

The **GRACE**
EFFECT

*How the Power of
One Life Can Reverse
the Corruption
of Unbelief*

LARRY ALEX TAUNTON

A PDF COMPANION TO THE AUDIOBOOK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Taunton, Larry.

The grace effect : how the power of one life can reverse the corruption of unbelief / by Larry Alex Taunton.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-59555-440-6 (alk. paper)

1. Apologetics. 2. Christianity and atheism. 3. Taunton, Larry—Family. 4. Intercountry adoption—Ukraine. 5. Intercountry adoption—United States. I. Title.

BT1212.T38 2011

261.8'35874—dc22

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2011015265

Printed in the United States of America

11 12 13 14 15 QG 5 4 3 2 1

THREE

Atheists Don't Do Benevolence



Photo by Christopher Taunton

The orphanage grounds.

FOUR

Show Me the Money

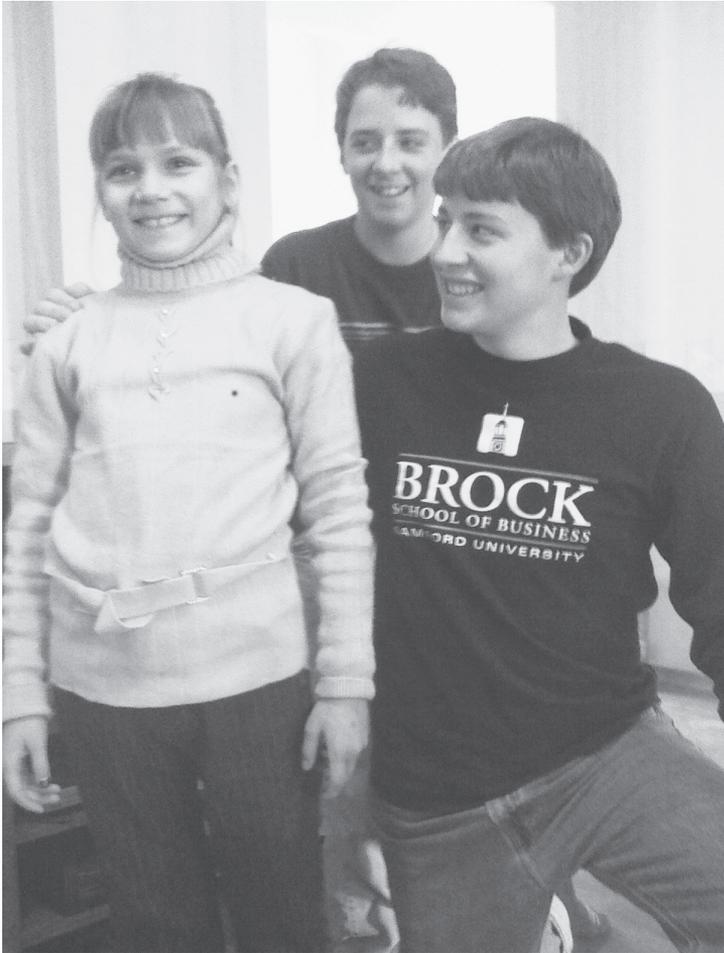


Photo by Larry Alex Taunton

Sasha's first day with us at our apartment in Odessa. Zachary (standing) and Christopher (kneeling) greeted her warmly.

FOURTEEN

Free at Last



Photo by Christopher Taunton

Sasha's first night of freedom in the apartment in Odessa.

SEVENTEEN

“Regarding Sasha . . .”

