

IN THE  
**GRIP OF GRACE**

# ALSO BY MAX LUCADO

## INSPIRATIONAL

3:16  
*A Gentle Thunder*  
*A Love Worth Giving*  
*And the Angels Were Silent*  
*Anxious for Nothing*  
*Because of Bethlehem*  
*Before Amen*  
*Begin Again*  
*Come Thirsty*  
*Cure for the Common Life*  
*Facing Your Giants*  
*Fearless*  
*Glory Days*  
*God Came Near*  
*Grace*  
*Great Day Every Day*  
*He Chose the Nails*  
*He Still Moves Stones*  
*How Happiness Happens*  
*In the Eye of the Storm*  
*In the Grip of Grace*  
*It's Not About Me*  
*Jesus*  
*Just Like Jesus*  
*Max on Life*  
*More to Your Story*  
*Next Door Savior*  
*No Wonder They Call*  
*Him the Savior*  
*On the Anvil*  
*Outlive Your Life*  
*Six Hours One Friday*  
*The Applause of Heaven*  
*The Great House of God*  
*Traveling Light*  
*Unshakable Hope*  
*When Christ Comes*

*When God Whispers*  
*Your Name*  
*You Are Never Alone*  
*You'll Get Through This*

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*Miracle at the Higher*  
*Grounds Café*  
*The Christmas Candle*

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*Word Bible*  
*Children's Daily*  
*Devotional Bible*  
*Grace for the Moment*  
*Daily Bible*  
*The Lucado Life*  
*Lessons Study Bible*

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*God Forgives Me,*  
*and I Forgive You*  
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*Ever Wonder*

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*Bedtime Prayers*

*One Hand, Two Hands*  
*Thank You, God,*  
*for Blessing Me*  
*Thank You, God,*  
*for Loving Me*  
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*The Crippled Lamb*  
*The Oak Inside the Acorn*  
*The Tallest of Smalls*  
*You Are Mine*  
*You Are Special*

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3:16  
*It's Not About Me*  
*Make Every Day Count*  
*Wild Grace*  
*You Were Made to*  
*Make a Difference*

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*God Thinks You're*  
*Wonderful*  
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*Grace Happens Here*  
*Happy Today*  
*His Name Is Jesus*  
*Let the Journey Begin*  
*Live Loved*  
*Mocha with Max*  
*Safe in the Shepherd's Arms*  
*This Is Love*  
*You Changed My Life*

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IN THE  
**GRIP OF GRACE**

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MAX LUCADO



THOMAS NELSON  
*Since 1798*

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Dedicated to my editor,  
Liz Heaney,  
in celebration of ten years  
of words and wonder.



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And to you, the reader: I've prayed for you. Long before you held this book, I asked God to prepare your heart. May I ask that you pray for me? Would you offer the prayer of Colossians 4:4 on my behalf? Thank you. I'm honored that you would read these pages.

May God secure you firmly in the grip of his grace.

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## PREFACE

A few years back, our family spent the Fourth of July at a nearby lake. The weekend was full of fireworks, hot dogs, and hot sun. But the memory-maker of the three days was the parasail ride. You've seen the sight: tethered to a high-speed boat, the parasail lifts the rope-clinging customer four hundred, or for an extra ten dollars, six hundred feet into the air.

Speeding around the lake, high above the clamor below, the passenger hangs on and enjoys the view, letting the boat do the work. What choice does he or she have? To reach such heights, help is needed. To maintain such heights, power is mandated. No person can self-elevate to such a level.

Such is a central theme of the New Testament. We cannot save ourselves, nor can we keep ourselves saved. Such is the work of God's grace. And such is the theme of this book. Gratefully, God has used it over the last few years to speak to many. I just received a letter from a Christian friend who went to visit his dying brother in Europe. The two had been unable to connect on a spiritual level. My friend mailed his brother a copy of *In the Grip of Grace*. By the time he arrived at his brother's bedside, death was at the door. But this book was on the bedside. The dying man gestured to it and told his brother, "Now I get it." And smiled.

## PREFACE

Oh, the great grace of God.

Watching as one of my daughters flew high above on the parasail, I thought, *Isn't this a picture of grace? Look at her, soaring and sitting.* Those two words seldom appear in the same sentence. Especially religious sentences. We tend to think soaring and working, soaring and striving, soaring and struggling. But soaring and sitting?

It happens. It happens when you let the boat do the work. It happens when you let God do the same.

It happens when you live in the grip of grace.

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Greatest Discovery of My Life

My only qualification for writing a book on grace is the clothing I wear. Let me explain.

For years I owned an elegant suit complete with coat, trousers, even a hat. I considered myself quite dapper in the outfit and was confident others agreed.

The pants were cut from the cloth of my good works, sturdy fabric of deeds done and projects completed. Some studies here, some sermons there. Many people complimented my trousers, and I confess, I tended to hitch them up in public so people would notice them.

The coat was equally impressive. It was woven together from my convictions. Each day I dressed myself in deep feelings of religious fervor. My emotions were quite strong. So strong, in fact, that I was often asked to model my cloak of zeal in public gatherings to inspire others. Of course I was happy to comply.

While there I'd also display my hat, a feathered cap of knowledge. Formed with my own hands from the fabric of personal opinion, I wore it proudly.

*Surely God is impressed with my garments*, I often thought. Occasionally I strutted into his presence so he could compliment the self-tailored wear. He never spoke. *His silence must mean admiration*, I convinced myself.

## INTRODUCTION

But then my wardrobe began to suffer. The fabric of my trousers grew thin. My best works started coming unstitched. I began leaving more undone than done, and what little I did was nothing to boast about.

*No problem, I thought. I'll work harder.*

But working harder *was* a problem. There was a hole in my coat of convictions. My resolve was threadbare. A cold wind cut into my chest. I reached up to pull my hat down firmly, and the brim ripped off in my hands.

Over a period of a few months, my wardrobe of self-righteousness completely unraveled. I went from tailored gentlemen's apparel to beggars' rags. Fearful that God might be angry at my tattered suit, I did my best to stitch it together and cover my mistakes. But the cloth was so worn. And the wind was so icy. I gave up. I went back to God. (Where else could I go?)

On a wintry Thursday afternoon, I stepped into his presence, not for applause, but for warmth. My prayer was feeble.

"I feel naked."

"You are. And you have been for a long time."

What he did next I'll never forget. "I have something to give you," he said. He gently removed the remaining threads and then picked up a robe, a regal robe, the clothing of his own goodness. He wrapped it around my shoulders. His words to me were tender. "*My son, you are now clothed with Christ*" (see Gal. 3:27).

Though I'd sung the hymn a thousand times, I finally understood it:

*Dressed in his righteousness alone,  
faultless to stand before the throne.<sup>1</sup>*

I have a hunch that some of you know what I'm talking about. You're wearing a handmade wardrobe yourself. You've sewn your garments, and you're sporting your religious deeds . . . and, already, you've noticed a tear in the fabric. Before you start stitching yourself together, I'd like to share some thoughts with you on the greatest discovery of my life: the grace of God.

My strategy is for us to spend some time walking the mountains of

Paul's letter to the Romans. An epistle for the self-sufficient, Romans contrasts the plight of people who choose to dress in self-made garments with those who gladly accept the robes of grace. Romans is the grandest treatise on grace ever written. You'll find the air fresh and the view clear.

Martin Luther called Romans "the chief part of the New Testament and . . . truly the purest gospel."<sup>2</sup> God used the book to change the lives (and the wardrobes) of Luther, John Wesley, John Calvin, William Tyndale, Saint Augustine, and millions of others.

There is every reason to think he'll do the same for you.

MAX LUCADO  
MEMORIAL DAY, 1996





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## THE PARABLE OF THE RIVER

Romans 1:21–32

Once there were five sons who lived in a mountain castle with their father. The eldest was an obedient son, but his four younger brothers were rebellious. Their father had warned them of the river, but they had not listened. He had begged them to stay clear of the bank lest they be swept downstream, but the river's lure was too strong.

Each day the four rebellious brothers ventured closer and closer until one son dared to reach in and feel the waters. "Hold my hand so I won't fall in," he said, and his brothers did. But when he touched the water, the current yanked him and the other three into the rapids and rolled them down the river.

