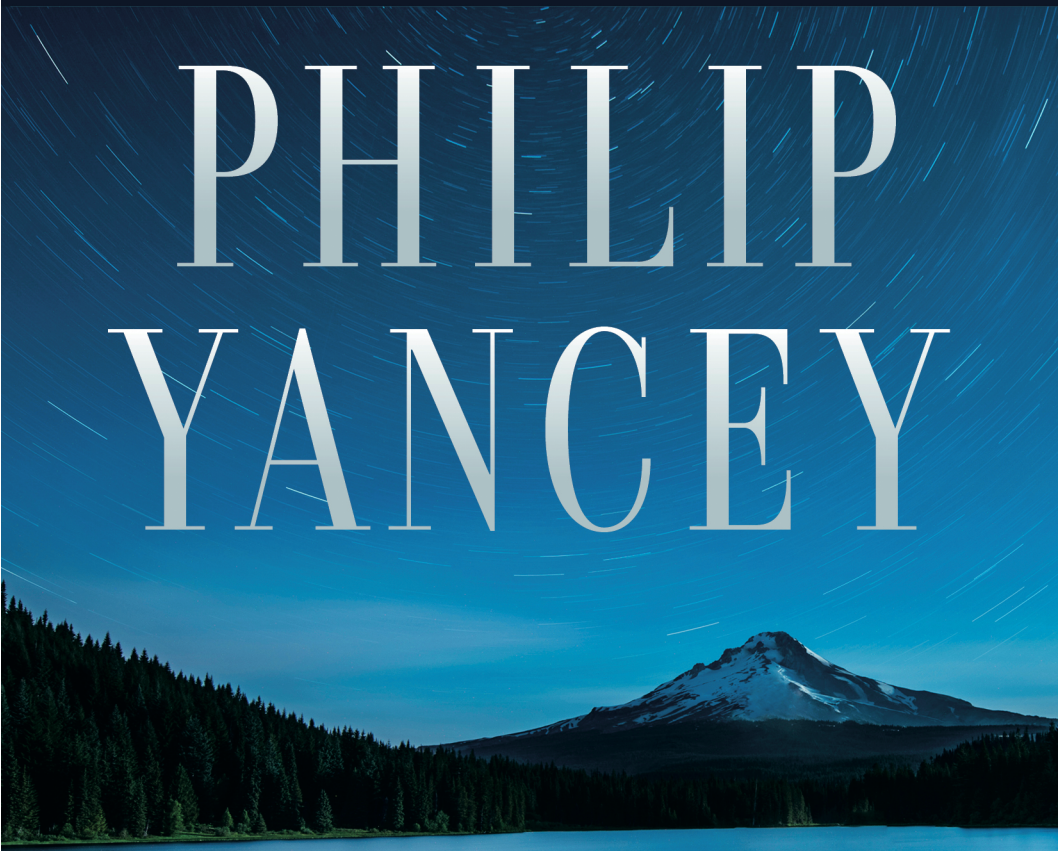
PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

SIX SESSIONS

PHILIP YANCEY



WHAT'S SO AMAZING ABOUT GRACE?

UPDATED EDITION

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PHILIP YANCEY

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PREFACE

Little did I know what I was getting into when I began writing a book about grace. I chose the topic out of my concern that some of us in the U.S. church have lost the way of grace and that we stand in danger of becoming ineffective in our most important role to the world. As I began my research, I came to see that grace underlies the gospel. It affects how we treat each other: our family members and the coworker we don't get along with, those who sit beside us in church and those who vote in ways we don't agree with, the friend who hurt us years ago and the cranky neighbor down the street. I truly believe that the future for Christians depends on how we master the art of giving grace.

Gordon MacDonald said, "You need not be a Christian to build houses, feed the hungry, or heal the sick. There is only one thing the world cannot do. It cannot offer grace." And that is the church's single most important contribution. Where else can the world go to find grace? And the world indeed is desperately thirsty for grace.

As I look back on my own pilgrimage—marked by wanderings, detours, and dead ends—I see now that what pulled me along was my search for grace. I rejected the church for a

time because I found so little grace there. I returned because I found grace nowhere else.

