

# James's Amazing Grace Gumbo

BY BERT MONTGOMERY

**A reckless reading sees only legalism. But if we take time to savor its flavor like a Cajun making gumbo, because James stirs in a heaping amount of Abraham, a good sprinkling of Elijah, and just a pinch of Rahab, we will taste rich grace through and through.**

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**W**illie Nelson appears a lot in my writings, and in one early column I declared him to be a saint. Every so often someone politely reminds me that when he is not singing really great hymns and spirituals, Willie does a lot of *other* things which obviously disqualify him from sainthood. Therefore, as a minister of the gospel I must be more discerning about whom I point toward as an example of Christian virtue.

Thomas Merton wrote that “the stamp of grace is on the memory of yesterday.”<sup>1</sup> Merton was writing about himself and his coming to accept and embrace, rather than be ashamed of and try to hide, his past. That wonderful phrase — “the stamp of grace is on the memory of yesterday” — illuminates our willingness to judge a person less and less as more and more time passes since that person died. In about seventy-five years people may very well remember the more godly things about Willie, but for now...well, let's just say I'm just avoiding the rush and getting an early start.

Merton's words are very important as we consider the cameo appearances of Abraham, Rahab, and Elijah as edifying figures in the letter of James, especially since James is very commonly understood as a works-rather-than-grace epistle. Such a generalization is not fair to James; in fact, in light of Merton's phrase, we may find that grace abounds throughout this work despite the fact we usually overlook it on a surface reading. James quickly tosses these three names out as examples of faith in action for us to emulate.

If we take the time to consider all the background that goes with these biblical characters, we indeed find a lot of grace embracing each one.

## **ABRAHAM**

Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,” and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

*James 2:21-24*

Let’s face it, Abraham was an old codger who at times seemed to wonder what kind of joke God was playing on him – that is, after he got up off the floor and dusted himself off where he had just fallen on his face laughing at God’s joke about fathering a child at one hundred years of age with his old lady (in the literal sense of an old and, in this case, barren woman).

Who could blame Abe? After all, God had promised as much some years earlier, and Sarah (good wife that she was) deciding that since she was not going to be able to do her part, volunteered her maid, Hagar, to be her surrogate. However, Sarah then got mad and the pregnant Hagar fled. God told Hagar to go back, which she did, reigniting the marital discord, which only worsened when her son Ishmael was born. That is a lot of drama for a man in his mid-eighties.

At this point the “father of many nations” had just one son, whom his wife resented until God blessed Sarah with a baby boy, Isaac. It is sometimes said that every blessing is also a curse, and while Isaac’s birth doubled the likelihood of Abraham fathering many nations, it also quadrupled the domestic woe until, desperate for a moment of peace and quiet, he sent Hagar and Ishmael away for good.

Oh, and sometime after figuratively cutting himself off from one son, God told him to do the same with the other, Isaac – albeit in a bit more literal manner. Given Sarah’s demanding disposition in regard to all things maternal, Abe decided it was best not to worry her about it. We know the ending of that story, of course, but one has to think Abraham, not Kris Kristofferson, may have been the one who first crooned, “Why me, Lord?”

Rolling on the floor laughing at God rarely counts as good faith-like behavior, but to keep going when it appears you may be losing your mind does. Being *willing* to sacrifice Isaac then still live with Sarah afterward, let alone himself, is just plain crazy. It is either that or a blending of faith and works together that marked Abraham as a Friend of God. The latter is how James preferred to record it, with a stamp of grace.

## RAHAB

Likewise, was not Rahab the prostitute also justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out by another road? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.

*James 2:25-26*

Sing along, if you know the words: "There is a house in Jericho, they call the Rising Sun, and it's been the ruin of many a poor boy...."<sup>2</sup>

Rahab could very well have run a thriving business in New Orleans, and no doubt many a Baptist minister would have tried to save her soul, until the visits cost some of them their marriages and their churches. We really do not know much else about Rahab, except that being the kind of woman she was, she was not always keen on following the rule of law, and therefore probably found it a bit thrilling to play a little game of hide and seek with the king's men, thereby helping the Hebrew spies sent into Jericho by Joshua. We are not told exactly *why* the spies sent to Jericho ended up at Rahab's place (perhaps they aspired to save her), but as it turns out, it was the Madam who did the saving. And for that, James applies the stamp of grace upon the memory of Rahab and mentions her in passing as another example of righteousness through faith and works.

## ELIJAH

Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest.

*James 5:16-18*

I sometimes imagine Elijah the prophet as a professional wrestler on television—strutting, bragging, trash-talking, and challenging his arch-nemesis to not just any old steel-caged match but a non-sanctioned, no-holds-barred, with extra obstacles tossed into the ring to make it even more fun steel-caged match. A little while later a new arch-nemesis appears, the girlfriend of the previous arch-nemesis, and she struts and brags and smashes chairs while stating what she's going to do to Elijah...and he cowers, hides, and cries like a baby.

A stickler for the law would question why anyone would point to Elijah as an example of faith in action. When he was "up" he was over-dramatic, arrogant, and obnoxious; he had an antagonist edge that kept him in conflict

with the majority of folks most of the time. And when he was “down,” that unstable emotional pendulum swung hard and fast and wide: there did not appear to be much faith at work when those mean woman blues drove Elijah to crawl inside a hole and wait to die. Noting that Elijah was really not all that different from any one of us, with all of our quirks and issues, James throws Elijah’s name out there as an example of a righteous man praying. Covering the width of Elijah’s mood swings with grace requires a rather large stamp.

### **A SIMMERIN’ POT OF GRACE GUMBO**

With its very clear directives on how to pray, what one should and should not say about the future, how to anoint with oil one who needs healing, and a strong emphasis on social action toward the poor, hungry, and outcast, James’s letter can come across as perhaps the most legalistic book in the New Testament. But when we take the time to savor the flavor like a Cajun making gumbo, because James stirs in a heaping amount of Abraham, a good sprinkling of Elijah, and just a pinch of Rahab, we will taste the richness of grace in which everything else rests.

As Merton said, “the stamp of grace is on the memory of yesterday,” and this is certainly true with the letter of James. A reckless reading sees legalism, but a hearty bite tastes grace through and through.

### **NOTES**

1 Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Inc., 1981 [1953]), 32. As a side note, I am convinced that had Merton not died in 1968, he would have come to absolutely love Willie Nelson.

2 With apologies to “House of the Rising Sun,” a traditional folk song that is most widely known through the blues-rock arrangement by The Animals in 1964. Granted, some interpret this song to be about gambling and drinking, but generally folks think of it as a song about Rahab’s line of work.

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