

**Prepared to Receive the Gospel**  
**Series: Grace Works! #1**  
 1 Tim. 1:8

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In an interview on October 15, 2013 Billy Graham said, “There are two basic needs that all people have: the need for hope and the need for salvation. It should not be surprising if people believe easily in a God who makes no demands, but this is not the God of the Bible. Satan has cleverly misled people by whispering that they can believe in Jesus Christ without being changed, but this is the Devil’s lie. To those who say you can have Christ without giving anything up, Satan is deceiving you.” That’s pretty strong language. Dr. Graham said that before his conversion he thought he was a Christian. But his life changed on November 1, 1934 when he repented and turned his life over to God. Listen to the comment that he then makes in the interview. “If there is no change in a person's life, he or she must question whether or not they possess the salvation that the gospel proclaims. Many who go to church have not had a life-changing transformation in Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

What prepares a person to have a life-changing transformation in Christ? Has everyone who says, “*Lord, Lord*” really surrendered their lives to Christ?<sup>2</sup> Have all the people in our churches been transformed by a supernatural encounter with God? Or is there an easy believism that is robbing people of the real thing? And if that is the case, what do we do about it?

I want to begin responding to that question by sharing four awakenings that prepare people to receive the gospel and have a life-changing transformation. Notice the progressive nature of these awakenings as I share them.

**I. An Awakening to God’s existence.**

Heb. 11:6 “*But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is....*”<sup>3</sup> The NIV says, “...*must believe that He exists....*” That’s a pretty basic belief. Polls indicate that 9 out of 10 Americans believe there is a God.<sup>4</sup> Of course, polls simply reflect what people say they believe. When the Bible talks about belief, it is referring to something deeper and more significant than intellectual assent.<sup>5</sup> You can tell what people really believe by what they actually do. People behave according to their real belief system. James confronts that in his epistle when he says, “...*Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. 19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe -- and tremble! 20 But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?*” (James 2:18-21). There is a lot of dead faith out there concerning the existence of God.

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<sup>1</sup> “Q&A: Billy Graham's Warning Against an Epidemic of 'Easy Believism'”, Christianity Today/ OCTOBER 15, 2013, retrieved 4/2/16 at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/october-web-only/billy-graham-interview-my-hope-easy-believism.html?start=1>.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:21

<sup>3</sup> All Scripture quotes are in New King James Version unless indicated otherwise.

<sup>4</sup> “More Than 9 in 10 Americans Continue to Believe in God,” Gallup by Frank Newport June 3, 2011 retrieved 4/2/16 at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/147887/americans-continue-believe-god.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> The Greek work *pisteuo* means ‘to believe,’ also ‘to be persuaded of,’ and hence, ‘to place confidence in, to trust,’ signifies, in this sense of the word, reliance upon, not mere credence.” See BELIEF, BELIEVE, BELIEVERS (from Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Copyright (c)1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers).

Ps 53:1 *“The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”* The fool sees the evidence of God all around him. All of creation declares the glory of God. Every insect crawling on the ground is evidence of God, because man cannot duplicate even that level of life. The billions of stars and galaxies indicate something bigger than you and me made all that. The design and complexity of human life is more than a product of chance. The Bible doesn’t even argue God’s existence. Genesis 1:1 simply opens with this statement, *“In the beginning God...”* God has revealed Himself through creation and this leaves every human being accountable for that revelation. Rom 1:20 *“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.”*<sup>6</sup> But even with all the evidence the fool says in his heart, *“There is not God.”* He has to work at it; but in his heart he convinces himself that God is not there. That’s not where most people are. Most people think He’s there; they just try to shape Him into something He is not.

There are levels of awareness in people’s lives. Some people accept the existence of God; but don’t think much about it. Others go deeper in their thoughts and consider the implications of such a reality. If there is no God; then we’re pretty much on our own and history tells us that’s not a very good scenario. Man has a tendency to kill and self-destruct. On the other hand, if there is a God, then wouldn’t that be the most important subject there is? If there is a Being out there somewhere who created me, maybe I should find out more about Him, perhaps get in touch with Him somehow? Maybe I should find out what He wants me to do and what He doesn’t want me doing? If God is, then that becomes highly significant! The more I realize the significance of that, the greater is this first awakening is in my life.

