

The
GREAT WORK
of the
GOSPEL

HOW WE EXPERIENCE GOD'S GRACE



JOHN ENSOR

FOREWORD *by* JOHN PIPER

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FOREWORD

I am a painfully slow reader. So I must be ruthless in the good things that I choose not to read. I did not begrudge the time it took to read the first edition of this book (then titled *Experiencing God's Forgiveness*). I started it because John Ensor is an admired friend. I finished it because it is a very good book. And now I welcome this gospel-centered revision. I expect that what I wrote of the earlier book will be true of this one as well.

I love the God-centeredness of this book. At one point I wrote in the margin, "John's great strength is reasserting the greatness of God in a way so compelling that God-neglecting moderns might feel it." In another place I wrote, "This book is a celebration of the greatness of Christ's work on the cross." And the cross is not the measure of our worth, but of God's. Christ's death for us is grounded firmly on "the value [God] places on himself and his own glory as a loving God." The book is a God-entranced vision of glorious forgiveness. "For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt" (Psalm 25:11).

The book succeeds because *it is biblical*. It is saturated with the Bible. John has a sweeping knowledge of Scripture and interprets it carefully. He would agree that the sieve of human thought is God's thought. So he says, "Only a truth-soaked mind can reshape our opinions, attitudes, responses, and decisions." It is a vibrantly truth-driven book.

It also succeeds because *it is real*. It connects with life. John writes with the savvy of one who has seen the legal and justice system from the inside. He has struggled with the most impossible crises. He has lost friends in murder. He has gained friends from converted criminals. He knows the street. He has learned some deep things; "If I come across a man raping a woman, I cannot love both of them in the same way." His God-centeredness grew in abortion wars and drug deals and manifold cases of abuse. What you read here has been tested in fire.

The book succeeds because *it is full of compassion and hope*. The

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glory of God is mainly the glory of his mercy. And the way to make it known is to move from guilt to gladness by faith. Under God the persons that count most are the broken, trapped, hopeless sinners. “God desires to make his *mercy* the apex of his own glory in the eyes of all creation. It is the ultimate reason for the creation of the world and the plan of redemption.”

But for all its emphasis on compassion, *the book is not sappy*. John is Jesus-like in his utter freedom from sentimentality. He is, in fact, strikingly blunt. “Murmuring is God-hatred in the acorn stage.” Our deepest problem is not our “woundedness” but our “waywardness.” There is such a thing as “healthy shame.” The wrath of God is “terrible . . . fierce . . . awful.” One thing God will not forgive is the “discounting of the Great Work of grace wrought by the Spirit.”

Yet for all its bluntness *it is a happy book*. “To believe means to trust that God’s outworking plan will in the end lead to [our] joy and his glory.” “The faith we are to place in God is a glad willingness to trust that he will provide for us everything that will truly make us happy in the long run.” John is gripped by the great truth that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

The Great Work of the Gospel is God-centered good news. It is the kind of message that will make deep, strong people and deep, strong churches. It will release people from the self-absorbed rationalizations that keep us from the fullest engagement in the global cause of God. So I am hopeful that for God’s sake the gladness on the other side of guilt will also be the gladness of the nations—in God.

—John Piper
Bethlehem Baptist Church
Minneapolis, Minnesota
December 7, 2005

INTRODUCTION

The Human Experience of God's Outworking Grace



Grace is but glory begun, and glory is but grace perfected.

—JONATHAN EDWARDS

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory.

—EPHESIANS 3:20-21A

Alexander Pope's famous axiom, "To err is human, to forgive, divine,"¹ points to the theme of this book. It is about our *human experience* of God's outworking *grace*—the sin-forgiving gift of it, the guilt-removing power of it, the soul-satisfying joy of it, the cross-suffering mystery of it, the conscience-cleansing experience of it, the life-transforming quality of it, the muscular faith-building impact of it, the eternally reconciling splendor of it.

Understanding how God works this out and seeing how we experience his grace as human beings is what I am after. It is his Great Work.

I say this for three reasons.

