

If Grace Is True

Why God Will Save Every Person



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A Note from the Authors



We've been friends since we stood in line together at registration for our first year of seminary. We sat next to each other in class, pastored small city churches, edited each other's sermons, and struggled together with the complexities of knowing and serving God. We deeply treasure the friendship God has given us. The book you are about to read is the fruit of that relationship.

Certain risks are inherent in coauthoring a book, even for the best of friends. Chief among them are the differences of opinion that arise in thinking and writing about the most personal of life's dimensions—the spiritual. Fortunately, as we wrote this book, we marveled at the many points at which our theology agreed. Though

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our backgrounds differ, our experiences with God are remarkably alike. Over time, it seemed quite natural to write as one voice. Hence, this book, though authored by two people, is written in the first person.

There are pragmatic reasons for writing this book in one voice. It seemed awkward to use the word *we* or to distinguish continually between “Phil” and “Jim.” Some of the stories in this book come from Phil’s life, some from Jim’s, and some are a combination of similar encounters. Regardless, they represent our shared view of life. We also hoped not identifying the author of a given passage would provide additional anonymity for the people we’ve written about. To that end, we’ve changed the names of most people to mask their identity further.

However, the chief reason we wrote this book together arises from our belief that theology is a conversation, not a monologue. We committed ourselves to writing a book both of us could fully affirm. That wasn’t always easy, but we believe this book is better and truer for our having worked together than if we had toiled alone. In that same spirit of Christian community, we invite your thoughtful response to the issues we’ve raised. Though we might not be able to respond personally to every contribution, we will take it seriously.

Though we realize a book of this nature is sure to generate disagreement and even hostility, our hope is

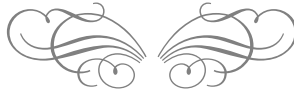
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that it will help our readers experience God's grace and presence in a deeper way. To that end, we offer this book to you, the reader, praying God's gracious Spirit might use it to bless and enrich your life.

Philip Gulley and
James Mulholland

O n e

The Dilemma



Sally was likely dead before she hit the floor. One minute she was laughing with co-workers. The next minute she lay crumpled at their feet. They called the paramedics, who rushed her forty miles to the hospital, where the doctors and nurses kept her heart beating for twelve more hours. Long enough for her son to call the church and ask me to come. Time enough for family to gather, to grieve, and to ask why. The doctor called it a stroke. I called it a mystery. Neither answer brought much comfort. Whatever the explanation, Sally was likely dead before she hit the floor.

Sally's death shook me. She was my age, our birthdays only a week apart. I thought this the cause of my discomfort when they asked me to speak at her funeral,

but in preparing her eulogy I faced far more than my own mortality. I learned many secrets about this woman whom I'd often judged, sometimes condemned, and never respected. I discovered her life had been as cruel as her death. I realized my opinion of Sally had been unfair. At her funeral, I would bury my self-righteousness and arrogance. I would leave next to the flowers arranged around her grave a belief I'd held since I was a child.

Let me tell you about Sally.

Sally's father deserted her when she was three. Her mother filled the void with a parade of temporary replacements, none of whom wanted Sally underfoot. She was discarded. Passed from aunt to cousin to grandmother and back again, staying only as long as their patience allowed. Shuffled from school to school, from town to town. She made only acquaintances, never a friend. Longing for a stability she'd never known, Sally married young, and poorly.

Her husband abandoned her with three small children, no job, and no diploma. Her dreams withered away as she struggled to survive. All her life she'd been neglected, and now she began to neglect herself. Like dominoes falling, bad jobs were followed by worse ones; a poor husband was replaced by abusive boyfriends. Alcohol and drugs sped her descent. When the last domino toppled, Sally was thirty-two years old, the mother of

five, unemployed, and living off the leftovers of neighbors and relatives. That domino tumbled the day she slept in with a hangover and woke to find her youngest daughter drowned in the pool next door.

When her son came and through his tears told me the news, I could barely contain my rage. Unaware of Sally's sad past, I saw only a mother who had failed her child, and I despised her. It was with great difficulty that I preached her daughter's funeral.

