

Introduction

There's a story about a beggar who had been panhandling by the road for most of his life. On one particular day a stranger walked by. "Spare a little change?" mumbled the beggar. "I have no money," replied the stranger, "but what's that you are you sitting on?" "Nothing," replied the beggar. "It's just an old box. I've been sitting on it for as long as I can remember." "Have you ever looked inside?" asked the stranger. "No," muttered the beggar. "What's the point? There's nothing in there." "Open the box and have a look inside," the stranger insisted. Though reluctant, the beggar managed to pry open the lid and with astonishment and joy he saw that his box was filled with gold.¹

It's an intriguing thought, isn't it? That one could be rich and mistake him or herself to be a poor beggar? I wonder if the same could be true about us.

I know that life rarely feels like we're sitting on gold. It *feels* like we're sitting on deadlines, demands, routines, disappointments, complex relationships, dirty diapers, existential angst, and a nagging sense that there just isn't "enough" to go around—enough time, enough money, enough energy, enough of a connection to God or to our church—enough *anything*. Life has a funny way of making us feel like the box is empty.

I often marvel why this should be so and I've concluded that our all-pervading sense of scarcity stems from the fact that most of us are zealously committed to a lie. Our hearts are all too eager to deny what the Bible emphatically proclaims as world-altering news: namely, that the universe and every aspect of our life *has already been reconciled to God* (see 2 Cor. 5:19). To put it a bit differently, we are home free before the game even starts. We live on earth as adopted sons and daughters of God, "possessing everything" as Paul put it. The great task of the spiritual life isn't so much to go anywhere or do anything, but rather to wake up, celebrate, and "see" ourselves and one another in a different Light.

Falling into Grace is an invitation to open the box of your life and to have a look inside. I write from a deep conviction that every aspect of this world has been reconciled with God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that, regardless of what we feel on any given day, God's grace permeates our life right down to the smallest detail. However, rather than being a mere comfort and support, I believe God's grace to be deeply threatening to the life that we have constructed. Grace is not some spiritual vitamin we take that helps us control our life, but the all-consuming experience of God's Life taking over, which *always* leaves us more relinquished to God than before. It is an experience that feels an awful lot like falling. Like Jacob, we limp away from the encounter with God not quite sure what happened or what to make of the experience.

There is nothing inside of us that instinctively wants to fall, even though Jesus routinely told us that he came, not to teach us how to succeed, but rather how to fall, lose, and die. We run from the experience of falling because we forget that resurrection always awaits us on the other side of death. We only experience healing, find our purpose, engage our suffering differently, evangelize the world more gracefully, and wake up to see ourselves as already resurrected *in* the falling.

This book is an invitation to let yourself fall. It's a reminder that, because you're already home free from the beginning, any fall can always be a fall into grace. And so don't expect to find within these pages a list of spiritual exercises that will help you grow closer to God. Growing closer to God is impossible. It's like saying that you want to grow closer to your skin. What actually "grows" is our subtle sense of union with God; in reality God has always been and will always be much closer to us than we are to ourselves. We are not solitary pilgrims looking to the heavens and calling out *to* God, but adopted sons and daughters looking out at the world, each other, and ourselves *through* God. "For '*In Him* we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:28, italics mine). We are already "in" Christ. We need not ascend but fall deeper into an awareness of that experience.

There's an old story about a disciple and his teacher. "Where shall I find God?" a disciple once asked. "Here," the teacher said. "Then why can't I see God?" "Because you do not look." "Well, what should I look for?" "Nothing, just look," responded the teacher. "But at what?" "Anything your eyes alight upon," the teacher said. "But must I look in a special sort of way?" "No," said the teacher, "The ordinary way will do." "But don't I always look in the ordinary way?" "No, you don't," the teacher replied. "Because to look, you must be *here*. But you're mostly somewhere else."²

As you begin reading this book, I wonder: where have you been looking for God? In God you live, move, and have your being—*right now*. You are not a beggar at all, but in fact wealthier than you could ever dare dream.

Open your life and have a look inside. Right now. Right *here*. You might just discover that the box is filled with gold.

