Q&A: How would you unpack the Bible step by step to show God’s big picture, that grace is a free, unmerited gift?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

My Mormon friends believe that they are saved by grace after all that they can do.

One of their former presidents said: “One of the most fallacious doctrines originated by Satan and propounded by man is that man is saved alone by the grace of God; that belief in Jesus Christ alone is all that is needed for salvation”.

How would you unpack the Bible step by step to show them God’s big picture – that grace is a free, unmerited gift? (And importantly doesn’t lead to licentiousness, which is what they have been taught.)

I’ve talked about the purpose of the OT law, that all our works are like filthy rags, that Jesus takes my sin and gives me his righteousness. But I think I need a logical structure that walks them through it rather than my scatter gun approach. Your thoughts would be much appreciated!

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]

Hi Sarah,

Intriguing question! A good place to begin our thoughts is in Ephesians 2, especially verses *1-10*.

> *1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,*
> *2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.*
>
> *3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.*
>
> *4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. 6 And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 7 in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.*
>
> *8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*

There are two reasons to ground ourselves here:

1) There's some explicit language about salvation by grace alone. Firstly, the language is about the *necessity* of

grace: Verse 5, "…it is by grace you have been saved…", verses 8-9, "…For it is by grace you have been saved… not by works, so that no one may boast." Secondly, the language is about the absolute *extent* of grace, i.e. that grace does more than provide the means for our rescue, the grace of God is what actually does the rescuing. This is found in the depths of our predicament: Verse 1, "…you were dead in your transgressions", Verse 3, "…by *nature* deserving of wrath". It is also found in the *agency* of God: Verses 4-5, "*God* made us alive with Christ", Verse 6, "*God* raised us up…", Verse 10, "We are *God's* handiwork…"

2) The context of this passage connects us with a bigger picture; Paul sees the work of Jesus on the cross resulting in the creation of a *"new humanity"* in which the great "mystery" of the Gospel is the inclusion of all people in the covenant promises made to Israel: that "the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise…." (Ephesians 3:6).

It's this second point that perhaps guides us to a framework for the story of grace: It is best to tell the story of God's covenant; his *promises* to his people, and especially to Abraham. Perhaps it might go something like this, as my own feeble attempt:

1) The human predicament is one of rebellion against the ways of God, and God's response is always both righteous deserved judgement and undeserved gracious provision. *Consider Genesis 1-11; the fall itself, the murder of Abel, the hardness in the time of Noah, the attempted usurpation of God by human empire at Babel. In each part the judgement is obvious, but also consider how God clothes Adam & Eve, protects Cain, puts a rainbow in the sky etc.*

2) By grace, therefore, the ultimate provision of God is his *intervention* in human history. In our historical

record, this intervention is grounded in the life of a man called Abram (later Abraham). This intervention is fundamentally *gracious* and it is received by *faith.* There is nothing particularly special about Abraham. He was weak and old. Any righteousness he has derives not from his works or moral fortitude, but as a gift bestowed ("credited") by God and received as Abraham trusted him. *Consider Genesis 12 and how God's gracious involvement with Abraham naturally follows from the rebellion at Babel. Consider also Romans 4:1-3*

3) By grace, God binds himself to Abraham in a covenant, i.e. a promise. Chief among these promises is that *"in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* This is the intervention, the promise of salvation; a new heaven and a new earth. *Consider Hebrews 11:8-10 and consider Abraham's vision with that of the new heavens and the new earth in Revelation 21*

4) By grace, God guides Abraham's children towards this blessing. He protects his chosen people, he saves them from Egypt, and instructs them on how they can be true to the promise: "This is how you embrace this grace! This is how you bless the families of the earth." In this way, the Law itself is grace, and there are times when we get a glimpse of that blessing. But mostly, what we see is the rejection of the promise, a refusal to trust God; the law continues to point to the promise and so reveals how far away God's people are from it. *Consider: the entire OT.*

5) By grace, God provides a true Son of Abraham; he is not only of Abraham's flesh, but also a Son of the Promise as well; i.e. he has faith after that of Abraham. He takes responsibility for his people; by meeting the just requirement of their transgression he deals with their *separation* from the promise. And he *receives* the fullness of the promise – the renewal of life, resurrection itself. *Consider: John 3:16 and Romans 4*.

6) By grace, the promise to Abraham is now fulfilled. The blessing of salvation now applies to all the "families of the earth." It applies as we all (both Jew and Gentile), dead in our sins, are "raised up with Christ." We are all made heirs of Abraham, children of his promise. *Consider: Ephesians 2-3 (which is where we started).*

It's a narrative of salvation in which the defining agency is God, the defining action is his promise, and the basis on which the promise applies to me is not me and my faithfulness, but Christ and his faithfulness. When we add anything else to this dynamic, we actually disavow it; Embraced by Jesus, I am child of Abraham and so called to live by faith as he did. Any attempt to prove myself worthy is a disagreement that the heart of salvation is promise; and if I do not share in the promise, I am not a child of the promise; I do not share in Abraham, or in the fulfilment of all that God bound himself to do; I do not share in Christ, and I am not saved. In short: *grace is essential, and absolute*. It is necessary for salvation, and cannot be added to.

Does this lead to licentiousness? As Paul would say, *"Absolutely not!"*. To deliberately sin is also to depart from the way of promise; how can licentiousness bless all the families of the earth? Grace abounds, I am still raised with Christ; but that grace calls me to holiness.

I hope that helps. Having just gone back and read what I have written, it seems terribly insufficient. In the end, what you are doing is proclaiming the gospel. Can I encourage you as you take your question to the Scriptures? Have you noticed how many of my references have been to the book of Romans, especially chapters 4-6? It's a good place to begin, and perhaps to take your Mormon friends.

Image credit: NASA/JPL-Caltech/Univ. of Virginia