

# The Free Gift

from The Grace Awakening

by Charles Swindoll

For the next few minutes let's think about heresy. To begin with, answer this question: What would you consider the most dangerous heresy on earth? Stop and think before you answer. The one I have in mind is not so bold and ugly that it would make angels blush. This one is subtle, rather attractive. For a long, long time it's been a favorite of many. Actually, it has been around since the Garden of Eden. Let me give you a few hints:

- It is a philosophy found in numerous self-help books, many poems, and most rags-to-riches biographies.
- It is a recurring theme in political speeches and commencement addresses. It flourishes in academia.
- It feeds our pride, it fuels our self-centered bent, it pleases our flesh.

In a word, it's humanism.

William Ernest Henley, born in Gloucester, England, in 1849—crippled since childhood—was among the early humanists. He wrote a piece that is commonly quoted by valedictorians at high school graduations all across America.

## INVICTUS

*Out of the night that covers me,  
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,  
I thank whatever gods may be  
For my unconquerable soul.  
In the fell clutch of circumstance  
I have not winced nor cried aloud.  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but unbowed.  
Beyond this place of wrath and tears  
Looms but the Horror of the shade,  
And yet the menace of the years  
Finds and shall find me unafraid.  
It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate;  
I am the captain of my soul.*

Pretty heady stuff, isn't it? Makes you want to get at it, to dig in deeper and try harder, right? After all, if you and I have souls that are unconquerable, the sky's the limit. If we really are our own master and captain, watch out, world!

The fact is, God helps the helpless, the undeserving, those who don't measure up, those who fail to achieve His standard.

### Warning: Heresy on the Loose

You've heard words like that, haven't you? If you're like me, you've heard them since you were just a child. They sound so right, so inspiring. "Just reach down real deep and pull up hard on your own bootstraps, and you can make it all on your own. You can endure whatever. Nothing is out of reach, so press on . . . climb higher! You can make anything of yourself. You can even attain heaven!" (Or, as in Luther's day, at least buy a quicker way to heaven for someone else.)

What seems so right is, in fact, heresy—the one I consider the most dangerous heresy on earth. What is it? The emphasis on what we do for God, instead of what God does for us. Some are so convinced of the opposite, they would argue nose to nose. They are often the ones who claim that their favorite verse of Scripture is "God helps those who help themselves" (which doesn't appear in the Bible). Talk about killing grace! The fact is, God helps the helpless, the undeserving, those who don't measure up, those who fail to achieve His standard. Nevertheless, the heresy continues louder now than ever in history. Most people see themselves as "masters" of their own fate, "captains" of their own souls. It's an age-old philosophy deeply ingrained in the human heart. And why not? It supports humanity's all-time favorite subject: self.

Let me show you one of the first times it reared its head back in the earliest days of the Scriptures. Many, many centuries before Christ, even before there were multiple languages and dialects, tribes and nations, the people of the earth lived in an area called Shinar and spoke the same universal language. By unanimous vote they agreed to build an enormous structure—a tower, whose top would reach into heaven itself. The biblical account puts it this way:

Now the whole earth used the same language and the same words. And it came about as they journeyed east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly." And they used brick for stone, and they used tar for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name." – Gen. 11:1-4

The Living Bible calls this construction project "a proud eternal monument to themselves." Doesn't that sound appealing? Doesn't that sound like a project that would attract everyone's attention? I mean, nobody could resist! This was the choice opportunity of a lifetime. I can just imagine the Shinar Chamber of Commerce promoting the new slogan, "Glory to man in the highest," as they recruited workers. Everybody pitched in.

This tower has intrigued me for years, especially its top that would "reach into heaven." I remember as a little boy in Sunday school seeing pictures of the Tower of Babel. Each picture of

the tower portrayed its top far up in the clouds. I assumed in my little mind that the top literally went right up to the heavens into the very throne room of God. But there was no way such an immense, towering structure could have been erected. Sizable construction projects were possible, but certainly nothing that tall.

Several years ago, I went back and did a little extra digging in the Genesis text and discovered some helpful information. I found that a crucial part of verse 4 reads literally, “whose upper part is with the heavens.” The little preposition “with” is a preposition of accompaniment or representation. Somehow, the topmost part of the tower was designed and constructed so that it would “represent” the heavens.

