

BECAUSE OF HIS AMAZING GRACE...

God Never Becomes Angry with Christians

I STOOD THERE STARING AT MY CAR sitting on the side of the road. “Lord, please. Let the engine start this time.” I got back into the car and once again turned the key in the ignition. The starter spun as fast as it could go, but the engine just wouldn’t respond. As I sat in the car waiting for the tow truck to arrive, I thought about all that had happened over the past few weeks—repeated trips to the doctor’s office with several of our children, who were very young at the time; the compressor on our refrigerator tearing up and having to be replaced at an expensive price; and now *this*. “Why are so many things going wrong right now?” I asked myself. No sooner had I asked the question than I heard the accusations inside me: “I *have* neglected my quiet time lately, in fact, I didn’t even read the Bible this morning. I haven’t been praying much either. For that matter, I haven’t shared the gospel with an unsaved person in weeks. And then there’s that time I lost my temper with the kids earlier this week.” On and on the inventory of failures over the past few weeks went through my mind.

I’m not comfortable in admitting that I thought God must be irritated with me because I didn’t do the things I imagined He wanted me to do. I only acknowledge it to you because I don’t

think my attitude was uncommon. In those days I envisioned God to be tense with me much of the time. I knew He loved me; I reasoned that because He is God, that goes with the job description. However, I *felt* that God wasn't always happy with me and sometimes I even thought He was probably exasperated because of my pitiful level of consistency. I've met many believers who are convinced that what they do or don't do determines God's mood toward them at any given moment. They are living in the shackles of legalism by believing that God blesses or curses them based on their behavior. They see God as being fickle, able to have His disposition toward them altered by what they do.

The children of Israel had been anything but consistent in their walk from the time that Moses had first led them out of Egypt and across the Red Sea. Even since entering Canaan, there had been occasional lapses in their faith (see Joshua 7:1; 9:14). However, in spite of God knowing their failures even before Israel knew them, His grace had led Him to give them the land. "So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their divisions by their tribes. Thus the land had rest from war" (Joshua 11:23). He took the whole land—victory was complete not because of their faithfulness, but God's. The residents of His grace-land always are cognizant of the fact that they have done nothing to earn it, but that complete victory was given to them as a gift.

One Thing Causes God to Be Angry

Some Christians imagine God to be impatient, ready to hurl lightning bolts into their lives every time they make the slightest misstep. That is far from what the Bible teaches about God's attitude toward believers. Generally speaking, the nature of God is that

He is slow to become angry (see Exodus 34:6; Numbers 14:18; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nahum 1:3).

What *does* anger God? Using Bible software, I did a search on the word “anger” to discover how many times in the Bible God is revealed as being angry. My research indicated that in Scripture, God is shown to be angry 153 times. I went back and examined the cause for His anger in each of the passages, and in every instance, the cause for God’s anger was the same—sin. God *hates* sin. The Bible suggests that there is nothing that angers God other than sin.

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God Cannot Be Contained by Time

If sin angers God and we, as Christians, don’t live sinless lives, how could one argue that God doesn’t become angry with us? After all, we *do* still commit sins. The answer lies in understanding God’s transcendent nature over time and the finality of the cross of Jesus Christ. It is true that believers occasionally sin, but our sins have been dealt with *in totality*.

Human beings are time creatures. We experience reality within the parameters of time, which may be described as duration measured by succession. In other words, the occurrence of events in our lives in chronological order produce “time.” From the

human perspective, all reality appears to be *linear*, having a starting place and a stopping point.

God, on the other hand, is not bound by the confines of time. Time can't contain God. To contain Him, it would have to be greater than Him, and nothing is greater than God. God exists outside the boundaries of time in a place called *eternity*. To attempt to understand eternity, we must look outside the grid lines of time.

A young boy once defined time as "the thing that keeps everything from happening all at once." Not a bad definition! While this earth and everybody on it exist on a path that has often been labeled as a "time line," God sits above the time line of the natural world and sees everything from beginning to end.

In fact, God does more than simply *see* the time line from beginning to end; He has designed it from start to finish. "He has made everything appropriate in its time. He has also set eternity in their [man's] heart, yet so that man will not find out *the work which God has done from the beginning even to the end*" (Ecclesiastes 3:11, emphasis added). God is absolutely sovereign over time. "I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning" (Isaiah 46:9). Some may be tempted to argue that God didn't write the script for many things that occur in time, but biblical evidence suggests that even Satan himself is nothing more than a two-bit player in the unfolding drama of time and eternity. *God is in charge* of time because He created it and stands above it (see Genesis 1:14-18). He is the Sovereign over every millisecond and each minuscule detail of its history.

