

How to Respond to the Story of Grace  
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We're gonna finish up a study today—in fact, we actually finished it last week—a focused study that we went through. We started in September and we worked at it all year long. And the target was that we would follow this theme through. The theme was “Know the Story, See the Grace.” And the approach was to do a survey of the entire Bible beginning at Genesis and working all the way to Revelation, to go through the entire story. We had to do it quickly; we did it in survey fashion which is a little different for us. We normally like to slow down, do more of a verse-by-verse, paragraph-by-paragraph study; but instead this year we said, 'you know what? We're just gonna run all the way through in survey fashion, and we're gonna look at the story of God's grace, start to finish, as one central story. And that's what we did. We began at Genesis, went all the way through Revelation, and we closed that study out last week with a kind of a final review. And when we were done we put the summary of the story line in front of you and said, you know, this is where we've been over the past year. We put that on a bookmark...you'll find it in the bulletin today, and there's other copies out on the information table...that kind of puts it in a form you can remember, you can go back to and review in terms of the story of God's grace beginning to end.

We put it in a fairly concise and yet comprehensive summary that begins with the beginning in Genesis of a good creation gone bad, and then ends in the book of Revelation with a new creation that will be forever good. In between we have that main story line that runs through the entire Bible, start to finish, all the twists and turns, ups and downs, the story of man's ever-increasing sin being answered by God's even greater grace; a grace that was promised to a man named Abraham who worshiped pagan idols. And yet God came to him and promised that He would bless all the peoples of the world through him; that promise of grace seeing its culmination, or seeing its high point, when that grace was released at the cross. We had the righteousness of God and the love of God coming together in one person named Jesus, a descendant of Abraham, releasing grace for all those who believe; a grace that is now being extended through the church, being salt, light, and witness to the reality of Jesus Christ everywhere, and culminating and looking to that time, that glorious time, when Jesus Christ will return, all will be raised, all will be judged, and all things will be made new. And there will be grace unending. That's the survey; that's the story we looked at. And I'm not gonna spend more time with it today.

What I wanna do now is kinda make one last thing as we finish. As we closed out the study last week, what I wanna do now is set the direction for where do you go from there. If you know that story, you've seen the grace, what do you do next? And I'm convinced that when we know this story and we've seen the grace that there should be a very definite direction set in our life. In fact, we should choose that direction, and we should set in that direction very deliberately and decisively when we've seen this story and we know it. And that's what I wanna talk about today...what is the direction you should deliberately and decisively set in your life when you know this story and you've seen the grace. That's where we're headed today.

To do it we need to start with a statement that, when I say it, you're gonna say, 'Uh, Larry, you don't need to say that; we know it.' But I'm gonna say it anyway. I wanna emphasize that this story, if we're gonna let it set our direction for us we need to recognize, we need to remember, this story is God's story. What I mean by that...it's a story about what God has said, and done, and will do. It's His story; it's about Him. You see that at the very beginning when the grace is extended to Abraham; and God comes to him and He tells him to leave his land and go to another place that God's gonna show him. And you go through that portion in Genesis 12 and you'll see it repeated like a drum beat. God says, 'I will bless you, and I will bless those who bless you. And I will give you the land. And I will do this, and I will do that.' And everything in that whole section is God saying, 'This is what I am going to do.' And the rest of the Bible records what God did. The story about Abraham is not about what Abraham did. It's about what God did through him.

You see when you come to the pinnacle of the whole story, the hinge point, the pivotal moment in all of human history when Jesus is crucified, He's put in a grave, and the stone is put over it; and then He's raised from the dead. And the disciples go out to tell people about this. And the very first time, the very first time they tell the Gospel story they're in the streets of Jerusalem, and they're telling them, the people of Jerusalem, about Jesus and what has happened. And they look at this crowd, the very people who had crucified Jesus...they look at the crowd and they say, 'You killed the Messiah. You killed the Messiah.' This is in Acts chapter 2. The very next statement from them...but God raised Him from the dead. God raised Him.' The church had such a good grip on that as they went

out to extend God's grace, and they looked to a future that everybody looked at and would say looked so uncertain...they went out and they were extending God's grace, and they did it with a phenomenal attitude best expressed by the Apostle Paul in Romans 8 when he says "For we know..." It isn't just Paul saying, 'I know this because I'm a great theologian.' He says, 'We know this! It's common knowledge! This is the way we, as Christians, think.' He says

*We know that God works all things together for good in the lives of those that love Him and know Him and are called according to His purposes.*

We know God does this. From beginning to end it's God's story.