CHAPTER

1

Grace

“The American Church today accepts grace in theory but denies it in practice.” —*Brennan Manning*

“Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind, but now I see.”
—*John Newton*

“For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” —*John 9:39 (ESV)*

The month after I graduated from college I went with a church group to build a house in Tijuana, Mexico. After our work was completed, we spent a day at Disneyland before flying back home. During the trip I lost my contact lenses to the dusty, Mexican desert. I could not see a thing. I had my glasses with me but was too stubborn to admit that I actually needed them to navigate the Magic Kingdom.

Around lunchtime I thought I saw a fruit stand that flaunted the most gorgeous bananas I'd ever seen. They looked freshly plucked from the Garden of Eden. With enthusiasm I approached the young lady working the stand, "One banana, please!" "That will be four dollars," she replied. A little steep, I thought, but still a small price to pay for perfection.

I handed her my money and reached for a banana only to find that the banana would not cooperate. I wanted the banana, but it was as if the banana did not want me. I tugged and tugged but could not break a banana free from the bunch.

I then noticed the woman laughing at me. "Perhaps you'd like one of these," she giggled, as she pointed to a much more inferior batch of fruit. "I don't think so," I said. "Well, I don't think the bananas you're holding will taste very good," she replied. "And why is that?" I sneered back. "Because the bananas you're holding are fake."

I obviously felt embarrassed. So I covered my tracks by doing what I suspect any aspiring minister would do. I looked exactly eight inches to her left, opened my eyelids as wide as I could, and, before dramatically storming off in anger, responded by saying, "I am *soooo* sorry ma'am. I can't help it. I'm legally blind."

Born Blind

In a spiritual sense we are all born blind. Our default state is not to see God, ourselves, and other people accurately. We're programmed to stumble through life in darkness, and the pathos of our condition is that it is painful to constantly collide with one another.

The gospels portray Jesus as a man who loved healing people's blindness. The author of John's Gospel tells one such story about blind people. It centers on a man who has been without physical sight from the day of his birth (John 9:1-41). But the irony of the story is that no one with physical sight possesses the spiritual sight they need to see

God, themselves, or other people accurately. The people in the story that can “see” are indeed blinder than the blind man himself. For instance, the disciples assume the man was born blind because his parents are sinners. They are blind to the goodness of God. Similarly, the man’s parents care more for their reputation than their own son. They are blind to what’s important in life. The Pharisees feel outraged because Jesus heals on the Sabbath. The Pharisees care more about rules than restoration. They are blind to the Christ that stands before them. Meanwhile Jesus, who sees into the soul with crystal clarity, responds by stating His divine purpose: “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind” (John 9:39, ESV).

Subverting Our Paradigm

I saw a bumper sticker recently that read: “Subvert the dominant paradigm.” It made me realize why people responded to Jesus with so much hostility. It was because Jesus intentionally subverted their view of God and how the world should work. Jesus was a wrecking ball, and his first order of business was never to confirm his listener’s view of the world, but rather to shatter it.

The word *paradigm* has Greek origins and refers to how we see, and therefore experience, the world. Our paradigms are our mental maps of the world. We don’t experience the world directly, but we have mental maps we rely on to navigate the world. We don’t just perceive, understand, and interpret life as it comes. Rather, we have a very particular frame of reference that we use to make meaning out of the people, circumstances, and events that we encounter. We all carry unconscious assumptions about God’s character, how the world works, and what abundant life is all about.

What’s challenging about the spiritual life is that we don’t *see* our paradigms, at least not naturally. We inherit them. Life, religion, the government, our family, the culture, our church, the media, and our

peers just dole them out. For example, I was raised in the western United States. My paradigm for living well is certainly more individualistic than had I been reared in a traditional Asian culture. I am also a Protestant. I carry ingrained views about what sort of behavior is acceptable that a person practicing Wicca, for example, might not have. But I am also a particular kind of Protestant. I grew up in a very traditional, liturgical church setting with pews, an organ, and prayer books. I see God differently than someone that grew up in a contemporary, Pentecostal setting.