## **II. An Awakening to Moral Accountability.**

If have already alluded to this because it is a natural product of knowing God exists. Since He exists, what kind of person is He? How am I to relate to Him? He is obviously superior to me. I can’t make people. I can’t even make myself. I certainly can’t make the galaxies of the heavens. I can’t even reach them.

So now we arrive at the second half of Heb. 11:6 *“But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”* So some things He rewards and it would seem some things He does not reward.

How do I know that God is a moral being?

The design of creation might indicate there is a right way of doing something and a wrong way—a way that works verses a way that would not work. If I try to fly using laws of aerodynamics, it works. If I violate those principles it does not end well. If my tribe eats strawberries, we are nourished. If we eat poison berries, we tend to die. There is order in creation that would at least imply right and wrong ways of behaving.

But the main way I know God is a moral being is that I have a sense of right and wrong built into me. That consciousness of right and wrong had to come from somewhere; and the obvious source is the Creator. Paul talks about this in Rom 2:14-15 *“for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, 15 who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them).”*

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<sup>6</sup> People ask, “What about the heathen who have never heard the gospel? They have this level of accountability to their Creator.

Everywhere in the world, every tribe, every nation operates with a moral code. We are hardwired for moral sensitivity. Innately we know we are morally responsible. And since we have been awakened to the fact that there is a higher being, we realize we are morally accountable to Him. Now at this point in the awakening, we may have a distorted understanding of what the moral boundaries are. But we have become aware of moral accountability. Thinking people will ponder the implications of that! Superficial people will feel it; but divert their attention elsewhere.

### III. An Awakening to Personal Transgression

The first law God gave to man is recorded in Gen. 2:16-17 *“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’”*

Only one rule and Adam broke that rule. Adam transgressed; and the consequences followed.

In time, God raised up the nation of Israel and gave them the Ten Commandments along with the rest of the Mosaic Law. On Mt. Sinai God manifested His holiness. The people trembled in His presence.<sup>7</sup> The Law told them clearly what they were to do. After rehearsing the Law to the nation of Israel, Moses says this to them in Deut. 32:46 *“...Set your hearts on all the words which I testify among you today, which you shall command your children to be careful to observe -- all the words of this law.”* That one little three-letter word *“all”* was the kicker. Maybe my disposition was such that lying and stealing were not such an issue. But two out of ten is not good enough. God’s standard is *“all.”* James tells us that if we offend in one point of the Law, we are guilty of all (2:10). Paul was a highly disciplined Pharisee, but even he failed in the area of covetousness.<sup>8</sup> *“All”* means perfection; and no one (including Moses) could live up to it. (Actually Jesus did!<sup>9</sup>).

So why would a just and merciful God give people a set of rules they couldn’t live up to?<sup>10</sup>

Gal 3:24 says that the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ. The Law was designed to show us our desperate need for a Savior. Without the demands of the Law we might have thought we were good enough on our own. But our righteousness, our independent goodness, comes so short of the glory of God that Isa. 64:6 says it’s like filthy rags.

An awakening to the perfect demands of the law leads naturally to an awakening of our own personal transgression. And this is absolutely essential if we are to be saved.

Rom. 3:19-20 *“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. 20 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”* Did you get that phrase, *“for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”* Sin is transgression of God’s laws.

Uninformed people think that Jesus did away with the Law.<sup>11</sup> But Jesus clearly tells us He did not come to do that. Matt 5:17-18 *“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did*

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 20:18

<sup>8</sup> Romans 7:7-8

<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 4:15

<sup>10</sup> I have talked with people who actually use this question to justify rejecting God in their lives. They do not understand the purpose of the Law nor the provision of God’s grace.

<sup>11</sup> When we do away with the Law, we do away with sin; for sin is transgression of the Law (1 John 3:4). When we do away with sin, we do away with the need for a Savior. We utterly undermine the gospel!

*not come to destroy but to fulfill. 18 For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.”*

Instead of doing away with the Law, Jesus explained it with an intensity that brought even more discomfort. Listen to His words in the Sermon on the Mount.

*Matt 5:21-22 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' 22 But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.”*

*Verses 27-28 “You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*

Jesus is using the Law exactly the way God always intended it to be used. The Law is designed to show people their sin, their sinfulness, their inability to reach the standard, their need for help.

