

Study 1: Freely Saved

IDENTITY

Orientate

I (John) suffer with renal colic/kidney stones. When a kidney stone starts moving down my ureter, the pain is excruciating. I might be a wimp, but I find it unbearable. And there is nothing I can do about it. Nothing helps. I am powerless. Thank goodness I have found a urologist who can save me. He eventually gets in and smashes that stone and sets me free from the pain. There is a cost involved (he doesn't work for nothing), but it's worth every cent.

We all have had a problem much worse than kidney stones. By doing what we wanted and living for ourselves, we were alienated from God and this had dreadful consequences for us both in the present and forever. But we could do nothing about it. We desperately needed saving. We needed a rescuer, a Saviour. That's where Jesus stepped in. But what does it cost us?

Explore: Ephesians 2:1-10

¹⁻⁶ It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat. It's a wonder God didn't lose his temper and do away with the whole lot of us. Instead, immense in mercy and with an incredible love, he embraced us. He took our sin-dead lives and made us alive in Christ. He did all this on his own, with no help from us! Then he picked us up and set us down in highest heaven in company with Jesus, our Messiah.

⁷⁻¹⁰ Now God has us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.

Journal

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. What have I been saved from? Why did God save me?

Reflect

The grace of God is incredible, isn't it? God loved you so profoundly that despite your deeply entrenched rebellion which was killing you and spoiling everything, he brought you to spiritual life through Jesus and gave you a significant place in his coming rule. He saved you. You became his child and heir. Wow. And you didn't have to do anything good or right or godly. This new life in Jesus has come as a surprising and wonderful gift. All you needed was the faith to receive it when God freely offered it to you.

Of course, in a way it's not completely free. Jesus had to pay a terrible price in taking your sin on the himself. It just shows how much he loves you. But for *you* it's completely free. That's what grace is all about.

You will need to come back to God's grace again and again. When you feel useless. When you feel discouraged. When you think you are achieving things yourself. When you feel the weight of

responsibility. When you struggle with failure or pride. Remember God's grace. He freely chose to save you in love. And nothing will change that. God has no second thoughts.

God's unending grace in saving you is the most important thing you will ever learn about your relationship with God. It will probably take you a lifetime to really appreciate it but let God's grace sink deeply into you today. Max Lucado (a prominent Christian author) says: "Grace is God's best idea. His decision to ravage a people by love, to rescue passionately, and to restore justly - what rivals it? Of all God's wondrous works, grace, in my estimation, is the magnum opus."

Pray

Lord I was trapped in my rebellion against you and just couldn't break free. I was doomed and heading for hell. I wish I could have done something about my state, but I couldn't. I was enmeshed in my self-centredness and had no hope. Then you in your love reached out to me in grace and saved me. You gave me freedom from my brokenness and life forever with you - at no cost to me, but at incredible cost to your Son, Jesus. I have earned nothing and received everything. I am astounded. This seems too good to be true. But it is so so real. I pray that I will live in your incredible grace for the rest of my life – soaking in your love, relying on your strength and trusting in your future for me.

Respond

See how many times today you can quote this truth to yourself: "I have been freely saved by Jesus and am now God's child."

Study 2: Graciously Adopted

IDENTITY

Orientate

My parents didn't get any choice when I came along. I was born their son and they had to put up with me just the way I was. They probably didn't like everything about my personality and attitude, but I was their son and that was it. They had to accept me and they did it very well, even including me in the inheritance. That's not always the case for parents and children. Some kids get adopted. In these cases, the parents make a choice to adopt a child, knowing at least in part what they're going to get. They make a choice to love the child and include them in their family.

The Bible talks about us being God's adopted children. His natural son is Jesus, but we have been graciously included in the family as well. God adopted you as his child fully knowing everything about you. It was a choice he made. See what the Bible says.

Explore: Romans 8:14-17

¹⁴For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Journal

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. What are the benefits of being adopted into God's family?

Reflect

God is outside time so he can see the past, present and future. There is nothing about your past and future that he doesn't know. Nothing about you comes as a surprise to him. You are an open book. He knows every weakness, every flaw, every attitude, every fear, every insecurity. And still he has decided to adopt you into his family. Out of all the people in the world, in his grace he has chosen you. This really is incredible and so reassuring. No wonder Paul (the author of Romans) says that we are no longer slaves to fear (15). We're in the family forever.

This means that God is our Dad. The New Testament was originally written in Greek, but the Jewish people at the time (like Paul) spoke Aramaic. So Paul has strangely put an Aramaic word "Abba" into his Greek letter to the Roman church. Why would he do that? Well he wanted to show how intimate our family relationship is with God. "Abba" means "Dad." It's the word a Jewish child used for their Dad. It wasn't ever used for God who was seen as holy and incredible and beyond such a childish address. But that exactly describes our family relationship with God. He's our Dad. And like a good Dad, he thinks we're special, loves us intimately, and really enjoys time with us.