1. *Because the problem is the greatest of all problems.* "The problem of forgiveness," wrote John Stott, "is constituted by the inevitable collision between divine perfection and human rebellion; between God as he is and us as we are."² What is becoming more self-evident to me, the longer I live, is the deep-seated and pervasive nature of

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human sinfulness. During the early years of the twentieth century, there was much glib talk of man evolving into a higher level of moral development. The First World War challenged the notion. The Second, reaching the apex of human depravity in the Holocaust, shattered the idea. Today's terrorism stuns us only as to the *depth* of human hatred and cruelty.

Jesus said, "he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). If I have only a little problem with sin, I need only a little favor. The faith that turned the world upside down, however, was an *amazing grace*.

Forgiveness is God's Great Work for another reason:

2. *Because the solution is the most excellent of all solutions.* The cross is the greatest surprise of human history. None of the religions of the world could even have thought of such a thing. Indeed even the closest associates of Christ never saw it coming. None understood *the plan* of it. When one discovers the reason for it and the wisdom of it and the nature of it, one understands why Christianity is "Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23). It is not simply a code of ethics or a set of principles for wise living, like those provided by Benjamin Franklin or Confucius. It is God at work in human life through the cross.

The unique character of Christianity as a religion of *music* is evidence for this excellence. The cross inspires song. No other religion inspires such a burning passion to put words of praise to music. Hymns, gospel songs, oratorios, choruses pour out of the cross in every language and in every ethnomusicological form in a never ending stream. Take the cross out of the mountain of music and you have a molehill. Such is the wonder of God's solution to our sin.

The third reason to call God's work of grace his Great Work is:

3. *Because the change it produces is the most extreme change possible.* God's grace takes a thief and convicts him. It not only forgives him for stealing but makes him abhor any thought of ever stealing again. Then it prompts him to make restitution and to find honest work to meet his needs. Then it gives him a heart to work harder and earn more, so that he might have something to give to charity. The apostle Paul says, "Let the thief *no longer steal*, but rather *let him labor*, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to *share* with anyone in need" (Ephesians 4:28). This is the

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change that God does in the work of grace; he turns a thief into a philanthropist.

I have a good friend who is a doctor. Just a few years ago he was an abortionist for Planned Parenthood. He exploited the fears of pregnant women and profited in the shedding of innocent blood. Today he works beside me in running a pregnancy help ministry. He offers his medical services *free of charge* and has *spent* large amounts of money to purchase ultrasound equipment so that women might understand their decision more clearly. What accounts for such a transformed life? What explains such a contrasting before and after? God's grace, in all its *ongoing and outworking power*.

The grace of God that forgives us changes us. It changes us not just initially but continually as well. It convicts us and troubles our conscience. Later on it comforts us, "wiping away every tear" (see Revelation 21:4). Soon after, it unleashes irrepressible shouts of praise. The grace of God wounds our pride but then increases our confidence. When God forgives, he exposes the most shameful things only to then cleanse them all from our conscience. And that is just the *early* work of God in the outworking of his grace.

In the ongoing outworking of God's grace, God reorients our passions. "The grace of God has appeared, bringing *salvation* for all people, *training* us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions" (Titus 2:11-12). It produces a radical joy and a strong faith, one that can endure great suffering and yet trust that, in the end, God's plan will lead to our joy and his glory. The grace that turns us from evil makes us "eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:14, NIV). The American theologian and philosopher Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) said, "Grace is but glory begun, and glory is but grace perfected."³ I want to trace out how this is true and track the human experience of grace doing this perfecting and glorifying work.

WHY DO I CALL IT "OUTWORKING GRACE"?

I call it "outworking grace" to get away from the more static idea of grace being a singular event, such as going to the movie theater or graduating from college. People get the idea that biblical grace means

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largely the event of being forgiven. What happens after is either secondary or extra or supplementary. By outworking grace I mean what Christ meant when he commissioned Paul to the gospel ministry: “I am sending you to *open* their eyes, so that they may *turn* from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may *receive* forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are *sanctified* by faith in me” (Acts 26:17-18). The work of grace here consists of opening eyes *and* turning hearts *and* receiving forgiveness *and* being sanctified. It is all *one* work of grace but it works itself out in terms of our human experience, in an ongoing, life-changing dynamic.

