can function in our disappointment. His thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8), but His love is ever constant.

Viewing life through the prism of the grace of God is optional and is an option that has blessed me. We don't have to view life through the window of grace. We can choose to see our blessings as a manifestation of our efforts—a viewpoint that may ultimately lead to hopelessness and despair.

When we truly acknowledge the presence and function of grace in our lives, we never feel cheated. On the contrary, we know that we have experienced God's provision completely undeserved, and this opens the door for us to express authentic gratitude, which results in a positive attitude and an optimistic expectation. It causes new blessings to emerge with pregnant potential on the dawning of each morning. I feel undeserving, which I believe is the foundation of authentic gratitude.

I am not writing my experience in this manner because it is unique. Rather, I write these words as my contribution to the great chorus of all who testify to the amazing grace of God. It is my testimony. It is an acknowledgment of God's fingerprints on my journey—a journey rich and wonderful. I have come to know God's favor, and I am grateful for it. Within the pages of this book, I do not speak of grace within the narrow view of salvation from sin exclusively but in the belief that all of life, what was, and is, and is to come, testifies to His grace!

As we move forward in faith, discovering grace is a retrospective, meditative experience. We look back over our shoulders to discover what God has done. We come to see the grace of God as we examine the journey which we have undertaken. The foundational attitude for discovering grace

is a sense of unworthiness, the idea that we have received more than we have earned. This notion awakens a grace consciousness in each of us, and this is what I hope to pass on to you as you read these pages.

Grace is God being available and accessible. Grace is the character, essence, and unmerited divine favor of God. The entire cosmic collaboration, from the sloping valleys to the majestic stars, to the roaring seas, to the crawling lizard, to the galloping stallions in the field, to the budding flowers, to the singing birds, and to all humankind, is the result of the function of grace.

Years ago, I heard the Reverend Manuel Scott qSr. of the St. John Baptist Church in Dallas, TX, preach about multiple expressions of God's grace as observed in the Genesis narrative of creation. He described them as Geological Grace (the grace of land and sea), Anthropological Grace (the grace of persons), Agricultural Grace (the grace of provision), and Astronomical Grace (the grace of the stars, the sun, and the moon). Each form of grace, he suggests, we did not purchase, but God gave it to us freely.

I acknowledge all of these unique physical expressions of God's grace. I must add to it what I consider to be the most marvelous expression of His grace: His presence. God's abiding companionship, both in the presence of His Son Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, is the ultimate gift of grace. I have known the gift of His presence and benefited from His thoughts towards me.

I have not come to this moment with any sense of self-righteousness. I admit that my brokenness has often been

the result of my actions, and I have been the recipient of an abundance of grace and mercy. I see mercy as an aspect of God's grace. Mercy is the pain that God chooses to withhold from me that I deserve, and grace is the favor which God decides to bless me with that I don't deserve. To be sure, I am grateful for his mercy.

This book is about His grace in all its dimensions. It is about God's aggressive participation in favoring the life of an undeserving believer. This book is about how the impact of His grace, which may often be a corrective rearranging of events that suggest failure. What I demonstrate in this book are the incidences of God's grace as a corrective presence in my life. He has turned failure into triumph and obstruction into opportunity. This corrective presence is at the heart of my Christology.

This book is the presentation of my understanding of a loving God who gave up His perfect best to save a wretched worst: "He paid an awful debt He did not owe, a debt we owed and could not pay." Oh, grace, that saved a wretch like me. May these shared reflections of grace, discovered and affirmed, prompt a fresh awakening in you of the thread of grace woven in the fabric of your life.