

The Journey of Faith

Title: Part 6 – Amazing

Date: May 12, 2024

Transition: Paul Prays & Seats

While everyone here is the house is saying “Hi” I want to take a moment and say “Hi” to everyone joining us on our app or social channels. We consider you a part of the family so let us know how we can pray for you or serve you in any way. AND if this message blesses you consider sharing it with a friend or family member.

Well, happy Mother’s Day again to all the ladies of the house. No matter what you take away from today I hope you take away that what you do matters! Your faith matters! Your prayers matter! The love you show us matters! We would not have a complete understanding of what God is like without understanding a Mother’s love.

Speaking of an understanding of God, we are in the sixth message of an eight-part collection of messages called “The Journey of Faith.” Which means there are only two more to go. For some of you that’s sad because you have really enjoyed this journey, you have been learning and wrestling and it’s been awesome. For others of you, knowing we only have two more weeks, that’s like light at the end of the tunnel.

In case you are just jumping in today, the question that has been driving this whole journey is:

What if we didn't know anything, where would we begin?

What if we'd never heard any of those old stories, what if we'd never read the Bible, where would we begin? Where would we begin our adult faith journey because every journey begins somewhere?

AND for many of us, that journey began in childhood like it did for me. Your parents, a pastor, a priest came along and said, “Here... believe this.” And so, you did. You believed in Jesus, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, Santa Claus and whatever else they told you because they were your parents, right? And there is nothing wrong with passing your faith onto your kids, it’s a good thing and a Godly thing.

BUT what happens when no one comes along and helps you begin your faith again as an adult is you get older and there’s this growing gap between what you were told as a child about faith and what you experience in the real world. So, some of us put on our Ray Ban’s and didn’t look too hard at real life, every once in a while something would happen that would kind of rock our faith a little bit, but we wouldn’t stare at it for too long. We put in our air pods, tune to the Joy FM, and tune out real life.

Others of you were too honest for that. As there was a gap between what you were told as a child and what you experienced as an adult, you brought it front and center and went, “Well, that just kinda of messes up everything I was taught!” And so, you intentionally walked away.

But, probably for most of us, you just got busy! Your view of God didn’t quite line up with the real world but who has time to study philosophy and theology with three kids running around under the age of 10? You just went on and hoped it worked out somehow, some way, show up for Easter and Christmas just in case, say a prayer every now and then, but you just got busy living life.

We’ve all responded a little bit differently, but the truth is, for many people in our culture today, they have not gone back and had an adult beginning point for their faith. We have this weird mix of Sunday School stories and Joe Rogan and something we heard in college. You kind of hope there’s a God out there somewhere, but you’re not sure it’s the Sunday School God you grew up with. Maybe it’s the Bible God, maybe it’s just the New Testament part. You’re not sure how to figure all that out. So, we’ve asked the question, “What would it look like to explore the question of faith as an adult?” That’s what this whole journey has been about.

Like I said, we are nearing the end of our trip in the next couple weeks, so if you missed any of this, you can go to our app or website and watch the previous messages. Every week has built, so I challenge you to get caught up. You can also point your friends and family to our website so they can watch this too.

TODAY, as we keep building on what adult faith looks like, I want to talk about something that we all have in common. Everyone at some point in their life has bargained with God, right? We all have this tendency to bargain and negotiate with God. We've all said things like this:

God, if you will... I promise I'll always...

Maybe you were driving home, you were a junior in high school, you had something in your car you are not supposed to have in your car because you and your buddies were out doing something you were not supposed to do, and the blue lights flash on behind you! And all of a sudden it's like, "Hey God, don't know if you remember me, I know it's been a while, but if you will not let this cop find what's under the seat, then I promise I will go to church for a year, I'll promise I will give money to feed the hungry, just please don't let the cop find what's under the seat!" Remember that?

Or, what about this, you go: *{ADD TO PREVIOUS ON SAME SLIDE}*

God, if you will... I'll never...

Right? If you will, I will never, ever, ever, ever do this again!