Over rocks they bounced, through the channels they roared, on the swells they rode. Their cries for help were lost in the rage of the river. Though they fought to gain their balance, they were powerless against the strength of the current. After hours of struggle, they surrendered to the pull of the river. The waters finally dumped them on the bank in a strange land, in a distant country, in a barren place.

Savage people dwelt in the land. It was not safe like their home.

Cold winds chilled the land. It was not warm like their home.

Rugged mountains marked the land. It was not inviting like their home.

Though they did not know where they were, of one fact they were

sure: they were not intended for this place. For a long time the four young sons lay on the bank, stunned at their fall and not knowing where to turn. After some time they gathered their courage and reentered the waters, hoping to walk upstream. But the current was too strong. They attempted to walk along the river's edge, but the terrain was too steep. They considered climbing the mountains, but the peaks were too high. Besides, they didn't know the way.

Finally, they built a fire and sat down. "We shouldn't have disobeyed our father," they admitted. "We are a long way from home."

With the passage of time, the sons learned to survive in the strange land. They found nuts for food and killed animals for skins. They determined not to forget their homeland nor abandon hopes of returning. Each day they set about the task of finding food and building shelter. Each evening they built a fire and told stories of their father and older brother. All four sons longed to see them again.

Then, one night, one brother failed to come to the fire. The others found him the next morning in the valley with the savages. He was building a hut of grass and mud. "I've grown tired of our talks," he told them. "What good does it do to remember? Besides, this land isn't so bad. I will build a great house and settle here."

"But it isn't home," they objected.

"No, but it is if you don't think of the real one."

"But what of Father?"

"What of him? He isn't here. He isn't near. Am I to spend forever awaiting his arrival? I'm making new friends; I'm learning new ways. If he comes, he comes, but I'm not holding my breath."

And so the other three left their hut-building brother and walked away. They continued to meet around the fire, speaking of home and dreaming of their return.

Some days later a second brother failed to appear at the campfire. The next morning his siblings found him on a hillside staring at the hut of his brother.

"How disgusting," he told them as they approached. "Our brother is an utter failure. An insult to our family name. Can you imagine a more despicable deed? Building a hut and forgetting our father?"

“What he’s doing is wrong,” agreed the youngest, “but what we did was wrong as well. We disobeyed. We touched the river. We ignored our father’s warnings.”

“Well, we may have made a mistake or two, but compared to the sleaze in the hut, we are saints. Father will dismiss our sin and punish him.”

“Come,” urged his two brothers, “return to the fire with us.”

“No, I think I’ll keep an eye on our brother. Someone needs to keep a record of his wrongs to show Father.”

And so the two returned, leaving one brother building and the other judging.

The remaining two sons stayed near the fire, encouraging each other and speaking of home. Then one morning the youngest son awoke to find he was alone. He searched for his brother and found him near the river, stacking rocks.

“It’s no use,” the rock-stacking brother explained as he worked. “Father won’t come for me. I must go to him. I offended him. I insulted him. I failed him. There is only one option. I will build a path back up the river and walk into our father’s presence. Rock upon rock I will stack until I have enough rocks to travel upstream to the castle. When he sees how hard I have worked and how diligent I have been, he will have no choice but to open the door and let me into his house.”

The last brother did not know what to say. He returned to sit by the fire, alone. One morning he heard a familiar voice behind him. “Father has sent me to bring you home.”

The youngest lifted his eyes to see the face of his oldest brother. “You have come for us!” he shouted. For a long time the two embraced.

“And your brothers?” the eldest finally asked.

“One has made a home here. Another is watching him. The third is building a path up the river.”

And so Firstborn set out to find his siblings. He went first to the thatched hut in the valley.

“Go away, stranger!” screamed the brother through the window. “You are not welcome here!”

“I have come to take you home.”

“You have not. You have come to take my mansion.”

“This is no mansion,” Firstborn countered. “This is a hut.”

“It is a mansion! The finest in the lowlands. I built it with my own hands. Now, go away. You cannot have my mansion.”

“Don’t you remember the house of your father?”

“I have no father.”

“You were born in a castle in a distant land where the air is warm and the fruit is plentiful. You disobeyed your father and ended up in this strange land. I have come to take you home.”

The brother peered through the window at Firstborn as if recognizing a face he’d remembered from a dream. But the pause was brief, for suddenly the savages in the house filled the window as well. “Go away, intruder!” they demanded. “This is not your home.”

“You are right,” responded the firstborn son, “but neither is it his.”

The eyes of the two brothers met again. Once more the hut-building brother felt a tug at his heart, but the savages had won his trust. “He just wants your mansion,” they cried. “Send him away!”

And so he did.

Firstborn sought the next brother. He didn’t have to walk far. On the hillside near the hut, within eyesight of the savages, sat the fault-finding son. When he saw Firstborn approaching, he shouted, “How good that you are here to behold the sin of our brother! Are you aware that he turned his back on the castle? Are you aware that he never speaks of home? I knew you would come. I have kept careful account of his deeds. Punish him! I will applaud your anger. He deserves it! Deal with the sins of our brother.”

Firstborn spoke softly, “We need to deal with your sins first.”

“My sins?”

“Yes, you disobeyed Father.”

The son smirked and slapped at the air. “My sins are nothing. *There* is the sinner,” he claimed, pointing to the hut. “Let me tell you of the savages who stay there . . .”

“I’d rather you tell me about yourself.”

“Don’t worry about me. Let me show you who needs help,” he said, running toward the hut. “Come, we’ll peek in the windows. He never

sees me. Let's go together." The son was at the hut before he noticed that Firstborn hadn't followed him.

Next, the eldest son walked to the river. There he found the last brother, knee-deep in the water, stacking rocks.

"Father has sent me to take you home."

The brother never looked up. "I can't talk now. I must work."

"Father knows you have fallen. But he will forgive you . . ."

"He may," the brother interrupted, struggling to keep his balance against the current, "but I have to get to the castle first. I must build a pathway up the river. First I will show him that I am worthy. Then I will ask for his mercy."

"He has already given his mercy. I will carry you up the river. You will never be able to build a pathway. The river is too long. The task is too great for your hands. Father sent me to carry you home. I am stronger."

For the first time the rock-stacking brother looked up. "How dare you speak with such irreverence! My father will not simply forgive. I have sinned. I have sinned greatly! He told us to avoid the river, and we disobeyed. I am a great sinner. I need much work."

"No, my brother, you don't need much work. You need much grace. The distance between you and our father's house is too great. You haven't enough strength nor the stones to build the road. That is why our father sent me. He wants me to carry you home."

"Are you saying I can't do it? Are you saying I'm not strong enough? Look at my work. Look at my rocks. Already I can walk five steps!"

"But you have five million to go!"

The younger brother looked at Firstborn with anger. "I know who you are. You are the voice of evil. You are trying to seduce me from my holy work. Get behind me, you serpent!" He hurled at Firstborn the rock he was about to place in the river.

"Heretic!" screamed the path-builder. "Leave this land. You can't stop me! I will build this walkway and stand before my father, and he will have to forgive me. I will win his favor. I will earn his mercy."

Firstborn shook his head. "Favor won is no favor. Mercy earned is no mercy. I implore you, let me carry you up the river."

The response was another rock. So Firstborn turned and left.

The youngest brother was waiting near the fire when Firstborn returned.

“The others didn’t come?”

“No. One chose to indulge, the other to judge, and the third to work. None of them chose our father.”

“So they will remain here?”

The eldest brother nodded slowly. “For now.”

“And we will return to Father?” asked the brother.

“Yes.”

“Will he forgive me?”

“Would he have sent me if he wouldn’t?”

And so the younger brother climbed on the back of the Firstborn and began the journey home.

---

All four brothers heard the same invitation. Each had an opportunity to be carried home by the elder brother. The first said no, choosing a grass hut over his father’s house. The second said no, preferring to analyze the mistakes of his brother rather than admit his own. The third said no, thinking it wiser to make a good impression than an honest confession. And the fourth said yes, choosing gratitude over guilt.

“I’ll indulge myself,” resolves one son.

“I’ll compare myself,” opts another.

“I’ll save myself,” determines the third.

“I’ll entrust myself to you,” decides the fourth.

