

A book you'll actually read

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A book you'll actually read
On the Grace of God



Justin S. Holcomb

“God’s amazing grace in Christ is ‘the power of God unto salvation,’ not only for the world but for the church and for life-long believers. Read this book and you’ll be washed with ‘wave upon wave’ of the best news you’ll ever hear.”

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Jefferson Bethke, author, *Jesus > Religion*

“The message of this book should never get old. Sinners saved by such astonishing grace will marvel for a lifetime that they’ve been rescued by such a God. More than that, we will marvel for all eternity at the personal manifestation of grace in the face of Christ Jesus. Go ahead now, sit yourself down with this book, get ready for heaven, and make yourself of more earthly good by meditating on the mind-stretching grace of God in which we are chosen, called, born again, justified, adopted, sanctified, glorified, and ushered into the very relationship with the God-man for which we were made. It is all of grace.”

David Mathis, Executive Editor, desiringGod.org; elder, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis

“This book offers a clear, concise, and compelling presentation of the grace of God. Many point grace out, and some might test it with their toes, but my friend Justin Holcomb is ever swimming in it, inviting all to join him. This will be now my go-to book recommendation on the subject.”

Dustin Kensrue, Worship Director at Mars Hill Church;
Singer/Songwriter, Thrice

“Justin introduces great theologians to the reader in the same way he would introduce neighbors to one another at a backyard barbeque. Through relaxed conversation, Justin invites the authors of Scripture and great Christian thinkers to sit with the reader in the presence of the touchable and knowable God of grace. Simple but scholarly, *On the Grace of God* is that book you will want to put into the hands of everyone you know—those who do not yet trust Christ as Savior and those who do.”

Judy Dabler, Reconciliation Specialist, Live at Peace Ministries;
author, *Peacemaking Women*

“*On the Grace of God* right-side-ups the upside-down-ness of our brokenness and broken thinking about God and his love. Since the Bible will not let us have virtuous ideas detached from their embodiment in Jesus—‘God is love,’ ‘he himself is our peace,’ ‘I am the truth’—Justin Holcomb will not offer anything less than the glorious Jesus either. Brilliantly, honestly, and passionately, this book bleeds the gospel.”

Jared C. Wilson, Pastor, Middletown Church, Middletown Springs, Vermont;
author, *Gospel Deep*s

“My friend Justin Holcomb wholeheartedly believes that the gospel of grace is *way* more drastic, *way* more offensive, *way* more liberating, *way* more shocking, and *way* more counterintuitive than any of us realize. He understands at the deepest level that there is nothing more radically unbalanced and drastically unsafe than grace. It is high time, in my opinion, for the church to embrace *sola gratia* (grace alone) anew. No more ‘yes grace, but . . .’ No more fine print. No more conditions, qualifications, and footnotes. And, especially, no more silly cries for ‘balance.’ It is time to get drunk on grace. Two hundred-proof, defiant grace. Justin understands that grace is scandalous and scary, unnatural and undomesticated. But he also knows that it’s the only thing that can set us free and light the church on fire.”

Tullian Tchividjian, Pastor, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida; author, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*

“*On the Grace of God* is just what we’ve needed: a scripturally rooted and deeply compassionate survey of how God’s uncompromising love for sinners shines through the entire biblical narrative. How Justin Holcomb pulled off such a comprehensive feat in so few pages is a refreshing testament not only to his great learning and wisdom but also to his passion for reaching everyday men and women. Anyone looking to be encouraged by the unchanging and life-saving reality of God’s grace in Jesus Christ should look no further.”

David Zahl, Director and Editor, Mockingbird Ministries

“Holcomb brings great understanding of God’s grace and love—a love undeserved and unconditionally given through the only one, Christ Jesus. *On the Grace of God* is an eye-opening, biblically rooted telling of the love story between God and his people. Where love and grace are many times misunderstood or misinterpreted, Holcomb sheds light on what God’s true grace looks like.”