By outworking grace I am after what Philippians 2:12-13 calls us to go after: “*Work out* your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is *God who works in you*, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” What is it that *we* are to work out with fear and trembling? And how is *God* at work in us producing these changes? What comes with salvation that needs to be worked out into our minds, our tongues, our wallets, and our sex lives? How is it that when my sins are forgiven, my neighborhood is improved?

In terms of human experience, in fear and trembling, we face the responsibility to repent: “*Repent* therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come” (Acts 3:19-20). Yet repentance is the work of God. Paul instructed Timothy to teach patiently, saying, “God may perhaps *grant them repentance* leading to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 2:25).

We are commanded to believe: “*Believe* in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31). As a human experience, this comes down to a decision of the will. But God is at work in our willing: “For it has been *granted* to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only *believe* in him but also suffer for his sake” (Philippians 1:29).

In fear and trembling, we are to keep God’s commandments: “by this we know that we have come to know him, if we *keep* his commandments” (1 John 2:3). But this is God at work: “And I will put my Spirit within you, and *cause* you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ezekiel 36:27).

In working out our salvation we are to set our hearts and minds after God: “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things

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that are on earth” (Colossians 3:2). But God is at work when it comes to our hearts and minds. So we find Paul praying “that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may *give* you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the *knowledge* of him, having the eyes of your hearts *enlightened*, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you” (Ephesians 1:17-18).

We are to live to God: “I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received” (Ephesians 4:1, NIV). And yet, “you, who were dead in your trespasses . . . God *made* alive” (Colossians 2:13). In terms of human experience we must “be *strong* in the Lord” (Ephesians 6:10). But because it is God at work, Paul says, “May you be *strengthened* with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy” (Colossians 1:11). It is ours as a human experience to “rejoice in the Lord” (Philippians 4:4). Yet even in this, God is at work in us! “For you, O LORD, have *made* me glad by your work” (Psalm 92:4). We are to take heed and be careful, lest we fall (1 Corinthians 10:12). But it is God “who is able to *keep* you from stumbling” (Jude 24). We may indeed “serve the Lord” (Romans 12:11), but our honest testimony will be similar to Paul’s human experience: “I was *made* a minister according to the gift of God’s grace, which was given me by *the working of his power*” (Ephesians 3:7). And we could go on. It is *our* experience of God’s outworking grace.

But it is not a partnership. It is not “I do half and God does half.” It is God’s work. Instead of a picture in our mind of meeting God halfway, a better picture might be that of dead Lazarus. Jesus called out for Lazarus to rise up (John 11:43), but with the call came the powerful work of grace, as Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Without that enabling power, Lazarus would not even have heard the call, let alone heeded it.

THE OUTWORKING OF GOD’S GRACE IN THE LIFE OF DAVID

Michelangelo’s statue of David shows him as the archetypal man—rugged and handsome, courageous, visionary, manly in form

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and temperament. The real David is more pocked and cracked. Scripture does affirm that he was a man after God's own heart (see 1 Samuel 13:14; Acts 13:22). But he was also like Woody Allen, who said, "The heart wants what the heart wants."

This was David's condition when we pick up his story in 2 Samuel 11. It was in the spring of the year, when kings lead their armies into battle. But King David was at home. Already in the wrong place, he was vulnerable. Henri Nouwen quotes the rabbinical proverb, "He who thinks that he is finished is finished."⁴ First Corinthians 10:12 (NIV) says it this way: "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"

David was on the roof of his house, killing time, when he spotted Bathsheba bathing nude across the way. She was a very beautiful woman (2 Samuel 11:2) and David wanted her.

Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, was at this time away on the battlefield, risking his life in the service of king and country. David betrayed Uriah's service and used his own name and position to seduce Bathsheba. Soon after, he learned that Bathsheba was pregnant.

In an effort to hide his actions, David ordered Uriah home under the guise of needing a war report. He then granted Uriah liberty to go home to his wife before returning to battle.