In my study I also learned that an extensive excavation took place in the land of Shinar numerous decades ago. Not just one tower, but many of these ziggurats (cone-shaped structures built with a spiral road around them for journeying up and down) were constructed. And among all the cone-shaped dwellings in this particular area, one tower stood above all the rest. Chances are good that the tallest was the tower referred to in Genesis 11. What is most interesting is that they discovered in that particular tower the signs of the zodiac etched into the stonework up toward its peak. Signs and symbols that represented the stellar spaces, which are commonly called “the heavens,” appeared at the top. It was like an ancient religious shrine up there . . . almost as if they were saying, “Good old God. He’s looking down on our city and is pleased with our efforts. Just think of the fame that will come our way as we make a name for ourselves. God can’t help but bless us for all we have achieved.” It was humanism’s finest hour.

The question is, What did God think of this original building constructed for and dedicated to the glory of man? To begin with, He immediately saw through their thinking:

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built.

And the Lord said, “Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.”

– Gen. 11:5-6

Make no mistake about it. Human effort can accomplish incredible feats. No one should underestimate the ability of human beings. God himself acknowledges such when He says, in effect, “This is just the beginning of a lifetime of such thinking. There’s no limit. Whatever they purpose to do, they will do.” Realizing that, He quickly put a stop to the project.

Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech. – Gen. 11:7

(Read the next two verses carefully. Notice that God never destroyed the Tower of Babel; the workers deliberately left it unfinished.)

So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of the whole earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the whole earth. – Gen. 11:8-9

One wonders how many generations traveled through Shinar and stared at that city as time slowly deteriorated those towers. Candidly, the answer is not enough. Humanity failed to learn the lesson Babel was designed to teach. Instead, we seem to have restored and enshrined what God attempted to erase. Too many of us continue to believe that doing what we want to do will result in being what we ought to be. “I want to build a tower,” one announces. Why? “Because I want to be famous. I want to have a name. I ought to be great. And I need that sense of accomplishment, the feeling of pride that comes from making a name for myself. I’ll do it my way!” God steps in and says, in effect, “There’s no way.” But still the self-made towers continue to be erected.

After all, “God helps those who help themselves,” the workers confidently proclaim. But their self-centered efforts represent heresy . . . a gospel of works, a grace-killer in its worst form.

By exalting my own effort . . . I insult His grace and steal the credit that belongs to Him alone.

James Russell Lowell was a contemporary of William Ernest Henley. They were separated by the Atlantic Ocean geographically and by an even larger distance theologically. Lowell, an American, wrote in his work, “The Present Crisis” of a philosophy that was much different from the one in Henley’s “Invictus”:

*Truth forever on the scaffold,  
Wrong forever on the throne—  
Yet that scaffold sways the future,  
and, behind the dim unknown,  
Standeth God within the shadow,  
keeping watch above His Own.<sup>2</sup>  
Defending: Truth on the Scaffold*

While most people in the world are busy building towers with highest hopes of making a name and gaining fame, God’s truth sets the record straight. On the basis of God’s Book, His Holy Word, it is my plea that we simply admit our need and claim God’s grace. Instead of striving for a manmade ticket to heaven based on high achievement and hard work (for which we get all the credit), I suggest we openly declare our own spiritual bankruptcy and accept God’s free gift of grace. “Why?” you ask. “Why not emphasize how much I do for God instead of what He does for me?” Because that is heresy, plain and simple. How? By exalting my own effort and striving for my own accomplishments, I insult His grace and steal the credit that belongs to Him alone.

Let’s leave the land of Shinar with its city of towers and turn to a man who lived shortly thereafter. His name was Abraham . . . a man who, in himself, had quite a name, not to mention

an impressive reputation. Yet, when it came to his being righteous before God, he had nothing in himself that earned God's acceptance. All this is clearly stated in Romans 4:1-2:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God.

That closing statement is worth pursuing. Anyone who has a lot of accomplishments to his credit has something to boast about before the public. People are impressed with human achievement. They will applaud you. They will give you credit. They will honor your name. They may even build a statue out of bronze or name schools and streets after you. You have something to boast about before others on earth, no question. But according to the statement in Romans 4, there is no room for boasting before God. Not even a great man like Abraham could earn God's favor and blessing.

In the final analysis, it was not the result of Abraham's hard work that caused him to find favor with God, it was the result of God's great grace. Apart from anything Abraham owned or earned, bought or achieved, God declared the man righteous. He "justified" Abraham.

