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REVISED AND UPDATED

WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?



PHILIP
YANCEY

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ZONDERVAN BOOKS

What's So Amazing About Grace? Revised and Updated

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ISBN 978-0-310-36780-2 (softcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-36783-3 (audio)

ISBN 978-0-310-36781-9 (ebook)

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Cover design: Curt Diepenhorst

Cover image: Bernd Webler / plainpicture

Interior design: Sara Colley

Printed in the United States of America

\$PrintCode

REFLECTION GUIDE

BY JOANNIE DEGNAN BARTH

CHAPTER 1: THE LAST BEST WORD

1. Grace is described as containing “the essence of the gospel as a drop of water can contain the image of the sun.” If it’s that important, how would you explain grace to someone who is not familiar with the gospel? What stories or images would you use?
2. Consider this statement: “Evidently the down-and-out, who flocked to Jesus when he lived on earth, no longer feel welcome among his followers.” Do you find this observation true to your experience? If so, can you suggest a reason this may have happened? If not, what is drawing the down-and-out to communities of Christians?
3. A counselor identified the two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians as “the failure to understand, receive, and live out God’s unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people.” Which of these two do you find more difficult to overcome? Is it possible to learn to receive and give grace, or does it just come naturally to some people and not others? Give examples, if you know of any.

4. What has *your* search for grace been like? Have you found a community of grace-givers in your church or family? If so, describe what that feels like. (If not, what would you like to experience?)

CHAPTER 2: BABETTE'S FEAST: A STORY

1. Recalling the story of Babette, what do you think was the most difficult sacrifice she made?
2. Consider the people of the village. If you were among them, would such an extravagant gift be hard to receive? Why or why not?
3. Think of someone who has modeled a grace-filled life for you. How does it make you feel to have received such grace? What have you learned from such "grace dispensers"?
4. Think of a person or a group to whom you could extend more grace. Is this an area in which God might be nudging you? What holds you back from showing grace to those you feel may not deserve it?
5. When considering today's society, or others in history, which individuals or groups have at times been deemed "undeserving" of grace? How might Jesus have responded to them?

CHAPTER 3: A WORLD WITHOUT GRACE

1. We've known many disappointing stories about the church; do they bring to mind any contrasting examples of people working to dispense grace? If not, what might that look like in an ideal situation?
2. Organizations are described as running on "ungrace" by insisting that we earn our way and by rewarding employees based on their rank. What systems or institutions might you know that run differently? Are they successful? What qualities can make grace practical in the real world?

3. “Unearned gifts and unexpected pleasures bring the most joy.” What comes to mind when reflecting on *your* unearned gifts? Are there people to whom you can express gratitude?
4. Dr. Paul Brand spent much of his life in a hot, arid region of South India serving leprosy patients, where he experienced and conveyed the grace of God. Through his example, the author states, “I learned grace by being graced.” Share a story of how being “graced” made a significant impact on you.

CHAPTER 4: LOVESICK FATHER

1. In Jesus’ stories of grace, we find no catch or loophole disqualifying us from God’s love. Does that make them more, or less, believable?
2. When an extravagant gift—either divine or human—seems too good to be true, do you ever feel tempted to reject it, or distrust the motivations of the giver?
3. The story of the prodigal son is one of three stories by Jesus that demonstrate a sense of loss, followed by rediscovery and jubilation (the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son). Do you find it hard to accept that God might actually be rejoicing over *you*? Can you imagine being claimed as God’s “most valuable possession”?
4. Jesus’ stories contradict the notion that we must “be good” to get to heaven. In them we are taught that all we must do is cry, “Help!” Which is more difficult for you, to strive to be good enough for approval, or to acknowledge your need for help? Why?

CHAPTER 5: THE NEW MATH OF GRACE

1. God is described as deliberately surrendering “to the wild, irresistible power of love.” How does this fit with your image of God?