David's plan, of course, was that Uriah would sleep with his wife and be deceived into thinking that Bathsheba's baby was theirs. But Uriah was a man of honor. He thought it dishonorable to enjoy the pleasures of marital intimacy when his brothers were away from their families, fighting and dying. He slept on the palace porch that night.

King David increased the pressure. He delayed Uriah's return to battle another night and insisted he eat and drink with him. He got Uriah drunk in an effort to loosen his code of honor. That too failed. Uriah again slept on the porch. But David would have his way. He sent Uriah back to battle with a note for his general that read, "Set Uriah in the forefront of the hardest fighting, and draw back from him, that he may be struck down, and die" (2 Samuel 11:15).

David, just by being home rather than with his army, was guilty of abandoning his responsibility as commander in chief. That by itself is no small sin, as any soldier will tell you. To this sin he added the sin

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of lust and the abuse of power. Then the cover-up began. He deceived and manipulated. He rewarded a soldier's deep devotion with the ultimate betrayal. He murdered him. As if nothing were wrong, perhaps even to look merciful, David took Bathsheba into his house as a wife and pretended that everything was just fine.

But God, who, we might say, was a God after David's own heart, now moved to deal with David's sin. He sent Nathan the prophet to confront David:

“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘I anointed you king over Israel. . . . And I gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your arms and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah. And if this were too little, I would add to you as much more. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife’” (2 Samuel 12:7-10).

I see in this devastating indictment the profound and life-changing work of God's forgiveness as it is designed for David's life. Why do I say this? Because by the time all is said and done in this affair, Nathan will add, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die” (12:13).

God's forgiveness was at work here. Nathan's message to David was “a severe mercy.”⁵ Nathan's probing (“Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes?”) and indicting (“You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own”) and reasoning (“And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more”) forced David to consider his life before God (as we will discuss in chapter 1). David's denial broke: “I have sinned against the LORD” (12:13). This is the prerequisite work of grace. We must own up to our real guilt (chapter 2). David wept and fasted before the Lord (12:21). David discovered what the old

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preachers called “the exceeding sinfulness of sin” and acknowledged the justice of God’s judgment (chapter 3). He cried,

For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and *blameless* in your judgment (Psalm 51:3-4).

The ongoing outworking of God’s grace taught David that the consequences of sin outweigh the “fleeting pleasures” of sin. There was loss, though not eternal loss. As for the temporal consequences for David: “Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun” (2 Samuel 12:11-12). In the subsequent years of his life, David witnessed sexual immorality, betrayal, murder, and death among his own family members (2 Samuel 11–21), just as he had done these things secretly against the household of Uriah. But, although there were serious and painful consequences for David’s sin, as there is with ours, Nathan reassured David, “The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die” (12:13).

From this David learned to ask for forgiveness and to put his hope in God (chapter 4):

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin! (Psalm 51:1-2).

How God would answer this prayer (chapter 5) or justify it (chap-

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ter 6) was unclear to David. But this did not stop David from seeking a cleansed conscience (chapter 7):

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow (51:7).

And still God's grace is not finished. David anticipated that grace would relieve his burden and gladden his heart (chapter 8):

. . . let the bones that you have broken rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities (51:8b-9).

He prayed for more grace, for a stronger and better relationship with God marked by praise and persevering faithfulness:

Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit (51:12).

This is what I mean by the outworking of God's grace. This is why I have concluded that it is God's Great Work and can say with David,

Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits—
who *forgives* all your iniquity,
and heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from *the pit*,
and crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who *satisfies* you with good
so that your youth is *renewed* like the eagle's (Psalm 103:2-5).

Here is a “my-life-is-in-the-pits” rescuing work. Here is forgiveness for all my sins. Here is a crowning life-achievement award. Here is the heart made glad with goodness. Here is youth-like renewing strength in God. That's the human experience of God's outworking grace that I am after.

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GROUP STUDY QUESTIONS

1. In this book, “the Great Work” refers to the great work of the *gospel*. Summarize why we are calling it the Great Work.
2. In your life to date, how have you perceived God at work in your life?
3. We have seen how much change can occur in our lives through the Great Work, turning thieves into philanthropists, for example, or turning a persecutor such as Paul into a passionate proclaimer of the gospel. Whom have you seen changed by the outworking of God’s grace, and how?
4. In Philippians 2:12-13, Paul calls us to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.” He also calls us to see “God at work” in us when we take human initiative. This is a difficult concept to grasp. How does the raising of Lazarus help us grasp the concept? In what ways have we seen the need for human initiative in pursuing God and yet have seen that this is God at work?