You say, 'Larry, you don't need to repeat it. We've heard you.' No, I'm gonna push it more, and here's why. We did an interesting thing this year. I think it's one of the most significant things for the future that we've done this year. It was done in the background; it was low key, not a whole lot of fanfare; but I think in the next decade it's going to be one of the most important things we've done this past year. And that is we went back and we reviewed, and for the first time we developed a complete scope and sequence for what we do with kids from cradle to graduation...and integrated plan, and a connected plan, of how we work with kids from when they first come into that nursery until they graduate, and how do we as a church partner with their parents to make disciples of that next generation; and what are the things that are age-appropriate that they need to grasp, and that make sense when they move from this grade to that grade, and on to that grade; and we tried to put everything together in a comprehensive program. We took two professional educators and one of our staff; we put 'em together with a couple other people, and we began to work that and develop it. We went through other people, got input, and we've got it and I'm excited about it. I am excited about it! We had so many good pieces in what we were doing, and now it's all integrated and it's connected and it flows. It's not repetitive as you go between years. I'm excited!

But here's the thing that we found as we did it. Is as we looked at the scope and sequence, and we looked at other publishers and curriculum guides and stuff out there, what we discovered as we did it...and this was something that I hadn't noticed so much until our people started showing me...is that most of the published material out there, most of the Sunday School curriculum put out, most of the teaching that goes on with kids is man-centered. And by that I don't mean they leave God out. It's just when a kid comes to Sunday School and hears a Bible story, when they walk away the hero will be the man or the woman in the story. They will walk away excited about what David did when *he* faced Goliath. They'll be excited about Queen Esther when she stood for her people before the king. And they get excited about the heroes and the heroines through Scripture. But by the time they graduate what they've got is a collection of disconnected stories about good guys and bad guys. And they know the rules that the good guys follow and the bad guys don't. But they don't necessarily know the big story, and that God was at work in all of it. The challenge is to make sure that whether we're talking about David and Goliath or Esther, the queen of Persia, the hero of the story is God.

Let me show you an example. Take David and Goliath. 1 Samuel 17:45-47 is a section I'll just kind of isolate here, and I tell you, this is one of my favorite stories, and the kids love it. When they taught it downstairs this year they made these big paper cut-outs of Goliath to scale, the way he's described in Scripture. And the kids just loved it! You know, they're going in there, they're throwing things at Goliath. It was just great. Ok? In the middle of that story there's...finally comes to the showdown, and you've got Goliath and you've got David. And they're facin' each other. And I tell you, these Old Testament stories, they really knew how to trash-talk back and forth. It was kinda...I mean, they're goin' at it. And you got Goliath lookin', and he's challenging David. And David comes back at Goliath in this passage, in verse 45, and he says 'Listen, I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts.' I mean, Goliath is makin' fun of this guy; Goliath has got his sword, his shield, his helmet and everything else, and there's this guy comin' at him with stones and a sling. And he's makin' fun of him, and David says, 'Listen, I'm comin' to you in the name of the Lord.' And he says 'This day the Lord's gonna deliver you into my hands. That's what God's gonna do.' And then he goes on and he says, 'This is what I'm gonna do to you when God's done that.' And he is, it's pretty gruesome what he's gonna do to Goliath when he's done. And then he makes this statement. He says, 'I'm gonna do this that all the assembly may know that the Lord does not deliver by sword or by spear; but you know that the swords and spears don't make a difference here, because,' and this is the important line,

*"For the battle is the LORD'S and He will give you into our hands."*

That's the point of the story of David and Goliath. The story is not about...it is not about if you have faith you can slay giants. That is not the point of the story. And the application is not 'go out there and be a David.' The point of the story is the battle is always God's. And that became a lesson embedded deep in Israel's ethos, so that generations later, when they faced other battles, other nations, other times of conflict, this is a line that would come

