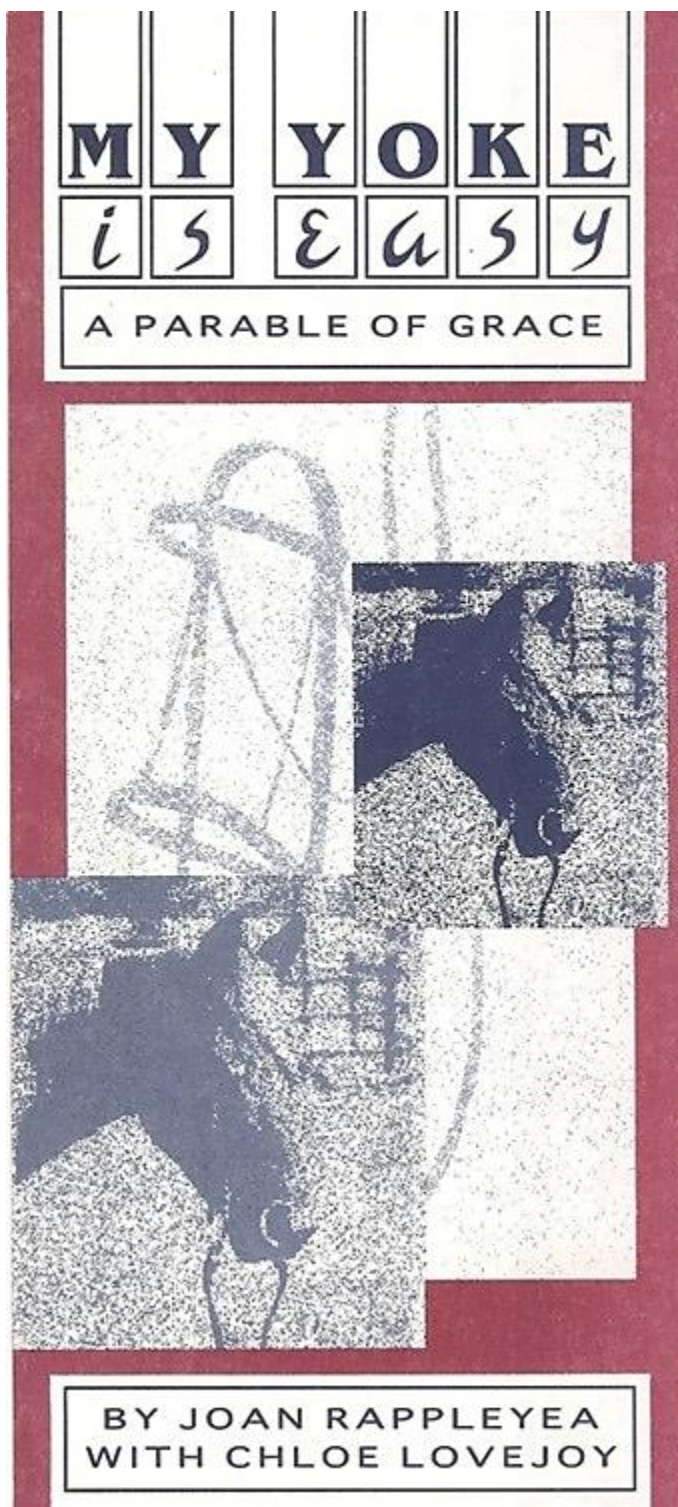




My Yoke Is Easy—A Parable of Grace

By Joan Rappleyea
with Chloe Lovejoy

A Parable Of Grace by Joan Rappleyea with Chloe Jovejoy.

This was the day I'd dreamed of for so long. Today God had answered my prayer and given me a horse of my own. But he wasn't what I had expected.

The horse standing in front of me was 1,100 lbs. of sheer nervous energy. As they loaded this huge strawberry roan into the trailer, the trainer told me, "Don't ever turn your back on him. He's not mean, but he's all horse."

Little did I know God would use this strange animal to teach me a powerful lesson about myself and about His amazing grace.

A Little Girl's Dream

Growing up during the 1950s in upstate New York, I wasn't like other little girls. While they dreamed of marriage and children, my childhood fantasy was something quite different. I wanted a horse of my own.

But a severe thyroid condition at the age of ten put my life on an emotional roller coaster, and for a few years all I could do was cry. My parents didn't know Jesus, so they had a hard time dealing with me during the illness. Friends disappeared, and there was no light of Christ to brighten the sadness of my existence. Yet I was convinced a horse would solve all my problems.

Kids would look at me differently if I had a horse! They'd see me galloping across an open field instead of trudging sadly along the sidewalk to school. Each year I dreamed there would be a horse in the garage when I woke up Christmas morning. But it never happened.