I have barely tasted grace myself, have rendered less than I have received, and am no "expert" on it. These are the very reasons that impelled me to write. I wanted to understand why the church seems to have lost this gift. Often the down-and-out, who flocked to Jesus, feel unwelcome among his followers. What happened? And most personally, what would it mean for us to truly understand, receive, and give the gift that God gives so generously to me and you?

I wrote the book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* at the end of the twentieth century. At the time, millions of people were rejoicing in their new freedom after the fall of communism in Europe. The United States was entering a new century with power and optimism. Since then, we have seen the rise of nationalism globally, deep political and racial divisions in the U.S., and the phenomenon of "nones" who claim no religious affiliation. The world is in desperate need of grace-dispensers.

We have produced six videos and the corresponding study sessions to help you and a study group or class to explore those very questions, learn from the example of Jesus, and reflect on what grace means for our daily lives. Most of the material in this video series is new, so those who read the book (though not necessary for group participation) will find that this participant's guide enhances their experience.

I have filled the book and this study with stories because I believe stories are the best way to comprehend grace. I hope they prompt you to reflect on and share the stories from your

own experiences. Groups are an ideal place to share stories of grace and ungrace because at its core, grace is always relational.

Philip Yancey

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

GROUP USE

The *What's So Amazing About Grace?* video-based curriculum is designed as an engaging experience for a small group, Bible Study, church class, or the like. To make sure everyone has time to share, it is recommended that large groups break into smaller groups of no more than six to eight people.

MATERIALS

Each member of the group should have their own participant's guide to go along with the six videos. Though not necessary, it is encouraged that each member has their own copy of the *What's So Amazing About Grace?* book for in-depth insights and an enriched experience.

FACILITATION

Groups find that studies like this one run best when a facilitator is appointed to run the video, keep discussions going, and make sure each member has a chance to share.

PERSONAL JOURNEYS

For deeper reflections, this participant's guide includes four studies per session for each member to do on their own in between group meetings. These individual studies take a closer look at biblical passages from the *What's So Amazing About Grace?* video and book and offer questions to prompt thoughts and ideas on how to apply the message of God's grace to your daily life.

CHAPTER REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

This participant's guide draws on the book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* [abbreviated WSAAG] by Philip Yancey. Chapter references and suggested reading notes are included throughout this guide for groups and individuals who want to read along.

SESSION ONE

NO STRINGS ATTACHED

God's Love for the Undeserving

Grace teaches us that God loves because of who God is, not because of who we are. Categories of worthiness simply don't apply.

—Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* video session one

INTRODUCTION

In one of his last acts before his death, Jesus forgave a thief dangling on a cross, knowing full well the thief had converted out of plain fear. That thief would never study the Bible, never attend synagogue or church, and never make amends to all those he had wronged. He simply said "Jesus, remember me," and Jesus promised, "today you will be with me in paradise." It was another shocking reminder that grace does not depend on what we have done for God but rather what God has done for us. [WSAAG, chapter 4]

By instinct, we feel we must *do something* in order to be accepted, to earn our place in the world and the love and acceptance of others. This concept of earning is built into every human system—and our relationship with divine love is no exception. We work obsessively to please both other people and God. Perhaps this is why we struggle so much to comprehend God's grace, let alone embody it in our daily lives.

Many of us formed an image of a mathematical God when we became Christians: a great judge who weighs our good and evil deeds on a set of scales and somehow always finds us wanting. We miss the God of the Gospels, a God of mercy and generosity who never ceases to find ways to extend love and give us grace. [chapter 5]

WATCH VIDEO

Watch the video for session one. Add to the key points below notes of your own on anything that stands out or prompts a thought or a feeling.

Grace, like water, always flows down to the lowest level.

"Doctors like Will Cooke and C. Everett Koop looked to Jesus, the Great Physician, as their model. Jesus put it bluntly: 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick,' he said. 'I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"

Jesus healed and ministered to those deemed "undeserving" by the culture of his day: the unclean, leprosy victims, cultural outsiders and enemies like the Roman soldier, and even the bodies of the dead in order to bring them back to life.