THE GREAT WORK CONSIDERED

Asking Life-Changing Questions



*Is there in the whole world a person who would have the right
to forgive and could forgive?*

—FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also
received: that Christ died for our sins*

—1 CORINTHIANS 15:3

In searching out the grace of God according to the Bible, it does not take long to be surprised. The apostle Paul said, “For I delivered to you as of *first importance* what I also received: that Christ died for our sins” (1 Corinthians 15:3). A matter of first importance? The top priority in life? I once had the disturbing experience of being told, “I forgive you.” It was disturbing because I had not asked for it. I was not looking for it and I did not sense that I needed it. In terms of our human experience, the gospel seems to do the same thing. It seeks to scratch where we feel no itch. It offers as a matter of first importance what we consider of least concern—God’s forgiveness, reconciliation, and new life through the life and work of Jesus Christ.

Nonetheless, there it is. It is something to consider.

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BILLY'S FEAR

Billy is a “personal trainer,” the guy assigned to me at my local gym to show me how to use the various weight machines safely and effectively. He is a young, handsome, unmarried man of about thirty. He appears to be hard-working, college educated, and a decent fellow.

He interrupted my grunting on the weight machine one day, asking, “So you’re a minister, right?”

I nodded yes.

“And that means I could ask you a question about God?”

I nodded again.

He looked around as if he were about to tell me where he hid the gold and whispered, “Do you think God is upset by some of the things we do?”

I was taken aback. I rarely find people in our contemporary culture openly wrestling with such grave spiritual concerns.

“Yes, I do,” I replied. “In fact I think God is *angry* over some of the things we do.”

It was Billy’s turn to look surprised. He clearly was hoping I would assuage his feeling of guilt, not confirm it. “I’m worried about that,” he said.

We were interrupted at that moment by someone who needed help on the cross trainer, and I was left alone with my flabby abs to wonder about the state of Billy’s soul. His conscience was troubled. He sensed that all was not well between him and God. The matter of forgiveness was becoming a matter of *importance* to him. He was starting to wonder out loud, “How can I get right with God? Is it too late? How do I get my sins forgiven?” These are basic questions. I admit that they are jarringly out of tune with modern sensibilities. But maybe they are simply questions we do not ask *out loud* because of modern sensibilities.

ALICE'S DESPAIR

Alice was a college student who was raised in a strict Christian home. I was manning a pregnancy distress hotline when she called. She was so scared that even after we talked for an hour, she was still too afraid to tell me her first name. “Call me X,” she said.

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Alice had fallen into a sexual relationship for the first time. Physically and emotionally sickened with feelings of guilt, she left school. Since she had no place to go, she stayed with her boyfriend. She was also terrified that she might be pregnant. The shame that an out-of-wedlock pregnancy would bring to her family was paralyzing. The thought of an abortion, which she believed was murder, terrorized her further. In this desperate act of self-preservation, she thought, God would despise her as she despised herself.

Alice asked me, “Are you a Christian?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“I *used* to be a Christian,” she replied, “but I lost my salvation.”

“Interesting. Just how did you do that?” I asked.

Alice explained what I already knew. By “I lost my salvation,” she meant that she had lost hope that she could, or even should, be forgiven by God. What she had done was so wrong, so unacceptable in her own mind, that it must surely be unacceptable to God. Therefore *she* was unacceptable. She was beyond the reach of God’s forgiveness, or so she thought. If God is justified in condemning us, how can he justifiably forgive us?

ANTOINETTE’S PRESUMPTION

Antoinette’s approach to the matter of grace and forgiveness was different still. She and her boyfriend, Rich, had lived together for nine years, since age sixteen. They had several children and now another baby was on the way. Rich needed help finding a job. They also wanted to get married. They came to me for help, and I was glad to help them.