God sees into eternity past and into eternity future (as we would understand it). Set right in the middle is the reality we know as time. Existing outside the bounds of time, God sees it all at once. He lives in what many have called "the eternal now." Ray Stedman observes:

We constantly think of heaven as a continuation on a larger and perfect scale of life on earth. Locked into our world of space and time, we find it very difficult to imagine life proceeding on any other terms. But we must remember that time is time and eternity is eternity and never the twain shall meet.¹

Time and eternity are two totally different categories of experience. While those of us in time experience events successively, the eternal perspective would allow one to see all things contained in time happening *simultaneously*.

They [time and eternity] are not the same, and we must not make them the same. Time means that we are locked into a pattern of chronological sequence which we are helpless to break. For example, all human beings sharing the same room will experience an earthquake together. While there are varying feelings and reactions, everyone will feel the earthquake at the same time. But in eternity events do not follow a sequential pattern. There is no past or future, only the present NOW. Within that NOW, all events happen.²

All events happen in the present NOW in eternity. To understand that concept helps make certain Bible verses and biblical concepts much more easily understood. For instance, Enoch saw the second coming of Jesus Christ even though he lived only seven generations beyond Adam. Jude 14-15 says:

Enoch, in the seventh generation from Adam, prophesied, saying, "Behold, the Lord came with many thousands of His holy ones, to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the ungodly of all their ungodly deeds which they have done in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which

ungodly sinners have spoken against Him" (emphasis added).

How did Enoch see this event happening when he lived seven generations beyond Adam? It is because he was enabled to see the reality that exists beyond time. Outside the bounds of time, he could look down on time and see Jesus coming again. We, who live *in time*, haven't realized that event yet, but it is a done deal in eternity!

Describing from the eternal perspective what God has done for the believer, Paul writes:

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified (Romans 8:29-30).

Paul lists five things that God has already done for those who are His: 1) He foreknew us; 2) He predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son; 3) He called us; 4) He justified us; 5) He glorified us. Each of these are spoken of in the past tense, as if they have already happened. Why would Paul describe these five acts of God in our lives in the past tense? It is because all five *have already happened* in the eternal realm!

The Cross of Christ Is Sufficient

Every believer has been foreknown, predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Whether or not we feel it or believe it, God's Word says it is true. From the eternal now, God looked down on our lifetime and saw every sin that we would ever commit. He took

those sins and placed them onto Jesus Christ, where “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross” (1 Peter 2:24). Paul the apostle wrote:

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, and which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-14).

The certificate of debt mentioned by Paul refers to an invoice used to show the debt an individual owed to a creditor. When he paid the balance on his account, the invoice was marked “Fulfilled,” showing that his debt had been completely paid in full. From the vantage point of eternity, God saw every sin you would commit in your lifetime and recorded each one on your own personal certificate of debt. He then took that invoice, showing the balance due from you for your sins (separation from God *in eternity*), and placed your debt onto Jesus Christ. When Jesus discharged the debt for our sin, He cried out, “It is finished!” The Greek word is *tetelestai*, which may also be translated “Fulfilled!”

Author Bill Gillham comments:

John 19:30 records Jesus’ final words on the cross. “...He said, It is finished! And He...gave up His spirit.” Do you know what Greek word has been translated “It is finished” here? *Tetelestai*! Oh, my brother, my sister, how profound! How awesome! Preserve this moment—make it a special happening. Get a pen and a piece of paper. Write this heading on the paper: Certificate of Debt. Now write a number across the center of the paper in one-inch script indicating the estimated number of sins

you will have committed in your entire life on earth (as in 10,000,000). Now take a red felt pen and in large block letters write the word TETESTAI, cutting diagonally across that number from lower left toward upper right. Then at the bottom of the sheet write, "Dictated personally, but signed for Him in His absence," and then sign the name *Jesus*. Fold the letter and place it in an envelope for safekeeping. Anytime someone or the power of sin tries to convince you that you have not been forgiven of *all your sins*, take out that signed certificate of debt and stare at it for a minute or so. Then have a praise and adoration session.³

"It can't be true that my future sins are already forgiven!" Patty protested after hearing me teach that *all* of the believer's sins are forgiven. I read her the passage from Colossians 2:13-14. Then I asked her these questions, which I encourage you to answer as you read them:

1. How many of your sins did God know about before you were born? (*All of them.*)
2. How many of them did He record on your certificate of debt? (*All of them.*)
3. How many of your sins did Jesus pay for on the cross? (*All of them.*)
4. How many of them were future at that time? (*All of them.*)
5. How many sins was He referring to when He said, "It is finished"? (*All of them.*)
6. At the time you were saved, how many of your sins did God forgive?