Before the funeral, Sally told me she'd been abandoned by God. I assured her God hadn't forsaken her. I told her, "God loves you. He knows your pain. You're not alone." But I offered those words through gritted teeth, certain she neither heard nor cared and doubting, myself, whether in her case it was true.

After the funeral Sally stood by her daughter's casket, clutching a wad of tissue and crying. "There's no reason to live," she said. "No reason at all."

She was wrong.

The last five years of Sally's life were her happiest. That's what everyone said at Sally's funeral. That's what her children said, what her mother said, what her friends said—Sally's last five years were her best.

How could that be?

In the days after her daughter's death, Sally repented. Now by *repentance*, I don't mean she fell to her

knees at a church altar and confessed her sins aloud. I don't mean she affirmed a set of spiritual laws or accepted a Lord and Savior. By *repentance*, I simply mean what the word itself means—Sally turned. She turned from thoughts of suicide. She turned from crippling self-pity. She turned from despair. She turned.

Sally moved to a small town. She found a job. Then she found a better one. She bought a car. She bought a house. She planted flowers. She even planted a tree. She made friends, not acquaintances. She made peace with her family. Life wasn't perfect, but she'd turned from despair.

A month before her death, she told her son of a new and surprising desire. The day before Sally's funeral, her son revealed her confession to me. It was the memory that comforted him the most. His mother had simply confided, "I think I'm going to look for a church."

Sally died searching.

The woman I'd so easily disregarded while she lived had become a dilemma in her death. I sat in my office, reflecting on all I had learned and struggling with the words I should speak at Sally's funeral. To many Christians, Sally's destiny was an easy judgment. Having never accepted Christ, Christ wouldn't accept her. She was doomed to hell.

I grew up believing we were destined for either heaven or hell. I was taught that only those who con-

fessed their sins and accepted Jesus as their Savior before they died would live with God forever. All the rest would suffer hell's eternal torment. As a child, I'd never questioned this formula. It was simple and clear. As an adult, I'd held on to this belief despite life's complexities.

Now Sally's life and death had unsettled what was once a sure conviction. In clear response to our prayers, she had been drawing close to God. She'd turned from the path of destruction. She'd been asking, seeking, and knocking. I couldn't believe God would invite Sally to his home, then slam the door as she stood at the threshold. It seemed a cruel joke.

What should I say at Sally's funeral?

I was torn. I'd once thought hell a fitting end to her life. But when I learned more about her, that judgment troubled me. Sally had spent her life climbing out of hell. How could I wish for her return? Though it defied the formula I'd been taught, I wanted God to be gracious to Sally. My scorn gave way to sympathy.

I began to pray, asking God to welcome Sally to heaven, to make a way for her to experience the truth of what I'd told her. "God loves you. He knows your pain. You're not alone." I thought about that for a while. The longer I thought, the clearer the answer became.

God loved Sally far more than I. He'd been there when she cried herself to sleep as a little girl, when she

was abused and rejected by those around her, when her efforts to find happiness led only to more misery, and when in her moment of greatest despair she determined to keep trying. If the little I knew had changed my heart toward Sally, why was it so hard to believe God was even more gracious? It was the formula. It limited God's grace.

The next day at the funeral, instead of talking about the formula, I spoke of grace. I read a story Jesus told—a story of a father and his prodigal son, of a son who wandered afar before turning toward home, of a father waiting, hoping, and longing.

I said, “Some people think God sits on a throne, holding fast to holiness and justice, waiting for us to grovel at his feet. But last night, as I thought about Sally, I remembered another prodigal's homecoming. I realized God is never content to wait on his throne. God was standing at the door watching for Sally, just as surely as that father watched for his prodigal. And while she was yet at a distance, God saw her and had compassion. God ran and embraced her. God welcomed her home.”

In the telling, I knew it to be true.

