



## **“But for the Grace of God, There Go I”**

*“By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace towards me was not in vain...” I Corinthians 15:10*

How privileged we have been to have a number of visitors in our home these five years in Africa. They have each been an encouragement to us. I believe without exception each was shocked at the poverty and at the deplorable conditions of humanity's plight without the grace of God upon their lives. Yes, “But for the grace of God, there go I.”

I discovered quite a lot of information about my lineage just before coming to Africa. My cousin is an accomplished genealogist, and she gained much knowledge about our Gowin family heritage. She discovered some time ago that through Grandma Gowin we were the descendants of Charlemagne or Charles the Great. Through his lineage came many of the kings of England and Scotland. I began to saturate myself with British history to find out about my lineage. One of my ancestors killed Macbeth. Another was hunting with his father who was the king, but when his father had an accident, the son left him to die to hurry to London to name himself the new king. Groan! I will not tell you who my Great-Great-Grandpa was in the movie *Braveheart*, but it is not who you think it might be. No, I was not pleased at what I found out about my ancestry. In fact, I was ashamed.



Then, just before coming to Africa, my cousin asked my nephew and I to give a DNA sample to see who our ancestor on Grandpa Gowin's side was. Through much study and effort she traced us back to two possible ancestors who came to America in the early 1600s.

One was an eighteen-year-old named Thomas Gowen who came to Virginia on August 7, 1635, thirteen years after the Pilgrim fathers arrived on the *Mayflower*.

The other possible ancestor was Mihil Gowen, a black slave who was given his freedom by Christopher Stafford of York County, Virginia, in September of 1657. Some reports suggest that Mihil had arrived on a slave ship near present day Norfolk, Virginia, in 1619.

The Portuguese had been involved in the slave trade in West Africa and been forced to go elsewhere. They sailed south to the Congo River and claimed 1,000 miles of the coast as Angola. Soon after, they brought the Catholic Church to make converts of the inhabitants.

When Mihil was taken from his home in Angola by the Portuguese, little did he know what was to become of him. The Portuguese were bound for the Caribbean and the beginning of the lucrative slave trade in those islands. God had other plans for Mihil, however, as a Dutch ship captured the cargo and realized they may possibly be found out if they deposited their “loot” in

the Caribbean. Thus, they traveled to the Virginia colony in 1619 and sold their goods. When the Portuguese Angolans stepped off the gangplank in Jamestown in 1619, they spoke the Portuguese language and were Christians. The English colonists hardly knew what to do with the two dozen or so blacks who landed from the Dutch ship that summer.

In time, Mihil took an African by the name of Prossa as his wife, and they had a son they named William. When Prossa was sold to someone else, Mihil took another wife, and they had children as well. Since there were few black women in the colony at the time and no honorable white woman would marry a black man, one of Mihil's sons married a woman from Powhatan's tribe. You may recall that when Pocahontas returned from England her tribe had been devastated, almost destroyed, by disease brought to them by the British settlers. It is quite interesting to note one of the most prominent names in that tribe today is Gowen. In time, that mixed-race family married whites and the Cherokee.

When the DNA test results arrived at my Indiana home just previous to coming to Africa, imagine my surprise to discover that my haplotype pointed to my African ancestor, Mihil. Now imagine a God who is so infinitely awesome He knows who you would become before He even created the universe. He knew Mihil would have a descendent who would minister in the Caribbean, come to Africa, explore slave castles the Portuguese were run out of by the Dutch, and participate in the annual Ghanaian festivals to honor the dead slaves who were taken away from their homeland. Our omnipotent heavenly Father knew all that and perhaps chuckled as He knew I would write this to you so we could marvel at Him together. Oh, Lord, how great Thou art!

Now, before I sent this newsletter out I sought permission from all my family that has email addresses. I did not want them to become shocked or offended. The fact that this is coming to you now communicates their answer to me. Personally speaking, I am ashamed at my ancestry through the kings of England and Scotland, but I am proud to be a Gowin as many of my ancestors through Mihil I have read were God-fearing and honorable men.

We read that to "whosoever wills" our loving heavenly Father opens the gates of Heaven solely by grace through faith. We all believe that, of course, yet I must admit that I am extremely pleased Mihil was taken from Angola and to America. If not, I would be a poor Angolan and not an American. That perspective is, of course, distorted by **my** perceptions of America and what I consider to be "the good life." Could it be that God gives "living grace" to poverty-stricken black folk here as he does the wealthy elsewhere? Could it be that African Christians are much happier in their poverty with Jesus than Americans who live their lives without Jesus? Could it be that words such as peace, joy, fulfillment, and satisfaction have been a bit distorted and skewed in our minds due to our confused perceptions? Are temporal things more valuable than peace and joy? What is your perspective about this GRACE thing anyway? Is it about a condition in life or a personal and intimate relationship with our Savior?

Paul said, "By the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me is NOT in vain." Can you say that, as well? God grant that I will not cheapen His wondrous grace by believing it involves just pleasing my temporal whims instead of His eternal purpose in my life. Shall we stand before Him and praise Him forever for a grace so exorbitant it was paid for with the Master's own blood!

By His grace and for His glory,  
*Jere and Ruth Ann*

