GOD-MADE SPACE FOR GRACE

HOSEA 11:1-11 ROMANS 4:16 – 5:11

IF I THROW MY KEYS UP, WHAT DO YOU THINK? DO YOU THINK THEY WILL KEEP GOING? OR WILL THEY COME BACK DOWN?

ABOUT 100 YEARS AGO COSMOLOGISTS DISCOVERED THAT THINGS DON’T WORK THE WAY THEY THOUGHT THEY WORKED IN THE UNIVERSE. 13.5 BILLION YEARS SINCE THE BIG BANG STARTED IT OFF, SCIENTISTS FOUND THAT THE UNIVERSE IS NOT RESPONDING TO GRAVITY’S POWER AS THEIR THEORIES ALL PREDICED. IN 1998 SCIENTISTS SAW THAT THE GALAXIES ARE EXPANDING AT EVER INCREASING, AND UNEVEN RATES, EXPANDING BY THE POWER OF SOME ENERGY – THEY CALL IT DARK ENERGY BECAUSE THEY CAN’T FIND IT – THAT IS AT WORK IN THE UNIVERSE. IN ITS IMMENSITY, A MILLION TIMES LARGER THAN THE LARGEST IMAGINING YOU AND I CAN DO. [[1]](#footnote-1) I LIKE TO THINK OF THIS EXPANDING UNIVERSE AS GOD’S GREAT SPACE FOR GRACE. GET READY TO THROW YOUR KEYS WITH ME AGAIN…BECAUSE GOD ISN’T GOING TO CONFORM TO OUR EXPECTED PATTERNS AGAIN TODAY, AS WE DISCOVER MORE ABOUT GOD’S SPACE FOR GRACE.

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 TO REALIZE GOD’S SPACE FOR GRACE TODAY WE DO WELL TO PUT ASIDE TWO GODS WHO GET IN THE WAY OF TRUE GRACE. MAYBE YOU’VE HAD THESE KINDS OF GODS YOURSELF. THE FIRST IS A GOD A LOT LIKE SANTA.[[2]](#footnote-2) SANTA GOD ALWAYS GIVES WONDERFUL GIFTS. WE START MAKING OUR LIST OF WISHES, WE KNOW ALL KINDS OF THINGS WE WANT, AND WE GIVE THE LIST TO SANTA AND SANTA GIVES US WHAT WE’VE ASKED. OH YES, WE KNOW ABOUT THE NAUGHTY VS. NICE LIST...BUT WE AREN’T TOO BOTHERED BY IT; WE’RE PRETTY GOOD MOST OF THE TIME, RIGHT? AND FRANKLY, WE GET WHAT WE WANT, ORDINARILY. BUT A SANTA-LIKE GOD PROVIDES NO GRACE AT ALL. IN OUR FAMILY, WITH AMAZON.COM AND OTHER WEBSITES, IN EARLY DECEMBER WE SEND EACH OTHER LINKS TO WHAT WE WANT FOR CHRISTMAS. AT CHRISTMAS WE ALL GET WHAT WE TOLD EACH OTHER WE WANT. IT DOESN’T FEEL MUCH LIKE A REAL GIFT. WE NAME WHAT WE WANT, WE LOOK TO GET IT. WE ARE THE FOCUS; GOD IS THE FULFILLER OF OUR WISH LIST. THAT’S NOT GIFT; THAT’S NOT GRACE.

THE SECOND GOD WE MIGHT CALL THE DEAL-MAKING GOD. GOD’S GOT THE GOOD THAT WE NEED, AND TO RECEIVE THAT GOOD, WE ARE SUPPOSED TO FULFILL OUR SIDE OF SOME DEAL. IN THE BEST SCENARIO, GOD’S GOODNESS, OUR BEING RIGHT WITH GOD DEPENDS ON OUR KEEPING OUR SIDE OF THE BARGAIN. OR, ON THE DARK SIDE OF THIS NEGOTIATING GOD, WE HAVE TO WATCH OUT; GOD ALSO HAS JUDGMENT AND PUNISHMENT, AND, IF WE DON’T KEEP OUR SIDE OF THE BARGAIN, GOD IS LIABLE TO GIVE THE PUNISHMENT WE HAVE EARNED.

A DEAL-MAKING GOD, OF COURSE, MOTIVATES A LOT OF DUTIFUL BEHAVIOR: YOU OUGHT TO GO TO CHURCH, YOU SHOULD OBEY THE TEN COMMANDMENTS, YOU’VE GOT TO LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR, OR ELSE. YOU’VE GOT TO DO YOUR PART IN THIS DEAL. AND A DEAL-MAKING GOD CAN LEAD TO A LOT OF PRIDE…OR TO A LOT OF GUILT...