May I ask a vital question? As you read of the brothers, which describes your relationship to God? Have you, like the fourth son, recognized your helplessness to make the journey home alone? Do you take the extended hand of your Father? Are you caught in the grip of his grace?

Or are you like one of the other three sons?

A hedonist. A judgmentalist. A legalist. All occupied with self to the exclusion of their father. Paul addresses these three in the first three chapters of Romans. Let’s look at each one.

MAPPING THE PARABLE				
	The Hut-Building Hedonist (Romans 1:18-32)	The Fault-Finding Judgmentalist (Romans 2:1-11)	The Rock-Stacking Legalist (Romans 2:17-3:20)	The Grace-Driven Christian (Romans 3:21-25)
STRATEGY	<i>indulge myself</i>	<i>compare myself</i>	<i>save myself</i>	<i>entrust myself to Christ</i>
GOAL	<i>satisfy my passions</i>	<i>monitor my neighbor</i>	<i>measure my merits</i>	<i>know my father</i>
DESCRIPTION	<i>fun-lover</i>	<i>finger-pointer</i>	<i>burden-bearer</i>	<i>God-lover</i>
PERSONALITY	<i>laid back</i>	<i>stuck-up</i>	<i>stressed-out</i>	<i>peaceful</i>
SELF-ANALYSIS	<i>I may be bad, but so what?</i>	<i>I may be bad, but I'm better than . . .</i>	<i>I may be bad, but if I work harder . . .</i>	<i>I may be bad, but I'm forgiven.</i>
THEOLOGY	<i>disregard God</i>	<i>distract God</i>	<i>reimburse God</i>	<i>seek God</i>
BUMPER STICKER	<i>"Life is short. Play hard."</i>	<i>"God's watching you, and so am I."</i>	<i>"I owe, I owe, it's off to work I go."</i>	<i>"I'm not perfect, but I'm forgiven."</i>
FAVORITE ANIMAL	<i>tomcat</i>	<i>watchdog</i>	<i>beaver</i>	<i>eagle</i>
SPENDS TIME LOOKING	<i>over the menu at the options</i>	<i>over the fence at the neighbor</i>	<i>over the list of requirements</i>	<i>over the abundance of God's blessings</i>
VIEW OF GRACE	<i>Who, me?</i>	<i>Yes, you!</i>	<i>Not me!</i>	<i>Yes, me.</i>
VIEW OF SIN	<i>No one is guilty.</i>	<i>He is guilty.</i>	<i>I'm always guilty.</i>	<i>I was guilty.</i>

IN THE GRIP OF GRACE

WORK ETHIC	<i>What I do is my business.</i>	<i>What you do is my business.</i>	<i>What God demands is my business.</i>	<i>What God does is my business.</i>
FAVORITE PHRASE	<i>Live it up!</i>	<i>Straighten up!</i>	<i>Get to work!</i>	<i>Thank you!</i>
BOUNDARIES	<i>If it feels good, do it.</i>	<i>If he feels good, note it.</i>	<i>If it feels good, stop it.</i>	<i>If it feels good, examine it.</i>
CONDITION	<i>bored</i>	<i>bitter</i>	<i>weary</i>	<i>grateful</i>
PAUL'S PRONOUNCEMENTS	<i>You have no excuse for the things you do.</i>	<i>You have no authority for the judgment you make.</i>	<i>You have no solution for the problem you have.</i>	<i>You have no reason to fear.</i>
KEY VERSE	<i>"God left them and let them go their sinful way." (1:24)</i>	<i>"If you think you can judge others, you are wrong. When you judge them, you are really judging yourself guilty because you do the same things they do." (2:1)</i>	<i>". . . people cannot do any work that will make them right with God." (4:5)</i>	<i>". . . those who are right with God will live by trusting in him." (1:17)</i>

THE HUT-BUILDING HEDONIST  
ROMANS 1:18—32

Can you relate to the hut-builder? He traded his passion for the castle for a love of the lowland. Rather than long for home, he settled for a hut. The aim of his life is pleasure. Such is the definition of hedonism, and such is the practice of this son.

The hedonist navigates his life as if there is no father in his past, present, or future. There may have been, somewhere in the somewhat distant past, a once-upon-a-time father, but as far as the here and now? The son



will live without him. There may be, in the faraway future, a father who comes and claims him, but as for today? The son will forge out his life on his own. Rather than seize the future, he's content to seize the day.

Paul had such a person in mind when he said, "They traded the glory of God who lives forever for the worship of idols made to look like earthly people, birds, animals, and snakes. . . . They worshiped and served what had been created instead of the God who created those things" (Rom. 1:23, 25). Hedonists make poor swaps; they trade mansions for huts and their brother for a stranger. They exchange their father's house for a hillside ghetto and send his son away.

### THE FAULT-FINDING JUDGMENTALIST ROMANS 2:1–11

The approach of the second brother was simple: "Why deal with my mistakes when I can focus on the mistakes of others?"

He is a judgmentalist. *I may be bad, but as long as I can find someone worse, I am safe.* He fuels his goodness with the failures of others. He is the self-appointed teacher's pet in elementary school. He tattles on the sloppy work of others, oblivious to the F on his own paper. He's the neighborhood watchdog, passing out citations for people to clean up their act, never noticing the garbage on his own front lawn.

"Come on, God, let me show you the evil deeds of my neighbor," the moralist invites. But God won't follow him into the valley. "If you think you can judge others, you are wrong. When you judge them, you are really judging yourself guilty, because you do the same things they do" (Rom. 2:1). It's a shallow ploy, and God won't fall for it.

### THE ROCK-STACKING LEGALIST ROMANS 2:17–3:20

And then there is the brother in the river. Ahhh, now here is a son we respect. Hardworking. Industrious. Zealous. Intense. Here is a fellow

who sees his sin and sets out to resolve it by himself. Surely he is worthy of our applause. Surely he is worthy of our emulation. And, most surely, he is worthy of the father's mercy. Won't the father throw open the castle doors when he sees how hard the son has worked to get home?

With no help from the father, the legalist is tackling the odds and fording the river of failure. Surely, the father will be happy to see him. That is, if the father ever does.

You see, the problem is not the affection of the father but the strength of the river. What sucked the son away from his father's house was no gentle stream but rather a roaring torrent. Is the son strong enough to build an upriver path to the father's house?

Doubtful. We certainly can't. "There is no one who always does what is right, not even one" (Rom. 3:10). Oh, but we try. We don't stack rocks in a river, but we do good deeds on earth.

We think: *If I do this, God will accept me.*

*If I teach this class . . . and we pick up a rock.*

*If I go to church . . . and we put the rock in the stream.*

*If I give this money . . . another rock.*

*If I endure a Lucado book . . . ten big rocks.*

*If I read my Bible, have the right opinion on the right doctrine, if I join this movement . . . rock upon rock upon rock.*

The problem? You may take five steps, but you have five million to go. The river is too long. What separates us from God is not a shallow stream but a tumbling, cascading, overwhelming river of sin. We stack and stack and stack only to find we can barely keep our footing, much less make progress.

The impact on the rock-stackers is remarkably predictable: either despair or arrogance. They either give up or become stuck-up. They think they'll never make it, or they think they are the only ones who'll ever make it. Strange, how two people can look at the same stacked rocks and one hang his head and the other puff out his chest.

Call the condition a *religious* godlessness. It's the theme behind Paul's brazen pronouncement: "We're sinners, every one of us, in the same sinking boat with everyone else" (3:19 MSG).

## GODLESS OR GODLY?

Quite a trio, don't you think?

The first on a barstool.

The second in the judge's chair.

The third on the church pew.

Though they may appear different, they are very much alike. All are separated from the Father. And none is asking for help. The first indulges his passions, the second monitors his neighbor, and the third measures his merits. Self-satisfaction. Self-justification. Self-salvation. The operative word is *self*. Self-sufficient. "They never give God the time of day" (3:18 MSG).

Paul's word for this is *godlessness* (Rom. 1:18 NIV). *Godlessness*. The word defines itself. A life minus God. Worse than a disdain for God, this is a disregard for God. A disdain at least acknowledges his presence. Godlessness doesn't. Whereas disdain will lead people to act with irreverence, disregard causes them to act as if God were irrelevant, as if he were not a factor in the journey.