Jake Luhrs, lead singer, August Burns Red

“Paul’s stated mission was ‘to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.’ As twenty-first-century believers, that is our mission as well. But in order to do that, we must know God’s grace ourselves. This book is a fresh reminder of how wonderful, matchless, and amazing is the grace of Jesus, a grace that is greater than all our sin. I was blessed in reading it and am sure you will be too.”

Brian Brodersen, Associate Pastor, Calvary Chapel, Costa Mesa, California

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Chapter 5

It's Grace All the Way

From Jesus Christ “we have all received grace upon grace.”^a We are saved solely through faith in Jesus Christ because of God’s grace and Christ’s merit alone. We are neither saved by our merits nor declared righteous by our good works. We do not deserve grace, or else it wouldn’t be grace. This means that God grants salvation not because of the good things we do or even because of our faith—and despite our sin. This is the ring of liberation in the Christian proclamation. If it is not grace all the way, then we will spend our lifetime wondering if we have done enough to get that total acceptance for which we desperately long. “I said the prayer, but did I say it passionately enough?” “I repented, but was it sincere enough?” Election puts salvation in the only place that it can possibly exist: God’s hands. God’s election is the unconditional and unmerited nature of his grace.

Ephesians 2:4–5 proclaims God’s grace clearly: “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace have you been saved.” Regeneration (being made

^aJohn 1:16.

spiritually alive) takes place when we as spiritually dead people are made alive in Christ. Dead people do not cooperate with grace. Unless regeneration takes place first, there is no possibility of faith. Paul got this from Jesus, who told Nicodemus: “Unless a man is born again first, he cannot possibly see or enter the kingdom of God.”^b

The Bible teaches us that new birth (regeneration) precedes saving faith in Christ. In other words, God in his sovereign grace makes spiritually dead people alive so they can have faith in Christ and be justified. Spiritual death is human self-dependence. When we are made alive, we are able for the first time ever to place our hope in someone else.

Left to our own abilities, we don't cooperate with grace or even seek God.^c We choose ourselves over God every time. We are unable to seek God because we're spiritually dead. Just as Lazarus couldn't raise himself from the dead, we can't raise ourselves from spiritual death. We also need Jesus to say, “Lazarus, come out.”

This teaching makes God's grace even more amazing. Salvation belongs to the Lord.^d It is not something we do, enact, or achieve. Jesus loves us, and he draws us to himself for God's glory while we are spiritually dead and utterly undeserving. That is grace, indeed. That is liberation.

As humans, we inherited a nature and a will that are in bondage to sin from Adam. This is why Augustine argued, “What God's grace has not freed will not be free.”¹ Calvin said it another way: “Human will does not by liberty obtain grace, but by grace obtains liberty.”²

We are born in sin. We are naturally enemies of God and lovers of evil. We needed to be made alive (regenerated) so that we could even have faith in Christ. All of this is grace that we don't

^b See John 3:3.

^c Rom. 3:11.

^d Ps. 3:8, Jon. 2:9.

deserve. When we realize we don't earn or attain this grace, we also realize we cannot lose it. God graciously preserves us and keeps us. When we are faithless toward him, he is still faithful.^e The grace just keeps going.

But if the gospel is outside of us, if we can't even stand before God until he graciously attributes to us the righteousness of Jesus Christ and attributes to him on the cross the consequences of our sin, how can this be so liberating? Is it really good news if our freedom is won by the hand of another? The fact that we try to reserve just a little part of salvation to ourselves is evidence that we don't understand our slavery. We look for our righteousness in some action or quality of ourselves—no matter how little. When grace opens our eyes we realize our righteousness is outside of us. It is then that we realize just how glorious, unchanging, and enduring the righteousness of Jesus (now ours!) actually is.

This good news is illustrated in John Bunyan's spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*:

Every little touch would hurt my conscience. But one day, as I was passing in the field, suddenly I thought of a sentence: "Your righteousness is in heaven." With the eyes of faith, I saw Jesus sitting at God's right hand. And I suddenly realized—THERE is my righteousness. Wherever I was, or whatever I was doing, God could not say to me, "where is your righteousness?" for that was right before Him. I saw that my good frame of heart could not make my righteousness better nor a bad frame could not make my righteousness worse. My righteousness was in Jesus Christ Himself, forever!