I GREW UP IN A NEIGHBORHOOD OF BOYS. MANY AFTERNOONS AFTER SCHOOL WE’D END UP PLAYING BASKETBALL ON A HOOP BY OUR NEIGHBOR’S TENNIS COURT. ABOUT THE TIME I REACHED EARLY ADOLESCENCE I LEARNED THAT LANGUAGE YOUNG TEENAGED BOYS LEARN...THE LANGUAGE OF “CUSS WORDS” YOU FLING AROUND WITH YOUR PEERS. WE DIDN’T EVEN KNOW WHAT SOME OF THEM MEANT, BUT OUR BASKETBALL GAMES WERE TIMES WE TRIED OUT THE LANGUAGE.

I WAS RAISED BY PARENTS WHO NEVER USED BAD LANGUAGE, AND I HAD BEEN TAUGHT TO DO SO WAS WRONG. SO MANY EVENINGS, AFTER A SUPPER MY MOM PREPARED AND AFTER HOMEWORK, I WENT TO BED AND, FILLED WITH GUILT AT MY FOUL WORDS ON THE BASKBALL COURT, PRAYED MY BARGAIN WITH GOD: “LORD, IF YOU WILL FORGIVE ME FOR MY BAD WORDS TODAY, IF YOU WILL FORGIVE ME AND HELP ME MAKE IT THROUGH THE NIGHT, I WON’T CURSE AGAIN.” MY PART OF THE DEAL USUALLY LASTED UNTIL BASKETBALL THE NEXT DAY.

HAVE YOU ACCEPTED JESUS AS YOUR SAVIOR? IT’S UP TO YOU, YOU HAVE TO...WHAT? DECIDE, SURRENDER, TURN FROM YOUR SINS, REDEDICATE YOUR LIFE, TRY REALLY, REALLY HARD NOT TO COMMIT SIN ANYMORE…WHAT? YOU NEED TO DO YOUR PART: YOU HAVE TO FEED THE HUNGRY, WORK FOR PEACE, PRAY FAITHFULLY? ASK GOD PERSISTENTLY? WHAT DO YOU AND I HAVE TO DO TO GET RIGHT WITH GOD? WHAT DO YOU AND I HAVE TO DO RECEIVE GRACE? WHAT DO YOU AND I HAVE TO DO TO CONTINUE TO BE IN GOD’S GOOD GRACES? HAVE WE MET OUR SIDE OF THE DEAL? BUT IF GOD’S GRACE DEPENDS ON ME AS MUCH AS ON GOD, IS IT GRACE AT ALL?

WHEN YOU HEARD LINDA/GEORGE READ THE PROPHET A FEW MINUTES AGO, DID YOU HEAR OF A SANTA-GOD, WHOSE REASON FOR BEING IS TO GIVE WHATEVER ISRAEL/EPHRAIM ASKED? DID YOU HEAR A DEAL-MAKING GOD, READY TO MAKE A TRANSACTION WITH GOD’S PEOPLE BASED ON THEIR FULFILLING THEIR SIDE OF THE AGREEMENT? YOU HEARD NEITHER.

 HOW MUCH MORE DISAPPOINTED AND ANGRY COULD GOD BE THAN EXPRESSED BY THE PROPHET HOSEA? GOD LOVED GOD’S PEOPLE ISRAEL, GOD SAVED THEM FROM SLAVERY, GOD, LIKE A DOTING PARENT TAUGHT THEM TO WALK, HEALED THEM WHEN THEY DID NOT EVEN REALIZE GOD WAS HEALING, LIKE A MOTHER WHO FEEDS HER CHILD WHEN THE CHILD IS HELPLESS, GOD CARED FOR GOD’S PEOPLE. YET THEY WENT TO OTHER GODS AND FORGOT THEIR MAKER AND SAVIOR. GOD IS ANGRY! GOD’S PEOPLE WILL SUFFER! THEY WILL BE ABANDONED! ......

NO! GOD TURNS TO GOD’S OWN:

*HOW CAN I GIVE YOU UP? HOW CAN I HAND YOU OVER?*

*…MY HEART RECOILS WITHIN ME, MY COMPASSION GROWS WARM AND TENDER. I WILL NOT EXECUTE MY FIERCE ANGER…FOR I AM GOD AND NO MORTAL, I AM THE HOLY ONE IN YOUR MIDST, AND I WILL NOT COME IN WRATH.* -HOSEA

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LET’S TURN TO PAUL’S WORDS TO US. TO FIND THE SPACE FOR GRACE GOD OFFERS, LET’S DO SOME WORD ASSOCIATION. I SAY A WORD, YOU THINK OF A PERSON TO GO WITH IT:

WEAK.

