

CHARLES R.
SWINDOLL



Awakened
by
GRACE

The Life Story of Chuck Swindoll

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CHARLES R. SWINDOLL



An Imprint of Thomas Nelson

Awakened by Grace

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*I dedicate this book to
Cynthia, my wife, whom I have loved and
enjoyed for over seventy years.*

*And to our delightful family:
Curt and Debbie Swindoll
Charissa and Mark Gaither
Colleen and Toban Thompson
Chuck and Jeni Swindoll*

Contents

<i>Introduction: Awakened by Grace</i>	ix
<i>Chapter 1: “You Were an Accident . . . a Mistake.”</i>	1
<i>Chapter 2: The Chemistry Changed When We Sang Together</i>	12
<i>Chapter 3: Two Weeks with the Justice of the Peace</i>	23
<i>Chapter 4: “I Want You in My Debate Class and on My Drama Team.”</i>	32
<i>Chapter 5: “You Need to Learn a Trade, Son.”</i>	41
<i>Chapter 6: Love at First Sight</i>	52
<i>Chapter 7: “You Will Never Have to Go Overseas.”</i>	59
<i>Chapter 8: “Chuck, You’re a Natural!”</i>	70
<i>Chapter 9: “I Believe God Is Calling Me to Ministry.”</i>	80
<i>Chapter 10: “I’m Going to Accept You on Probation.”</i>	90
<i>Chapter 11: “Your Tuition Has Been Paid.”</i>	100
<i>Chapter 12: “I Love You, Chuck.”</i>	109
<i>Chapter 13: “I Will Do This the Rest of My Life.”</i>	118
<i>Chapter 14: “Oh, Pastuh.”</i>	127
<i>Chapter 15: “You Pray. I’ll Pack!”</i>	137
<i>Chapter 16: “Go to Fullerton, and Then Stay There!”</i>	147

Contents

<i>Chapter 17: The Tale of The Guy and the</i>	157
Unanimous Vote	
<i>Chapter 18: The Whine of a Harmonica and the</i>	167
Smell of a Good Cigar	
<i>Chapter 19: Gold Dust and Shoeboxes Under the Bed</i>	176
<i>Chapter 20: The Lake House and The Grace</i>	186
Awakening	
<i>Chapter 21: From Probation to President</i>	197
<i>Chapter 22: The Shepherd President</i>	206
<i>Chapter 23: "Drive to Hooters and Turn Left!"</i>	216
<i>Chapter 24: Matters of the Heart</i>	225
<i>Chapter 25: "We Could Do This!"</i>	234
<i>Chapter 26: Passing the Batons</i>	246
<i>Chapter 27: Guided by Grace</i>	255
<i>Chapter 28: Three Hours Every Saturday Morning</i>	266
<i>Chapter 29: From Common Corporal to the</i>	276
Commandant's Choice	
<i>Chapter 30: What Older Chuck Would Tell</i>	286
Younger Chuck	
<i>Milestones and Achievements</i>	295
<i>Notes</i>	301
<i>About the Author</i>	303

Introduction

Awakened by Grace

This is a book I never expected to write.

First, I have never considered my life all that significant. And, second, I have always been very uncomfortable talking about myself.

But people kept asking me for this book in every venue in which I was engaged, especially during the past twenty years of my life. I heard the question from members of our church congregation, listeners of our radio broadcast, *Insight for Living*, and from people who were reading my books and attending our conferences, tours, and cruises. “Chuck,” they urged, “we know bits and pieces about your life, but we need you to put it all together!” Yet I maintained my reluctance.

And then I had a breakthrough.

I began to realize the book that needs to be written is not about me. It’s about God’s sovereign plan working in and through me—and even in spite of me!

I may be *in* the story, but it’s not saying, “Look at me!” Rather, this story says, “Look at what God has done!” It’s

Introduction

really saying, “Can you believe all of this stuff truly happened to me?”

This book is about God’s work in my life and how He has awakened me by His grace. Moments of being awakened by grace are woven throughout this book like a silver thread through a multicolored tapestry.