We all have a unique mental map, and this map is never the same as the real world. A mental map is what we use to *navigate* the real world. It is the lens through which we view God, ourselves, and other people. In the spiritual life, it is this lens, this mental map, which so heavily impacts our experience of God, ourselves, and other people. A distorted lens always leads to a distorted life, and to navigate with a bad map is to live our lives perpetually lost.

Sociologist Christian Smith studied the religious beliefs of young adults in America. He coined the term “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” to describe the lens through which many of them viewed God.¹ Smith claims that most young adults in America believe in God and even self-identify as Christian. However, when it comes to important questions of faith, he noted that very few people have solid convictions. Smith claims Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the new religion of America’s youth. Here are a few highlights of this particular religious paradigm.

1. God’s chief concern is that people are nice and good. Good people go to heaven when they die (moralistic).
2. God wants me to feel good about myself and to find happiness on earth (therapeutic).
3. God doesn’t want to be overinvolved in my life. But it is fine to reach out to God from time to time when I am really in a jam (deism).

I offer Smith's work as just one example of a less-than-useful religious map. There are of course others—for instance, the belief that God punishes sinful parents by striking their child with blindness. But in my experience most religious paradigms, ancient and modern, have one key ingredient: *they are fueled by an intense passion to get what we perceive to be fair.*

An Unfair God

The “Laborers in the Vineyard” (Matt. 20:1–16) is perhaps Jesus's most subversive parable. This parable has a timeless ability to tick us off. It's a story about a landowner who hires some day laborers to work his farm. Some began work at nine o'clock in the morning, some at noon, and some at three in the afternoon. Finally, a few others began work at five o'clock.

When the time came for the landowner to hand out paychecks, the five o'clock workers were paid the exact same as everyone else. This outraged the early morning workers because it violated what they perceived to be fair. To which the landowner, who represents God, responded: “Take what belongs to you and go; *I choose* to give to this last the same as I give to you” (Matt. 20:14, italics mine).

People struggled with the God map Jesus gave them in his teaching and parables. Jesus spoke of a God that wasn't fair, at least not as we understand fairness. Of course, the God Jesus spoke of was good, loving, merciful, compassionate, and kind. But for Jesus, fairness wasn't His Father's strong suit.

George Bernard Shaw once said, “God created man in His image and then man returned the favor.” I believe that Shaw was right; we instinctively understand God through the lens of how we experience most people: as a *bookkeeper*. Our world keeps score, and so we reason that God must keep score, too. It may very well be that simple. We think it only fair that the first shall be first and

the last shall be last.² We imagine that God's chief concern is that I am nice and that I live a good life and, assuming I keep my end of the bargain, that God owes me happiness in return. After all, *it would only be fair*.

We like bargaining with God. It's the reason our default religious instinct is to hand God a contract with incredibly childish terms. "Lord, I'll obey. I'll go to church. I'll read my Bible. I'll be a good person. And in return, I want you to bless me. Make sure nothing bad happens to me, that the market performs well, and let me die in my sleep when I'm ninety-three years old. And in the meantime give me X, Y, and Z because I need X, Y, and Z to be happy. Amen."

What typically follows is chaos. Perhaps we keep our end of the bargain, only to discover how painful it is that God refuses to play along. "How unfair," we think. Or maybe we come to terms with the fact that we're not as virtuous as we imagined ourselves to be, and when life turns sour we conclude that God is fair to punish us. We may even believe, as James Bryan Smith points out, that God is "eager to punish us for even minor infractions."³ But in either case we are like people using a map of downtown New York to navigate the streets of Los Angeles. We can try harder, work on our behavior, or join another prayer group. But when it comes to seeing the Living God, we're still lost. Thankfully Jesus came to "seek and save the lost" and to give us a better map (Luke 19:10).

The Biblical Paradigm: One-Way Love

Eugene Peterson once said that the oldest religious mistake in the book is to assume that God has the same plans for us that we have for ourselves. I invite you to see Jesus's ministry as an attempt to remedy that mistake. God's plan for our life looks radically different than we think. The God map we've relied on may need to be torn to shreds.