"See to it that no one misses the grace of God" (Hebrews 12:15).

"Grace is tough, and difficult. It means showing love and compassion to people who may take advantage of it. It means forgiving those who have wounded us, and sacrificing our own interests for the sake of others."

GROUP DISCUSSION

Choose the questions that work best for your group.

1. Both Dr. Cooke and Dr. Koop faced the temptation to let judgment determine the way they served those in need. Instead, they followed the example of Jesus and let the healing power of grace determine how they treated others. Imagine putting yourself in the doctors' shoes: What part of their response would be hardest for you?

2. Jesus healed and ministered to those who were deemed the most undeserving by the culture of his day. Who are the individuals and groups considered "undeserving" of grace and second chances by our culture today? What are some examples of how you could extend grace to those individuals or groups?

3. Based on Philip's informal survey, most people don't think of the word *grace* when they think about Christians. Why do you think this is so?

4. **Read John 3:16–17.** Instead of casting divine judgment, what was Jesus's primary goal in coming to earth? What does this verse tell you about God's heart for the world?

5. By default, we can't seem to help thinking of God's grace in terms of fairness, as if we could somehow earn his free gift. How does this limit our understanding of God's true nature?

6. "Grace, like water, flows to the lowest part." What might the world look like for Christians to put this principle into action?

CLOSING PRAYER

Spend a few minutes reflecting on today's discussion, then pray the following prayer together—out loud as a group—or allow a volunteer to pray on behalf of the group. Add in your own words as you like.

> *Lord, we confess that we have practiced ways of ungrace—in our judgmental thoughts, in our reluctance to be generous and kind to others, and in the ways we have tried to earn your grace for ourselves. Please open our eyes, our hearts, and our hands that we may recognize, receive, and, in turn, pass along the gift of your grace.*

SUGGESTED READING

For more thoughts and stories about grace from Philip Yancey, read: *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, chapters 1–5.

Each reading will include stories about Philip's personal journey toward God's grace and will often highlight stories from well-known authors, movies, or historical events that illustrate the power of grace.

BETWEEN SESSIONS

These four individual studies take a closer look at biblical passages from the *What's So Amazing About Grace?* video and book and offer questions to prompt thoughts and ideas on how to apply the message of God's grace to your daily life.

PERSONAL JOURNEY 1.1

"Grace is not about finishing last or first;
it is about not counting."
—Philip Yancey [WSAAG, chapter 5]

Read Matthew 20:1–16.

Jesus's parable of the workers and their grossly unfair paychecks confronts the scandal of grace head-on. In a contemporary Jewish version of this story, the workers hired late in the afternoon work so hard that the employer, impressed, decides to award them a full day's wages. Not so in Jesus's version, which notes that the last crop of workers have been idly standing around in the marketplace, something only lazy, shiftless workers would do during harvest season. Moreover, these laggards do nothing to distinguish themselves, and

the other workers are shocked by the pay they receive. What employer in his right mind would pay the same amount for one hour's work as for twelve!

Jesus's story makes no economic sense, and that was his intent. He was giving us a parable about grace, which cannot be calculated like a day's wages.

- Which group of workers in Jesus's parable do you relate to the most and why?

- Why does grace so often seem offensive or scandalous to us?

- Like the workers who grumbled at the generosity of the vineyard owner, when have you been envious of the gift God has given to another?

- In what ways have you been blessed by the *unfairness* of God's grace?

PRAYER

Start your prayer with these words from Isaiah and add your own words of gratitude for the ways God has given undeserved grace to you.

> *"'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the* Lord*. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8–9).*

PERSONAL JOURNEY 1.2

"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."
—C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*

Read Matthew 18:23–35.

The parable of the unmerciful servant is an exaggeration on many levels. For the servant to owe the king such a large amount—the equivalent of several million dollars today—that his family, children, and all his property would not make a dent in repaying the debt is unrealistic to say the least. Jesus heightens the contrast by telling us that the amount the servant's colleague owed him was a mere few dollars.

Why Jesus draws the parable with such exaggerated strokes becomes clear when he reveals that the king represents God. This above all should determine our attitude toward others: a humble awareness that God has already forgiven us a debt so mountainous that beside it any person's wrongs against us shrink to the size of anthills.