How does God respond to godless living? Not flippantly. "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness" (Rom. 1:18 NIV). Paul's main point is not a light one. God is justly angered over the actions of his children.

I might as well prepare you: the first chapters of Romans are not exactly upbeat. Paul gives us the bad news before he gives the good news. He will eventually tell us that we are all equal candidates for grace but not before he proves that we are all desperately sinful. We have to see the mess we are in before we can appreciate the God we have.



PART ONE

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# WHAT A MESS!

*The loss of mystery has led to the loss of majesty.  
The more we know, the less we believe.  
No wonder there is no wonder.  
We think we've figured it all out.  
Strange, don't you think?  
Knowledge of the workings shouldn't negate wonder.  
Knowledge should stir wonder.  
Who has more reason to worship than the  
astronomer who has seen the stars?  
Than the surgeon who has held a heart?  
Than the oceanographer who has pondered the depths?*



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## GOD'S GRACIOUS ANGER

Romans 1:18–20

God's anger is shown from heaven against all the evil and wrong things people do. By their own evil lives they hide the truth. God shows his anger because some knowledge of him has been made clear to them. Yes, God has shown himself to them.

*Romans 1:18–19*

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“And you discovered that your boyfriend had been sleeping with your mother?” The audience snickered. The teenage girl on the stage ducked her head at the burst of attention.

The mother was a middle-aged woman in a too-tight black dress, sitting with her arm entwined with the skinny one of a boy in a sleeveless T-shirt. She waved to the crowd. He grinned.

Talk-show host Christy Adams wasted no time. “Do the two of you really sleep together?”

The mother, still holding the hand of the boy, looked at him. He grinned, and she smiled. “Yes.”

She went on to explain how she'd been lonely since her divorce. Her daughter's boyfriend hung out at her house all hours of the day and night and, well, one afternoon he plopped beside her on the couch and

the two started talking and one thing led to another and the next thing she knew they were . . . Her face flushed, and the boy shrugged as they let the audience complete the sentence.

The girl sat expressionless and silent.

“Aren’t you worried what this might teach your daughter?” Christy inquired.

“I’m only teaching her the ways of the world.”

“What about you?” Christy asked the boy. “Aren’t you being unfaithful to your girlfriend?”

The boy looked honestly amazed. “I still love her,” he announced. “I’m only helping her by loving her mother. We are one happy family. There’s nothing wrong with that!”

The audience erupted with whistles and applause. Just as the hubbub began to subside, Christy told the lovers, “Not everyone would agree with you. I’ve invited a guest to react to your lifestyle.” With that, the crowd got quiet, anxious to see who Christy had recruited to spice up the dialogue.

“He’s the world’s most famous theologian. His writings have long been followed by some and debated by others. Making his first appearance on the Christy Adams Show, please welcome controversial theologian, scholar, and author, the apostle Paul!”

Polite applause welcomed a short, balding man with glasses and a tweed jacket. He loosened his tie a bit as he settled his small frame in the stage chair. Christy skipped the welcome. “You have trouble with what these people are doing?”

Paul held his hands in his lap, looked over at the trio, and then back at Christy. “It’s not how I feel that matters. It’s how God feels.”

Christy paused so the TV audience could hear the “ooohs” ripple through the studio.

“Then tell us, please, Paul, how does God feel about this creative tryst?”

“It angers him.”

“And why?”

“Evil angers God because evil destroys his children. What these people are doing is evil.”

The strong words triggered a few hoots, some scattered applause,



and an outburst of raised hands. Before Christy could speak, Paul continued. "As a result, God has left them and let them go their sinful way. Their thinking is dark, their acts are evil, and God is disgusted."

A lanky fellow in the front shouted out his objection. "It's her body. She can do what she wants!"

"Oh, but that's where you are mistaken. Her body belongs to God and is to be used for him."

"What we're doing is harmless," objected the mother.

"Look at your daughter," Paul urged her, gesturing toward the girl whose eyes were full of tears. "Don't you see you have harmed her? You traded healthy love for lust. You traded the love of God for the love of the flesh. You traded truth for lie. And you traded the natural for the unnatural . . ."

Christy could restrain herself no longer. "Do you know how hokey you sound? All this talk about God and right and wrong and immorality? Don't you feel out of touch with reality?"

"Out of touch? No. Out of place, yes. But out of touch, hardly. God does not sit silently while his children indulge in perversion. He lets us go our sinful ways and reap the consequences. Every broken heart, every unwanted child, every war and tragedy can be traced back to our rebellion against God."

People sprang to their feet, the mother put her finger in Paul's face, and Christy turned to the camera, delighting in the pandemonium. "We've got to take a break," she shouted over the noise. "Don't go away; we've got some more questions for our friend the apostle."

## GOD HATES EVIL

How does the above dialogue strike you? Harsh? (Paul was too narrow.) Unreal? (The scene was too bizarre.) Outlandish? (No one would accept such convictions.)

Regardless of your response, it is important to note that though the script is fictional, Paul's words are not.

God is "against all the evil and wrong things people do" (Rom. 1:18).

The One who urges us to “hate what is evil” (Rom. 12:9) hates what is evil.

In three chilling verses Paul states:

“God left them and let them go . . .” (Rom. 1:24).

“God left them and let them do . . .” (Rom. 1:26).

“God left them and allowed them to have their own worthless thinking . . .” (Rom. 1:28).

God is angry at evil.

For many, this is a revelation. Some assume God is a harried high-school principal, too busy monitoring the planets to notice us.

He’s not.

Others assume he is a doting parent, blind to the evil of his children.

Wrong.

Still others insist he loves us so much he cannot be angry at our evil.

They don’t understand that love is *always* angry at evil.

## GOD HAS EVERY RIGHT TO BE ANGRY

Many don’t understand God’s anger because they confuse the wrath of God with the wrath of man. The two have little in common. Human anger is typically self-driven and prone to explosions of temper and violent deeds. We get ticked off because we’ve been overlooked, neglected, or cheated. This is the anger of man. It is not, however, the anger of God.

God doesn’t get angry because he doesn’t get his way. He gets angry because disobedience always results in self-destruction. What kind of father sits by and watches his child hurt himself?

What kind of God would do the same? Do we think he giggles at adultery or snickers at murder? Do you think he looks the other way when we produce television talk shows based on perverse pleasures? Does he shake his head and say, “Humans will be humans”?

I don’t think so. Mark it down and underline it in red. God is

rightfully angry. God is a holy God. Our sins are an affront to his holiness. His eyes “are too good to look at evil; [he] cannot stand to see those who do wrong” (Hab. 1:13).

God is angry at the evil that ruins his children. “As long as God is God, he cannot behold with indifference that his creation is destroyed and his holy will trodden underfoot.”<sup>1</sup>

## WE HAVE NO EXCUSE

My father had a similar hostility toward alcohol. Jack Lucado hated drinking in every form because he knew its power to destroy. His mild nature bristled at the thought of drunkenness. He left no doubt in my mind that he hated drinking and wanted his kids to have nothing to do with it.

But children don't always listen to their fathers. As a fifteen-year-old, I plotted a plan to get drunk and succeeded. I drank beer until I couldn't see straight, then came home and vomited until I couldn't stand up. My father came to the bathroom, smelled the beer, threw a towel in my direction, and walked away in disgust. I stumbled back to bed, knowing I was in deep trouble.

He woke me early the next morning. (There was no way I'd have the pleasure of sleeping off the hangover.) While in the shower I tried to think of an explanation. “My friends made me do it,” or “It was an accident,” or “Somebody must have put whiskey in the punch.” But one option I never considered was ignorance. Never once did I think about saying, “You never told me I shouldn't get drunk.”

Not only would that have been a lie, it would have been slander against my father. Had he not told me? Had he not warned me? Had he not tried to teach me? I knew better than to say that I didn't know better.

I was without excuse. According to Paul, we all are. In some of the most arresting words of the Bible he says:

God shows his anger because some knowledge of him has been made clear to them. Yes, God has shown himself to them. There

are things about him that people cannot see—his eternal power and all the things that make him God. But since the beginning of the world those things have been easy to understand by what God has made. *So people have no excuse for the bad things they do.* (Rom. 1:19–20, italics mine)

We are without excuse because God has revealed himself to us through his creation.