Now my chains fell off indeed. I felt delivered from slavery to guilt and fears. I went home rejoicing for the love and graces of God. Now I could look from myself to him. . . . Christ is my

^e2 Tim. 2:13.

treasure, my righteousness. Christ was my wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and salvation.³

Ephesians 2:8–10 teaches all this clearly: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” We are saved by grace alone,⁴ through faith alone.⁵

Ephesians 2 is filled with the high-octane gospel of grace for both our justification and sanctification. It begins with how believers were dead in their sins, then moves to how God loved us and rescued us from this death by his grace, bringing salvation to all in Christ, uniting Jews and Gentiles as one people in which the Spirit of God dwells. The first half of the chapter focuses on God’s rescue operation for his people, which delivered us from our sin and God’s wrath, and ends with verse 10, which centers on how God’s deliverance means we are created anew for lives of righteousness. As one commentator notes, salvation has already been described by Paul as “a resurrection from the dead, a liberation from slavery, and a rescue from condemnation”; he moves now to the idea of a new creation.⁶

The theme of Ephesians 2:8–9 is clear: grace. This theme was already mentioned in Ephesians 2:5, but what was then more of an “undercurrent” now becomes the main point.⁷ We are saved by grace, not by anything we have done. The passage is a traditional one used to support the idea that justification before God is by grace alone, not by anything we do.⁸ And for good reason. The verses strike with great emphasis the note of salvation as a complete “gift of God.” We have done *nothing* to bring it about that could lead us to boast about it.⁹ And yet it is nearly impossible *not* to boast in the radical love of God when we grasp this reality.

We now move to Ephesians 2:10 with its focus on “good works.” It is tempting at first glance to think that verses 8 and 9 are about grace and verse 10 is about works. But this would be to miss something very important that we easily neglect: everything is grace. Or, as one scholar puts it, “it is grace all the way.”¹⁰ But what does that mean exactly?

Ephesians has focused on the work of God from the very beginning, in 1:1. Now it all “comes to a crescendo.”¹¹ Notice how God-centered Ephesians 2:10 is. In the Greek, the first word in the sentence is “his,” which is an unusual placement and puts the emphasis squarely on God. We are “*his* workmanship.” We “*are created* [by God] in Christ Jesus” for good works. These good works are those “that *God* prepared beforehand.” Clearly, works are important to Paul, but his emphasis here is on *God* bringing them about within us.

Notice that this verse does three important things.¹² First, it gives the reason *why* Paul can say in verses 8 and 9 that salvation is a complete gift of God: we are *his* workmanship, re-created in Jesus Christ.¹³ Second, it points forward to other places the new creation idea is found in Ephesians.^f Third, it completes the section of Ephesians 2:1–10 in a fitting way by using again the idea of “walking,” which contrasts with Ephesians 2:2 where Paul talks about how we used to “walk” in sin, following the “course of the world.” Now we “walk” in good works God has set before us.

Ephesians 2:10 continues that we have been created in Christ Jesus “for good works.” So we are saved *for the purpose of* walking in good works. Good works are never the ground or cause of our salvation. They can't be; they just don't work like that. They are not the cause but the “*goal* of the new creation.”¹⁴ And God has already prepared them for us ahead of time.

^fEph. 2:14–15; 4:24.

We must always hold Ephesians 2:10 together with 2:8–9. The Bible paints a holistic picture of the believer as one whose life is continually lived in grace that bears fruit, fruit that is used by God to bless others.