We've all done that! We've all bargained with God. In every religion, people negotiate with God. In fact, people who don't even believe in God negotiate with God. It's like, "To whom it may concern, I have reached my end, show me a sign before I drive off this cliff." Everybody, at some point in life, whether it's a serious thing, somebody's sick and the doctors say there is nothing they can do, or a silly thing from your party days, we've all kind of done this.

So, let's do some confession. I hear it's good for the soul. If you have ever negotiated with God, I want you to raise your hand and keep it up. Look at all of us... Now here's the other thing I know about you:

You didn't keep your end of that deal, did you?

We don't. Because when you negotiate and it works out in your favor, what do you do? You say, "Whew! That was a close one, got lucky that time." And then you told your friends, "The baggy was still like sticking out and the cop didn't even see it..." Come on, you're not going to church, you're not donating money to the poor, right? "I got there, and my boss hadn't even arrived yet, I had 10-minutes to spare." Or "The client was sick; I had an extra day to prepare." Or "The birth control came through for me after all." Nervous laughter. Whatever your deal was with God, when it works out in our favor, we don't follow through. We're not better people. It's just sort of a desperate attempt to avoid getting in trouble.

Now, here's the thing about bargaining with God, regardless of your religious beliefs, there are two main assumptions. If you've ever tried to do a deal with God:

Assumption #1 - God knows you exist.

If you have ever negotiated with God, you have way more faith than you think you do. If you've ever tried to negotiate with God, you believe that God knows you exist. You think God knows your name. You think God knows your circumstances, *AND* you think God gives a rip! That is a lot of faith! You think the God of the

universe actually heard you going, "Now, God I know I haven't talked to you in a long time, and I don't know if you really care about my grades, or my job, or whatever, we've got enough kids..." You think God heard that, and that He cares! You have extraordinary faith. If you have ever negotiated with God, that's the first big assumption you have made.

AND here's the other assumption, if you've ever tried to negotiate with God, you believe:

Assumption #2 - You have something God wants.

I mean if you negotiate with somebody, its like, "I know what I want from you, let me see what I got that you want... How about some obedience? Ooooh... If you will, then I have a little obedience. Or some church attendance. Or I bet you want some of my money. In fact, I've heard that's all you care about." The assumption is, if you've ever done a deal with God, is that you have something that God wants!

But here's the thing. As you consider Christianity, here's what separates Christianity from any other faith system. Here's the thing that you need to sit down and come to terms with because this is what separates Christianity from everything else. AND this is really good news! This is so freeing and so refreshing and it is very different from what most of you were taught about God. In fact, this is one of things I love to talk about because it's so refreshing, and it stands in stark contrast to what you've been told about God. In fact, it stands in stark contrast to what most of you heard about God, even if you grew up going to a Christian church, Protestant or Catholic. It's simply this:

God doesn't want something *from* you.

God wants something *for* you.

That's the reason you can't negotiate! The reason there's no point in bargaining with God, is because you don't have anything God needs! You don't have anything God wants! God doesn't want something from you. God actually wants something *for* you.

And when you when you read the story of Jesus, and when you read what the people who came after Jesus said about Jesus, it becomes clear. Being a Christ Follower is not about you getting something from God because God wants something from you. He doesn't want something from you. He's pretty much got it all, He's God. What He wants is something *for* you!

There is a word that captures that whole big idea, it is this word right here, the word:

GRACE

This word is at the epicenter of the New Testament, it's at the epicenter of Christianity. It's the thing that drives everything as it relates to following Jesus and becoming a follower of Jesus. So, what is grace? Grace is simply this, write this down: *{ON SAME SLIDE UNDER ABOVE}*

Unmerited Favor.

Unmerited means that we did nothing to deserve it. It's all about the person who is dispensing the grace, not about the person who's receiving the grace. That if there's any cost, it's paid by the person that's dispensing, it's unmerited. Favor means I'm getting something. So, I am basically getting something for nothing. Grace says because of who I am, not because of who you are, but because of who I am, I'm gonna do something for you: Unmerited favor. In other words, grace is too good to be true!

Grace is when you bring home a full-size candy bar for your kids, not because they deserve it, not because they earned it, just because you wanted them to have it. Grace speaks to the character of the Giver, not the receiver. It's unmerited favor. And this is at the center of Christianity.