The day came when, in the accounting of God, ungodly Abraham was suddenly declared righteous. There was nothing in Abraham that caused the action; it began in God and went out to the man in sovereign grace. Upon a sinner the righteousness of God was placed. In the accounting the very righteousness of God was reckoned, credited, imputed. The Lord God Himself, by an act of grace moved by His sovereign love, stooped to the record and blotted out everything that was against Abraham, and then wrote down on the record that He, God, . . . credited . . . this man Abraham to be perfect even at a moment when Abraham was ungodly in himself. That is justification.<sup>3</sup>

How could anyone say a great man like Abraham was "ungodly"? Well, when you look behind the scenes of his life (or any life) you find out. Deep within Abraham was a hollow emptiness. Spiritual death. Behind all of the possessions and human greatness there was a background of idolatry (according to the Old Testament book of Joshua, chapter 24). He had been reared by an idolater. He had married a woman who had come from the same region of idolatry. He was by birth, by nature, and by choice a sinner. However, God in sovereign grace penetrated through all of that. And when he heard Abraham say, "I believe," God, in grace, credited perfect righteousness to the man's account. The Scriptures call this "justification."

May I suggest a definition? Justification is the sovereign act of God whereby He declares righteous the believing sinner—while he is still in a sinning state. Even though Abraham (after believing and being justified) would continue to sin from time to time, God heard Abraham when he said, "I believe . . . I believe in You." And God credited divine righteousness to his account. This occurred even though Abraham was still in a sinning state. But never again would the man have to worry about where he stood before his God. He was, once and for all, declared righteous. He received what he did not deserve and could never earn. Once again I remind you, that's grace. But is Abraham unique? The answer is in the next two verses:

Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness. – Romans 4:4-5

Most people I know look forward to payday. You do too, right? For a week, or perhaps a two-week period, you give time and effort to your job. When payday arrives, you receive a hard-earned, well-deserved paycheck. I have never met anyone who bows and scrapes before his boss, saying, “Thank you. Oh, thank you for this wonderful, undeserved gift. How can I possibly thank you enough for my paycheck?” If we did, he would probably faint. Certainly, he would think, What is wrong with this guy? Why? Because your paycheck is not a gift. You’ve earned it. You deserve it. Cash it! Spend it! Invest it! Give it! After all, you had it coming. In the workplace, where wages are negotiated and agreed upon, there is no such thing as grace. We earn what we receive; we work for it. The wage “is not reckoned as a favor but as what is due.”

But with God the economy is altogether different. There is no wage relationship with God. Spiritually speaking, you and I haven’t earned anything but death. Like it or not, we are absolutely bankrupt, without eternal hope, without spiritual merit; we have nothing in ourselves that gives us favor in the eyes of our holy and righteous heavenly Father. So there’s nothing we can earn that would cause Him to raise His eyebrow and say, “Um, now maybe you deserve eternal life with Me.” No way. In fact, the individual whose track record is morally pure has no better chance at earning God’s favor than the individual who has made a wreck and waste of his life and is currently living in unrestrained disobedience. Everyone who hopes to be eternally justified must come to God the same way: on the basis of grace; it is a gift. And that gift comes to us absolutely free. Any other view of salvation is heresy, plain and simple.

So much for Abraham. Our next stop-off is Romans 5. It will help me explain how this free gift flows over into our lives and the lives of all who will believe.

Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. – Rom. 5:1

Study those words carefully. We, being justified by faith, not works, get the one thing we’ve longed for—peace with God. Is it through our merits? Not at all. The verse states we’ve been justified by faith. It is through Jesus Christ our Lord who paid the absolute, final payment for sin when He died in our place at the Cross. Sin against God required the payment of death. And Jesus Christ, the perfect Substitute, made the ultimate, once-and-for-all payment on our behalf. It cost Him His life. As a result, God gives the free gift of salvation to all who believe in His Son.

Because this is foundational to an understanding of grace, I have set aside this second chapter as a declaration and explanation of God’s free gift. Once we grasp its vertical significance as a free gift from God, much of horizontal grace—our extending it to others—automatically falls into place. Once we accept the seldom-announced fact that we have nothing to give God or impress

God with that will prompt Him to credit righteousness to our account, we will be ready to take His free gift.

This sounds so simple. And it is—except for one troublesome barrier. It is the problem of sin. No amount of education, no amount of reading, no amount of church-going will take away our problem; we are contaminated with sin.

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned. – Rom. 5:12

Learn a little theology. It is vital to understanding and appreciating grace. We were born wrong with God. The same sin that Adam introduced has polluted the entire human race. No one is immune to the sin disease. And no human accomplishment can erase the internal stain that separates us from God. Because Adam sinned, all have sinned. This leads to one conclusion: We all need help. We need forgiveness. We need a Savior.

So...how do we get out of this mess?

Read the next two verses slowly and carefully.

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.  
– Rom. 5:18-19

Wonderful! Marvelous reassurance!