How do we then live? If our works are “prepared beforehand,” what do we do? Paul says we “walk in them.” We show up. We abide in the vine of Jesus.^g We walk by the Spirit.^h We do our best not to muck it up. But we will; and when we do, grace picks us up again. It’s like the old Rich Mullins lyric: “If I stand, let me stand on the promise that you will see me through, and if I can’t, let me fall on the grace that first brought me to you.” There is a damaging idea floating around that says, “God saved you, now what are you going to do for him?” This is a recipe for failure. If you come to the table believing you can do anything for God in your own strength or repay him on any level, you have already lost. You are back to confessing your self-dependent spiritual death from which Jesus saved you.

Above all else and before any discussion of what we should *do*, we must understand deeply in our bones who we *are*: the workmanship of God. You are his project. So, you are invited to be who you are. Your life is not your own; it was bought with a price. Live with the gratitude, humility, joy, and peace that come from knowing it does not all depend on you. You are loved and accepted in Christ, so you don’t have to focus on what you do or don’t do for God. Now you can focus on what Jesus has done for you, and that will cause you to love God more. Then you can’t help but walk in grace, realizing how costly God’s grace was.

Our salvation cost God the precious blood of Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes that God’s grace “is costly grace because it cost

^gJohn 15:4.

^hGal. 5:16–25.

God the life of His Son. . . . God did not reckon His Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up for us.”¹⁵ God accomplished all he intended through his Son. God gave everything in Jesus. This is why Jesus said: “The Son of Man came . . . to give his life as a ransom for many.”¹⁶ Paul uses the language of ransom: you were bought at a price.¹

Steve Brown tells a story about costly grace and freedom.¹⁶ Abraham Lincoln went to a slave auction one day and was appalled at what he saw. He was drawn to a young woman on the auction block. The bidding began, and Lincoln bid until he purchased her—no matter the cost. After he paid the auctioneer, he walked over to the woman and said “You’re free.” “Free? What is that supposed to mean?” she asked. “It means you are free,” Lincoln answered, “completely free!” “Does it mean I can do whatever I want to do?” “Yes,” he said, “free to do whatever you want to do.” “Free to say whatever I want to say?” “Yes, free to say whatever you want to say.” “Does freedom mean,” asking with hope and hesitation, “that I can go wherever I want to go?” “It means exactly that. That you can go wherever you want to go.” With tears of joy and gratitude welling up in her eyes, she said, “Then, I think I’ll go with you.”

This story illustrates what God did for us. We are bought with a price and it was costly—the life of God’s own Son. Once our new master paid the price for us, he set us free.

Charles Wesley reflects this freedom in his hymn “And Can It Be That I Should Gain?”:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night;

¹⁵Matt. 20:28.

¹⁶1 Cor. 7:23.

Thine eye diffused a quickening ray.
 I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
 My chains fell off, my heart was free,
 I rose, went forth, and followed thee.
 My chains fell off, my heart was free,
 I rose, went forth, and followed thee.

“My chains fell off, my heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed thee.” You go where you are loved. And we love God only because he first loved us. You don’t need to be exhorted and told “You’d better love God.” How could you not? You’ve been ransomed by God’s grace.

Christians live every day by the grace of God. We receive forgiveness according to the riches of divine grace, and grace drives our sanctification. Paul tells us, “The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives.”^k This doesn’t happen overnight; we “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”^l Grace transforms our desires, motivations, and behavior.

In fact, God’s grace grounds and empowers everything in the Christian life. Grace is the basis for:¹⁷

- Our Christian identity: “By the grace of God I am what I am.”^m
- Our standing before God: “. . . this grace in which we stand.”ⁿ
- Our behavior: “We behaved in the world . . . by the grace of God.”^o

^kTitus 2:11–12.

^l2 Pet. 3:18.

^m1 Cor. 15:10.

ⁿRom. 5:2.

^o2 Cor. 1:12.