The psalmist wrote: “The heavens tell the glory of God, and the skies announce what his hands have made. Day after day they tell the story; night after night they tell it again. They have no speech or words; they have no voice to be heard. But their message goes out through all the world; their words go everywhere on earth” (Ps. 19:1–4).

Every star is an announcement. Each leaf a reminder. The glaciers are megaphones, the seasons are chapters, the clouds are banners. Nature is a song of many parts but one theme and one verse: *God is.*

Hundreds of years ago Tertullian stated:

It was not the pen of Moses that initiated the knowledge of the Creator. . . . The vast majority of mankind, though they had never heard the name of Moses, to say nothing of his books, knew the God of Moses none-the-less. . . . Nature is the teacher; the soul is the pupil. . . . One flower of the hedgerow . . . one shell from any sea you like . . . one feather of a moor fowl . . . will they speak to you of a mean Creator? . . . If I offer you a rose, you will not scorn its Creator.<sup>2</sup>

Creation is God’s first missionary. There are those who never held a Bible or heard a scripture. There are those who die before a translator puts God’s Word in their tongues. There are millions who lived in ancient times before Christ or live in distant lands far from Christians. There are the simple-minded who are incapable of understanding the gospel. What does the future hold for the person who never hears of God?

Again, Paul’s answer is clear. The human heart can know God through the handiwork of nature. If that is all one ever sees, that is

enough. One need only respond to what he is given. And if he is given only the testimony of creation, then he has enough.

The problem is not that God hasn't spoken but that we haven't listened. God says his anger is directed against any *thing* and any *one* who suppresses the knowledge of truth. God loves his children, and he hates what destroys them. This doesn't mean that he flies into a rage or loses his temper or is emotionally unpredictable. It means simply that he loves you and hates what you become when you turn from him.

Call it holy hostility. A righteous hatred of wrong. A divine disgust at the evil that destroys his children.

The question is not, "How dare a loving God be angry?" but rather, "How could a loving God feel anything less?"



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## GODLESS LIVING

Romans 1:21–32

They traded the glory of God who lives forever for the worship of idols made to look like earthly people, birds, animals, and snakes. . . . They worshiped and served what had been created instead of the God who created those things.

*Romans 1:23, 25*

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Can a cricket comprehend communion? I've been pondering this question since last Sunday, when both the cricket and the question came my way. The Lord's Supper was being served when I bowed my head and noticed the visitor beneath my pew. Best I can figure, he'd sneaked in a side door, slipped between the deacon's feet, and worked his way to the front of the sanctuary.

The sight of a cricket stirs many emotions within me, not one of them spiritual. Forgive me, all you bug lovers, but I'm not attracted to his beauty nor stunned by his strength. Typically I would have no interest in the insect, but the sight of a bug in an auditorium strikes me as symbolic.

We have something in common, you, me, and the cricket. Limited vision. I hope the parallel doesn't bug you (*ouch!*), but I think it's fair. None of us do too well imagining life beyond the rafters.

You see, as far as the cricket is concerned, his entire universe is an auditorium. I can envision him taking his son out of the wall at night and telling him to look up at the rafters. He wraps his clickers around the boy's back and sighs, "It's a mighty sky we live under, son." Does he know he sees only a fraction?

And then there are the aspirations of a cricket. His highest dream is to find a piece of bread. He falls asleep with visions of pie crumbs and jam drippings.

Or consider the hero of the cricket's world. Crickets lionize bugs. A fast one who can dash across a room full of feet. A gutsy one who has explored the hinterlands of the baptistry. A courageous one who has ventured to the edge of a mighty cabinet or hopped along the precipice of a windowsill. Is there, in the legends of cricketdom, a story about Cricket Revere who dashed through the walls yelling, "The bugman is coming! The bugman is coming!"?

Do amazed crickets ever look at each other and proclaim, "Jimminy Human!"?

Perhaps the best question is, who does a cricket worship? Does he acknowledge that there was a hand behind the building? Or does he choose to worship the building itself? Or perhaps a place in the building? Does he assume that since he has never seen the builder there *was* no builder?

The hedonist does. Since he has never seen the hand who made the universe, he assumes there is no life beyond the here and now. He believes there is no truth beyond this room. No purpose beyond his own pleasure. No divine factor. He has no concern for the eternal. Like a cricket who refuses to acknowledge a builder, he refuses to acknowledge his creator.

The hedonist opts to live as if there is no creator at all. Again, Paul's word for this is *godlessness*. He wrote, "People did not think it was important to have a true knowledge of God" (Rom. 1:28).

What happens when a society sees the world through the eyes of a cricket? What happens when a culture settles for grass huts instead of the father's castle? Are there any consequences for a godless pursuit of pleasure? Is there a price to pay for living for today?

The hedonist says, "Who cares? I may be bad, but so what? What I



do is my business.” He’s more concerned about satisfying his passions than in knowing the Father. His life is so desperate for pleasure that he has no time or room for God.

Is he right? Is it okay to spend our days thumbing our noses at God and living it up?

Paul says, “Absolutely not!”

According to Romans 1, we lose more than stained-glass windows when we dismiss God. We lose our standard, our purpose, and our worship. “Their thinking became useless. Their foolish minds were filled with darkness. They said they were wise, but they became fools” (Rom. 1:21–22).

## 1. WE LOSE OUR STANDARD

When I was nine years old, I complimented a friend’s model airplane. He curtly replied, “I stole it.” He could tell that I was stunned because he asked, “Do you think that was wrong?”

When I told him I did, he answered simply, “It may be wrong for you. It’s not wrong for me. I didn’t hurt anyone when I stole the plane. I knew the owner. He is rich. I’m not. He can afford one. I can’t.”

What do you say to that argument? If you don’t believe in life beyond the rafters, you have little to say. If there is no ultimate good *behind* the world, then how do we define “good” *within* the world? If the majority opinion determines good and evil, what happens when the majority is wrong? What do you do when the majority of kids in a certain group say it’s all right to steal or raid or even fire pistols from a moving vehicle?

The hedonist’s world of no moral absolutes works fine on paper and sounds great in a college philosophy course, but in life? Ask the father of three children whose wife abandoned him, saying, “Divorce may be wrong for you, but it’s okay for me.” Or get the opinion of the teenage girl, pregnant and frightened, who was told by her boyfriend, “If you have the baby, it’s your responsibility.” Or the retirees ripped off of their pension by a huckster who believed anything is right if you don’t get caught.

A godly view of the world, on the other hand, has something to

say to my childhood thief. Faith challenges those with cricket brains to answer to a higher standard than personal opinion: “You may think it’s right. Society may think it’s okay. But the God who made you said, ‘You shall not steal’—and he wasn’t kidding.”

By the way, follow the godless thinking to its logical extension, and see what you get. What happens when a society denies the importance of right and wrong? Read the answer on a prison wall in Poland: “I freed Germany from the stupid and degrading fallacies of conscience and morality.”<sup>1</sup>

Who made the boast? Adolf Hitler. Where are the words posted? In a Nazi death camp. Visitors read the claim and then see its results: a room stuffed with thousands of pounds of women’s hair, rooms filled with pictures of castrated children and gas ovens that served as Hitler’s final solution. Paul described it best: “Their foolish minds were filled with darkness” (Rom. 1:21).

*Come on, Max, you’re going too far. Isn’t it a stretch to state that what began as a stolen model plane will conclude in a holocaust?*

Most of the time it won’t. But it could, and what is there to stop it? What dike does the God-denying thinker have to stop the flood? What anchor will the secularist use to keep society from being sucked out to sea? If a society deletes God from the human equation, what sandbags will it stack against the swelling tide of barbarism and hedonism?

As Dostoevsky stated, “If God is dead, then everything is justifiable.”

## 2. WE LOSE OUR PURPOSE

The following conversation occurred between a canary in a cage and a lark on the windowsill. The lark looked in at the canary and asked, “What is your purpose?”

“My purpose is to eat seed.”

“What for?”

“So I can be strong.”

“What for?”

“So I can sing,” answered the canary.

“What for?” continued the lark.

“Because when I sing I get more seed.”

“So you eat in order to be strong so you can sing so you can get seed so you can eat?”

“Yes.”

“There is more to you than that,” the lark offered. “If you’ll follow me I’ll help you find it, but you must leave your cage.”