“You’re telling me, Chuck, that by simply believing in Jesus Christ I can have eternal life with God, my sins forgiven, a destiny secure in heaven, all of this and much more without my working for that?” Yes, that is precisely what Scripture teaches. I remind you, it is called grace. It’s what the Protestant Reformation was all about. Salvation is offered by divine grace, not by human works. Do you want a classic scriptural example? How about a man who was breathing his last? The man I have in mind is one who was dying on a cross, hanging next to Jesus at our Lord’s crucifixion. Remember the scene?

He was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!” Those are words of faith, the simple statement of a man who has been an unbeliever all of his life. Suddenly, with his last sigh (unable to do one religious deed...couldn’t even be baptized!), he turns to Christ, hanging helplessly on a cross, and he believes. He states his faith in Christ, “Lord...remember me.” And Jesus answers with this promise: “Truly...today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” The man’s faith without

works, without conditions, was rewarded with Jesus' grace.

Once again, back to Romans 5, verse 20, where we read, "And the Law came in that the transgression might increase...." Did it ever! Some misread that and assume there's something wrong with the Law if it brings an increase in transgression, an inaccurate assumption. Let me put it this way. When the Law came in, our transgression was identified and our guilt was intensified. By reading for the first time "Thou shalt not...thou shalt not...thou shalt not..." we realized what sin was. God's demands are right, His commands are pure and clean. They are God's expectation of a holy people. The Law came, declaring what it took to measure up to God's standard of righteousness—but we couldn't do it. The Law kept hammering away, "Don't...don't...don't!" But mankind still failed. The Law gave us the demands of perfection, but no assistance, no encouragement. The best thing the Law did was identify sin and intensify our guilt. As a matter of fact, it still does so. To this day, the Law makes us painfully aware of our wrong.

I remember back when I was in my early teens, one of my earliest jobs was throwing a paper route. I threw the Houston Press for a couple of years during junior high school. It was a good job and kept me out of mischief, but it got tiring.

After a long afternoon of folding about two hundred papers, throwing my route, and returning toward home on my bike, I remember coming to the backyard of a large lawn at the corner across the street from our house. I thought to myself, I'm tired...no need to go all the way down to the end of the street and around this big yard. I'll just cut across and be home in a jiffy. It was a quick-and-easy shortcut. The first time I did that I entertained a little twinge of guilt as I rode my bike across that nice, plush grass. You need to understand, this was a beautiful yard. To make matters worse, our neighbor was very particular about it. I had watched him manicure it week after week. Still, I figured it wouldn't hurt just this once. Late the next afternoon I came tooling down the same street, thinking, I wonder if I ought to use that same shortcut? I did . . . with less guilt than the first time. Theoretically, something told me I shouldn't; but practically, I rationalized around the wrong.

In less than two weeks my bicycle tires had begun to wear a narrow path across the yard. By then, I knew in my heart I really should be going down and around the corner, but I didn't. I just shoved all those guilt feelings down out of sight.

By the end of the third week, a small but very obvious sign appeared near the sidewalk, blocking the path I had made. It read: "Keep Off the Grass—No Bikes." Everything but my name was on the sign! I confess, I ignored it; I went around the sign and rode right on over my path, glancing at the sign as I rode by. Admittedly, I felt worse! Why? The sign identified my sin which, in turn, intensified my guilt. But what is most interesting, the sign didn't stop me from going across the yard. As a matter of fact, it held a strange fascination. It somehow prodded me on into further wrong.



It's like a "Wet Paint" sign. I have touched more wet paint just because somebody put a sign there, haven't you? I've thought that if they just wouldn't identify it as wet, I wouldn't touch it. But when it says "Do Not Touch," I have to touch it. Something inside me forces my fingers onto wet paint. It's called sinful depravity. Signs don't help a bit.

One of my close friends told me about a trip he took to San Francisco, during which time he saw a most unusual sign. It read "Try to Keep Off the Grass." My point? When you see a sign, the sign has no power whatsoever to make you obey. It certainly identifies the sin in us, and it intensifies the guilt when we ignore it, but it offers no power to restrain us.

And so it is with the Law. The Law came and in bold letters etched by the finger of God it read, "This is holiness! Honor My Name by keeping My Law!" But the fact is, nobody could keep it, which explains the statement in Romans 5:20 that says "sin increased." The Law arouses sin but never arrests it. So how can the tailspin stop? What hope is there? The answer is found in the same verse: "...but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." Isn't that great! Grace overshadowed sin, it outranked it and thereby brought hope.

Let me amplify the scriptural statement even more. Where sin overflowed, grace flooded in. Where sin measurably increased, grace immeasurably increased. Where sin was finite, grace was infinite. Where sin was colossal, grace was super-colossal. Where sin abounds, grace superabounds. The sin identified by the Law in no way stopped the flow of the grace of God. Jesus' death on the cross was the sufficient payment for sin, putting grace into action that was not simply adequate but abundant.