- Our living: those who receive “the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ,”^p by the “grace of life.”^q
- Our holiness: God “called us to a holy calling . . . because of his own purpose and grace.”^r
- Our strength for living: “Be strengthened by the grace that is in Jesus Christ,”^s for “it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace.”^t
- Our way of speaking: “Let your speech always be gracious.”^u
- Our serving: “Serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”^v
- Our sufficiency: “My grace is sufficient for you.”^w “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.”^x
- Our response to difficulty and suffering: We get “grace to help in time of need,”^y and when “you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace . . . will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.”^z
- Our participation in God’s mission: As recipients of grace we are privileged to serve as agents of grace. Believers receive grace,^{aa} are encouraged to continue in grace,^{ab} and are called to testify to the grace of God.^{ac} In John 20:21 Jesus says, “As

^p Rom. 5:17.

^q 1 Pet. 3:7.

^r 2 Tim. 1:9.

^s 2 Tim. 2:1.

^t Heb. 13:9.

^u Col. 4:6.

^v 1 Pet. 4:10.

^w 2 Cor. 12:9.

^x 2 Cor. 9:8.

^y Heb. 4:16.

^z 1 Pet. 5:10.

^{aa} Acts 11:23.

^{ab} Acts 13:43.

^{ac} Acts 20:24.

the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” God’s mission is to the entire world.¹⁸

- Our future: God and his grace are everlasting. “Set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”^{ad}
- Our hope beyond death: “Grace [reigns] through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”^{ae}

This is liberation, indeed.

The gospel is all about God’s grace through Jesus Christ. That’s why Paul calls it “the gospel of the grace of God”^{af} and “the word of his grace.”^{ag}

The gospel of the grace of God is the message everyone needs. The word of grace is proclaimed from every page of the Bible and ultimately revealed in Jesus Christ. The last verse of the Bible summarizes the message from Genesis to Revelation: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all.”^{ah} Because of and from Jesus “we have all received grace upon grace”^{ai}—the gratuitous and undomesticated grace of God.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.^{aj}

^{ad} 1 Pet. 1:13.

^{ae} Rom. 5:21.

^{af} Acts 20:24.

^{ag} Acts 14:3; 20:32; cf. Col. 1:5–6.

^{ah} Rev. 22:21.

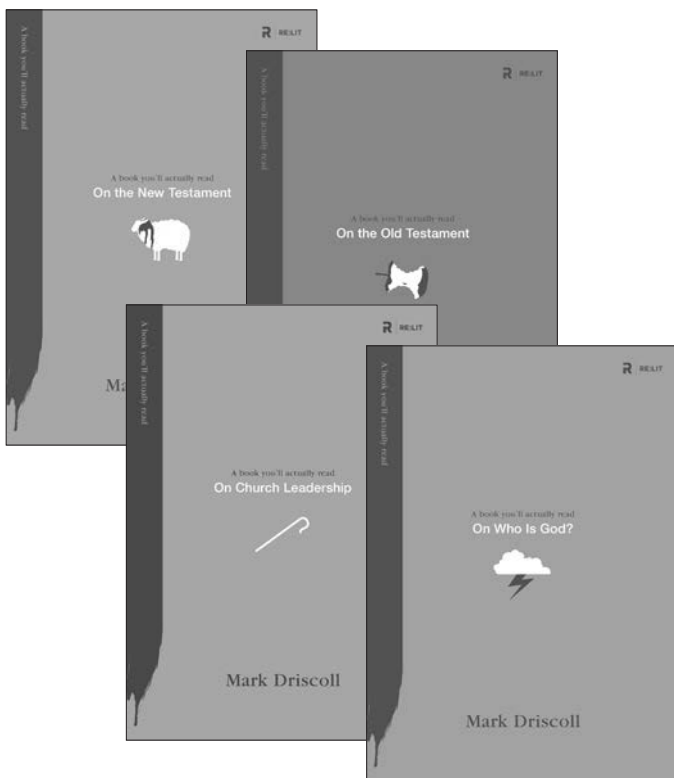
^{ai} John 1:16.

^{aj} 2 Cor. 13:14.

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Justin S. Holcomb (PhD, Emory University) is a pastor at Mars Hill Church in Seattle and the executive director of the Resurgence. He also serves as adjunct professor of theology and philosophy at Reformed Theological Seminary and is the coauthor of *Rid of My Disgrace*.

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