If you didn't answer number six by saying, "All of them," I encourage you to ask yourself if you're being intellectually honest. Would it make sense that God would see and note *all* of our sins, that Jesus Christ would bear *all* of them upon Himself, that He would declare from the cross that payment had been made for *all* of them, and then after all that, God would only forgive you for *some* of your sins—namely the ones you had committed up to the point in time at which you were saved? Don't make the mistake of trying to put God in the "time box." He won't fit. He has forgiven you for every sin you will ever commit—past, present, and future. The verse clearly says that He has "forgiven us all our transgressions," not just our past ones.

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For many years I believed that in order to stay in a state of forgiveness before God, it was necessary that I ask Him to forgive me for each sin that I committed. This kind of faulty theology raises some serious questions. What happens if I *don't* ask Him to forgive me for a specific sin? Does it remain unforgiven until the day I die? What happens then, when I go into eternity with an unforgiven sin? Nobody can go into heaven with unforgiven sin (imagine being eternally separated from God for calling somebody in another car on the interstate an idiot and forgetting to ask God for forgiveness).

On the other side of the issue, consider this question: Is there *anything* that you know is the right thing to do that you aren't doing? James said, "To the one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, it is sin" (James 4:17). Do you see the dilemma? If *all* our sins are not forgiven, then we had better make sure we are living a perfect life, because not only do we have to deal with sins related to doing wrong, but we also have to be worried about the right things we *haven't* done. Keeping track of all that would be enough to give the Christian a nervous breakdown!

Relax—You Are Forgiven!

Christians don't have to worry about sins that might go unforgiven. We can rest in the truth that God has forgiven us for every sin of our lifetime. Remember the *only* thing that causes God to become angry? It is sin. The good news is that your sin was dealt with at the cross. You are forgiven! (see Acts 10:43; 13:38; Ephesians 1:7; 4:32; Colossians 1:14). The cross of Jesus has forever discharged God's anger against you. Christians never need to be fearful of God's anger. "Take courage, My son, your sins are forgiven," Jesus said to the paralytic in Matthew 9:2. John wrote, "I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for His name's sake" (1 John 2:12). When you placed your faith in Jesus Christ at salvation, His eternal response to you was, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you" (Luke 5:20). God won't become angry with us as Christians, because the only thing that causes anger in God has been removed from us by the cross!

God Accepts You, So Accept Yourself

Betsy came to me crying one day. As we began to discuss her problem, she explained that she had committed adultery three

times in her life. When she was caught, her husband divorced her. She had been single again for a little over a year. "I know that the Bible says God has forgiven me for all my sins, but I cannot overcome the guilt I feel," she explained. "Every time I date a sincerely good man, I find myself thinking that I can't allow myself to become serious with him because he deserves someone better than me."

Although Betsy knew that God had forgiven her, she had not forgiven herself. Consequently, she was wallowing in the misery of self-condemnation. Many Christians struggle with nagging guilt over their sins. They know intellectually that they have been forgiven, but the truth hasn't reached their emotions. They underestimate the gentle grace of God.

If Jesus appeared at your dining room table tonight with knowledge of everything you are and are not, total comprehension of your life story and every skeleton hidden in your closet; if He laid out the real state of your present discipleship with the hidden agenda, the mixed motives, and the dark desires buried in your psyche, you would feel His acceptance and forgiveness.⁴

Jesus isn't mad at you! I used to think that He *must* be angry; after all, I would sometimes keep committing the same sin over and over again. Wouldn't my repeated failure eventually wear out His patience? The answer is an emphatic *no*! Remember that God saw *every* sin you would ever commit as He looked at your spot on the time line. He placed all of them into Christ and forgave them all, even the ones you haven't committed yet. Don't believe that your failures can bankrupt God's grace. You can't out-sin the grace of God! (See Romans 5:20.)

Many have asked, "Won't teaching people that God's grace has pardoned all of their sins encourage those same people to

commit sins?" Absolutely not. To the contrary, the grace of God teaches Christians to deny ungodliness and to live holy lives (see Titus 2:11). A legalist is afraid of this kind of excessive grace because he has never experienced the freedom to know what sins he might commit if given the chance. And, by the way, the concern that unmeasured grace will lead people to sin isn't new. Paul faced the same concern in his day. In Romans 6:1-3, after having addressed the matter of justification by grace through faith, he poses the question he knows is on everybody's mind:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?

Why won't the believer who knows that all of his sins have been forgiven go out and live a lifestyle of constant sinfulness? It is because he *died* to the sin-life and no longer has the desire for it anymore. This doesn't mean he won't sin. But when he does lapse into sin it will change nothing in his relationship to God.