2. “You are the one Jesus loves.” How well do you embrace this as your primary identity in life? Reflect on how you view yourself, and imagine how differently this perspective would make you feel. (Try to say it out loud: “I am the one Jesus loves.”) Who do you know who needs to hear this today?
3. “Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more. . . . And grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.” Respond honestly to this definition. Does it ring true? Do you hear yourself being skeptical? Do you think there might be exceptions?
4. The story of the basketball player describes a world that runs by ungrace. What other examples can you give that might illustrate this concept?

CHAPTER 6: UNBROKEN CHAIN: A STORY

1. The story of Daisy, Margaret, and Michael reveals a cycle of unforgiveness. In your opinion, what was the main reason this behavior perpetuated over generations? How could Margaret or Michael break the chain? Do you have (or know of) a similar family situation that needs to be resolved?
2. “Grace is unfair, which is one of the hardest things about it.” How reasonable is it to expect someone to forgive terrible things just because of an apology? Do we need to make sure they are genuinely sorry in order to forgive them?
3. The pattern of unforgiveness in a family is also true of tribes, races, and nations. Can you describe a situation of unforgiveness that has transcended generations? Is there any hope of reconciliation? What would be the first step?
4. Can you describe a time when forgiveness seemed impossible for you? How did you handle that situation?

CHAPTER 7: AN UNNATURAL ACT

1. “God has granted us a terrible agency: by denying forgiveness to others, we are in effect determining them unworthy of God’s forgiveness, and thus so are we. In some mysterious way, divine forgiveness depends on us.” How does this concept sit with you? (Is it hard to accept? Do you find yourself resisting it?) What does it say about God that we would have such power? What does it say about us?
2. The danger of unforgiveness is that it weakens, and perhaps destroys, our relationships. Have you been wronged by someone you care about? Talk about how to reconcile your need for getting “justice”—or at least expressing your hurt feelings—with a desire to protect the relationship at all costs.
3. “By forgiving another, I am trusting that God is a better justice-maker than I am.” This sounds honorable, but does it satisfy your need for justice?
4. Have you had the experience of attempting to balance justice and mercy? How did it work out? What, if anything, could have been improved?

CHAPTER 8: WHY FORGIVE?

1. Consider this statement made by the immigrant rabbi: “Before coming to America, I had to forgive Adolf Hitler . . . I did not want to bring Hitler inside me to my new country.” What are you bringing into your tomorrows that would be better left behind?
2. You read that the only thing harder than forgiveness is the alternative. How does harboring feelings of unforgiveness cause harm? Can you think of an example?
3. Describe the difference between the power of justice and the power of grace. Why is it important to understand this distinction?

4. Discuss one of the three pragmatic reasons to offer forgiveness. Do any seem strong enough to overcome the desire to “get even”?
5. How does gracious forgiveness work when the offender has never repented? Have you ever experienced this type of forgiveness, either by receiving or giving?

CHAPTER 9: GETTING EVEN

1. Does the severity of the wrongdoing determine our ability (or need) to forgive? Is there a greater risk of the offense being repeated, if forgiven?
2. Which carries a higher cost, forgiveness or unforgiveness? Think of some examples from history or current events to support your perspective.
3. Imagine yourself in Simon Wiesenthal’s place, as described in *The Sunflower*. Would you be able to offer forgiveness? Should anyone forgive crimes of which they are not the victims? Explain why or why not.
4. Without forgiveness, we cannot free ourselves from the grip of the past. Can you reflect on a time in your life that you were in danger of being held in the grip of unforgiveness? What can you notice about the freeing power of grace?

CHAPTER 10: THE ARSENAL OF GRACE

1. Consider this statement by Abraham Lincoln, after the Civil War: “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?” How is this example evident in the world today? How might it apply to you or to your community?
2. How does the sin of human slavery and racism affect our society

today? What role could Christians play in showing a hurting society a better way? Are we presently living up to that role?