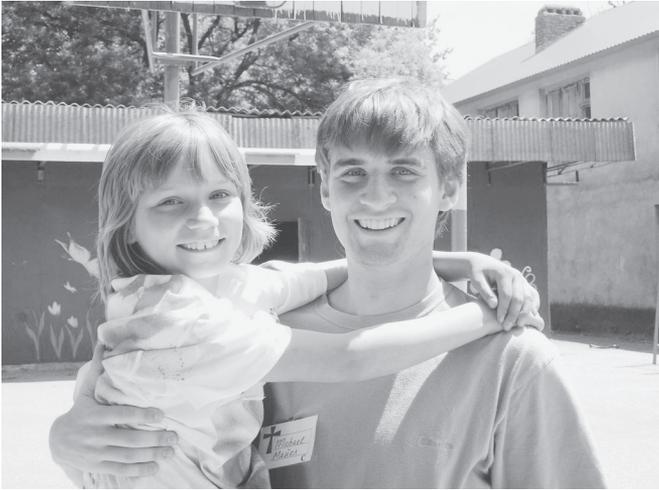


Photo by Christopher Taunton

Michael with Sasha during a mission trip to Orphanage #17.

NINETEEN

Sasha's New Beginning



Photo by Christopher Taunton

Sasha meets the Birmingham Barons' mascot.



Photo by Christopher Taunton

Sasha learns how to ride a bike.

TWENTY

Is America Safe?



Photo by Hannah Slamen

Sasha and her dad, the author.



Photo by Christopher Taunton

Sasha and her mom, Lauri.



Photo by Larry Alex Taunton

Sasha and her brothers. From left, Michael, Christopher, Sasha, and Zachary.



Photo by Christopher Taunton

Sasha with Blitz, at Lake Martin.

EPILOGUE

The Debate Ends



Photo by Christopher Taunton

The marquee for the debate.



Photo by Hannah Slamen

Sasha and the rest of the Taunton family at her brother Michael's wedding. Sasha was a bridesmaid.



Photo by Hannah Slamen

Sasha catches the bouquet at her brother's wedding.



Photo by Hannah Slamen

Sasha and her brothers.

The Grace Effect

Discussion Guide

I. The Debate Begins (preface and prologue)

There have been innumerable debates about God's existence, the credibility of the Gospel accounts, and so on. These are important issues. But the question here is the most practical of all: What kind of society do we want to live in? Is it preferable to live in a society primarily influenced by a Judeo-Christian worldview or in one that is atheistic in nature? This section presents the relevant arguments offered at a late-night gathering of seasoned—but friendly—combatants who disagree on this question.

1. It may seem surprising that these men went to dinner after an intense public debate. How do you think a friendship between an atheist and a Christian could be of mutual benefit? Do you think it is a true friendship? Why or why not?

2. Hitchens believes that “man is unquestionably evil.” Do you agree? If so, how do you define “evil”?
3. Taunton and Lennox draw a distinction between the conduct of self-professed Christians and the actual teachings of Christ as recorded in the Gospels. Is this differentiation a sufficient defense against Hitchens’s criticisms of the behavior of the Russian Orthodox Church and televangelists? Why or why not?
4. Is it your perception that, as Taunton insists, the civil rights movement is an “example of evil defeated by a people who were motivated by a Christian conscience”?
5. On the whole, do you think Christianity is a force for good or evil in modern society? Why?

RECOMMENDED READING: *God Is Not Great*, Christopher Hitchens; *Has Science Buried God?* John Lennox

RECOMMENDED VIEWING: *Is God Great?* A debate between Christopher Hitchens and John Lennox (available on the Fixed Point Foundation website: www.fixed-point.org)

II. An Atheistic Society Is Without (Much) Grace (chaps. 1–3)

This part of the book describes the Christian concept of common grace and how it informs our cultural attitudes.

According to Taunton, this “grace effect” is an observable phenomenon—life is demonstrably better where authentic Christianity flourishes. This section records the expectations and first impressions the Tauntons had when they arrived in Ukraine. That Ukraine is culturally different from America is not relevant to the debate. All cultures differ in ways that have no significant implications: Americans drive on the right side of the road; British, on the left. Very well. But the contrasts emphasized here reveal moral standards of fairness and compassion. Many of the Ukrainian expectations and attitudes show how little common grace has influenced their government.

1. What are some encouraging signs of common grace in the first experience the Tauntons have in Kiev? Which convey a *lack* of common grace?
2. What factors do you think account for why atheists give significantly less to nonprofits than Christians do?
3. It is clear that Ukrainians tolerate and incubate many cultural norms that subvert the sanctity of life. In what major areas of the culture do Americans tolerate and incubate the devaluing of human life?

