

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

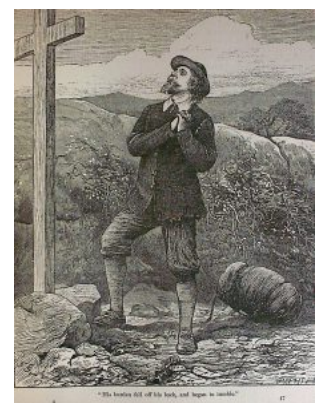
Q&A: Does a desire for forgiveness mean faith?

Anonymous asks:

If someone claims to be without faith, yet morally knows they have done something “wrong” due to our God given in built moral compass (even if said person chooses to not believe that God gave them the compass) and is looking for forgiveness, does that mean they have faith...? I guess they will only feel forgiven if they realise who they must submit to, which leads them to faith...? It is almost like our inbuilt ability to continually fall short of the inbuilt compass leads us to God. Smart design. Seek and you shall find.

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This question has come in response to our latest sermon series in the evening at St. Nic's. Thank you for it. You've put forward something very interesting. Let's unpack it a little, explore this hypothetical person's situation, and look to see where faith can be found...



You talk about someone who “morally knows that they have done something wrong.” This is an experience that is common to all people (excluding a sociopath or two) and is simply the operation of our conscience. Theologically, we can find the roots of conscience in our identity as image-bearers of

God, *and* in the loss of innocence grasped by the eating of fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But our conscience doesn't depend on faith, it is simply a part of who we are as human beings. Similarly, a pricked conscience doesn't necessarily lead to faith, or anything else in particular. We all know what it means to deaden our conscience, and harden our hearts.

However, there is also an experience that we might describe as "being convicted of sin." This something different to feeling guilty about something, it is about an awareness of a fractured relationship with our maker. It can feel like dread, but always has a sense of hunger to make it right, even if we are at a loss for words and aren't sure of what we can do about it. It's what is happening when the *psalmist* writes, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." This is what is happening when Peter witnesses Jesus at work and *cries out* "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

The big question is whether this sense of conviction is an aspect of faith. I think I'd like to turn it the other way around and consider how faith is present in the conviction of sin. After all, you cannot understand yourself to be disconnected from God's holiness if you don't have some sense of belief that God exists, and that he is holy. The longing for forgiveness is a longing for restoration of relationship, and for me, that is faith:

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

True conviction of sin, a ministry of God's Spirit awakening our own, draws us to God in search of his grace, even if it is on our knees. And, as you say, "seek and you shall find."

The conundrum with your hypothetical person is that we see

something of an existential wrestle: Clearly he is looking for forgiveness from someone, yet has “chosen to believe that God has not given them their moral compass.” It’s a tension that can’t last! Either what we are seeing is simply the operation of conscience, or it is true conviction and will find its end. In the meantime it is existential disequilibrium, and while it may take some time for it to resolve, that is what will happen. As you say, it’s a smart design.

What is clear is that it presents an urgency to be ready with the gospel, in word and deed. If someone is seeking the path of reconciliation, we show them Jesus, and bear witness to how he has overcome the power of sin with newness of life. Conviction finds its end in Jesus as forgiveness and assurance, and that is very much the stuff of a life of faith.

Q&A: Forgiveness... can you explore and unpack the topic (a little) and steer us towards some useful scripture.

Dave O asks:

Forgiveness. I’ve heard it said:-

“My dear wife I forgive you for last night’s dinner!” is judgement rather than forgiveness – and I think I’d agree.

In a circumstance like sexual abuse we are “moving in a direction of forgiveness (and may never get there this side of heaven).” – which to me at least feels like a cop out.

“I forgave him as my gift to myself” – which doesn’t seem to really be forgiveness.

“We forgive as God forgave us” i.e. unrepentant and dead in their sins – which I am inclined to, but ponder just how you do it, if that is the call.

Will, can you explore and unpack the topic (a little) and steer us towards some useful scripture.

Hi Dave 0

Two parts of scripture. Matthew 18:21-35, which in the ESV is as follows, and on which my boss preached the other week.