Here are some examples:

- A high school teacher who sought me out to be a member of his drama team—even though I stuttered! “Oh, don’t worry about your stutter,” he said almost nonchalantly. “We can fix that. I will teach you how to speak in front of people without being nervous.” As I look back, his words and investment in my life were God’s grace at work.
- A young associate pastor who found me working in a machine shop and asked, “Chuck, why are you here?” He sensed that God had something different and greater for me. Indeed, He did. That was clearly a grace awakening in my life.
- The most amazing slice of life that occurred when I was a lonely and struggling US Marine, sent to Okinawa eight thousand miles away from my bride. It was on that distant island that I met a man who would mentor me for fifteen of the sixteen months I was there. He had access to all the troops from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and the Marine Corps on the island, but for some reason he chose me! Why? God’s grace. As a result of this man’s mentorship, I lost the disillusionment

Introduction

I had developed toward God, as well as the discouragement I was feeling. It was also during my tour of duty as a Marine that I was awakened by God's grace to my leadership abilities. The Marine Corps taught me discipline, leadership, and determination, and my mentor taught me hope, vision, and a deep love for ministry.

- Returning home to the United States and feeling God's leading to attend seminary. I chose Dallas Theological Seminary, and I was graciously given a one-hour interview, even though I was clearly going to have to be a "special student." Why was I given that opportunity? That appointment alone was an act of God's grace extended my way. I was accepted into the seminary on probation. Grace was extended further in my wife and me getting the last apartment on campus available for married couples, along with a huge financial gift for my tuition. When I added it all up, it said to me that God was in everything happening in our lives. The whole thing was part of His sovereign plan.
- My favorite professor, Howard Hendricks, who chose me to do a summer internship with Ray Stedman, pastor of Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California. How did I rise above all the other students in his eyes? That summer proved to be life-changing, and I could see the Lord putting things together.
- God opening the door for me to have *four* opportunities after graduation, while some students didn't have a place to go. After graduation I joined the pastoral team

Introduction

serving Dr. Dwight Pentecost at Grace Bible Church in Dallas, where I learned more about church ministry.

- All the lessons of grace I learned while pastoring in Waltham, Massachusetts, and Irving, Texas. Many of them were learned through challenging tests and trials, but they were used by God to awaken me to His grace.
- Grace continuing as we made more moves. My mom passed away, and we moved my dad in with us, which taught us additional truths.
- God's grace when we moved to Fullerton, California. It was His perfect timing, as we landed in the right place at the right time when Orange County was in full explosion mode. Fullerton was where I learned to be who I am—what an awakening!

Remember now, I didn't ask for *any* of these things! They all came to me. Bill Gwinn invited me to speak at Mount Hermon Conference Center. Al Sanders urged me to consider a broadcast ministry. John Van Diest offered to publish my first book. All of those men came to me.

And then the biggest surprise of my life—the call to become the president of Dallas Theological Seminary. I wasn't in it for myself. I just loved serving the faculty and the students. They needed love and encouragement, and I loved being their shepherd. God's grace in full bloom.

While in Dallas, we considered starting a church in Nashville. But it wasn't right. I also considered becoming the pastor of a Dallas church but pulled out. Why? It just wasn't a

Introduction

fit. And that led us to begin Stonebriar Community Church. And in God's grace, that one was right!

It was the Lord who led the commandant of the United States Marine Corps to invite me to address the graduating class of officers from Quantico at the Washington National Cathedral. And through that God blessed me with one of the most memorable moments in my ministry life.

And now here I am at ninety-one years of age—I mentor, I write, and I listen a lot more than I talk.



Before you begin this journey with me through all these memories, I need to acknowledge that writing this book has been a team effort—and what a great team they are!

First, my editor, Bill Butterworth, has been a magnificent source of encouragement and wise counsel. My daughter Charissa Swindoll Gaither has patiently assisted in many of the details, along with Cathy Carl, Ginger Hiott, Beverly Hoge, and Bryant Kelley. Each one has been a delight to work with.