RECOMMENDED READING: *The Devil's Delusion*, David Berlinski

RECOMMENDED VIEWING: *Can Atheism Save Europe?* A debate between Christopher Hitchens and John Lennox at the Edinburgh International Festival (available on the Fixed Point Foundation website: www.fixed-point.org)

III. How an Atheistic Society Suppresses Grace (chaps. 4–7)

In these chapters, the author argues that Ukraine’s government institutions impede grace. As a result, its positive force does not stream through the legal, economic, and political machinery of that government. The entire population is ordered and regulated by less humane standards than those to which Americans are accustomed. What is the primary cause of this difference? It isn’t that Americans are better people. Rather, the Russian Orthodox Church was drained of grace centuries ago. The rejection of *biblical* Christianity in times past crippled the nation’s future.

1. Ukrainian attitudes toward the law seem, for the most part, in striking contrast to American attitudes. Why do you think this is so?
2. Why is an economic system alone—whether socialistic or capitalistic—insufficient to develop and sustain economic fairness?
3. Explain why the author thinks “the devil is a bureaucrat.”

4. In practical terms, how can common grace slowly improve Ukraine’s “corruption index” of 134th out of 180 countries?
5. What were the practical consequences of Prince Vladimir’s choice of Greek Orthodoxy over Roman Christianity, Islam, and Judaism?

RECOMMENDED READING: *The World Turned Upside Down*, Melanie Phillips; *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky

IV. Atheists in Charge (chaps. 8–9)

In the debate over whether a society is better served by atheism or Christianity, atheists point to *theoretical* models instead of real examples (like China, North Korea, the former Soviet Union, etc.). In this section, the author defines socialism as antithetical to Christianity and then walks us through history to show how this is so. He then demonstrates to us how the “orphanage archipelago” represents a poignant example of what a world created by atheists looks like.

1. Define “communism” and “socialism” and explain why the author thinks that these economic and political theories hinge upon *spiritual* issues.
2. Is Christianity primarily about meeting physical needs? Why or why not?

3. What is your response to the following statement of Richard Dawkins: “Suppose there is no hope. Suppose there is no justice. Suppose there’s nothing but misery and darkness and bleakness. Suppose there’s nothing that we would wish for, nothing that we would hope for. Too bad!”?
4. Do you agree with George Washington’s statement in his farewell address: “Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle”? Why or why not?
5. What were the major assumptions about human existence that influenced the creation of the orphanage system under Lunacharsky and Makarenko? How does Christianity differ with regard to these major assumptions?

RECOMMENDED READING: *A Peoples’ Tragedy*, Orlando Figes;
Brave New World, Aldous Huxley

V. Divine Creation and the Value of a Soul (chaps. 10–12)

It is the nature of secular societies to devalue human life. As a former communist country, this attitude persists in Ukraine. By contrast, common grace, flowing as it does out of a Christian worldview, elevates human life, regarding it as the pinnacle of God’s creation.

1. How does one best measure whether a given society elevates or degrades the sanctity of life?
2. Does Zachary's experience at McDonald's represent a neutral cultural difference or a deeper phenomenon that relates to common grace? Why?
3. It is clear that the author grew impatient and even angry through his experience. Indeed, he quotes a passage in Exodus in which God is said to be "angry." Can some forms of anger be a virtue? If so, how?
4. Do you think Americans are more compassionate solely because of the tradition of economic prosperity or because of other factors too?

RECOMMENDED READING: *Borderland*, Anna Reid

VI. Facing Challenges Resulting from Grace (chaps. 13–14)

It is a common misconception that Christian grace offers a kind of blank check to people, as if grace exempts them from any sense of responsibility. In these chapters the author relates some new challenges Sasha faces as a direct consequence of the grace shown to her. These would never have arisen had she not been delivered from her life in the orphanage system. In overcoming these challenges, faith proved to be essential. She had to muster the confident persistence to accomplish things previously unknown to her.

But she also needed to know that, while she might doubt herself, others truly believed in her.

