

*Witness to Grace*

WITNESS  
*to* GRACE

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A TESTIMONY OF FAVOR

W. FRANKLYN RICHARDSON

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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

*Scarsdale, New York 2020*

# *Content*

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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	211
APPENDIX	217
INDEX	223
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	235



## *Foreword*

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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

*Witness to Grace*

## *Mad at God*

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IT WAS SEPTEMBER 1994. I WAS STANDING ALONE IN THE convention hall at the Super Dome in New Orleans with tears running down my cheeks. I was disappointed, despaired, and disillusioned. I was mad as hell at God! But I did not know it at that moment. I suppressed the truth of what I truly felt about what God had permitted. My anger for the moment obscured all that God had been to me and done for me.

I was standing there defeated, pondering the outcome of the presidential election of the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. I had served for thirteen years as general secretary. In September 1982, Dr. T. J. Jemison was elected president of the convention. Based on his recommendation, I was elected general secretary at age thirty-two and followed Dr. Jemison's twenty-nine-year tenure in that office. When his tenure as president ended. I ran to succeed him and lost.

Being angry with God and questioning Him at that moment may be the highest form of faith. To be angry with God is not disrespect, nor is query blasphemy. It is the last resort of a believer's frustration: addressing the only one who has the answer. He may not answer or may simply say, "Get over it." This time, the process of divine query brought me to a place of fresh discovery.

The suppression of one's disappointment with God is advanced by the guilt of being angry with God. Being confused by God's actions leaves you in a dark place. It took much prayer and reflection for me to own and engage with the anger I felt. It required me to be confessional, especially against the backdrop of my grandmother's early admonition to never question God.

Emma Richardson Williams was my paternal grandmother and she was born in Irmo, South Carolina. Her grandmother was enslaved. My grandmother, like most of her contemporaries from the South, had an unwavering faith in God and was surrendered to His authority. Even in the face of the cruel inhumanity of slavery and racism, their faith left no room for questioning God.

When I was a lad, she would authoritatively declare; "You never ask God, 'Why?'" In her thinking, to question God was a form of distrust and ingratitude. I think it may have also been a way to survive the cruel hardship of her situation. To be sure, the faith of my forebears was authentic.

After experiencing the sting of failure, I was forced to focus on the broader presence of God in my life—not a narrow focus on a single event. All of us have known disappointment and despair at one time or another, but the gift of grace is

to discover, in our disappointment and failure, lessons that prepare us to manage future opportunities for prosperity. The positive collateral consequence of failure may very well be that it sets us up to see the grace of God!

Days later I was rising out of my despair, secluded and sitting on the seashore listening to the waves and watching the glistening sun kiss the turquoise waters of the Caribbean. It came to me that I was so fortunate to be a beneficiary of the grace of God. All around me was evidence of His favor. I just needed to change my focus, open my mind and behold His goodness. The very embrace of the sun and sea was symbolic and literal evidence of the grace of God, not purchased or earned by me, but was, like it is to every other human, a cosmic gift of God. I recalled in that moment that there were multiple expressions of God's amazing grace in my life.

I found myself taking inventory of His goodness and mercy, a reflection that began with me pondering my origin and the fact that my forebears were slaves who survived the constraints of a denied humanity and overwhelming cruelty in juxtaposition to the opportunities and exposures I had been given. I am overwhelmed by God's love, patience, provision, and grace towards me and how what others have intended for evil, God intended for good. My life is empowered by the thought that not only did God intend positive purpose for our lives, but even in the face of determined adversaries committed to our detriment, He has the power to actualize His purpose on our behalf.



## *The Fork in the Road*

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IN MY MORE FORMATIVE YEARS, I BEGAN TO REFLECT ON MY future, engaging the notion of faith at a more mature level. What had been a gentle tug to consider ministry as my life's work began to become more pronounced.

As a child, I was obsessed with the fascination of being a preacher to the extent that I would gather my sister, brother, cousins, and other children around the stoop of the entrance to our home and play church. I was always the preacher. As I became a teenager, the idea of being a preacher was less enticing, and I discouraged any suggestion of the sort. Ministry wasn't "cool" to me, but I remained very active in the life of the church through youth ministry, teenage choir, and junior ushers.

I was an industrious youth. My first job, where I had to be every workday, was sweeping up hair at Mr. Martinelli's

barbershop down on the corner from my home. Next I shined shoes at Mr. Taylor's shoeshine stand around the corner from where we lived. I enjoyed work, something I hadn't considered ministry to be.

I enjoyed earning my own money, and in the eleventh grade I secured a job that would become the most memorable of my young adulthood. It was a full-time summer job assisting in the laboratory of the West Park Hospital. I worked with everything from blood protoplasm to tissue samples to autopsies. It was fascinating and opened my eyes to the vulnerabilities of human life and aspects of healthcare that I had never considered.

Having sufficiently suppressed the impulse to go into ministry, or so I thought, and prompted by new exposure to medicine and health care, I decided that I was going to explore the possibility of becoming a doctor. I was encouraged in my consideration by the hospital staff and particularly by Dr. Fink, chief of pathology, under whose supervision I worked in the lab, and Dr. Weinstein who was a general practitioner and chairman of the board of the hospital. The doctors promised that when I graduated from college, they would pay for my medical school. I was excited and challenged by their offer, and that settled my decision: I was going to be a doctor.

I returned to school for my final year and resumed my after-school job in the laboratory. My work at the hospital encouraged my decision to attend college and avail myself of the opportunity to take advantage of the generous offer that would allow me to become a doctor. However, when I went to discuss my plans with my high school counselor,

Mr. Dribin, he told me solemnly, “You are not college material.” He suggested that I should consider a vocation instead of college. Needless to say, I left his office shattered and deeply discouraged, but I was determined to prove his assessment inaccurate.

My plans took a turn in November 1965 while I was walking home from school, I experienced a very sharp pain in my right side that proved to be appendicitis. My parents took me to the hospital, where the doctors recommended immediate surgery to remove my appendix. They did not give me general anesthesia but gave me a spinal procedure. Back then the spinal block was not widely used. Consequently, while the surgery was a success, there were complications. The effects of the spinal block did not wear off, as they should have, leaving me paralyzed longer than expected. The doctors were concerned. My parents and I were afraid, wondering when or if it would wear off.

During the three days that I was paralyzed, I reached out to God in prayer, acknowledging that I knew He called me to ministry. I promised that if He returned the feeling and mobility to my legs, I would preach the gospel—a promise I reneged on once I was well and out of the hospital.

The following June I graduated from high school and was admitted to West Philadelphia Community College (WPCC). I enrolled and matriculated in September, determined to proceed with my plan. I struggled that semester and ended up dropping out of WPCC. I couldn’t get the voice of my high school counselor out of my head and began to believe that his conclusion that I was not college material was accurate.