Thanks to the team at Nelson Publishing, especially Andrew Stoddard, Christopher Sigfrids, Lisa Beech, and Brigitta Nortker.

I am also grateful for Sealy and Matt Yates, who have faithfully served as my literary agents.

One of the books by the incomparable C. S. Lewis is titled *Surprised by Joy*. If I had to choose an alternative title

Introduction

for this book, it would have been that same title, or perhaps just *Surprised*. I never expected any of these things to come to pass in my life. I have truly been surprised throughout all my years. As you will see, there wasn't a lot of grace at the beginning of my life, and there were issues that stayed with me for a long time.

But this is a book about God's miraculous intervention. I was simply the recipient. I couldn't have planned it. None of it was manipulated, orchestrated, or expected. Yet it all came. This is the story of how God awakened me by His grace through the intersecting of my life with

Richard Niemi

Bob Newkirk

Donald Campbell

Howard Hendricks

Ray Stedman

Dwight Pentecost

Grace Bible Church

Waltham Evangelical Free Church

Irving Bible Church

First Evangelical Free Church of Fullerton

Dallas Theological Seminary

Stonebriar Community Church of Frisco

Mount Hermon Conference Center

Forest Home Conference Center

Insight for Living

A book about all of them.

Introduction

And so much more . . .

Now that's the kind of book I feel honored to write.

CHUCK SWINDOLL

FRISCO, TEXAS

Chapter 1

“You Were an Accident... a Mistake.”

The home in which I grew up was not a place of grace. That’s part of why grace was to become so important to me in my life.

Our family operated under a banner that said significance was earned. Any role of importance had to be achieved. It was never given, and none of it came easily.

That worked beautifully for my older brother, Orville, whose IQ was approaching genius. He loved chemistry sets, advanced math, scientific projects, and electronics. My brother could also have easily become a concert pianist. He was playing Bach and Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky and Chopin and Beethoven and Mozart before he graduated from high school. He truly had a command of the keyboard.

Then there was my older sister, Luci. Like our older brother, she was a member of the National Honor Society, and she was the most popular girl in both our neighborhood

and the high school we attended. Everyone then and forever loved Luci. She was charming and blessed with many gifts. She was also a fine athlete, excelling in volleyball and swimming.

It wasn't long before it was obvious that Orville was my mother's favorite. She adored him. And my dad, of course, was crazy about his daughter. He loved her dearly and favored her.

And then I came along.

Clearly, my conception was not planned. My mother would say to me, "You may not understand this right now, but you were an accident . . . a mistake." I don't believe they wanted a third child. A large part of me believes that if abortion had been legal back then, she would have considered aborting me.

Don't misunderstand; I was never abused. I was just unwanted.



Tucked away on the coastal plains of Texas, about seventy miles southwest of Houston, is the little town of El Campo. The largest town in Wharton County, with a current population of around twelve thousand, it was the home of the county's justice of the peace, a man named Lewis Orville Lundy, better known as L.O. A bit of a local celebrity, he built a lovely large house with an impressive wraparound porch. He owned and operated the L.O. Lundy Insurance Agency.

L.O. and his wife had four children: Evelyn, Lovell, Ernestine, and Rozell. It was child number two, the attractive Lovell Lucille Lundy, that caught the eye of a young man named Earl Swindoll. The only thing I ever knew about this man's past, the man who would become my father, was that Earl had come to Texas from New Mexico. He had worked on air brakes for the Santa Fe Railroad. Once in Texas, he went to work for Lovell's father and quickly became the agency's top salesman.

"Earl, I've been going over your résumé," L.O. remarked one day. "And I see that you have been divorced." (Divorce was a cardinal sin back then.) "Well, I have some advice for you: *Stay away from my daughters!*"

L.O.'s advice didn't sit well with Lovell, who had other plans. "Earl, if I'm going to leave college so that we can be together, we need to get married," she explained.

"But your dad told me to stay away from you," Earl countered.