That night I sat in my living room thinking back on Sally's funeral. It had been a good funeral. Sally's family said my words about her rang true. A good funeral not only should speak the truth about the person, it should ring true about God. It should speak of a Father who

does not abandon his children. Even the Sallys of our world. Especially the Sallys.

A good funeral should also speak of grace. Now by *grace*, I don't mean an expected reward earned by good people. Neither do I mean a divine gift offered grudgingly to a chosen few. I don't mean any notion that slips easily and naturally into our tidy formulas. By *grace*, I mean God's unfailing commitment to love.

Writing Sally's eulogy was the breaching of a dam—the first rivulet of what would soon become a coursing flood. For many years God had been eroding my obsessive devotion to judgment, punishment, and wrath. God had used countless experiences to wear away my inadequate understanding of his grace. The life and stories of Jesus had slowly undercut theological formulas I'd accepted uncritically. Sally's funeral simply washed away any remnants of resistance. The dam ruptured, and grace swept through, softening ground that had long been cracked and dry.

Now I have a new formula. It too is simple and clear. It is the most compelling truth I've ever known. It is changing my life. It is changing how I talk about God. It is changing how I think about myself. It is changing how I treat other people. It brings me untold joy, peace, and hope. This truth is the best news I've ever heard, ever believed, and ever shared.

I believe God will save every person.

Now by *salvation*, I mean much more than a ticket to heaven. I mean much more than being cleansed of our sins and rescued from hell's fire. I mean even more than being raised from the grave and granted eternal life. By *salvation*, I mean being freed of every obstacle to intimacy with God. We will know as we are known and love as we are loved.

Some have already experienced this salvation, though not all call it by that name. Others, like Sally, long for this salvation but will find it only beyond the grave. Many, like me, have experienced God's love but have misunderstood salvation. We've thought it a trophy rather than a gift, a personal achievement rather than a work of God. We've gloried in our salvation and damned those whose obstacles have far exceeded our own.

I was ungracious to Sally. There were so few hurdles in my life. I was blessed with good parents, a nurturing church, a loving wife, healthy children, education, and affluence. I'd known love as long as I could remember. My sin was comparing Sally to myself and despising her. She faced difficulties I'll never understand.

I do understand her reluctance to believe God loved her. Though my religious experience was largely positive, I often vacillated between reveling in God's favor

and fearing God's wrath. I'd been told of God's love, but warnings of God's high expectation and the consequences of failure were equally emphasized. Sunday school tales of Adam and Eve's ejection, the flood's destruction, and God's quick retribution for the slightest infraction only reinforced my fears. Lot's wife took one look back and was turned into a pillar of salt. I spent my early years afraid I'd displease God with my thoughts, words, or actions and he'd destroy me.

Fortunately, Sunday school also introduced me to Jesus, who became a friend and companion, forgiving and understanding. I easily accepted his divinity. He became the focus of my prayers and adoration. I knew Jesus loved me because the Bible told me so. The biblical accounts of God's attitude weren't as comforting. Hearing that Jesus was all that stood between me and God's wrath didn't ease my anxiety. God wanted to destroy me, but Jesus had died for me. I found myself wishing God could be more like Jesus. At Sally's funeral, I realized he was.

The grace I experienced in Jesus was the grace of God. The Father he spoke of—who welcomed the prodigal and embraced Sally—was the very Father who loved me. The assurance of this love freed me from childhood fears, enabling me to voice these optimistic words: *I believe God will save every person.*

Seven words. Seven simple words. When I first spoke them in a sermon, I stated them boldly, hoping for agreement. Some folks were intrigued, but others were appalled. Some even suggested I had abandoned my faith. They all had questions. Good questions. Thoughtful questions.

“How can you contradict thousands of years of tradition and the testimony of the Bible?”

“Of course, God is love, but isn’t he also holy and just?”

“Aren’t we free to reject God’s love and ignore his grace?”

“If everyone is going to heaven, why was Jesus necessary?”

“You mean even Adolph Hitler will be in heaven?”

I’ve prayed and thought about these questions. I’ll address them further on. But these questions have not diminished my conviction: I believe God will save every person.

This book is about those seven words.