



A World Shaped by Grace and Drenched in Love

By Chris Webb

One of my great joys in writing *God-Soaked Life* was taking the opportunity to explore “the gospel” as genuinely good news—not, that is, primarily as something concerned with sin, judgment and death, but as a declaration of grace, love and life. It’s a message I long to hear preached and celebrated more often; it was tremendously liberating to be able to think aloud about it in the book.

The Bible, of course, is riddled with grace from beginning to end. It begins with a story which invites us to see the entire universe as a gift, and ends with a fantastically generous vision of that gift being renewed and re-given. Between those first and last pages we are offered a picture of a God resplendent in goodness, beauty, love and joy. The Ten Words begin not with a commandment but a declaration of grace-filled relationship: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20.2). A repeated refrain throughout scripture reminds us of the character of this covenant-making God: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34.6). No wonder the *Shema*, the heart prayer of every Israelite, is a simple call to loving response: “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6.4-5). On this relationship of grace, said Jesus, along with the parallel call to love our neighbor made in God’s image, “hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22.40). John dared to simplify all theology into three words: “God is love” (1 John 4.8). We might similarly dare to add: “And all Scripture is about love.”

God, who is love, fashions the cosmos as a gift of love. He fills it with life, especially human life, men and women over whom he sings with joy and delight. We rebel and turn away, and this corrupts and ruins us, tearing us apart from one another and our own selves, alienating us from God and creation. We are wrecked beings. God’s love, however, is not at all diminished. He continues to be wholly himself: faithful, loving, gracious, magnificent. He forgives, heals, restores, makes covenant, leads and guides us through our self-made wilderness. Astoundingly, he continues to believe in us - in our worth, our value, our dignity and beauty. Even faced with the brutality of the cross, our ultimate rejection, he is unwavering; as John expresses it, “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13.1).

All this was my starting point while writing the first few sections of the book. I was tired of listening to the “gospel” being presented as something angry and ugly, a message centered on the depravity of our shriveled souls, and on the petulant response of a wrathful deity who could only be pacified by legal loopholes of his own devising. Honestly, there are times when I read the latest church news online or in magazines and can only sigh in despair. If the gospel is essentially about judgment, we’ve nailed it. Everything I read is about how people are getting things wrong: people who are wrong about homosexuality, or evolution, or theories of inspiration, or gender issues, or church leadership, or abortion, or gun control, or church leadership, or separation of church and state (you know, all the stuff Jesus was clearly so passionate about). And we wonder why so many people aren’t drawn by us to fall in love with Christ ...!

What happens, though, if we set all this to one side for a while and start talking about a world shaped by grace and drenched with divine love? What happens if we start thinking about God delighting in



human beings and joyfully dancing with the angels over the beauty of his creation? If we start seeing ourselves as creatures of love - warped and twisted, certainly, but capable of being healed by grace? If, in short, we start with a gospel rather than a gnarled and cantankerous seed of misery? That's what I wanted to explore in the first sections of *God-Soaked Life*.

I'm intrigued to know what others will make of it. I'm not the first to say these things, by a long margin (I like to think, for example, that quite a lot of what I wrote is simply a reflection on things Jesus said). But it may be that, for some of my readers, I'm the first person to say it to them; that, after all, is one of the privileges and gifts of writing. I know that happens, because people tell me. There will be people who read the book and, for the first time, realise that it's about love, about grace, mercy, forgiveness, delight, joy, wonder, and the wild generosity of an extravagant God who rejoices over all he has made. Who realise there's a reason we call it good news, and that by following Jesus they've done more than scrape a pass from burning in hell for all eternity.

But what I'm wondering now is: what are you thinking? I'm pitching for the idea that all creation is about this love, about God's love for us and his desire for us to live in loving community with one another. I'm setting out an idea that love is somehow our own essential nature, and that salvation implies the healing of that love within us. And I'm suggesting that all this was the heart of Jesus' message, the core of his proclamation of the Kingdom of God. What do you make of that?

I hope you'll wrestle with these ideas: explore them, expand them, challenge them. I hope you'll find the gaps and weaknesses in my ideas and open them up, perhaps shape something stronger in response. On the details, we might find ourselves in broad agreement or at considerable difference. I'm quite relaxed about that (I learned long ago to let go of my compulsion to be right about everything!) But I do want to keep this one central question before you: Am I right to say that it's all about love? If so, what does that mean for our understanding of God, life, the world in which we live? And if not —then what in heaven's name is it all about?