The most famous verse in the New Testament says it best: For God so loved the world that He... gave! The Christian faith is not based on the negotiation model; it's based on the gift model. The cross of Jesus is the overwhelming evidence that God is for us. So, there's no need to bargain. Obedience is not a bargaining chip. Obedience isn't a way to get something. It's our response to having already received something.

Grace is favor or blessing that is neither earned nor deserved. Mercy (sometimes we lump these words together, but mercy) is not getting what you **DO** deserve: punishment & payback. Grace on the other hand is getting precisely what you **DON'T** deserve: favor & blessing. Grace, this unmerited favor that we are going to look at today, is what separates Christianity from everything else AND maybe even from the way you have approached God in the past.

There's a very specific passage in the New Testament I want us to look at for a few minutes to better understand this. If you grew up in church, you've probably heard this before. If you didn't grow up in church, this is kind of a complicated passage of Scripture where the Apostle Paul describes for us the centrality of grace and the importance of grace as you consider your adult faith journey.

In about 65AD, or about 30 years after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, the Apostle Paul writes to a church in the port city of Ephesus. As some of you know, the Apostle Paul doesn't walk onto the pages of history as Paul. He was actually named Saul and we first see him trying to arrest and kill any followers of this Jesus cult. Saul has an encounter with a resurrected Jesus and his life is changed forever. Instead of killing Christians, he now becomes *the* leading Christian.

Paul would go on to start most of the first churches, including one in the ancient port city of Ephesus. And while he was awaiting trial in Rome, Paul wrote this church a letter that has been preserved in the New Testament book of Ephesians. And in this little letter, he gives us extraordinary insight into what it means to understand or to embrace the grace of God, if anyone knew about unmerited favor, it was Paul. This is what he writes, he says: (Eph 2)

1 As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...

And by dead, he meant you were separated from God. He was using an analogy, he's saying, in terms of your relationship with God, you didn't have one. It's like you were dead to God, and God was dead to you.

And then he goes on in the next few verses and describes the details of how we were far from God, and we did things we knew we shouldn't do, and we violated our own conscience. We didn't even keep our own standards. We aren't just mistakers we are actual sinners, remember that, we talked about that in week 2. BUT a few verses later, he hits a transition point. He says, "You were dead in your trespasses and sin. You were far from God." And then he says this:

4 But God,

BUT God... You had a problem, but God.

Now the reason this is important is because the way many of us approach God is this, "God, I've done some bad things, but I am going to do better. God, I haven't talked to you in a while, but I am going to start praying more. God, I've really screwed this one up but I, but I, but I, but I..." And the apostle Paul says, NO it's a new day. There's a new approach. God has done something new. When you realize that you have blown it,

when you realize you are a sinner far from God, when you realize I need to start over, it's not a "but I", it's a "but God."

Because here's what we say, we say:

"God, I know I shouldn't have... but I promise..."

God, I know I shouldn't have done this, gone there, again... but I promise, but I, but I... The apostle Paul says, "No. It's but God... but God!" and here's what he says: *{KEEP BUILDING VERSE THROUGH VERSE 5}*

⁴ But God, being rich in mercy,

For Paul to write this is amazing because he understood the mercy of God. God had every reason in the world to squash the apostle Paul like a bug. But God took the Christian killer and made him the guy that started more churches than anyone. That's rich in mercy. But God, being rich in mercy:

because of His great love with which He loved us,

The reason this is an important phrase is this answers the question, "God, why do you care? God, why would you listen to my prayers? God, why would you give me a second chance? God, why would you even pay any attention to me?" To which God says, "It has nothing to do with you." The answer is because of His great love with which He loved us.

If you are considering hitting the reset button on faith, if you are considering an adult faith journey, **THIS** is at the center, this is central. "*Because of His great love with which He loved us.*" That's why you don't have to negotiate, that's why you don't have to bargain with God. Because He doesn't want something from you. He wants something FOR you. So here, put it all together:

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us," then he goes on, he says this:

⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by GRACE you have been saved.