It’s tough to find meaning in a caged world. But that doesn’t keep us from trying. Mine deep enough in every heart and you’ll find it: a longing for meaning, a quest for purpose. As surely as a child breathes, he will someday wonder, “What is the purpose of my life?”

Some search for meaning in a career. “My purpose is to be a dentist.” Fine vocation but hardly a justification for existence. They opt to be a human “doing” rather than a human “being.” Who they are is what they do; consequently they do a lot. They work many hours because, if they don’t work, they don’t have an identity.

For others, who they are is what they have. They find meaning in a new car or a new house or new clothes. These people are great for the economy and rough on the budget because they are always seeking meaning in something they own.

Still others seek meaning in who they sire. They live vicariously through their kids. Woe be unto these kids. It’s hard enough being a youngster without also being someone’s reason for living.

Some try sports, entertainment, cults, sex, you name it.

All mirages in the desert of purpose. “Claiming themselves to be wise without God, they became utter fools instead” (Rom. 1:22 TLB).

Shouldn’t we face the truth? If we don’t acknowledge God, we are flotsam in the universe. At best we are developed animals. At worst we are rearranged space dust. In the final analysis secularists have only one answer to the question, “What is the meaning of life?” Their answer? “We don’t know.”

Or as paleontologist Stephen J. Gould concluded:

We are because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the

earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of million years ago, had managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a ‘higher’ answer—but none exists.<sup>2</sup>

Sacrificed upon the altar of godlessness is the purpose of man.

Contrast that to God’s vision for life: “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to devote ourselves to the good deeds for which God has designed us” (Eph. 2:10 NEB).

With God in your world, you aren’t an accident nor an incident; you are a gift to the world, a divine work of art, signed by God.

One of the finest gifts I ever received is a football signed by thirty former professional quarterbacks. There is nothing unique about this ball. For all I know it was bought at a discount sports store. What makes it unique is the signatures.

The same is true with us. In the scheme of nature, *Homo sapiens* are not unique. We aren’t the only creatures with flesh and hair and blood and hearts. What makes us special is not our body but the signature of God on our lives. We are his works of art. We are created in his image to do good deeds. We are significant, not because of what we do, but because of whose we are.

### 3. WE LOSE OUR WORSHIP

You’ve heard the story of the man searching for his keys under the street-light? His friend sees him and stops to help. After some minutes he asks, “Exactly where did you drop your keys?”

“In my house,” the man answers.

“In your house? Then why are we looking out here?”

“Because the light is better out here.”

You’ll never find what you need if you don’t look in the right place. If you’re looking for keys, go where you lost them. If you’re looking for truth and purpose, go outside the rafters. And if you’re looking for the sacred, once again, you won’t find it by thinking like a cricket.

“They traded the glory of God who holds the whole world in his hands for any cheap figurines you can buy at any roadside stand” (Rom. 1:21 MSG).

Let’s return to the crickets for a moment. Assume that these crickets are quite advanced and often engage in the philosophical question, “Is there life beyond the rafters?”

Some crickets believe there is. There must be a creator of this place. How else would the lights come on? How else could air blow through the vents? How else could music fill the room? Out of their amazement for what they see, they worship what they can’t see.

But other crickets disagree. Upon study they find the lights come on because of electricity. The air blows because of air conditioners, and music is the result of stereos and speakers. “There is no life beyond this room,” they declare. “We have figured out how everything works.”

Would we let the crickets get by with that? Of course not! “Just because you understand the system,” we’d tell them, “that doesn’t deny the presence of someone outside the system. After all, who built it? Who installed the switch? Who diagrammed the compressor and engineered the generator?”

But don’t we make the same mistake? We understand how storms are created. We map solar systems and transplant hearts. We measure the depths of the oceans and send signals to distant planets. We crickets have studied the system and are learning how it works.

And, for some, the loss of mystery has led to the loss of majesty. The more we know, the less we believe. Strange, don’t you think? Knowledge of the workings shouldn’t negate wonder. Knowledge should stir wonder. Who has more reason to worship than the astronomer who has seen the stars? Than the surgeon who has held a heart? Than the oceanographer who has pondered the depths? The more we know, the more we should be amazed.

Ironically, the more we know, the less we worship. We are more impressed with our discovery of the light switch than with the one who invented electricity. Call it cricket-brained logic. Rather than worship the Creator, we worship the creation (see Rom. 1:25).

No wonder there is no wonder. We’ve figured it all out.

One of the most popular attractions at Disney World is the Jungle Cruise. People will spend forty-five minutes waiting in the Florida heat for the chance to board the boat and wind through snake-infested forests. They come for the thrills. You never know when a native will jump out of the trees or a crocodile will peek out of the water. The waterfalls drench you, the rainbow inspires you, and the baby elephants playing in the water amuse you.

It's quite a trip—the first few times. But after four or five runs down the river, it begins to lose its zest. I should know. During the three years I lived in Miami, Florida, I made nearly twenty trips to Orlando. I was single and owned a van and was a sucker for anybody who wanted to spend a day at the Magic Kingdom. By the eighth or ninth trip, I could tell you the names of the guides and the jokes they told.

A couple of times I actually dozed off on the journey. The trail had lost its secrets. Ever wonder why people sleep in on Sunday mornings (whether in the bed or in the sanctuary)? Now you know. They've seen it all. Why get excited? They know it all. There is nothing sacred. The holy becomes humdrum. Rather than dashing into life like kids to the park, we doze through our days like commuters on a train.

Can you see why people become “full of sexual sin, using our bodies wrongly with each other”? (Rom. 1:24). You've got to get excitement somewhere.

According to Romans 1, godlessness is a bad swap. In living for today, the hut-building hedonist destroys his hope of living in a castle tomorrow.

What was true in Paul's day is still true in ours, and we would do well to heed his warning. Otherwise, what is to keep us from destroying ourselves? If there is no standard in this life, no purpose to this life, and nothing sacred about this life, what is to keep us from doing whatever we want?”

“Nothing,” said one cricket to the other.

How does God feel about such a view of life? Let me give you a hint. How would you feel if you saw your children settling for crumbs when you'd prepared for them a feast?

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## GODLESS JUDGING

Romans 2:1–11

If you think you can judge others, you are wrong. When you judge them, you are really judging yourself guilty, because you do the same things they do. God judges those who do wrong things, and we know that his judging is right.

*Romans 2:1–2*

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You know what disturbs me most about Jeffrey Dahmer?

What disturbs me most are not his acts, though they are disgusting. Dahmer was convicted of seventeen murders. Eleven corpses were found in his apartment. He cut off arms. He ate body parts. My thesaurus has 204 synonyms for *vile*, but each falls short of describing a man who kept skulls in his refrigerator and hoarded a human heart. He redefined the boundary for brutality. The Milwaukee monster dangled from the lowest rung of human conduct and then dropped. But that's not what troubles me most.

Can I tell you what troubles me most about Jeffrey Dahmer? Not his trial, as disturbing as it was, with all those pictures of him sitting serenely in court, face frozen, motionless. No sign of remorse, no hint of regret.

Remember his steely eyes and impassive face? But I don't speak of him because of his trial. There is another reason.

Can I tell you what really troubles me about Jeffrey Dahmer?

Not his punishment, though life without parole is hardly an exchange for his actions. How many years would satisfy justice? A lifetime in jail for every life he took? But that's another matter, and that's not what troubles me most about Jeffrey Dahmer. May I tell you what does?

His conversion.

Months before an inmate murdered him, Jeffrey Dahmer became a Christian. Said he repented. Was sorry for what he did. Profoundly sorry. Said he put his faith in Christ. Was baptized. Started life over. Began reading Christian books and attending chapel.

Sins washed. Soul cleansed. Past forgiven.

That troubles me. It shouldn't, but it does. Grace for a cannibal?

Maybe you have the same reservations. If not about Dahmer, perhaps about someone else. Ever wrestled with the deathbed conversion of a rapist or the eleventh-hour conversion of a child molester? We've sentenced them, maybe not in court, but in our hearts. We've put them behind bars and locked the door. They are forever imprisoned by our disgust. And then, the impossible happens. They repent.