The Kindness Of God

When I was 26 years old, working in a pharmaceutical lab in Albany and living on my own, I finally saved enough money to buy a beautiful chestnut mare. When she died of an illness

three years later, I immediately assumed God didn't want me to have a horse. I'd become a Christian at 21, but my childhood had left many scars.

The Bible said God was intimately acquainted with the desires of my heart, but I found that hard to believe. No one had ever really cared about me - why should God be any different? So I prayed, "Lord, I'm going to leave it in Your hands. I'll never buy another horse." That day an entire chapter of my life closed as I surrendered my childhood dream to God.

But only nine months later a friend happened to tell me about a 15-year-old racehorse being retired because of a shoulder injury. Something in my spirit quickened when I heard about this horse. His name was Steve. That night I prayed: "God, if You want me to have this horse, I'll give him the best home I can and keep him until death."

The next morning my friend and I visited the racetrack stable. Some Amish farmers were there looking for retiring horses to use behind the plow, and they were standing right next to Steve. My heart sank as they offered to buy him. Only God understood why I couldn't make a counter offer. But as the bidding progressed, my friend took the owner aside and told him about me. He assured him I would give Steve a good life, not put him to work for the rest of his days. That didn't seem like a very convincing argument to offer a businessman, but then the impossible happened. The owner gave me the horse. Absolutely free.

"Thou dost open Thy hand, and dost satisfy the desire of every living thing." (Psalm 145:16)

An Honest Horse

Steve was what racetrack people call an 'honest' horse. Even though years of racing had sapped his strength, he gave his whole heart to win. Just before his final race, the track vet had to draw fluid out of his knee and soak his legs in ice water to keep the swelling down. Steve should have never been entered in that race, yet he went on to win first place. As they led him from the winner's circle, he was so lame he could hardly stand. Yet he never lost that lifelong desire to be "up in front."

After winning his first race, Steve had been doomed to a life of being bought and sold. He was fed, watered, groomed, and kept in a clean stall, but he never knew friendship could exist between a man and a horse.

There was only one purpose for Steve's existence, and that was to perform. Even on his day off he was strapped to a cart and paced five miles. He didn't know the sheer joy of being a horse. He'd never been allowed to canter in a summer pasture or drink from a free-flowing stream. He'd never eaten an apple from the hand of someone who loved him.

God created horses to run, but Steve was trained to be a pacer. Whenever he broke into a run, he was beaten for disobeying. So when he was nervous, Steve would start to pace. Pleasing his master through performance had been stamped into his very being, and sometimes he forgot he'd been given a new life.

Sometimes he forgot he belonged to a new master.

"For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons...." (Romans 8:15)

More Than Survival

One of the first things I noticed about Steve was his fear of being touched. He was used to being fed, groomed, and disciplined - but when I tried to pet him, he'd tremble like a leaf. He didn't know a human hand could be used for anything but pulling on reins and swatting his backside.

Steve was a lot like me. Neither one of us understood what it meant to be loved. My parents had tried their best, but they knew little about giving or receiving love. Steve and I had learned to survive by doing whatever was expected of us. We just pointed our noses towards the finish line and kept on running no matter what. We didn't know there was any other way to live.

God must have smiled as He devised such a unique way to pour love into two such lonely creatures. As I learned to be patient with Steve, I began to understand how incredibly patient God is with me. And, as I was gentle with him, I learned about the amazing gentleness of my Creator.

I never expected perfection from Steve, but committed myself to loving him through his fear and striving. Trainers used whips to make Steve into a pacer, but love turned him back into a horse. And as I continually assured my frightened horse that I didn't expect a perfect performance from him, I began to realize God wasn't demanding that from me either. Just as my love was transforming Steve, God's love was transforming me.

"And Thy gentleness makes me great..." (Psalm 18:35)

Striving For First Place

His trainers had done a thorough job. Steve was competitive in everything.

He couldn't even go out for a trail ride without trying to beat another horse back to the barn. When it was time to eat, he'd

go to war with the horses in adjoining stalls. He'd leap from side to side trying to protect his food, but would usually end up spilling most of it on the stable floor.

Although he'd probably been punished in the past for this behavior, the Lord showed me a "more excellent" way to work with him. Each evening I'd lead him out into the pasture and, while he ate his grain, I would stroke his neck and sing to him. He was particularly fond of "The Rhinestone Cowhorse."

As I took him far from the other horses, he lost his spirit of striving and self-protection. He began to relax, and within a few weeks he was able to eat in peace. Little by little he began to understand that my kindness was being offered to him as a gift. He didn't have to earn it by moving faster. This was an entirely new concept for Steve.

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness, and speak kindly to her." (Hosea 2:14)

Binding Up Our Wounds

After I'd owned Steve a few months, he came in from the pasture one day with a puncture wound in his left side. It looked pretty deep, so I applied ice to the wound. As Steve felt the first cold touch, he wheeled his head around and came at me with teeth bared. Then, just as quickly, he turned his head away.