- What thoughts and feelings arise in you when you read the quote by C. S. Lewis at the top of the page?

- Reflect on the ways this parable mirrors the gospel. **Read Romans 3:23–24.**

- What does the reaction of the forgiven servant tell us about human nature? Why is forgiving others so difficult for us?

- Think about the people in your life—colleagues, family, and friends. Who exemplifies grace and forgiveness? What person in your life is God prompting you to give grace or forgiveness to?

PRAYER

Start your prayer with the Lord's Prayer from Matthew 6:9–13. Ask God to reveal the depths of his forgiveness for you and the opportunities you have to extend forgiveness to others.

> *"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, for ever and ever, Amen.*

PERSONAL JOURNEY 1.3

"I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love."
—Hosea 11:4

Read Hosea 3.

In an astonishing acted-out parable, God asks the prophet Hosea to marry a woman named Gomer in order to illustrate God's love for Israel. Gomer bears three children for Hosea, then abandons the family to live with another man. For a time she works as a prostitute, and it is during this period that God gives the shocking command to Hosea, "Go, show love to your wife again" (v. 1).

Gomer did not get fairness, or even justice; she got grace. Throughout the book of Hosea—especially in God's speeches which begin with sternness and dissolve into tears—it's a

wonder that a God who allows himself to endure such humiliation never fails to return again and again. At the heart of the gospel is a God who deliberately surrenders to the wild, irresistible power of love.

- Rather than resting in her husband's gracious love, Gomer turned back to sources of false affection. In what ways have you done the same?

- Gomer understood she did not deserve Hosea's forgiveness and love, yet she received his gift of grace and returned home. In what areas of your life do you struggle to receive God's forgiveness?

- Humans work very hard at protecting their reputation and self-respect. Yet the act of giving grace has very little to do with either. Hosea bore the public disgrace of paying a prostitute's price to bring his wife back home, and Jesus bore the disgrace of being executed as a criminal. What would it mean for you to put grace above self-respect?

- Who in your life might you, like Hosea, extend love to again regardless of what happened in the past?

PRAYER

Start your prayer with this Psalm. Confess the ways you've withheld grace from others and ask God for the courage and opportunity to pass on his extravagant love to the people around you.

> *"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. . . . He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him" (Psalm 103:8–11).*

PERSONAL JOURNEY 1.4

"My deepest awareness of myself is that I
am deeply loved by Jesus Christ
and I have done nothing to earn it or deserve it."
—Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*

Read Romans 8:31–39.

Philip writes, "I know how I respond to rejection letters from magazine editors and to critical letters from readers. I know how high my spirits soar when a larger than expected royalty check arrives, and how low they sink when the check is small. I know that my self-image at the end of the day depends largely on what kind of messages I have received from people. Am I liked? Am I loved? I await the answers from my friends, my neighbors, my family—like a starving man, I await the answers.

"Occasionally, all too occasionally, I sense the truth of grace. There are times when I study the parables and grasp

that they are about *me*. I am the sheep the shepherd has left the flock to find, the prodigal for whom the father scans the horizon, the servant whose debt has been forgiven. I am the beloved one of God."

At a seminar, beloved author Brennan Manning said about the apostle John, "If John were to be asked, 'What is your primary identity in life?' he would not reply, 'I am a disciple, an apostle, an evangelist, an author of one of the four Gospels,' but rather, 'I am the one Jesus loves.'" [chapter 5]

- On an average day, what would you say is your primary identity?

- Imagine you came to a place where you could say your primary identity in life is as "the one Jesus loves." What would it mean for your relationships? Your work? The way you relate to God?

- What causes you to doubt your belovedness?

- When next you doubt how loved and accepted you are by God, what practical step could you take to restore your trust in your true identity?

PRAYER

Start your prayer with these words drawn from today's reading, and then add your own words of thanks for God's unconditional love.

> *God, I thank you for loving me so profoundly, and I trust that neither death nor life, neither my past, or my future, nor any powers or obstacles, nor anything else in all creation can separate me from your love that is in Christ Jesus, my Lord.*