As God's adopted child, not only do you get God as your Dad, but you also get included in the inheritance (17). Everything that Jesus gets is yours too. You not only have Jesus as your brother, but the power and the glory and the respect and the beauty and the kingdom of Jesus is yours too. He loves sharing this with you and there is plenty for all, seeing everything good belongs to God. All this comes because God has chosen in his grace to adopt you into his family.

Pray

Well Dad I have no idea why you would want to adopt me into your family, but I am so glad you did. You knew every little detail about me and you still wanted me. That's incredible. Please help me to live close to you as my Dad and really enjoy being in your family with my brother Jesus and all my other brothers and sisters.

Respond

Try using the word "Dad" when you speak to God today. If this is too difficult for you, ask the Spirit to help you because it comes naturally to him. Enjoy your closeness with God today.

Study 3: Eternally Loved

IDENTITY

Orientate

Shame is a terrible thing. One of the dangers of our new life in Jesus is that we can easily feel shame because we're not good enough for God and don't deserve his grace. We try hard, but we fail. Shame. We cave in to temptation again. Shame. We don't tell people about Jesus. Shame. We don't speak to God for a day. Shame. And so it goes on. We are susceptible to shame (or condemnation) that makes us feel that God couldn't really like us, couldn't really be pleased with us, couldn't really be on our side.

If you struggle with shame or anxiety at all, you need to let this reading settle deep into your heart.

Explore: Romans 8:31-39

³¹What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Journal

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. What is God's response to the shame we feel about our weakness and failure?

Reflect

There are two pictures in this Scripture reading of how God deals with us in our brokenness. The first picture is that of a judge (31-33). This judge listens to all the accusations against us. Some of these accusations come from other people, but most of them come from within ourselves as we experience shame. The trouble for the accusers is that the judge has already made up his mind. He has already pronounced us “Not guilty.” No matter how serious or frequent the allegations, the judge's response is the same, “Not guilty.” Jesus has already taken our sin and he keeps reminding God of this, so there is just no charge to consider, the case has already been thrown out of court.

The second picture is that of an incredible Brother (35-39). Jesus just keeps on loving us. We go through some very difficult times. Jesus keeps loving us. We are weak and broken. Jesus keeps loving us. We are attacked by dangerous spiritual forces. Jesus keeps loving us. We are worried about the future. Jesus keeps loving us. We feel worthless. Jesus keeps loving us. No matter what happens in our life, Jesus keeps loving us. Nothing, nothing can separate us from the love of our gracious big Brother (and our loving Father). It's a family thing.

You have to hold on to this, especially when you are dealing with shame or anxiety. As far as God is concerned, nothing can come between you and him. No accusation will be heard against you. Jesus has dealt with them all. No problem or failure will cause God to stop loving you deeply. Jesus just never stops loving his brothers and sisters. Nothing changes this. God is completely for you. God will love you eternally, no matter what you do.

Pray

Your grace is so incredible Jesus. To think that you won't hear a word against me, even when I feel so much shame. To think that you keep on loving me, even when I don't really love myself. This is so abnormal (in my thinking) and so good. Please help me to really absorb and enjoy your love. May I not push you away in my brokenness but hold on to you tightly. I thank you that you will love me forever.

Respond

Take some time to be aware of the deep love that Jesus has for you. You really are safe. You can't slip away from his love. He's protecting and loving you now. And will do so forever. Relax and receive his precious love.

Study 4: Wonderfully Designed

IDENTITY

Orientate

You might think that God has been dealt a rather ordinary hand with you. That when he adopted you into his family, he had to take what he was given, which wasn't much. So now he just has to do the best he can with a pretty ordinary person. But this is not true. God was involved in your life a long time before you became a Christian. He designed you uniquely and specially for the special plans he has for you.

King David was not only a man of God and excellent leader, he was also a brilliant musician and poet. In Psalm 139, David is musing on God's involvement in every part of his life. He has found that God is always there in and around him, working out his purposes through his life. In this section of the song, David reflects on his early formation by God.

Explore: Psalm 139:13-16

- ¹³ For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- ¹⁴ I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
- ¹⁵ My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
- ¹⁶ Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.

Journal

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. Are you happy with the way God has made you? Why or why not?

Reflect

We (John and Debbie) are presently designing a house that we will probably be living in for the rest of our lives. We actually will have part of a house with one of our sons and his family in the other part. As you can imagine, we're pretty fussy about the design. This could be our home for 20+ years and it needs to be suitable for us as seniors. We're interested in fans and lights and taps and showers and power points and storage and sound proofing, and so the list goes on. It's worthwhile planning carefully now, so we won't be disappointed later.

So you can imagine how carefully God has designed you. He has always had a purpose for you and has created you for this purpose. Your personality, your intellectual ability, your passions, your physical capacity, your body, your gifts, etc. were all designed by God according to his plan. There was no guesswork in it because God had already laid out his plan for you (16). As David sings, you have been "wonderfully made" (14). Of course, you need to grow and develop and use your gifts, but the basic ingredients of God's plans for you have already been put into you.

