

DIANE VILLA

Jesus has never left me alone, even when I didn't want Him around. While I was busy demoting Him to a mere prophet and inventing my own version of God, He was planning a way to get my attention. Before I met Jesus, I thought I understood a little about suffering. Suffering seemed a normal occurrence, and I grew up tough. The home I grew up in was not a safe place. My relationship with my dad was based on fear. So much so that my four brothers and I bailed out of the windows and ran away from the house when he was seen coming. He always seemed angry and disappointed with us, no matter what we did, and the verbal and physical abuse was a daily thing.

Because of the lack of affection in our home, I was very needy and vulnerable. The kids at school could tell, and they were merciless. Unfortunately, predators could tell as well, and they took full advantage of it. Survival was the goal, but my heart grew cold, even when I convinced myself it was pursuing love.

The world didn't make sense to me, but drugs did: it seemed to make things so much easier.

I eventually decided that evil didn't exist and became religious about my beliefs, which opened the door for all kinds of deceptive spiritual influences. These influences were blatantly evil, and one night I shared them with Lorenz. He told me he thought I was going to hell with my beliefs. I pitied him, thinking I had come to a greater spiritual understanding than him and that he was at the end of his spiritual journey.

Though I was oblivious to it at the time, I lived my life as if I ran on a treadmill, running hard to pursue the elusive goal of "holiness," denying that I was going nowhere. I ran even when I was exhausted, ran in spite of evidence to the contrary that things were not working out the way I had planned. No matter what happened, I could put a positive spin on it.

I was not looking for God. I thought I had discovered the truth, and I was convinced I could eventually get it right and become holy on my own. God knew better, and He sought me out. In His mercy and grace He took the scales off my eyes and revealed that evil permeated my life, and that He alone had the power to quell its influence over me. I had very little to do with it. He showed up and chose me. He bought me out of the

marketplace of sin and embraced me on the spot. It was love without a doubt. My response to Him has been to try to love Him with my whole heart, mind, and soul.

His response to me has been to keep offering me grace. I've come to the conclusion that grace is primary in our relationship. There is absolutely nothing about me now or before He introduced Himself to me that warranted His movement towards me. It's about Him, because His love is something He simply does not want to restrain. He gives because of who He is. His grace is what sustains me. Without it, this place is a barren wasteland. I'm looking for another country—the place He has prepared for me. My name is Diane Villa, and I am so grateful that I am His.