1 Tim 1:8-9 *“But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, 9 knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners....”* The Law was never given as a means of salvation. It was never able to do that, because people are not able to live by its statutes.<sup>12</sup> The Law was given to show people their sin. It was given to make them aware of their transgression. The more thoroughly that happens, the better prepared a person is to receive the gospel.

People say, “Don’t condemn me with the Law.” John 3:18 says you’re condemned already if you have not surrendered to the cross of Christ. Your own choices condemn you. The solution begins with acknowledging that.

Why were the Scribes and Pharisee not saved, even though they saw the Savior face-to-face? Jesus told them why in John 9:41 *“...If you were blind, you would have no sin; but now you say, 'We see.' Therefore your sin remains.”* They were not fulfilling the Law. If they would have humbled themselves and acknowledged that, they too could have been saved. But their position was one of self-righteousness. “We’re fine. We don’t have a problem.” *“Therefore your sin remains.”*

#### **IV. An Awakening to Pending Judgement**

By the Law also comes an awareness of judgement that accompanies disobedience. In Deut. 27 Moses put one group of people on Mt. Gerizim and another group on Mt. Ebal. Those on Mt. Gerizim pronounced the blessing that would come on them if they kept the commandments of God. Those on Mt. Ebal pronounced the curses that would come on them if they did not keep the commandments of God.

So the Levites shouted out the curses in Deut. 27.

15'Cursed is the one who makes a carved or molded image, an abomination to the LORD, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets it up in secret.'

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<sup>12</sup> Even those living under the Old Covenant were aware of their failure to live up to the moral demands of the Law. As they brought their sacrifices to the temple, they were acknowledging their need for atonement and forgiveness. Old Testament sacrifices were an act of faith looking forward to the sacrifice at Calvary that would take away their sins. We look back to the cross in faith and receive forgiveness of sin. Only the blood of Jesus can cleanse sin (Heb. 10:3-4, 11-14).

"And all the people shall answer and say, 'Amen!'"

16'Cursed is the one who treats his father or his mother with contempt.'

"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

17'Cursed is the one who moves his neighbor's landmark.'

"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

18'Cursed is the one who makes the blind to wander off the road.'

"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

19'Cursed is the one who perverts the justice due the stranger, the fatherless, and widow.'

"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

20'Cursed is the one who lies with his father's wife, because he has uncovered his father's bed.'

"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

21'Cursed is the one who lies with any kind of animal.'

"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

22'Cursed is the one who lies with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother.'

"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

23'Cursed is the one who lies with his mother-in-law.'

"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

24'Cursed is the one who attacks his neighbor secretly.'

"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

25'Cursed is the one who takes a bribe to slay an innocent person.'

"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

26'Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law.'

"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'"

I want you to notice three things from that reading.

(1) It gets detailed and personal—very specific sins that individuals in the crowd might be guilty of. The Law has not really done its work until it makes the individual aware of his specific transgressions before God. It's not that you just generally messed up. You did this; and you did that: You're guilty of this iniquity. Over and over you have violated this boundary and done these people wrong. The Law is designed to awaken the conscience to guilt. And without that awakening, a person is really not ready to respond to the gospel.

(2) Also notice the final nail in the coffin. Verse 26 "*Cursed is the one who does not confirm **all** the words of this law.*" Partial disobedience is still disobedience. God doesn't take a big set of scales and put your good deeds on one side and your bad deeds on the other; then see which one wins out. No, He is perfect. His standard is perfect. Heaven is perfect. Nothing short of perfection is acceptable. By that standard, you are guilty before the throne of God. And there is a curse

associated with that guilt. So not only am I to realize I have sinned; but I am also aware that I am under the judgement of God.

(3) Again notice in Deut. 27 that the people were required to acknowledge these judgements.

*"And all the people shall say, 'Amen!' I'm going to make you feel the reality of this. I need to hear you confess, not only the transgression, but also the consequence.*

What I have been describing to you is conviction of sin. Without conviction of sin, no one gets saved. Salvation is not a decision to "join God's team." Salvation is a cry for mercy. The sad thing is this. Preachers have shielded people from the benefits of real conviction of sin. We tell people about the opportunity to be saved before people even realize they need to be saved. We lead them in the sinners' prayer when they are not really convinced that they are sinners.