When the vet arrived, it was a different story. Every time he came near, Steve tried to kick him. He just didn't trust human beings.

"Don't let him hurt you," warned the vet. "I have to go back to my truck for a minute."

But when he left the barn, an amazing thing happened. Steve walked over to me, gently laid his head on my shoulder, and closed his eyes. I knew then something powerful had changed between us. He was never the same after that day. It was as if he'd finally decided, "I can trust this person."

I can only imagine the joy God must have felt the day I trusted Him enough to lay my head upon His breast.

"Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?" (Rom. 2:4)

Love Never Fails

Steve was really "too much horse" for my limited riding skill, so I made plans to move him to a stable where I could take lessons. On the morning he was to be moved, I helped the stable-hands load him onto a van bound for his new home. After watching them drive off into the distance, I hopped in my car to do a few errands before going to the stable.

When I arrived later and walked into Steve's stall, I found him standing forlornly with his head down. His water bucket and hay had not been touched, and I could see immediately something was wrong. Assuming he'd been hurt in the move, I rushed into the stall, got down on my knees, and started running my hands up and down his legs to feel for injuries.

Then I felt his gentle breath as he lovingly nosed my hair and greeted me with his familiar "nicker." As I stroked his neck and spoke kindly to him, he began to relax and eat his hay. As his depression turned to peace, I realized what had happened.

All his life he'd been moved from stall to stall, never being owned by one master for very long. He'd dared to let me get "close," and now he thought I'd sold him back into a life of racing. I wish those who think human beings are the only creatures capable of emotion could have seen Steve that day. His grief wasn't human - but it was very real. He refused to eat or drink because he was in mourning for me. With great joy I realized how deeply he had come to love me.

It took several years, but Steve finally did learn that I had no intention of selling him back into the slavery of the race-track. I was committed to him. And if I was that committed to a horse - how much more was God committed to me? I began to understand what it meant to belong to God. I was His forever, and He would never sell me back into the slavery of my former life.

"Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you." (Isaiah 49:15)

The Mystery Of Grace

People at the riding stable said I'd never be able to train Steve. He was a "pacing machine," and when I'd ask him to canter, he would wring his tail and buck - pacing harder and faster. He was afraid to try.

But he wanted so much to please me. Although he didn't really understand the concept of reward, he certainly understood punishment. After nine years of racing, Steve knew the wrong moves would probably earn him the whip. So he kept trying to figure out what I wanted from him.

To calm his fear, I would speak softly to him. I never used a whip, but would gently stroke his neck and tell him it was O.K. It took a few years, but he finally did learn to trot and canter with joy and freedom.

Although Steve changed in many ways, he was never quite able to break the habit of striving to please. He knew my love for him was not based on performance, but old habits sometimes follow us into a new life. He found it hard to believe he wouldn't be punished for some wrong move. I guess horses are a lot like people. They have a hard time believing in grace.

It seems too good to be true.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of Yourselves, it is the gift of God..." (Eph. 2:8)

Entering Eternity

As the years went by, my hard-to-handle horse turned into a gentle and trusting friend. Someone once told me Steve probably thought he'd died and gone to heaven - that's how happy he was with me. I eventually moved him to a farm where he could stroll out in the pasture all day with the young ponies. He seemed to love it there.

One late summer evening I felt God prompting me to go to the farm. When I arrived, I was told Steve hadn't been seen all day. The stable-hands thought he might have gotten out through a broken fence, but I knew that couldn't be true. Steve would never have crossed a downed fence. He was in trouble.

As a friend walked out with me into the dark fields, we called for him - but he was nowhere to be found. Then I prayed. Just as I said "Amen" I heard a dog barking nearby.

Following the sound of that bark led me right to Steve. I found him fallen in a ditch, straining and struggling to get up. He had slipped on wet clay and somehow gotten his head lodged under the roots of a tree growing on the embankment. Although he wasn't hurt, his constant heaving to get up had taken its toll. He was suffering from hypothermia and exhaustion.

I felt so helpless as I leapt into the ditch next to him. Steve was near death, yet when he heard my voice he lifted his head and greeted me with that old familiar "nicker" He couldn't stand up, so I waited there with him while my friend went for help. When the vet arrived, he confirmed what I already knew. Steve wouldn't live through the night, so we mercifully put him to sleep. But God graciously allowed me to be there so he wouldn't die alone and frightened. I was with Steve to the end, and he knew it.

People may think I'm crazy, but I know the Lord used that horse to change my heart. In the words of Job 12:7: *"But now ask the beasts, and let them teach you; and the birds of the heavens, and let them tell you."* I was too wounded to receive God's love, so He used one of His precious creatures to communicate that love to me. And in the ten wonderful years we had together, Steve and I both learned to trust in the faithful love of our new Master.

"For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from His love. Death can't, and life can't... all the powers of hell itself cannot keep God's love away." (Romans 8:38,39 LB)

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