Our response? (Dare we say it?) We cross our arms and furrow our brows and say, "God won't let you off that easy. Not after what you did. God is kind, but he's no wimp. Grace is for average sinners like me, not deviants like you."

And for proof we might turn to Romans 1. "*God's anger is being shown against . . .*" And then Paul lists it all: sexual sin, evil, selfishness, hatred, jealousy, murder (see 1:26–30). We want to shout, "Go get 'em, Paul! It's about time someone spoke out against sin! It's high time someone pulled back the blanket on adultery and turned the light on dishonesty. Nail those perverts. String up those porn peddlers. We'll stand by you, Paul! We decent, law-abiding folk are with you!"

Paul's response?

"If you think that leaves you on the high ground where you can point your finger at others, think again. Every time you criticize someone, you condemn yourself. It takes one to know one" (Rom. 2:1 MSG).



Whoops!

Having addressed the hut-building tomcat, he turns his torch on the hillside watchdog.

## WE DON'T HOLD THE GAVEL

In Romans 1 Paul confronts the hedonists. In chapter 2 he deals with another group, the judgmental moralists: those who “pass judgment on someone else” (2:1 NIV). Somewhere between the escort service and the church service there is the person who “points [his] finger at others” (2:1 MSG).

“Therefore you have no excuse, O man, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon him you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things” (2:1 RSV).

Who is this person? It could be anyone (“O man, whoever you are”) who filters God’s grace through his own opinion. Anyone who dilutes God’s mercy with his own prejudice. He is the prodigal son’s elder brother who wouldn’t attend the party (see Luke 15:11–32). He is the ten-hour worker, upset because the one-hour worker got the same wage (see Matt. 20:1–16). He is the fault-finding brother obsessed by his brother’s sins and oblivious to his own.

If you “think you can judge others” (Rom. 2:1), Paul has a stern reminder for you. It’s not your job to hold the gavel. “God judges those who do wrong things, and we know that his judging is right” (v. 2).

The key word here is *judges*. It’s one thing to have an opinion. It’s quite another to pass a verdict. It’s one thing to have a conviction; it’s another to convict the person. It’s one thing to be repulsed by the acts of a Jeffrey Dahmer (and I am). It’s another entirely to claim that I am superior (I’m not) or that he is beyond the grace of God (no one is).

As John Stott writes: “This [verse] is not a call either to suspend our critical faculties or to renounce all criticism and rebuke of others as illegitimate: it is rather a prohibition of standing in judgment on other people and condemning them (which as human beings we have no right to do), especially when we fail to condemn ourselves.”<sup>1</sup>

It's our job to hate the sin. But it's God's job to deal with the sinner. God has called us to despise evil, but he's never called us to despise the evildoer.

But, oh, how we would like to. Is there any act more delightful than judging others? There is something smug and self-satisfying about donning the robe, stepping behind the bench, and slamming down the gavel. "Guilty!"

Besides, judging others is the quick and easy way to feel good about ourselves. A convenience-store ego-boost. Standing next to all the Mussolinis and Hitlers and Dahmers of the world, we boast, "Look, God, compared to them, I'm not too bad."

But that's the problem. God doesn't compare us to them. They aren't the standard. God is. And compared to him, Paul will argue, "There is no one who does anything good" (Rom. 3:12). In fact, that is one of two reasons why God is the One who judges.

## REASON #1: WE AREN'T GOOD ENOUGH

Suppose God simplified matters and reduced the Bible to one command: "Thou must jump so high in the air that you touch the moon." No need to love your neighbor or pray or follow Jesus; just touch the moon by virtue of a jump, and you'll be saved.

We'd never make it. There may be a few who jump three or four feet, even fewer who jump five or six; but compared to the distance we have to go, no one gets very far. Though you may jump six inches higher than I do, it's scarcely reason to boast.

Now, God hasn't called us to touch the moon, but he might as well have. He said, "You must be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). None of us can meet God's standard. As a result, none of us deserves to don the robe and stand behind the bench and judge others. Why? We aren't good enough. Dahmer may jump six inches, and you may jump six feet, but compared to the 230,000 miles that remain, who can boast?

The thought of it is almost comical. We who jump three feet look

at the fellow who jumped one inch and say, “What a lousy jump.” Why do we engage in such accusations? It’s a ploy. As long as I am thinking of your weaknesses, then I don’t have to think about mine. As long as I am looking at your puny jump, then I don’t have to be honest about my own. I’m like the man who went to see the psychiatrist with a turtle on his head and a strip of bacon dangling from each ear and said, “I’m here to talk to you about my brother.”

It’s the universal strategy of impunity. Even kids use it. *If I can get Dad more angry at my brother than me, I’m off scot-free.* So I accuse. I compare. Rather than admit my own faults, I find faults in others. The easiest way to justify the mistakes in my house is to find worse ones in my neighbor’s house.

Such scams don’t work with God. Read carefully Paul’s words.

God isn’t so easily diverted. He sees right through all smoke screens and holds you to what *you’ve* done. You didn’t think, did you, that just by pointing your finger at others you would distract God from coming down on you hard? Or did you think that just because he’s such a nice God he’d let you off the hook? Better think this one through from the beginning. God is kind, but he’s not soft. In kindness he takes us firmly by the hand and leads us into a radical life change. (Rom. 2:2–4 MSG)

We aren’t good enough to judge. Can the hungry accuse the beggar? Can the sick mock the ill? Can the blind judge the deaf? Can the sinner condemn the sinner? No. Only One can judge, and that One is neither writing nor reading this book.

## REASON #2: WE DON’T KNOW ENOUGH

Not only are we unworthy, we are unqualified. We don’t know enough about the person to judge him. We don’t know enough about his past. We condemn a man for stumbling this morning, but we didn’t see the blows he took yesterday. We judge a woman for the limp in her walk but

cannot see the tack in her shoe. We mock the fear in their eyes but have no idea how many stones they have ducked or darts they have dodged.

Are they too loud? Perhaps they fear being neglected again. Are they too timid? Perhaps they fear failing again. Too slow? Perhaps they fell the last time they hurried. You don't know. Only one who has followed yesterday's steps can be their judge.

Not only are we ignorant about yesterday, we are ignorant about tomorrow. Dare we judge a book while chapters are yet unwritten? Should we pass a verdict on a painting while the artist still holds the brush? How can you dismiss a soul until God's work is complete? "God began doing a good work in you, and I am sure he will continue it until it is finished when Jesus Christ comes again" (Phil. 1:6).

Be careful! The Peter who denies Jesus at tonight's fire may proclaim him with fire at tomorrow's Pentecost. The Samson who is blind and weak today may use his final strength to level the pillars of godlessness. A stammering shepherd in this generation may be the mighty Moses of the next. Don't call Noah a fool; you may be asking him for a lift. "Do not judge before the right time; wait until the Lord comes" (1 Cor. 4:5).

A condemned criminal was sent to his death by his country. In his final moments, he asked for mercy. Had he asked for mercy from the people, it would have been denied. Had he asked it of the government, it would have been declined. Had he asked it of his victims, they would have turned a deaf ear. But it wasn't to these he turned for grace. He turned instead to the bloodied form of the One who hung on the cross next to his and pleaded, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus answered by saying, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).

As far as we know, Jeffrey Dahmer did the same thing. And as far as we know, Jeffrey Dahmer got the same response. And when you think about it, the request Dahmer made is no different than yours or mine. He may make it from a prison bunk and you may make it from a church pew, but from heaven's angle we're all asking for the moon.

And by heaven's grace we all receive it.

---

## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION: THE GREATEST DISCOVERY OF MY LIFE

1. Edward Mote, “The Solid Rock.”
2. Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann: Muhlenburg Press, 1960), 365.

### CHAPTER 2: GOD’S GRACIOUS ANGER

1. Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1949), 98.
2. Carthaginian theologian Tertullian, quoted in William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1975), 27.

### CHAPTER 3: GODLESS LIVING

1. Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God?* (Dallas: Word, 1994), 23.
2. Stephen Jay Gould, quoted in Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1995), 16.