Some weeks later, Antoinette called. “Pray for me,” she said, “and ask God to forgive me for what I am about to do tomorrow.” She was scheduled to terminate her nineteen-week, preborn child in the morning. She had lost her job. Rich could not find a second one, and she had grown afraid and depressed.

What could I say? To pray for permission to destroy an innocent life is to make a mockery of the entire Christian faith; it shows contempt for the grace of God and turns it into a license to do evil. Antoinette was dangerously confused about God’s forgiveness. But many of us are.

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Under these terms forgiveness is not extended—in fact, I think it angers God that we should even ask. It is like someone asking me for permission to rape my daughter. The very question ignites a holy rage in defense of my daughter and against her would-be assailant.

It is possible to be presumptuous when it comes to the matter of God's grace. The French cynic says, "The good God will forgive me; that is his job."¹ But is this true? Could this not be an example of "believing in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:2)? Is it possible to believe in the forgiveness of sins in an unacceptable manner?

EVA'S WOUND

Eva was a street-wise girl who grew up in poverty in the inner city. She had a rough edge to her that I liked immediately. I invited her to help on some volunteer project now long forgotten. But I will never forget her. The subject of our families came up. I was rambling on about how my wife and I were planning a birthday party for my daughter later that week. Eva shook her head.

"You want to hear about my family?" she asked. "I was ten years old when I started to smoke pot. When I was eleven I did this with my father. He bought me a line of cocaine when I was seventeen. That pretty much explains where I'm coming from."

I almost burst out in tears. What kind of father buys cocaine for his teenaged daughter? What kind of evil is this that robs a young girl of fatherly love and treats her to the perverse pleasures of snorting cocaine? Eva had spent years on the streets: drugs; alcohol; sexual promiscuity; and reaping the pain and anger that resulted. I went home and hugged my daughter that night. I felt angry at Eva's father, a man I had never met. How ought God to deal with him? Here forgiveness seems immoral, and surely a just God would not give it. But is it sinful of me to think so? Are my sins less sinful? And just how does the grace of God work itself out in Eva, so that she can forgive her father? Or should she?

ASKING THE LIFE-CHANGING QUESTIONS

In one of his great novels, Fyodor Dostoyevsky asked, "Is there in the whole world a person who would have the right to forgive and could

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forgive?”² There are *many* probing questions we can ask in our desire to get hold of a biblically based, God-glorifying, heartfelt experience of God’s grace. Does God forgive? Does he forgive everyone or only some? Are there degrees of sin? Is speeding to church as bad as adultery? Is slander the same as slitting a throat? Does the forgiveness of God go only so far?

Aren’t some things unforgivable? If righteousness demands that judges never condemn the innocent or acquit the guilty, how can God forgive the guilty? How can he wink at wickedness? Do rapists and murderers sit down in heaven with raped and murdered men, women, and children and say, “Let’s all live in harmony”? Is that heaven? Isn’t there hell to pay for our sins? And if there is, how can I ever escape it?

Will God be more willing to forgive me if I make a sincere effort to reform myself? Will it help if I punish myself in certain ways? How *can* God forgive me for what I’ve done? I condemn myself; how can God do less?

Why is the cross necessary? If God requires us to forgive others without requiring of them anything so drastic as a blood sacrifice, why doesn’t God practice what he preaches and merely forgive? What happened on the cross? Why did Jesus go through with it? Can I have any assurance that God has forgiven me? What are the grounds for this assurance? Can I ever live without the painful shame of the past?

There comes a time in our lives when we want to know God’s grace. Human experience—the experience of people doing wrong and being wronged—leads us to this place. We want to know God’s grace as a heartfelt experience. We want to know it intellectually, meaning something our mind can see and rejoice in. We want to know that it’s based on a higher authority than our own opinion, and we want to know how we ought to live in light of the experience.