21 Then Peter came up and said to him, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” 22 Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

23 “Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants.⁷ 24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.⁸ 25 And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. 26 So the servant⁹ fell on his knees, imploring him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. 28 But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii,¹⁰ and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’ 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. 31 When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were

greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. 32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' 34 And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers,¹¹ until he should pay all his debt. 35 So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

And Romans 12:9-21

9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. 10 Love one another with brotherly affection. w0utdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit,⁷ serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.⁸ Never be wise in your own sight. 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. **19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it⁹ to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."** 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Which takes us to Deuteronomy 32 which is in the context of noting Israel's rebelliousness and their rejection of God's grace.

"Is not this laid up in store with me,

sealed up in my treasuries?

*35 Vengeance is mine, and recompense,⁶
for the time when their foot shall slip;
for the day of their calamity is at hand,
and their doom comes swiftly.'*

*36 For the Lord will vindicate⁷ his people
and have compassion on his servants,
when he sees that their power is gone
and there is none remaining, bond or free.*

So here's my take on it:

God is judge. Sometimes the path of justice is clear. Sometimes the path of justice is mirky. Either way, we are not able to be the judge because we neither have the capacity to see through the mirk, nor the integrity to condemn a fellow sinner. Vindication does not come from the assertion of our rights but when we are submitted under the grace of God when "our power is gone."

The outworking of this submission is in two modes. Firstly, when it comes to the dealing with our "brothers", as Peter asks Christ. The instruction to forgive here is in the context of ensuring the body/family of Christ demonstrates the grace of God. This involves truth, sometimes hard truth and conflict management as spelled out earlier in Matthew 18, and is towards repentance and reconciliation. The dynamic here is clearly one of an issue being faced, repentance occurring, and forgiveness offered. I don't think this is controversial.

The second mode is the more abstract dealing with the wrongs of this world. Paul's imperatives help us here as we are instructed to not be slothful, haughty, etc. Of particular relevance is his referral to dealings with people who are not brothers but enemies, and our interaction with evil. This mode takes us back to our "emptiness" before God. We are not to be "wise in our own sight" and so be overcome by evil, but

to overcome evil with good. That good coheres with the notion of “do not avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.” This is not forgiveness in the sense of responding to repentance but the individual responsibility of “so far as it depends on you, leave peaceably with all.” This is impossible without that empty reliance on the grace of God – which is faith. Faith that he will actually do justice, bring vindication, deal with this on his terms which are better than my own.

Looking at your two examples of “moving in a direction of forgiveness” and “forgiving as a gift to myself” – I think much of the inadequacy of these articulations can be alleviated by applying the above modes rather than the over-used term of “forgiveness.” The mode towards the unrepentant abuser is not so much forgiveness but “vengeance is yours, oh Lord, I trust you to judge him.” The “gift to myself” is the recognition that judgement is a heavy load to bear – and to hand vengeance to Christ is to take up the yoke and burden of grace that is easier and light.

Hope this helps.

W.

Responsibility and Grace

There are a number of causes that lie behind ministers and pastors burning out, hitting the wall, breaking down, or generally flaming (or shaming) out. Underlying these causes are issues of human frailty, sin, insecurity and depravity.



A significant example of this is the tendency for ministers to overextend their concept of responsibility to the point where they are carrying burdens that don't belong to them, and so collapse. To illustrate, consider the following recount of a conversation I had with a mental health professional recently...

Him: "Your organisation seems remarkably well set up to handle cases of burnout and breakdown."

Me: "I think that is due to it having some experience in this area. In fact the prevalence of clergy breakdown is high across all denominations..."

Him: "Why is that? What are the churches doing wrong?"

Me: "I don't necessarily think it comes from expectations placed by church hierarchy or even from the grassroots (although that is more common), I think it usually comes from self-imposed expectations by most pastors."

Him: "What are they?"

Me: "Those associated with the world's worst job description – 'Go and change the world.' How on earth do you set KPI's and SMART goals for that?!??"

