

essentials : grappling with grace & fairness

Liz Birdie Ong describes lessons learned in a crisis



I am blessed to have grown up mostly in a Christian family and environment, but a major life crisis caused me to grapple with and re-evaluate many concepts that I took for granted, or never fully understood, including that of grace and fairness. Though my circumstances may not be the experience of many, I hope the lessons I took away may help you as much as they helped me.

grace in sin: fully known, fully forgiven

One reason I feared death was that I felt like I would not know what to say when I met God. I felt like I had not done enough, or done it well enough.

Maybe you're going through a spiritually dry season, or constantly struggle with sins you cannot seem to shake, or feel powerless to do what you know you should be doing. Perhaps you have not been very active at CMF, or missed 'golden opportunities' to tell your patients or colleagues the gospel, or prioritised your studies or friendships or ambitions more than you should, or said something to your patients you wish you could take back. Whatever the reason, you might

feel the same sense of inadequacy and guilt.

This might seem ridiculous coming from someone who grew up in Sunday school and knows full well that salvation is by faith and not by works. However, the way I was living and what I based my joy and sense of accomplishment on, made me realise that knowledge does not always equal action.

As I was being driven to my knees in fear and doubt, God's grace through the people and resources around me helped me find some answers to the questions, 'What will make us ready to meet God? Who are we, and how does God view us?' The answer to these questions may bring comfort in times of overwhelming failure.

When we think that by attending CMF meetings or sharing the gospel, or doing any other 'good deed', that we will be less of a failure and more ready to meet him – when we derive our confidence and satisfaction in ourselves from what we have done rather than what Christ has done on our behalf – we are deceiving ourselves and in reality living a life of 'salvation by works'.



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The comforting truth is that our sins are fully paid for, and that no other good deed will ever make us any more ready to meet him. He knows about any ulterior motives we might have had when volunteering or donating, or being nice to our friends, or being on the CMF committee or community, or even in deciding to enter medicine.

He knew them all – yet he loves us still and has provided a way to make us ready to meet him. He sees not our stained records but rather the cloak of the righteousness of his perfect Son.

fairness in disparities: Christ is enough

Life never seems fair, does it? Perhaps it is a chronic longstanding illness, or encountering young terminally ill patients or disparities in healthcare access and finances. Being dealt a tough hand yourself may stir up cries of indignation that hide a hint of envy, and seeing others you know go through it may trigger similar emotions.

Why can one lady have three healthy children while her friend has to pay for expensive visits to the hospital and may still never be able to have children of her own? Why can't the system do more to help this poor child who is dying because his parents simply cannot afford his care?

Let me take it one step further and relate it to the previous topic on grace. What will the poor terminally ill twelve-year-old say to God when he meets him? What could he have done that would make God say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant'?

At the end of John's Gospel in chapter 21 is a story that seems unfair by human standards – how Peter will die a death like Christ and John may get to live to a ripe old age. This passage always made me feel slightly uncomfortable, for messy reasons I did not dare explore – until I encountered this challenging season and could not avoid it anymore. And yet, surprisingly, I found a strange comfort for my weary struggles. 'If I want him to remain

alive until I return, what is that to you?'¹

The next time you cry out in bitterness and despair about the seemingly endless challenges you or someone you know is facing, remember the incredible privilege of belonging to Jesus, which makes any difference between individuals fade away into insignificance.²

'If I want that mother to have three beautiful and successful children; if I want this youth pastor's ministry to thrive and change many lives; if I want this child to live 105 happy cancer-free years; if I want this young man to succeed in his application – what is that to you?'

Jesus never commanded that we must be successful or accomplish great things for his kingdom. He simply asked us to follow him. With whatever he has given us, wherever he has led us, whoever he has made us to be – we are to follow him.

conclusion

Grasping these truths freed me from the guilt, shame and fears that paralysed and robbed me of the joy, confidence, and abundant life that Christ died to give me.

Grasping these truths freed me from the unwarranted stress that accompanies the lack of results from my striving and struggling, whether in academics, church, relationships, personal development, or good works – because it does not matter how it compares to the achievements of others.

Grasping these truths means that it does not matter whether I or my patient or my friend has 20 short years plagued by a debilitating illness or 100 healthy years to do good works because it is not about what I have done or can do, but what he has done for me. ■

REFERENCES

1. John 21:22
2. Piper J. Battling the Unbelief of Envy. *Desiring God*, 1988. bit.ly/battlingenvy