1. Sasha faces greater challenges in her education than the average American student. Describe how common grace as exhibited through the gift of parents is critical to a child's education and development.
2. How was the author's handling of Sasha's refusal to work on the alphabet an example of grace?
3. Does "believing in a student" mean that we should encourage him/her to aim at whatever his/her "dreams" are? Why or why not?
4. How does Sasha's newly discovered "freedom" differ from the typical American's notions of "freedom"?

RECOMMENDED READING: *The Art of Teaching*, Gilbert Highet

VII. The Foundations of a New Life (chaps. 15–17)

This section draws our attention to the ground level of life and the human experience: family and community. No one is born into this world without a history and an identity. An orphan faces the unique challenge of knowing very little about his or her family history even while being deeply shaped by that history. As we mature, we enter into a larger

community of family, friends, and acquaintances that can be strongly positive or negative. According to Taunton, the force with the greatest potential to create good families and communities is grace. Even so, that is not the primary purpose of common grace. Common grace is meant to give people a foretaste of *heavenly* grace. It is meant to cultivate a desire to enjoy an eternal home with God.

1. Communists sought to suppress their true history and invent a new one. Why?
2. Are there negative consequences for societies or individuals when they do not know their real histories?
3. How has your life been shaped by your forebears?
4. What are the implications of Dr. Olivera Petrovich's research? In what ways does her research confirm teachings in the Bible?
5. Do you think Sasha's experience with prayer is compelling? Why or why not?
6. Sasha's HIV proved a concern for the Tauntons, not just medically but also socially. They wondered how she would be received in their community of relationships. Do you think American Christians are good examples of common grace in respect to this infirmity? Cite examples from your experience.

VIII. Grace Given Becomes Grace Received (chaps. 18–19)

A temptation for all parents who adopt a child is to see themselves as the primary dispensers of grace. After all, they don't *have* to pay large sums of money, carve out huge chunks of time, and make innumerable daily sacrifices to welcome and accommodate an orphan. They have chosen to do so out of a deep compassion and kindness. But as we learn in this climactic part of the book, grace given becomes grace received. The Tauntons gave an incalculable gift of a new life to Sasha. That is obvious. What may not be so easily seen is that Sasha is a gift to them.

1. The Tauntons' interaction with American (and French) government administrators was markedly different from what they had experienced with Ukrainian officials. How were these expressions of kindness related to common grace?
2. The author says that Sasha's first interactions with American culture resulted in some comedic episodes. What factors shape the rules that govern how we interact as a society? How are they influenced by common grace—or how do they run counter to it?
3. Describe the practical ways in which Christianity's influence directly benefited Sasha in her first weeks in America.
4. Who around you might be sending his or her

“flare high into a night sky”? What can you do to show common grace to that person (or people)?

IX. A Debate Ends: How One Life Refutes Atheism and Gives Hope to Entire Nations (chap. 20 and epilogue)

The question up for debate in this book has not been whether Christianity was a positive force in the formation of Western civilization. Even Hitchens cedes this in the late-night conversation recounted in the prologue. The more important question is whether Christianity should continue to be a primary influence in Western society. Is Christianity an *inherently* positive force in the formation, development, and maintenance of society? Taunton’s argument is that the life and experience of this one little girl proves that the answer is yes.

1. What does the author mean when he says, “Only a Christian culture could produce a Richard Dawkins”?
2. Given that Richard Dawkins has argued for many years that belief in God is “delusional” and “very, very dangerous,” why do you think he now says, “Christianity might be a bulwark against something worse”?
3. Do you think the author is right when he says that there has never been a Christian nation? Why or why not?

4. Both Sasha and Hitchens suffer from life-threatening illnesses. At a practical level, what does Christianity offer someone in these circumstances? What does atheism offer?
5. Do you agree with the author that Sasha's experience validates the conclusion that Christianity should be a primary influence in society? Why or why not?

RECOMMENDED READING: *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom; *What's So Great About Christianity*, Dinesh D'Souza

RECOMMENDED VIEWING: *God or No God?* A debate between Christopher Hitchens and Larry Taunton (available on the Fixed Point Foundation website: www.fixed-point.org)