Lovell replied, "But Daddy never told *me* to stay away from Earl Swindoll!"

Eventually L.O. gave in. He liked Earl, so he called him aside and whispered, "Earl, it's okay. Let's just not talk about it." Whispering and not talking about it were how this family dealt with many of their issues.

Lovell and Earl were married on October 5, 1930. They honeymooned in Oklahoma City. Not long after they returned to El Campo, Lovell announced that she was pregnant. Ten months after their wedding, Orville Earl Swindoll was born on August 5, 1931. Thirteen months later, Lovell

gave birth again. This time it was a girl, Lovell Lucille, born on September 8, 1932. Another twenty-five months went by, and a third child was born, Charles Rozell, on October 18, 1934.

Three babies in four years—a statistic to keep in mind.

I was born in a one-bedroom garage apartment that had a bedroom for my parents, a room for all us kids, and a kitchen. If you looked at our place from the outside, you would see that the structure literally leaned to the north, having been buffeted by the fierce winds coming off the Gulf about fifty miles away.

My dad was present at each of our births and actually assisted the doctor by holding a wad of cloth soaked in chloroform to put over my mother's mouth when she screamed in pain. "Earl, don't give it to her until I tell you," the doctor advised. The conventional wisdom was that too much chloroform could affect the baby.

Mom wasn't ready for that many kids in such a short period of time. She was clearly irritated by little ones. Perhaps it was that irritation that caused her to call me a mistake.

Meanwhile, the favoritism in the family grew exponentially. Dad doted on Luci, and Mom favored Orville. They tolerated me. Here was Orville, so gifted that he took piano lessons from Rebecca Friedman Miller, one of Houston's finest teachers at the time. He would play in her recitals regularly, and because he was her youngest student and the most gifted, he would always be the last to perform at the recital, with thunderous applause to follow. She advised him, "Always have an encore ready."

In school, my grades could not compare to my brother's, though my dad often did just that when we brought our report cards home. I can still see him smiling at Orville's report card as he held it in his right hand and his furrowed brow and frowning as he looked at mine, clutching it in his left hand.

My brother earned enormous respect from my parents because of his brilliance. He built a radio from scratch. He built a record player (at that time called a Victrola) from scratch. He was a ham radio operator before he turned fifteen. When my dad built our garage, he built a little shop for Orville. It was like his own personal Radio Shack, and my brother loved spending hours in there.

As a teenager, he competed in a science fair sponsored by Bausch & Lomb and, of course, he won. His winning project? Raising *Drosophila melanogasters*, more commonly known as Mediterranean fruit flies. It was quite an operation since those flies were about the size of gnats, yet my brother nurtured them and watched them and bred them. He fed them a substance called agar-agar, which he faithfully dispensed to their home in an old-fashioned glass milk bottle.

One night, Dad was employing his custom of having himself a big bowl of cereal right before bed. On this particular night, instead of pouring milk on the cereal, Dad wasn't paying attention, and he grabbed the bottle of fruit flies. He opened the top and immediately there were fruit flies everywhere.

"Everybody, wake up!" Orville screamed. "Each of you grab one of these little nets and catch as many flies as you can." And then, believe it or not, he said, "Luci, you catch

the females and, Charles, you catch the males!” Here we were, running around the house, swinging a tiny net from side to side, all the while trying to do a microscopic gender reveal. If anyone had seen what was going on in our house, they would have concluded we had escaped the asylum and joined the circus.

Even with that milk-bottle prison break, Orville got his project all back together and received the top prize in the contest: a full scholarship to Rice Institute, often referred to as the “Harvard of the Southwest.” Dad and Mom were so proud that, upon his high school graduation (Orville was valedictorian, of course), they gave Orville their car so he could drive to Rice! I just couldn’t compete with that sort of brilliance.

Then there was my older sister, Luci. Not only did she make good grades, but she also had a magnetic personality that could draw just about anybody to her way of thinking. Her musical talent was over the top, as was her strong athletic ability. After high school she went on to college at Mary Hardin Baylor, from which she graduated with honors.