For example, I am a strong introvert which means that I renew my energy by being alone. As a pastor, I often wondered about God's design of me when my ministry involved a lot of time with people. But in my

years as the Principal of a Theological College with lots of study and writing and thinking and preparing, my introversion was a great gift, as it is with writing discipling studies. God knows what he's doing. You have been wonderfully designed for God's purposes for you.

Pray

I thank you that my beginnings were shrouded in your presence. That you knit me together Lord and made me the way I am. Sometimes I wish I was different – more capable, more noticeable, more insightful, more gifted, more courageous, more spiritual, more influential. Sorry for my lack of trust in your work. You have made me the way I am for your purposes and you never have design flaws, so I thank you for the way you have created me. May I appreciate and enjoy your wonderful design.

Respond

List a few of your most obvious characteristics and see if you can work out how God is using/could use these in his work through you. Don't worry if you can't see anything yet, you have plenty of time to go.

Study 5: Continually Forgiven

IDENTITY

Orientate

The Apostle John wrote the gospel of John and another couple of letters that we have in the Bible. In the letter of 1 John, John is writing to Christians. He calls them, “my dear children” because he is an experienced and respected leader. He is giving them guidance in this letter on how to please God so that “you will not sin.” He understands that Christians have been set free from sin and its consequences, and that they can live God’s way.

But he also knows that perfection is not possible while we live in this world that is plagued with sin and temptation and so he is very clear that sometimes we all fail. If we pretend that this is not true, we’re setting ourselves up as hypocrites and actually ignoring God’s expectations of us. So while you are now right with God through the grace of Jesus, you live in a broken world and are still broken yourself, so you will let God down at times.

Explore: 1 John 1:8-2:2

^{1:8} If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

^{2:1} My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

Journal

1. What is God saying to me? Which verse is most significant?
2. What do I want to discuss/explore further?
3. What do I need to do?
4. What does it mean to confess our sins? How often should we do it?

Reflect

So the bad news is that you are still going to struggle with sin while you live in this world. One day when God finally intervenes, this will not be the case. Yes! But while God will continue to shape you and grow you here, you won’t completely escape the temptation and pressure of your broken human condition. It will feel like a battle at times, but every Christian is in the same boat.

This is not an excuse to cave in to temptation. You need to fight it and God promises that he will help you. You will have many wins. But when you do fail, Jesus is still on your side. John says that he is not your accuser but your advocate. Got that? He is there to help you deal with the sin, not put you on trial for caving to it. You need to come to Jesus, admit your sin, say sorry, turn away from the sin and receive the forgiveness of Jesus that comes through his sacrificial death. That’s grace! You will need to do this your whole life, and every time you will experience grace not judgement. That’s God’s commitment. You will continually be forgiven.

Pray

Lord I’m thankful that I’m not the person I used to be. In your grace, you are changing me and making me more like you. But I’m sorry that I am not yet the person I wish I could be. Sin is still appealing to me and sometimes I cave in to its pressure and short-term pleasure rather than trusting and obeying you. When

this happens, I feel dirty and weak and unworthy. I wonder what you must think of me. Thanks so much that in your grace you keep on loving me. You stay on my side and you want to help me deal with my failure. You are for me not against me. Please help me to be honest with you; to keep confessing my sin and not to ignore it or justify it. Right now may you forgive and cleanse me so that I can keep on doing life together with you with no barriers or secrets

Respond

Take a few minutes today to examine your life to see if there are any areas in which you have recently failed God by disobeying him or not doing what he has asked you to do. Say sorry and receive his forgiveness. If you don't feel forgiven, make sure you claim that you are, according to this Scripture.

Discussion Questions

IDENTITY

Study 1: Freely Saved (Ephesians 2:1-10)

1. Any reflections or questions on Study 1? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
2. What have you been saved from? Why did God save you? How is your life different?

Study 2: Graciously Adopted (Romans 8:14-17)

3. Any reflections or questions on Study 2? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
4. What are the benefits of being adopted by God? How do you feel about calling God, "Dad"?

Study 3: Eternally Loved (Romans 8:31-39)

5. Any reflections or questions on Study 3? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
6. What is God's response to the shame we feel about our weakness and failure? Do you feel this?

Study 4: Wonderfully Designed (Psalm 139:13-16)

7. Any reflections or questions on Study 4? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
8. Are you happy with the way God has made you? Why or why not? Do you have any idea of God's purpose for you?

Study 5: Continually Forgiven (1 John 1:8-2:2)

9. Any reflections or questions on Study 5? What did you learn? Which verse was most significant?
10. What does it mean to confess our sins? How often should we do it? Does God ever not forgive?
11. In light of the first three studies, how would you respond to the question, "What is a Christian?"
12. How are you going spiritually and personally? What other things would you like to talk about?