back to remembrance. The battle is the LORD'S. They did not look around at each other and say, 'Where's David?' They said, 'It's the LORD'S battle. He's the hero we need.' I tell you, it's a different way to read the Scriptures. And you have to be intentional about it. That's why we took our application groups...some of you were in our home groups, our small groups this year, and we were very deliberate about it. A different type of Bible study. We took six different stories from the Scriptures, narratives, stories like David and Goliath, and others like those, and we had each group read through those six stories, one each week. And the target, the way we taught 'em to work with those stories, is we gave 'em a grid. We gave 'em ten different attributes of God, characteristics of God. And we said when you read this story what we want you to do is see if you can identify God's attributes at work in that story. Don't tell us how brave David is. Don't tell us how strong a faith he had. Don't tell us how fearless he was. In that story tell us what God's like. It was one of the most refreshing times of small group Bible studies I've ever been through. I'd walk away from those small groups and I wouldn't walk away sayin' 'Oh man, I gotta be brave like David, I gotta be brave like David. I gotta face the giant.' I'd walk away from those Bible studies with my spirit lifted with the reality of how great our God is.

That's the mindset Paul has in the passage of scripture I want us to read. I'll ask you to turn with me to Romans 11, Romans chapter 11. I told you we were gonna get to a place of response that needs to be deliberate, needs to be decisive, and needs to be directional. And in Romans we're gonna find that place, that verse. But we're gonna lead into it by looking at the last part of Romans 11. What happens in this section beginning at verse 33, and I'm gonna encourage you to open your Bibles and put a marker here because this is a verse that we're eventually gonna get to that it's one of those directional verses that are foundational and fundamental. The Apostle Paul here in verse 33 has got to the point where he's covered the story we covered this past nine months. He's done it in a more theological and analytical way. We told it more in stories; he tells it in more theological progression. But he's basically told the same story we've been telling. And as he comes to the end of that, halfway through the end of chapter 11...he's done, he's been goin' for eleven chapters now...the story is done and he makes this statement. As he looks back over everything he's taught in this whole amazing story of God's grace from beginning to end Paul goes

*Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? OR WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.*

Paul finishes telling the story and all he can say is "To God be the glory." To God be the glory. It's His story.

Now, we go one verse more and we'll have a directional response. We have it laid out for us—how do you respond when you see the story and you know it's God's story? And this is one of those places where chapter divisions are a little bit unfortunate, 'cause it breaks up a thought flow. But chapter 12 verse 1 is the logical connective. It flows right out. It begins with the word 'therefore'. And it's saying as a consequence of this, because this grand story is God's story, it's His doing, it's unfathomable to us but it's His amazing, glorious, wondrous story. And Paul says, as a logical consequence of that,

*Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.*

He'll go on and expand on that, calling them to think differently. Don't be shaped and conformed by this world, but think differently. And then he has this last part at verse 2,

*...so that you may prove...*

...you may get out there and experience and know what the will of God is...

*...that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

So you can get out there, you can be part of this plan, and you can taste it and you can know how great it is. "Therefore I urge you," Paul says, since it's His story, that you present yourselves to Him, that your reasonable, your spiritual worship... I mean, don't think that Sunday morning is a reasonable response of worship. It's good, but it's not reasonable considering everything God's given us. A reasonable response is your entire life, given that it's God's story.

A couple notes as we look at it. Number one, it's written to Christians. And that's most specifically who I'm talking to right now, and speaking to. He's talking to those who believe the story. If you asked him 'This is what happened? And is that what's gonna happen?' he would respond 'Yes.' He's not talking about people who are still trying to figure the story out, still not sure of it, still have questions about it, but that person who basically says, 'Yeah, that's the story. I believe it.' He's talking to Christians, and he's saying 'Give yourself to it.'

Some of that step we talked about last week. We can put it in a little bit different words, but whenever I go through this story I'm reminded of how, as Christians, so often we end up in one of two camps. Number one...it's those who say, 'You know what? I want God to be part of my story.' Sometimes that's in desperation, sometimes it's a sense of duty ('Yeah, I should have God involved in my life'), sometimes it's a desire ('Yeah, I'd really like to have God helping me out.') We want God in our story. We believe Jesus died for us, He's comin' back for us, all that stuff. And boy, we want that God in our story. And then there's that Christian that simply says, 'I just wanna be in His story and find my place in it.' Well, that's the distinction Paul's talking about here to these Christians. It's moving from saying 'I want God in my story' to saying, 'No, God, I just wanna find my place in Yours, and give You everything about me.'