My parents’ favoritism was obvious growing up, as they doted on Orville and Luci. I, on the other hand, was the unplanned third child that they tolerated. At bedtime I would climb into bed and then hear my mother say, “Orville, would you like a glass of warm milk before you go to sleep?” And every night she would prepare that warm milk for him and walk right past me to hand it to him. Nothing was ever offered to me.

In some ways, that sense of my being less-than seeped into

us kids as well. There was plenty of arguing in our house, and it felt like Orville was always picking on me. I remember being so angry with him one time that I shouted out, "You should've been named Hitler!"

Mom took up his defense, saying to me, "That's not funny."

I replied, "I didn't say it because it was funny. I said it because it was true!" But, overall, I learned to try and stay out of arguments as best as I could, for I knew I would never win.

The three of us had nicknames for each other. Luci was Sister, I was Babe, and Orville was Bubba. Whenever we played the board game Monopoly, Orville, of course, was the banker. "Babe, you're too dumb," Luci would tease. Naturally, she couldn't be the banker, because when she was, she was constantly stealing money. Orville was the obvious choice over a dummy and a thief.

One time when Luci was about nine and I was about seven, we were sitting in a tree house. Luci said to me, "You know, Babe, if you go down there and strip that cedar off those posts that Daddy put up"—he'd built a cedar fence around the backyard of our home—"and get some notebook paper, I'll show you how to smoke."

"Boy, that sounds great," I said.

She got the kitchen matches while I climbed out of the tree house and stripped all the cedar bark off one post. I presented it to her, and she began to shred it and roll it up inside a sheet of notebook paper. I remember wrapping my mouth around it as she said, "Now, when I light this match, Babe, you suck." Well, after that experience, let's just say I wasn't sure I would ever speak again.

Sometimes we were allowed to go to the movies. Dad would give each of us a quarter. The ticket was five cents, and the popcorn was ten cents. “Bring home the change,” Dad would instruct. But Orville would take the remaining dime from each of us, silently reminding us, “I am in charge!” Still, the nickel would get us into the theater where a double feature was being run. Not only that, but between the two movies the theater would provide a live stage show for its patrons. Well, that was too much for Luci to resist. She would jump up on the stage and regale the crowd with a song that would bring down the house. Who could compete with something like that?

I use that terminology because that was the way we were brought up. There was no grace. Instead, there was competition. You got what you deserved. You worked for your reward. My brother was a genius, and my sister was the life of the party. I was neither. Just a mistake, an accident.

I quietly longed for someone to see significance in me. My parents went to all Orville’s recitals and all Luci’s swim meets and volleyball matches. But they didn’t come to anything involving me. Dad never even threw a ball with me. I grew to be very self-conscious, because I felt I couldn’t keep up. I began to stutter. But neither Mom nor Dad seemed concerned about it at all.



Early in December of 1941, our family had the special treat of heading down to Carancahua Bay for a week of vacation. We

piled into Dad's two-door '41 Ford, all shiny, black, and—a special treat—it had a radio! Dad drove, Mom was in the front passenger seat, and the kids were in the back—ten-year-old Orville by one window, nine-year-old Luci by the other, and seven-year-old me stuck in the middle.

It was on that drive down to the bay that we heard the news on the car radio. Pearl Harbor had been attacked.

"Oh, Earl, Earl," my mother moaned. "What are we going to do?"

Dad comforted us by saying, "Lovell, it's all right. We're Americans. We'll beat them!" And with that, he pulled the car off to the side of the road. He turned around and looked at his three kids in the back seat. "Children, we're not going on a vacation while our boys are going to war." We all agreed, for we were patriots at heart.

When World War II first broke out, my dad was too old for the draft. Being as patriotic as he was, he discussed it with my mother and then told us that we were going to move to Houston to assist our soldiers by helping make airplane parts from retooled oil drill bits.

It was 1942 and I was in the third grade. In those days, Houston was known for its high murder rates. I can still remember Mom describing the city to me with the familiar phrase "Charles, it's dog-eat-dog out there," to which I swallowed hard and immediately responded, "They eat dogs there?"