GOD’S WINSOME INVITATION

A woman once came to see me about her unhappy marriage. Her husband was emotionally absent and inattentive, among other things. The marriage was in deep trouble, and she was looking for my help

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to save it—or so I thought. I met with her husband. We talked about his life, his goals, his marriage, and his children. We talked about his priorities in life and how his marriage was crumbling around him as he puttered around in his various hobbies. In the weeks that followed he looked at his failures as a husband and father and began to seek help and guidance. Changes soon appeared, welcome changes. Then the wife came to me, upset. She acknowledged the improvements but then told me she really did not expect it and she did not want him to change. She wanted out. I discovered that she had “left” the marriage a long time earlier. His repentance was too late.

Might this be analogous to our relationship with God? Is it too late to change and expect God to welcome our repentance? There are several reasons to believe not only that it is not too late but that God’s grace is set to a hair-trigger. One reason we might be able to reach this conclusion is God’s winsome invitation. He says in Isaiah 1:18,

“Come now, let us *reason* together,
says the LORD:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow;
though they are red like crimson,
they shall become like wool.”

What an amazing invitation: “Come now, let us *reason* together.” The idea contains the notion of debate. God has anticipated our questions concerning our guilt, his justice, his love, and our desire to be happy. Here a gauntlet is thrown down. God is ready to contend with our mind, grapple for our heart, reconcile us to himself through a deep and cleansing process—turning blood-red stains into pure white joy. Here is an invitation to know and experience the grace of God. And there are others:

“Come, everyone who thirsts,
come to the waters;
and he who has no money,
come, buy and eat!

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Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
hear, that your soul may live;
and I will make with you an everlasting covenant”
(Isaiah 55:1-3).

GOD'S BOLD PROMISE

Besides his winsome invitation, God has boldly promised to do a great work of grace. We read in Jeremiah 31:13, 33-34:

“Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry.
I will turn their mourning into joy;
I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. . . .”

“But this is the covenant that I will make . . . declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. . . . *For I will forgive their iniquity,* and I will remember their sin no more.”

Here God declares his intention to do a great work of grace. He promises to turn our mourning into gladness. He promises to alter our thinking and our passions so that we delight in his laws (rather than discount them). “I will be their God” means he will reconcile us and unite us to him and his purposes. But note that all of this flows as part of the ongoing outworking of God’s grace. “*For,*” he says, “I will *forgive* their iniquity, and I will *remember their sin no more.*”

GOD'S DEEP MOTIVATION

There is one question that rises above all others, one question I did not think to ask until I was in seminary and took a course on the writ-

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ings of Jonathan Edwards. Edwards, an eighteenth-century Puritan preacher and philosopher, has been called America's greatest thinker. He wrote a treatise titled *The End for Which God Created the World* (published 1765).³ It asks why God does what he does. What motivates God to do one thing and not another? The reason this is important is that it gets to the very heart of the issue before us. What motivates God to want to forgive?

The fuller answer will develop as we go, but for now, let me summarize what I think the answer is. Why should we take God's invitation and promise to heart? Because God's own great passion is to glorify himself in our knowing him and enjoying him. More particularly, he wants to show us his grace; more particularly still, he wants to show us his infinite mercy, to the praise and glory of his own name. In other words, God desires to make his *mercy* the apex of his own glory in the eyes of all creation. It is the ultimate reason for the creation of the world and the plan of redemption. It is the ultimate reason we should believe he is ready to do a great work of grace in us!

Dana Olson, a pastor friend of mine, opened my eyes to this. He wrote:

Prior to creation God had no means of revealing one pinnacle attribute of his glory, mercy. While he could within the fellowship of the Trinity express love and maintain justice, mercy inherently requires some injustice or inadequacy before loving-kindness can be expressed in forgiveness. For this reason God set in motion redemptive history—to manifest his glory by revealing this very capacity to redeem, mercy.⁴

God wants to do a work “to the praise of his glorious *grace*” (Ephesians 1:6). God wants to show us his grace so that we “might glorify God for his *mercy*” (Romans 15:9). This is precisely the reasoning of Romans 9:22-23: “What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to *make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy*, which he has prepared beforehand for glory . . . ?” In his final judgment God will dis-

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play the power of his wrath. But God could not demonstrate his capacity for mercy apart from ordaining a world of sin and a way for redemption. He endures with great patience the impenitent, so that he can magnify his all-glorious mercy in the eyes of those who put their hope in him!