Here's the rub for many of us ministers. We *do* deal with eternal matters. We *are* about interacting with the broad eschatological arcs of history and applying them in the broken, hard, confusing here-and-now. Without that the task would be nothing but some form of insipid civic chaplaincy, at best.

But how is a temporal person expected to further such eternal things? Does the responsibility for the Kingdom of God lay upon our shoulders?

It's not like there isn't a biblical mandate for stretching our arms wide, thinking big and reaching long. Consider two

popular biblical commissions that have energised many, including myself:

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Mt 18:19-20a)

“...I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction... keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.” (2 Tim 4:1b,2,5)

And it's not like there's any pretense that it's going to be easy. Paul, for instance, exemplifies something of the pastoral reality when he corrects (with only a hint of sarcasm) the spiritual pride of the Corinthians:

“We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honoured, we are dishonoured! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world... I urge you to imitate me.” (1 Cor 4:10-14, 16)

All this is stuff that we are charged with doing, energy and cost that we are called to bear as ministers of the gospel. It is unashamedly, and in the Bible often quite literally, a calling for martyrs. (The word, in the broadest sense, simply means “witness”, a martyr bears witness to the truth even to the end.) To have passion for the gospel is to be passionate for Jesus and so share his Passion. This means that ministry involves suffering, as Paul says:

“Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.” (Col 1:24-26)

So, is this what ministry is all about – responsibility for the application of eternity, commitment to whatever affliction and suffering is necessary?

Perhaps, yes, for it’s an answer that looks like Jesus, and we are called to imitate him.

But it’s an answer that is missing one thing – Jesus himself.

The picture of ministry, if concluded at this point, would be concluded too early. And the result, I contend, is despair and burnout.

The thought process in this incomplete picture runs like this:

- The minister has been charged with ministry.
- The responsibility for ministry lies with the minister – whose job it is to do the baptizing, the teaching, the preaching, the correcting, the rebuking, the encouraging, etc. – if you like, the bringing of the Kingdom of God.
- When the ministry lacks fruit (as it always will in certain seasons of consolidation or testing) or misses some non-biblical, human-imposed KPI (e.g. something nonsensical like percentage growth in attendance) then this must be because the minister has not baptized, taught, preached, corrected, rebuked, or encouraged, etc. well.
- The answer is to push harder, suffer more, embrace weariness as a friend, and push on in affliction, do

everything yourself, etc.

Such a thought process is often internal to the minister and fueled by an over-developed sense of duty or responsibility, and in recent times amongst younger generations by an overdeveloped sense of machoism.

But it misses Jesus.

It may be a picture that is patterned on Jesus, but it actually ignores him or replaces him.

It misses the point.

The point of ministry is never the minister, it is God.

The heart of ministry is not affliction, it is grace.

We need a more complete picture. Which, unsurprisingly, is actually the picture that the Bible provides. Consider the words of commission listed above, this time with some words of context:

“All authority in heaven on earth has been given to me. Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Mt 28:18-20)

“In the presence of God and of Christ who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage – with great patience and careful instruction... keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.” (2 Tim 4:1-5)

The task is not “Do ministry” it is “Given that Christ is real

and present, minister with him.”

And so Paul can write about doing “everything *through him* who gives me strength” (Phil 4:13) and “struggling with all *his* energy, which so powerfully works in me” (Col 1:29). And when it comes to affliction he looks only to “suffering *by the power of God*, who has saved us and called us to a holy life – not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace.” (2 Tim 8b-9). He is echoed in the lives of the early church fathers – people like Polycarp – who would deliberately avoid affliction and martyrdom where they could because it was seen not as something to run towards but as a grace to receive if, and only if, it is given and empowered by God.

In other words, without the power of God, without his energy, without Christ’s strength – in short, without *grace* – ministry is simply human, sin-ridden, frail and emotionally deadly.

Without the specific call of God, suffering is the fruit of sin and pride, and the grace is for it to be dealt with or remedied, not embraced.

And those who are in ministry (which is all of us, right?) would do best not to begin with ourselves, on human responsibility and human agenda; but to begin with worship and actively work from there, by his grace alone, all the way to the end.