David Seamands recounts the following story:

I will always remember a turning point in the spiritual life of one of the young teenagers of our church. He had already made his personal commitment to Christ. He tried hard, but, like most adolescents, was plagued by the ups and downs in his Christian life. So he often came forward to the prayer altar during the invitation time following church services. He had done so once again after a Sunday night service conducted by a visiting evangelist. I had prayed with him and now we sat talking at the altar. His face was very sober as he shared with me his determination "to make it this time." Then he asked, "But what if I fail? What happens if I fail?"

I replied, "Steve, I've come to know you pretty well. Probably better than anyone in the church. So I think I can guarantee you one thing—you *will fail*. So what?"

He looked up at me a bit shocked. He had expected me to reassure him, not give him a guarantee of failure. When he didn't reply, I could see he was thinking over the implications of my "So what?"

And then something seemed to dawn on him. It was almost as if the rays from a flashlight had gradually moved across his face. Very slowly he began to smile and to nod his head. "Hmmm...I think I see what you mean. I think I'm catching on," he said. "Of course I'm going to fail; sure, I'll fall. *But that really doesn't make any difference, does it?*" And then the smile lit up his whole face.

Of course, a lot of growth followed, but that was his initial discovery of the way of grace. And his discovery—that with grace, failure doesn't make any difference—changed his life. It was a joy to watch him grow in grace. Later, he became a dispenser of grace as a pastor for eleven years, and now teaches about grace as a professor of systematic theology in a seminary. Are you wondering about my strange reply that I was sure he would fail because I knew him so well? That's because I happen to be his dad!⁵

There is no failure in your life that overshadows God's mercy and grace. Just as God gave Israel the land of Canaan and "thus the land rested from war," so it is to be in your own journey into His land of grace. The war with guilt over our sin is done, and we won. We can relax, knowing that "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). God has reached from eternity into the time line of your existence and has removed your guilt forever. He will never hold your sins against you again (see Isaiah 38:17; 44:22; Jeremiah 31:34; Romans 8:1).

Robert Capon attests:

Trust him. And when you have done that, you are living the life of grace. No matter what happens to you in the course of that trusting—no matter how many waverings you may have, no matter how many suspicions that you have bought a poke with no pig in it, no matter how much heaviness and sadness your lapses, vices, indispositions, and bratty whining may cause you—you simply believe that Somebody Else, by his death and resurrection, has made it all right, and you just say thank you and shut up. The whole slop-closet full of mildewed performances (which is all you have to offer) is simply your death; it is Jesus who is your life. If he refused to condemn you because your works were rotten, he certainly isn't going to flunk you because your faith isn't so hot. You can fail utterly, therefore, and still live the life of grace. You can fold up spiritually, morally, or intellectually and still be safe. Because at the very worst, all you can be is dead—and for him who is the Resurrection and the Life, that just makes you his cup of tea.⁶

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Think of the worst sin you have ever committed. Do you have it in mind? Do you remember the specifics of the sin—what you were thinking and how you were feeling when you committed it? Now think of Jesus Christ hanging on the cross, His brow, feet, and hands pierced and bleeding. His head hangs in

agony. You are standing at the foot of the cross when He lifts His head and looks you directly in the eyes. He looks deeply into your eyes, and you into His. You feel the love emanating from His gaze, then He speaks: "I *love* you, my child. I know about your worst sin. I know every detail. I know about *all* your sins. That's why I'm here. I forgive you. I *forgive* you; now forgive yourself and let's forget this sin and agree to never mention it again."

If it were possible for a moment to move beyond the restraints of this dimension we call *time* and see the cross from the eternal perspective, *that* is what we would hear Jesus say. All is well. Your sins are forgiven forever. Now, answer this question: Does that realization cause you to want to go out and sin, or does it cause you to want to live a godly lifestyle because of your great love and appreciation for Jesus?



Dear Father,

Thank You that all of my sins have been forgiven. Your grace is so much bigger and generous than I have imagined it to be at times. I accept the truth that You hold nothing against me anymore and that You never become angry with me. I choose now to forgive myself for the same things You have already forgiven through the cross. I love You, Lord, and am overwhelmed with gratitude for Jesus. Allow my lifestyle to express that gratitude from this day forward. Thank You, Father.

G.R.A.C.E. Group Questions

1. What is the one thing that causes God to become angry?
Does He become angry with Christians about the sins in their lives? Why or why not?
2. Read Romans 8:29-30. List the five things God has already done for every believer. How is it possible that all of these are spoken of as past events?
3. How many of the Christian's sins have been forgiven?
How would you respond to a person who says that the sins we have not yet committed haven't been forgiven?
4. Pretend that you are listening in on a conversation when God is telling someone else about you. What is He saying about your sins?
5. What is the result of failure in our lives as Christians?
How does God see our failures? How are we to view our own personal failures? What is the difference between self-condemnation and conviction by the Holy Spirit?