JOHN NEWTON'S GRAVESTONE

John Newton, author of the hymn “Amazing Grace,” died in 1807, having accomplished much in his lifetime. But he saw it as God’s Great Work in him. He made this his lasting testimony by having the following words put on his gravestone:

John Newton, Clerk
Once an Infidel and Libertine,
A Servant of Slaves in Africa,
Was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour
JESUS CHRIST,
Preserved, restored, pardoned,
And appointed to preach the Faith
He had long laboured to destroy⁵

Newton’s “rich mercy” is the Great Work of the gospel. It was his life experience to seek it, discover it, live it, and proclaim it an amazing work of grace. The apostle Paul summarized the gospel in similar fashion:

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister (Colossians 1:21-23).

This summary we will consider again and again, in searching out the Great Work. It will be our anchor text. With this, along with God’s

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winsome invitation and his bold promise, let us consider how God might desire to be glorified in our own human experience of his rich mercy.



THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S OUTWORKING GRACE

In the outworking of God's grace, there comes a point when we begin to consider the matter of forgiveness and reconciliation as a matter of first importance. As we do, God encourages us to look to him and to search out the glory of his mercy.

GROUP STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Billy, Alice, Antoinette, and Eva each have their own reasons for needing to learn about God's forgiveness and ongoing grace. What stories do you have of people struggling with similar issues? What is your story; what draws you to consider the gospel at this time?
2. This chapter has raised lots of questions that will be addressed throughout the book. What questions do you bring to this study of the Great Work?
3. The apostle Paul says it is possible to believe the gospel in *vain* (1 Corinthians 15:2). According to this text, what constitutes a vain or worthless kind of faith? Describe a situation or pattern of behavior where someone's claims are dubious at best.
4. Isaiah 1:18 and Jeremiah 31:33-34 are two promises of God. What would faith in these promises cause us to do?
5. I have said that God has a chief motive within himself that is good news for seekers of God's grace. What is it, and why is it good news?
6. We are calling Colossians 1:21-23 the "anchor text" of this book. Outline the key truths of the Great Work according to this text. Compare your outline with the Table of Contents page of this book.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism* (l.i.9).
2. John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 88.
3. Cited in Gordon S. Jackson, compiler, *Quotes for the Journey, Wisdom for the Way* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2000), 73.
4. Henri Nouwen, cited in Bob Benson and Michael W. Benson, *Disciplines of the Inner Life* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1985), 30.
5. The expression “a severe mercy” is from the title of Sheldon Vanauken’s book, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977).

CHAPTER 1: THE GREAT WORK CONSIDERED

1. Cited in John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 87.
2. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: New American Library, 1957), 226.
3. Jonathan Edwards, “Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 1:94.
4. Dana Olson, unpublished ordination paper, 1-2. Used by permission.
5. Cited in Richard Cecil, “Memoirs of the Author,” in John Newton, *The Works of the Rev. John Newton*, 6 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 1:90.

CHAPTER 2: THE GREAT WORK DESIRED

1. Plutarch, *Lives*, “Demetrius,” sec. 1.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), 227.
3. Nietzsche said, “What is more harmful than any vice” is “active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak—Christianity” (cited in John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986], 43).
4. Ole Hallesby, *Conscience*, trans. C. J. Carlsen (London: InterVarsity, 1950), 9.
5. William K. Kilpatrick, *Psychological Seduction: The Failure of Modern Psychology* (Ridgefield, Conn.: McCaffrey, 1983), 36.
6. In some modern hymnals, the word *worm* has been replaced with *sinners*. I suspect that this is because *worm* runs contrary to contemporary theories on self-esteem.
7. George MacDonald, “The Wise Woman, or the Lost Princess,” in *The Gifts of the Child Christ: Fairytales and Stories for the Childlike*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1973), 1:202.
8. Frederick Buechner, cited in Larry Crabb, *Men and Women: Enjoying the Difference* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 25.
9. Larry Crabb, at a conference I attended, illustrated the problem of self-centeredness in marriage, saying, “We got two ticks here and no dog!”
10. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 226.
11. H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London: Nisbet, 1927), 9.
12. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 229.