3. When the Black majority gained political power in South Africa, they began formally considering issues of forgiveness. How do you feel about the policy that victims were required to forgive for themselves, with no one allowed to act on their behalf? And what about the requirement that those who committed the atrocities must agree to ask for forgiveness before it can be granted?
4. “Because it goes against human nature, forgiveness must be taught and practiced, as one would practice any difficult craft.” Think of a prominent public example of forgiveness from recent years. What lessons can we learn from it?

CHAPTER 11: A HOME FOR BASTARDS: A STORY

1. Will Campbell gave this synopsis of the gospel: “We’re all bastards but God loves us anyway.” How did you initially react to his choice of words? Explain why this is, or isn’t, an accurate representation of Jesus’ message. Are you able to apply this concept to yourself as well as to others?
2. How would you explain the Christian message in ten words or less? What is the role of grace in your explanation?
3. Consider Will Campbell’s expanded insight into grace: “The free offer of grace extends not only to the undeserving but also to those who in fact deserve the *opposite*.” Which is more difficult: to see your foe as someone who deserves the opposite and yet receives grace, or to view yourself that way?
4. How might you offer the promise of grace to someone who has given up hope?
5. Consider the hazard of developing a morally superior attitude. How can this be avoided?

CHAPTER 12: NO ODDBALLS ALLOWED

1. Share any teaching or opinions you've heard about why God forbade the consumption of certain foods in the Old Testament. What do you think is the reason behind these laws?
2. In which ways are people judged or "ranked" in our society?
3. Reflect on ways in which Jesus' revolution of grace affects your access to God. Likewise, consider how Jesus' revolution impacts how we are to view "different" people. Give examples of each.
4. Dorothy Day is quoted as saying, "I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least." What does this mean to you? Who might you have identified as "the least," and how might this quote motivate you to change your heart?

CHAPTER 13: GRACE-HEALED EYES

1. Can you identify a friend or a family member with whom you have serious differences? What are some lessons you've learned? Have you made any mistakes in the situation?
2. How willing are you to apply grace to a person with whom you disagree?
3. Mel White is quoted as saying, "I don't know how Philip feels about every aspect of the issue of homosexuality, and to tell you the truth I'm afraid to ask. But I do know how he feels about me—he loves me." Share a story about someone who knows that you love them, despite having significant differences. What about someone who loves you that way?
4. Try to put yourself in a situation, or call one to mind, where the other person is extending more grace toward you than you are toward them. How does that feel?
5. Helmut Thielicke wrote that Jesus was able to detect the "divine original" in every person. How would your response to someone

differ if you could always see the “divine original” in them? What would it mean if others could see the “divine original” in you?

CHAPTER 14: LOOPHOLES

1. Reflect on how the awareness of God’s forgiveness can lead to the potential for “grace abuse.” Why do you think God would take such a great risk by announcing forgiveness in advance?
2. C. S. Lewis explains the difference between condoning and forgiving. Define what each means. How can misunderstanding this distinction lead to “grace abuse”?
3. You read about people who push the outer edges of the envelope of grace, seeking to find out what they can get away with. What do you think they are missing in their understanding of grace?
4. In your own words, what is the best motivation for living an upright and godly life?
5. How can grasping the wonder of God’s love keep us from entertaining the devious question of “What can I get away with?” Can you think of a practice that might help keep your focus on God’s love rather than exploiting grace?

CHAPTER 15: GRACE AVOIDANCE

1. What is your understanding of legalism? Have you struggled to recognize or overcome the tendency? What does it mean to say, “You can know the law by heart without knowing the heart of it”?
2. Tolstoy gave us the analogy of the man and the lantern (attached to a post or carried). How does this image apply to the pitfall of legalism?
3. What helps move you out of a legalistic mindset?
4. How would you encourage people who believe that they missed God because they broke the rules?