That's a really long run on sentence Paul, what did you say? Paul is saying when you were separated from God, **BUT GOD**, not but you, when you were separated from God, God who is rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved you made you alive... Or in other words, "It is by grace that you have been saved." Or to say it another way:

God chose to un-separate you because He wanted to.

That's grace! That's unmerited favor. And in case we missed it the first time, Paul comes back a few verses later and repeats himself: *{NEW SLIDE}*

⁸ For it is by GRACE you have been saved, [And then he adds something he left out at first. He says] **through FAITH**

And now he takes us all the way back around to what we discovered when we talked about Abraham and God giving him a right standing. All the way back around to what we discovered when we talked about the nation of Israel leaving Egypt with Moses. Remember? The beginning of a relationship with God is

trust. So, Paul takes us all the way back around to say, "Now, the way that you experience this, the way gain this grace, is by a single act of faith in what Jesus has done for you on the cross." *For it is by GRACE you have been saved, through FAITH...* and then he says this: *{BUILD ONTO PREVIOUS, VERSE 8}*

-and this is not from yourselves, it is the GIFT of God [It's not a trade. It's not a bargain. It's not a negotiation... "I will, if you will." He says it is the gift of God. And then just in case we still don't get it] **- 9 not by works, so that no one can boast.**

This was a gift you didn't deserve and you didn't earn. It's not about what you can do for God, it's about what God has done for you.

It's all about God! God didn't leverage your character, God didn't leverage your good works, and God didn't leverage your goodness, He leveraged His own to do something for you that you don't deserve! You don't need to negotiate, and you don't need to bargain! You just put your faith in Him! Come on make some noise if you are glad this is not from yourself! That this is a gift from God, not by works!

NOW this brings us to a question you have to answer in your faith journey at some point. For those of you who are exploring faith *AND* for those of you who've been believers a long time, this is a really, really big deal. Because of what we've heard, because of what we've been taught, and because we live in a world that's, "If you will, I will." As you explore faith and even as you think about your own Christian walk, here's the question:

What standard will you use to determine where you stand with God?

- Your behavior?** -OR-
- God's grace?**

Those are basically your only two options. And most of us were raised to believe that it had at least something to do with what we did in terms of where we stood with God. At least part of it was based on our behavior. So, let's talk about that for a minute, because there's some problems with that.

In our culture, we have just enough Christianization left in our thinking to have a rough idea of what God might accept, and what God might not accept. What God might approve of and what God might not approve of. Our sense of right and wrong and our sense of justice has been shaped by Bible ideas and Christian ideas, whether you're Christian or not, or whether you've read the Bible or not.

So, if I were to say to you, "Tell me some of the behaviors that you think are acceptable or not acceptable to determine where you stand with God" you would give me behaviors that are biblical(ish) even if you didn't exactly know where they came from.

BUT here's the problem, and I don't want to press on you too hard because we're friends and I want you to come back. But don't reach for the Bible to validate your behaviors that put you in good standing with God, because you're in trouble at that point. For instance, the 10 Commandments, we've talked about that. The Ten Commandments weren't given to get people in good with God. The Ten Commandments were given to people who were already redeemed by and loved by God. So don't reach for the Ten Commandments.

And certainly, don't reach for the teachings of Jesus to validate your standing with God. Jesus' standards are so high you fail every single time. I mean Jesus intentionally raised the bar so high, everybody gets an F.

AND don't point to the New Testament because most of it was written by the guy who just told us it's by grace and not by works.

So, our whole idea that somehow we can kind of guess at what God is looking for, yes it is a biblically informed moral system. It's a biblically informed value system, but it's just not a biblically accurate system! If you think that somehow you know what it takes to get in good with God, based on your behavior, your belief system is Biblically informed, but it is not Biblically accurate. Maybe it's based on the teachings you've heard from Jesus, but it's not from the ministry of Jesus. Its verbs and adjectives that come from the New Testament, but they've been taken out of context from the New Testament.

Because, when you open the Scriptures, we discover nobody is good enough, nobody is even close to being good enough. If it's all about behavior, we're all doomed!