HELPLESS.

UNGODLY.

STILL SINNERS.

ENEMIES.

WHO DID YOU THINK OF? DID YOU THINK DAVID SUTTON? DID YOU THINK OF YOURSELVES? ACCORDING TO PAUL IN ROMANS, THOSE WORDS ALL DESCRIBE YOU AND ME AND EVERY HUMAN PERSON. THEY DESCRIBE THE ONLY WAY WE STAND BEFORE GOD IF WE ARE LEFT TO OUR OWN DEVICES. CAN YOU EASILY MAKE A LIST OF WANTS FOR A SANTA-GOD WHEN YOU ARE ENEMY, UNGODLY, WEAK, STILL SINNER? CAN YOU EVER IMAGINE A DEAL WHERE YOU MAKE YOURSELF STRONG, BECOME GODLY ON YOUR OWN, RID YOURSELF OF YOUR SIN, AND TURN YOURSELF FROM ENEMY TO FRIEND...BEFORE GOD WILL ACCEPT YOU?

THIS IS GOD’S SPACE FOR GRACE:

…AT THE RIGHT TIME CHRIST DIED FOR THE UNGODLY…

ENEMIES WE WERE RECONCILED TO GOD BY THE DEATH OF HIS SON…

…WHILE WE WERE STILL SINNERS, AT THE RIGHT TIME CHRIST DIED…

...IF, WHILE WE WERE ENEMIES, WE WERE RECONCILED TO GOD THROUGH THE DEATH OF HIS SON, SO MUCH MORE SURELY, HAVING BEEN RECONCILED, WILL WE BE SAVED BY HIS LIFE.”

ABRAHAM AND SARAH, BEFORE THERE WERE TEN COMMANDMENTS, BEFORE THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT, BEFORE THE INSTRUCTIONS OF PAUL’S LETTERS, WERE CALLED BY GOD TO GO TO A PLACE KNOWN ONLY TO GOD, AND TO BE A BLESSING FOR ALL THE EARTH. AND ABRAHAM TRUSTED GOD AND “IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS BEING RIGHT WITH GOD.” PAUL SAYS THAT TRUST IS RECKONED TO US TOO. WE ARE MADE RIGHT WITH GOD BY GOD’S CHOICE AND ACTION, NOT OURS.

SOMETIMES OUR JEWISH FRIENDS AND THEIR INSIGHTFUL READING OF SCRIPTURE HELP ME. LIKE THIS ONE:

*HERE IS A STORY FROM THE RABBIS: BEFORE SETTING OUT TO CREATE THE WORLD, THE ALMIGHTY TOOK A MOMENT TO LOOK INTO THE FUTURE OF CREATION. GOD SAW BEAUTY, TRUTH, GOODNESS, AND THE JOY OF CREATURES, BUT THE ALL-KNOWING ONE ALSO SAW A NEVER-ENDING STREAM OF HUMAN MISDEEDS, SMALL, LARGE, AND HORRENDOUS, A TRAIL OF SIGHS, TEARS, AND BLOOD. “IF I GIVE SINNERS THEIR DUE,” THOUGHT THE JUST ONE, “I’LL HAVE TO DESTROY THE WORLD THAT I AM ABOUT TO CREATE. SHOULD I CREATE JUST TO DESTROY?” AND SO, GOD DECIDED TO FORGIVE THE WORLD IN ADVANCE SO THAT THE WORLD COULD BE BROUGHT INTO BEING. CREATION OWES ITS VERY EXISTENCE TO GOD’S FORGIVENESS.*

*REDEMPTION...IS NOT A SOLUTION GOD THOUGHT UP AFTER HUMAN BEINGS BOTCHED UP GOD’S FIRST ATTEMPT (AT CREATION). INSTEAD, (REDEMPTION) WAS THE PURPOSE OF CREATION... …THE GIFT OF LIFE RESTS ON THE GIFT OF FORGIVENESS.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

PAUL TELLS US THAT IS WHY GOD GAVE HIS SON FOR YOU…AND ME… THE GIFT OF OUR LIVES RESTS ON THE GIFT OF HIS FORGIVENESS. NOT A PRESENT *WE* DECIDED *WE* WANTED. NOT AN OUTCOME *WE* GET BY FULFILLING *OUR* SIDE OF SOME BARGAIN. THAT WE LIVE AT ALL IS BECAUSE GOD FORGIVES! GOD DOES THE DOING TO MAKE US RIGHT. CAN YOU SEE IT?