5. Explain how legalism can lead to hypocrisy. What is the danger, and how can it be avoided?

CHAPTER 16: BIG HAROLD: A STORY

1. The story of Big Harold introduces a challenging situation. What surprised you as you read it? How would you have handled the various personas of Harold as they were revealed?
2. Tell of a relationship you've had with someone you love whose core beliefs don't align with yours or with Christianity. How have you managed to maintain the friendship? Or how did it dissolve?
3. Big Harold seemed to react to moral failure with a desire to work even harder at enforcing morality and judging others. What would have been a healthier (more grace-filled) response? How would you approach a friend who might respond as Big Harold did?
4. Try to come up with a current situation in which you might be tempted to "enforce morality" over an important issue, rather than dispensing grace. How might you handle that dilemma?

CHAPTER 17: MIXED AROMA

1. As you read about the meeting with President Clinton, how did you respond to the interactions described? Put yourself at that breakfast table. What would you want to say to the president in your allotted five minutes?
2. We sometimes face the challenge of conveying grace and love to people who have very different moral values. What makes this so difficult? And when have you observed someone who handles this challenge well?
3. React to this statement: "The only way to have a genuine spiritual

revival is to have legislative reform.” What can go wrong with this approach? How would you complete that sentence: “The only way to have a genuine spiritual revival is . . .”?

4. What does it look like to be Christ’s church in an increasingly hostile world? Where have you seen successful efforts to spread the aroma of grace in your community or elsewhere?
5. “Politics, which always runs by the rules of ungrace, allures us to trade away grace for power, a temptation the church has often been unable to resist.” Do you agree with this comment? How can the church avoid the temptation of political power while still being actively involved in the public square?

CHAPTER 18: SERPENT WISDOM

1. We have been presented with this question: “Who is my enemy? The abortionist? The Hollywood producer polluting our culture? The politician threatening my moral principles? The drug lord ruling my community?” When you are motivated to political activism, is it more important to choose the right cause or to represent your faith well? Where do you believe the attention of Christians should focus?
2. You read that dispensing God’s grace is the Christian’s main contribution to society. Describe how that might look, while following Jesus’ precept of being wise as serpents and harmless as doves, rather than the other way around.
3. When speaking to an adversary, or someone with whom we strongly disagree, experts suggest we employ deep listening rather than persuasive techniques. Think of how a conversation might be more productive if your goal was to understand the other person, rather than to convince him or her of your beliefs. Give some examples of what such a conversation might sound like.

CHAPTER 19: PATCHES OF GREEN

1. Review the discovery after the Mount Saint Helens volcanic eruption. How is this a suitable image for the spread of Christian influence? Can you propose another appropriate analogy?
2. You learned of a TV celebrity who was gradually becoming interested in part of the gospel message. What experiences have you had with friends or relatives who are curious about your faith?
3. Jesus and his followers were recognized as subversives. The most subversive act the church can take is consistently to obey the command to love one another. Have you seen evidence of that obedience recently?
4. The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau said the church set up a loyalty dilemma, attempting to be good citizens of this world while primarily concerned about the next world. Give some examples of how this dual loyalty is actually possible.

CHAPTER 20: GRAVITY AND GRACE

1. According to Karl Barth, Jesus' gift of forgiveness, of grace, was more astonishing than Jesus' miracles. Miracles broke the physical laws of the universe; forgiveness broke the moral rules. How has your perception of grace expanded over the course of this study? What do you appreciate now, that had been unfamiliar or puzzling before engaging this book?
2. Describe "spiritual gravity" as you see it in our high-achievement and ranking-conscious world. How can we escape the ungrace pressures around us?
3. Discuss the difference between the concept of gravity, as explained in this chapter, and grace. Have you felt both of those forces at various times? Give some examples of how each force might slip in and direct your mind.

4. When emulating the spirit of Jesus, we also may begin to see each other as thirsty people—thirsty for grace. What is the most difficult part of shifting your perspective on someone you once viewed as a “sinner”? How would you like to be seen on your worst days?
5. Receiving grace requires empty hands. Recite or sing the lyrics to “Amazing Grace” in your group, or to yourself. Allow yourself to feel lost, then *found*; blind, then *seeing*. Start today to sing God’s praise, and invite others to join the chorus.