We have a generation of people ill-equipped to receive the real gospel. We have pampered them with self-esteem and bribed them to obey. We have carefully preserved their fragile self-image. We give them trophies even if they came in last. As a result the emerging generation is known as the "Me Generation." "It's all centered on me; and how dare you tell me I have come short of the glory of God. You had better say nice things to me or I won't come back." "Yes, and God is lucky to get me. He had better be careful if He wants to keep me on His team." It would be laughable, if it weren't so tragic.<sup>13</sup>

The gospel is good news—but it is only good news to those who know they need it. John 3:16 is good news: *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."* That is mighty good news if you know you're perishing. If not, it might just be a bit of an interruption.

It's good news in the light of John 3:18 *"He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already...."*

If a person is drowning and knows he's drowning, it is mighty good news to be rescued. But if I am just taking a swim and feel no danger, then leave me alone; don't bother me.

So we lead people in the sinners' prayer, yet no life-changing transformation takes place. They say the words, join the church, and continue to live the same way they always lived. God sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for people to receive Messiah. God sent the Law as a preparation for people receiving grace.<sup>14</sup> Nobody gets saved by keeping the Law. When the Law is working the way it's intended to work, it prepares people to repent and receive the free gift of salvation in Christ.

We are responsible to give the whole counsel of God. We are responsible to preach the word. The proclamation of truth is an important part of the process.<sup>15</sup>

But only the Holy Spirit can bring these realities to bear on the heart! He uses the Law to awaken the conscience. But He alone can make a sinner know he's a sinner. So in John 16:7-11 Jesus said, *"Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. 8 And when He has come,*

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<sup>13</sup> Children certainly need a lot of affirmation; and this is not intended to imply otherwise. However, they also need truth. They also need to learn to hear correction and deal with realities. It is the excessive pandering in the name of self-esteem that is the problem.

<sup>14</sup> Why didn't God send Messiah before the days of Moses? Why even bother with giving the Law I the first place? Preparations were necessary (Gal. 4:4).

<sup>15</sup> Acts 20:27; 2 Tim. 4:2-4; Rom. 10:14

*He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: 9 of sin, because they do not believe in Me; 10 of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; 11 of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.*" The key to understanding this verse is to see the work of the Holy Spirit in relationship to Jesus.<sup>16</sup> That is the context. He will convict the world of sin, "*because they do not believe in Me.*" The sin problem has been dealt with on the cross. Anyone who will put his/her faith in Christ, will be forgiven of sin. "*The blood of Jesus cleanses from all unrighteousness.*"<sup>17</sup> So ultimately the problem is not the sin, but the unwillingness to receive the cure. Ultimately the problem is unbelief: unwillingness to trust in Christ and follow Him. He will convict of righteousness "*because I go to My Father and you see Me no more.*" The resurrection and ascension of Jesus guarantees the provision of righteousness in Christ. You can be made righteous through Him. He will convict of judgment, "*because the ruler of this world is judged.*" Satan's dominion has been crushed at Calvary. He no longer has authority over you. You can be free in Christ!

In Acts 2 Peter built upon these awakenings as he preached the gospel. The people he was talking to knew the Law. They were there in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. They were already awakened to God's existence and their own moral accountability. In verse 36 Peter reminds them of their own personal transgression: "*Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.*" The One you rejected and crucified is now your Judge, an implication of pending judgement. With those awakenings fresh on their minds, look with me at the conviction they experienced in verse 37 "*Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'*" With them fully prepared to receive grace, Peter tells them what to do( verse 38) "*Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins....'*" They got real deal that day!

Awakened to God's existence; Awakened to Moral Accountability; Awakened to Personal Transgression; and Awakened to Pending Judgement: those awakenings prepare the soul for the good news of Jesus Christ. Have you felt the sting of conviction in your life? Have you realized your utter inability to save yourself? Have you come to the end of yourself so that you are truly open to the grace of God? Maybe there are some here today who feel those realities right now. Maybe you are ready to receive God's mercy and His salvation in your life? As a gift from the mercy seat of God, you can receive forgiveness of sin and eternal life in Christ right now!

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<sup>16</sup> I'm grateful to G. Campbell Morgan for helping me see this: *The Westminster Pulpit, Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House) p. 155.

<sup>17</sup> 1 John 1:7; Rom. 10:13; John 6:37