### CHAPTER 4: GODLESS JUDGING

1. John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 82.



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core scripture: Phillipians 4:4–8

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core scripture: The Beatitudes, Matthew 5:1–10

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core scripture: Psalm 145:19

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... how to rehydrate your heart and sink into the wellspring of God's love.

core scripture: John 7:37–38

## **Cure for the Common Life**

... the unique things God designed you to do with your life.

core scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:7

## **Facing Your Giants**

... when God is for you, no challenge is too great.

core scripture: 1 and 2 Samuel

## **Fearless**

... how faith is the antidote to the fear in your life.

core scripture: John 14:1, 3

## **A Gentle Thunder**

... the God who will do whatever it takes to lead his children back to him.

core scripture: Psalm 81:7

## **Glory Days**

... how you fight from victory, not for it.

core scripture: Joshua 21:43–45

## **God Came Near**

... a love so great that it left heaven to become part of your world.

core scripture: John 1:14

## **Grace**

... the incredible gift that saves and sustains you.

core scripture: Hebrews 12:15

## **The Great House of God**

... a blueprint for peace, joy, and love found in the Lord's Prayer.

core scripture: The Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:9–13

## **He Chose the Nails**

... a love so deep that it chose death on a cross—just to win your heart.

core scripture: 1 Peter 1:18–20

## **He Still Moves Stones**

... the God who still does the impossible—in your life.

core scripture: Matthew 12:20

## **In the Eye of the Storm**

... peace in the storms of your life.

core scripture: John 6

## **In the Grip of Grace**

... the greatest gift of all—the grace of God.

core scripture: Romans

## **It's Not About Me**

... why focusing on God will make sense of your life.

core scripture: 2 Corinthians 3:18

## **Just Like Jesus**

... a life free from guilt, fear, and anxiety.

core scripture: Ephesians 4:23–24

## **A Love Worth Giving**

... how living loved frees you to love others.

core scripture: 1 Corinthians 13

## **Next Door Savior**

... a God who walked life's hardest trials—and still walks with you through yours.

core scripture: Matthew 16:13–16

## **No Wonder They Call Him the Savior**

... hope in the unlikely place—upon the cross.

core scripture: Romans 5:15

## **Outlive Your Life**

... that a great God created you to do great things.

core scripture: Acts 1

## **Six Hours One Friday**

... forgiveness and healing in the middle of loss and failure.

core scripture: John 19–20

## **Traveling Light**

... the power to release the burdens you were never meant to carry.

core scripture: Psalm 23

## **Unshakable Hope**

... God has given us his very great and precious promises.

core scripture: 2 Peter 1:4

## **When God Whispers Your Name**

... the path to hope in knowing that God knows you, never forgets you, and cares about the details of your life.

core scripture: John 10:3

## **You'll Get Through This**

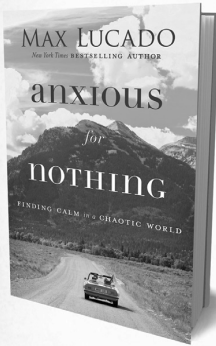
... hope in the midst of your hard times and a God who uses the mess of life for good.

core scripture: Genesis 50:20

## Recommended reading if you're struggling with . . .

### FEAR AND WORRY

*Anxious for Nothing*  
*Before Amen*  
*Come Thirsty*  
*Fearless*  
*For the Tough Times*  
*Next Door Savior*  
*Traveling Light*



### DISCOURAGEMENT

*He Still Moves Stones*  
*Next Door Savior*

## Recommended reading if you want to know more about . . .

### THE CROSS

*And the Angels Were Silent*  
*He Chose the Nails*  
*No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*  
*Six Hours One Friday*

### GRACE

*Before Amen*  
*Grace*  
*He Chose the Nails*  
*In the Grip of Grace*

### HEAVEN

*The Applause of Heaven*  
*When Christ Comes*

### GRIEF/DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

*Next Door Savior*  
*Traveling Light*  
*When Christ Comes*  
*When God Whispers Your Name*  
*You'll Get Through This*

### GUILT

*In the Grip of Grace*  
*Just Like Jesus*

### LONELINESS

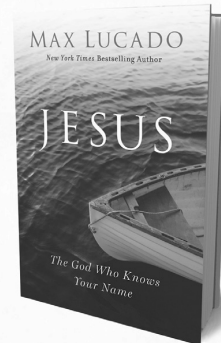
*God Came Near*

### SIN

*Before Amen*  
*Facing Your Giants*  
*He Chose the Nails*  
*Six Hours One Friday*

### WEARINESS

*Before Amen*  
*When God Whispers Your Name*  
*You'll Get Through This*



### SHARING THE GOSPEL

*God Came Near*  
*Grace*  
*No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*



## Recommended reading if you're looking for more . . .

### COMFORT

*For the Tough Times*  
*He Chose the Nails*  
*Next Door Savior*  
*Traveling Light*  
*You'll Get Through This*

### COMPASSION

*Outlive Your Life*

### COURAGE

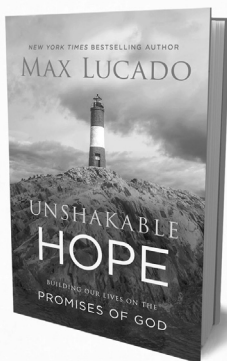
*Facing Your Giants*  
*Fearless*

### HOPE

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*Before Amen*  
*Facing Your Giants*  
*A Gentle Thunder*  
*God Came Near*  
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### JOY

*The Applause of Heaven*  
*Cure for the Common Life*  
*When God Whispers Your Name*



### LOVE

*Come Thirsty*  
*A Love Worth Giving*  
*No Wonder They Call Him the Savior*

### PEACE

*And the Angels Were Silent*  
*Anxious for Nothing*  
*Before Amen*  
*The Great House of God*  
*In the Eye of the Storm*  
*Traveling Light*  
*You'll Get Through This*

### SATISFACTION

*And the Angels Were Silent*  
*Come Thirsty*  
*Cure for the Common Life*  
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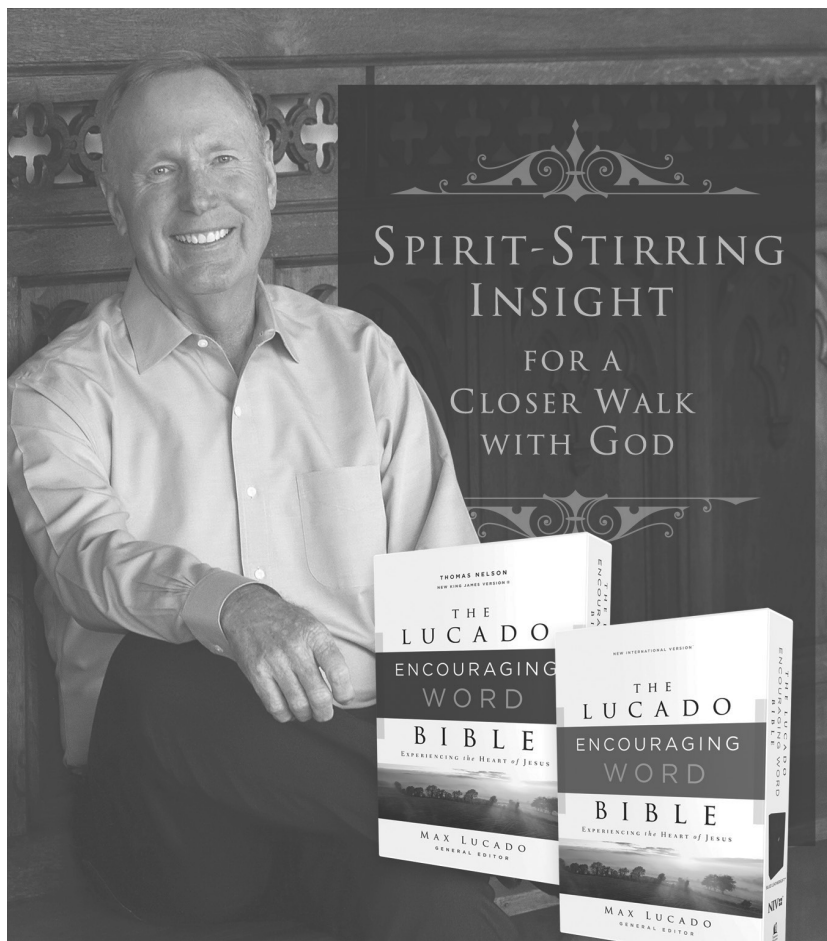
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