Augustus Toplady wrote it this way:

*The terrors of Law and of God  
with me can have nothing to do;  
My Savior's obedience in blood  
hide all my transgressions from view.*

Explaining: Grace for the Sinful

For the next few moments, graze slowly over this paragraph of truth recorded by Paul in the letter to the Ephesians. Take your time.

Don't hurry.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show

the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. – Eph. 2:1-9

Pay close attention to ten single-syllable words, “by grace...through faith...it is the gift of God.”

One of my greatest anticipations is some glorious day being in a place where there will be no boasting, no namedropping, no selfishness. Guess where it will be? Heaven. There will be no spiritual-sounding testimonies that call attention to somebody’s super colossal achievements. None of that! Everybody will have written across his or her life the word “Grace.”

“How did you get up here?”

“Grace!”

“What made it possible?”

“Grace.”

“What’s your name?”

“Grace.”

There will be more graces up there than any other name. Everywhere, Grace, Grace, Grace!

When I was in seminary, one fellow who struggled with academics—I mean really struggled—was grateful just to get through school. I can still remember going to the mail room where everybody got their tests back. Invariably, there would be a handful of guys in the corner, asking, “What did you get on number 4?”

“Well, I got so and so.”

“Really? I wrote the same thing and he counted me wrong on 4.”

But one dear guy never did any of that nonsensical comparison stuff. He would quietly open his box, pull out his test booklet, and before he ever looked at his grade, he wrote in big bold letters across the front of the test “G-R-A-C-E.” If he did poorly: “Grace.” If he did well: “Grace!” If he passed, that was sufficient: “Grace!” I learned a valuable lesson from my friend. That’s all any of us have to claim.

Nothing in my hands I bring,

Simply to Thy Cross I cling.<sup>5</sup>

And when grace is our only claim, who gets the glory? The One who went to the Cross.

Now for the big question: Can you understand why the grace killers would attack this great truth? Of course! It cuts the heart out of do-it-yourself-and-get-the-glory religion. As they did in Luther's day, they appear in every generation with convincing arguments, saying, "You know, you have to try real hard." Or, "You need to give up such and such." Or, "You need to start doing so and so." Or, "You must prove the sincerity of your faith." Or, "Before God can do this in your life, you must earn it by doing such and such." Forget it! God, in grace, offers you the free gift of forgiveness. All you can do is take it. Once you take it, you will be given the power to give up, to put on, to take off, to quit, to start—whatever. But don't confuse the issue of salvation. It is yours strictly on the basis of God's free gift. In spite of all the stuff you may hear to the contrary, the emphasis is not on what we do for God; instead, it is on what God has done for us.

Some time ago, while digging deeply into this subject of God's amazing grace, I happened upon a piece by Dorothea Day, in which she answers Henley's "Invictus" with words that cut to the heart of his humanistic philosophy. She calls it "My Captain."

#### MY CAPTAIN

*Out of the light that dazzles me,  
Bright as the sun from pole to pole,  
I thank the God I know to be  
For Christ the conqueror of my soul.  
Since His the sway of circumstance,  
I would not wince nor cry aloud.  
Under that rule which men call chance  
My head with joy is humbly bowed.  
Beyond this place of sin and tears  
That life with Him! And His the aid,  
Despite the menace of the years,  
Keeps, and shall keep me, unafraid.  
I have no fear, though strait the gate,  
He cleared from punishment the scroll.  
Christ is the Master of my fate,  
Christ is the Captain of my soul.<sup>6</sup>*

Can you honestly say that Christ is the Master of your fate, the Captain of your soul? Trust me, His name is the only name that will take you from earth to heaven when you die. And it won't be your achievements or your fame or your fortune that will get you there. You will be granted entrance because you accepted the free gift of eternal life—nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

There is one and only one password for entering heaven: Grace.

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Notes:

1 William Ernest Henley, "Invictus," in *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*, selected by Hazel Felleman (Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1936), 73.  
2 James Russell Lowell, "The Present Crisis" [1844].

Taken from 15th ed. of John Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, 567.

3 Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Romans, God's Remedy*, vol. 3

(Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1954), 208.

4 Augustus Toplady, as cited in *Romans: The New Man, An Exposition of Chapter 6* by Martyn Lloyd-Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1973), 19.

5 Augustus Toplady, "Rock of Ages" (1776).

6 Dorothea Day, "My Captain," in *The Best Loved Poems of the American People*,

selected by Hazel Felleman (Garden City, NY: Garden City Books, 1936), 73-74.