The other option then is grace. BUT here's what most of us try to do. Most of us say, "Well I think it's a blend. I gotta do my part, I gotta be faithful, pay my taxes, vote, don't hurt the environment (which by the way every time you breath out CO2 you are hurting the environment, so stop breathing) be kind to people, don't murder anybody. And then from there God fills in the gaps." Well, here's my question. Where'd you get that idea? You probably got it from the church unfortunately.

But the guy who wrote most of the New Testament said this, just a quick review. Say it with me:

...it is the [What? The what? One more time, the...] **GIFT of God—not by WORKS**

Not by what? Not by what? That's what the Apostle Paul believed. That's what he believed Peter and John who followed Jesus believed. And he believed that's what Jesus came to demonstrate and die for.

BUT those are our two options. Our behavior or God's grace. Are you going to live your life trying to earn a right standing with God based on behavior, that you made up, that's sort of a fabrication from something that was in the Bible, that you can't really find. OR is God's amazing grace really enough?

Here's another way of asking the same question:

What standard will you use to determine where you stand with God?

What you DO for you? -OR-

What God has DONE for you?

See if you ever consider Christianity, or if you are beginning your faith again as an adult, and you don't remember anything else I say, I hope you'll remember this. All religion, all religion is about DO. The Christian faith is about DONE.

All religion is what can I do, "God let's negotiate?" Years ago, in ancient times, "How many sheep, how many lambs, how many bulls, how many rams do I have to kill to get You to help me win in war?" How do I bribe You, how do I get Your attention, how do I get rain on my crops, how do I have healthy children, how do I get a job? What do I have to do in order to get You interested in me? That's the world of religion.

But true Christianity, the message of Jesus, is not about what you do, it's about what God has already done! The "earning" is over. Jesus did all the earning for you! Our lives are to be expressions of gratitude. The reason the message of Jesus is good news for the entire world is because there is no more guessing, wondering, or negotiating! That's grace; unmerited favor just because God wanted to!

AND it is that very same grace that enables us to do all those to-do's you read about in Scripture. Do you know why Christians forgive? Because we've been forgiven! Do you know why we give? Because God gave! Do you know why we serve? Because we've been served! Do you know why we're kind to each other? Because God has been so kind to us! Do you know why we submit and surrender to one another and put other people first? Because at the cross God put us first!

BUT we don't do those things to earn a right standing with God. We do those things FROM a right standing with God based on His amazing grace. I don't know what you've heard, what you've seen, what kind of family you were raised in but I'm just telling you, you can open the New Testament and check this one out. All the to-dos in the Christian faith are a response to what God has already to-done. Never ever, ever do we have to negotiate with God, "I will if you will and if you will I will." NO! That's religion.

So, let's sum it up. Here's what Paul says:

• Because of his great love with which he loved you...

• It is by grace you have been saved, through faith...

• It is the gift of God...

The Old Testament pointed in this direction. Jesus died to make it a reality, and everybody after Jesus has looked back and said, "It's because of Christ's death on the cross that we know God loves us, and anything I do after that is just a response and an expression of gratitude for all He's done for me."

We don't earn it, we don't trade with it, we don't bargain with it. We just say, "In light of that kind of love what else could I do but surrender to my heavenly Father, my Savior, my God?"

And I'll just tell you, when you embrace the grace of God, wholly and completely, you'll find peace. But until you do there will never be peace. And you will always wonder because nowhere on the planet does there exist a list from God that says, "Here's how to behave your way into my good graces." The reason we sing "Amazing Grace" is because that's amazing! And the less amazing you have been, the more amazing it is.

Now, on your way home, in your car, over lunch, I want you to discuss a question. Every week we have had a homework question, so here is this week's, ready?

Most people respond to the idea of unconditional grace with, "But what about...?" What's your "But what about...?"

Because you've got one. For some of you it's a verse, for some of you it's just an idea, maybe it's something you've heard growing up. What's your, "but what about..." When you think about unconditional grace, what's your push back? I want you to verbalize that with someone. Begin that discussion. And then we're gonna pick it up there next week.

Let me pray for you.