I have a variety of memories from living as a young boy during the war. Things were being rationed, and there were fascinating trade-offs like turning in bacon drippings for a

piece of meat. Factories made explosives out of grease, so those drippings were valuable and, believe me, my mother saved every single drop. Toilet paper was rationed, so Dad stated the goal: "Seven squares!" I recall resisting, only to hear my dad respond, "Make it work, son!" Nylon stockings were turned in to make parachutes, so women were going bare-legged with a line drawn down the back of their legs. And Dad never missed a fireside chat, the evening radio addresses President Roosevelt gave. Dad thought FDR was perfect. Dad also never missed a newspaper column by his favorite writer, Ernie Pyle. It was a sad day when it was reported that Ernie died by enemy fire in the South Pacific during the Okinawa campaign. Dad also told us about a German spy who had been discovered in Houston. The authorities caught and hanged him.

The war persisted and life went on here in the States. Things were different in the public schools back then. Each day began with us standing by our desks, hands over our hearts, facing the American flag, and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, which was followed by our teacher offering up a prayer. The Wednesday before Thanksgiving of 1944, we were doing just that, as usual. But when it was time for our teacher to pray, she didn't get too far into her prayer before we noticed her voice breaking up. She began to sob her way through the rest of the prayer. We were all surprised at our teacher's emotions, so she had us sit down for an explanation. "Boys and girls, you need to know something. In June of this year, I lost my husband on the shores of Normandy. This will be the first Thanksgiving that I will be all alone."

"You Were an Accident... a Mistake."

That thought stuck with me the whole day. I remember walking home from school, looking up at the sky and thinking about how much I loved my country and my family. And how blessed I was to have them—favoritism, faults, and all.

It was a moment when I was awakened by grace.

And ever since then, Thanksgiving has been my favorite holiday of the year.

About the Author

Pastor Charles R. Swindoll has devoted his life to the accurate, practical teaching and application of God's Word. He is the founding pastor of Stonebriar Community Church in Frisco, Texas, as well as the founder of *Insight for Living*, a leading program in Christian broadcasting since 1979 that airs around the world. Chuck has also served as president and chancellor emeritus at Dallas Theological Seminary and has written more than 135 books for a worldwide reading audience, for which he has received the Gold Medallion Lifetime Achievement Award, twelve Gold Medallion Awards, and the Christian Book Award for Bible of the Year.

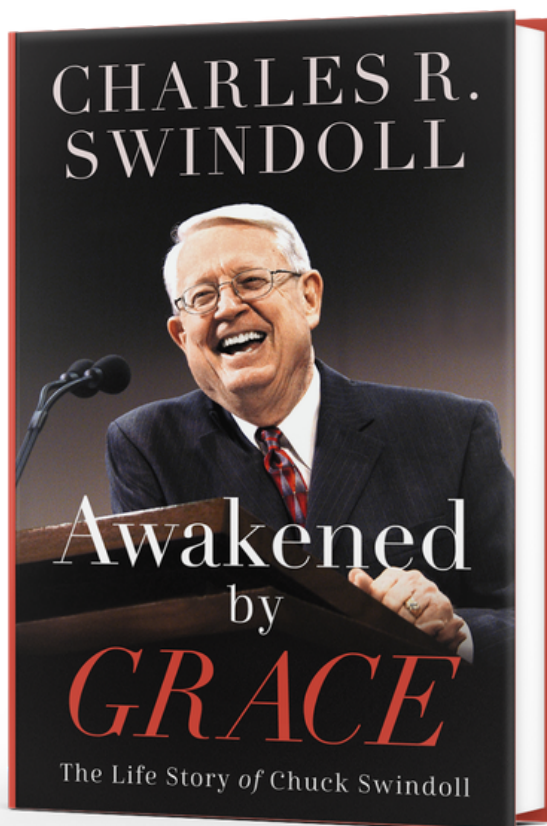
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