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THERE IS ONE LAST THING. WHEN GOD MAKES SPACE FOR GRACE EVEN IN ME, IN YOU, THEN THERE IS SPACE IN US FOR GRACE TOWARDS ONE ANOTHER. PAUL USES THE WORD RECONCILIATION FOR WHAT GOD HAS DONE FOR US...AND RECONCILIATION, THEN, BECOMES POSSIBLE FOR US TOWARD EACH ANOTHER.

THIS HAPPENED NOT LONG AGO: A CHURCH MUCH LIKE THIS ONE IS ORDERING THE *GLORY TO GOD* HYMNAL. PEOPLE ARE ORDERING THEM IN HONOR OF FOLK, IN MEMORY OF FAMILY OR CHURCH FRIENDS. THEIR PASTOR GETS A CALL FROM JOY, A LONG TIME MEMBER.

“PASTOR, I HAVE A QUESTION ABOUT BUYING A NEW HYMNAL.”

“WHAT CAN I ANSWER FOR YOU, JOY?” REPLIES THE PASTOR.

“DO YOU THINK IT WOULD BE ALL RIGHT FOR ME TO GIVE IT IN MEMORY OF MY DAUGHTER SALLY?”

THE PASTOR KNOWS: SALLY DIED FORTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, IN ONE OF THE WORST ACCIDENTS YOU COULD IMAGINE. SHE WAS HIT BY THE CAR OF ANOTHER CHURCH MEMBER, JANE, IN THE PARKING LOT AFTER CHURCH ONE DAY. THE WOMAN DRIVING THE CAR WAS DEVASTATED, THE CHURCH WAS GRIEVED OVER THE ACCIDENT FOR YEARS. JOY AND HER HUSBAND AND HER OTHER DAUGHTER...THERE AREN’T WORDS FOR THEIR SORROW. BOTH FAMILIES STAYED IN THE CHURCH AND SOMEHOW MADE IT, FORTY-FIVE YEARS.

 JOY CONTINUES: “PASTOR, DO YOU THINK IT WOULD BE ALL RIGHT TO GIVE ONE OF THE NEW HYMNALS IN MEMORY OF SALLY? YOU SEE, I’VE NEVER ONCE DONE ANYTHING IN HER MEMORY AT THE CHURCH. I’VE NEVER DONE FLOWERS FOR HER, NEVER GIVEN IN HER MEMORY TO THE MEMORIAL FUND. YOU SEE, I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE TOO HARD ON JANE, BECAUSE SHE’S THE ONE WHO HIT SALLY. I WAS AFRAID I WOULD HURT HER.

 THE PASTOR SAID “YES, IT WOULD BE WONDERFUL TO REMEMBER SALLY.”

 *WHILE WE WERE ENEMIES, WE WERE RECONCILED TO GOD THROUGH THE DEATH OF HIS SON. MUCH MORE SURELY WILL WE BE SAVED BY HIS LIFE.*

GOD-MADE SPACE FOR GRACE.

 IMAGINE THIS: I CAN IMAGINE JOY AND JANE’S PASTOR, HAVING JUST BEEN IN THAT AMAZING SPACE FOR GRACE, LEAVING CHURCH THAT AFTERNOON. SHE WALKS TOWARD HER CAR, GETS HER CAR KES AND TOSSES THEM IN THE AIR...

 ...AND THEY JUST KEEP ON GOING, RISING UP AND UP.

 -DAVID H. SUTTON, September 5, 2021

1. See Dennis Overbye, *Dark, Perhaps Forever,* NY Times, June 3, 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For these two kinds of gods see Miroslav Volf, [*Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*](https://www.amazon.com/Free-Charge-Forgiving-Culture-Stripped/dp/0310265746/ref%3Dsr_1_5?dchild=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwvuGJBhB1EiwACU1AidOBx4nj7XzeQ2UjpA5lEmwL08hKrM7YKDng8G8FPsjM9-eVzVMH-hoCwQ0QAvD_BwE&hvadid=539982626148&hvdev=c&hvlocphy=9009941&hvnetw=g&hvqmt=e&hvrand=3460069223735165310&hvtargid=kwd-332371146879&hydadcr=27862_10743475&keywords=miroslav+volf+books&qid=1631106103&sr=8-5)*,* 2006*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Miroslav Volf, *Free Of Charge*, p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)