That is, as we look at the text, something deliberate, something that's decisive. That's the sense of this statement here. You present your bodies. You say, 'God, here I am.' This is not something you simply drift into. The sense of the text, the sense of the verb here that's used in the Greek is a sense that it's decisive, it's deliberate. And it's also directional. In other words, it looks very deliberately and decisively at giving yourself to God. It's not deliberately and decisively asking God to be with you. It's deliberately and decisively saying, 'God, I'm with You. I wanna be part of Your story.' You don't drift into this. It's something you do deliberately, you do decisively.

Question would be, 'Ok, if I wanna do that, Larry, where do I start? Where do I start?' My response here, and I've thought about it a lot this week...my response here is you start in the way you talk to God. You start in the way you pray. Jesus taught His disciples how to pray. He did it on a couple of occasions. One time He taught it, His very first sermon ever, He taught 'em how to pray. Other time, later in His ministry, they came to Him and said, "*Teach us how to pray.*" Typical disciples, ok. We're always kinda remembering, need to go back and learn again. Both times He taught 'em the basic, same thing. It's a pattern. He says you don't need a whole lotta words, don't do this for show. He says, 'Just pray like this.' And as I start to say it you'll recognize it. It'll come right to your mind.

*"Our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name."*

By the way, that is not a statement. That is a request. It is not saying, 'God, Your name is hallowed.' It is saying, 'God, hallow Your name. Set it apart. Make it holy in people's minds and in their hearts and in their lives. Set Your name apart, God.'

*"Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debtors as we forgive those who've wronged us  
(or are indebted to us).  
And deliver us from evil.*

We all know that prayer. Do you see the pattern of it? Do you see the pattern of it? It starts with 'Father, Your name, Your kingdom, Your will. Take care of my needs today. Touch me with Your grace. And protect us from the evil one.' First concern—His name, His kingdom, His purpose. It's a very different way of praying than 'Father, give me this job!' 'Father, heal me of this!' 'Father, make my kids turn out good.' 'Father, straighten out our country.' It's 'Father, Your name, Your kingdom, Your will. Take care of us as You take care of those.' That is a very different way of praying. It is saying, 'God, I wanna be part of Your story. I wanna be part of Your story.'

I said the direction we set needs to be deliberate and decisive. It doesn't need to be dramatic. I worked at this throughout the week, and my thought was, 'Ok, I'm finishing nine months of preaching through a series of studies that we've all been through, and we've been all focused on, and I'm getting ready to leave for two months without any preaching after that. So you know what I wanna do? I wanna get up there today and I wanna hit a home run. I mean, I wanna get them fired up, and I wanna...man, I wanna zinger.' And the Lord just kept bringing me back to this. He just kept bringing me back to this. And I go, "Lord, they all know this prayer." Question is, are we deliberately and decisively praying that prayer? It's not dramatic. But then, we don't do the drama. It's God's story. He will do what He's gonna do, how He's gonna do it, and when He's gonna do it. We simply say, 'God, go for it.'

I'm gonna ask you to stand with me. I'm gonna lead us through that prayer as a pattern prayer, not repetitious. And I'm gonna ask you, as I pray, to follow along with me, maybe paraphrased, and make it your prayer as we get ready to close.

*Sovereign Lord, eternal and immutable, all-present, all-powerful, all-wise, righteous yet merciful, loving and true, beyond the reach of our eyes, beyond the boundaries of our imagination, You are holy, holy, holy. And yet we follow the words of Jesus, our heart to Your heart, and we call You Father. Our request, Father, as we do so is that You would work in us, You would work through us, and You would work among us individually and congregationally, to make the wonder and the glory of Your reality known in such a way that it brings reverence and rejoicing to the hearts of men. We pray, Father, that You'll work in us, and You'll work through us, and You would work among us to extend Your kingdom. And we pray, Father, that You would work in us, among us, and through us to accomplish Your purposes, Your will, Your desire. Father, we ask that as You do that You would provide us this day exactly what we have need of, every good thing needed, for doing Your will. Give us our daily bread, physically, spiritually, emotionally, relationally. Touch us with a grace that is greater than our sin, and a grace that is more powerful than the evil that stands against You. Father, we pray this in the name of Jesus, who came, who died, who rose again so that we can have a part in Your story and we can enjoy Your grace forever and ever and ever. We thank You in His name, amen.*

[Congregation sings the prayer song.]

Enjoy that grace. Extend that grace. Amen.