

Session 2: The Rescue We Could Not Stage

Grace comes first, last, and everywhere in between

PART 1 · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers that in Scripture, God's saving initiative always comes first: he loves, chooses, and rescues people who were helpless to rescue themselves and did nothing to deserve it. Grace is not God's response to our goodness; our goodness is a response to God's grace.

Catholic Touchstone. "Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us" (CCC 1996), and even our preparation to receive grace is itself grace at work (CCC 2001). The Church condemned as heresy the idea that we can take the first step toward God on our own. Whatever this study says later about cooperation, warnings, and perseverance sits on this foundation and never leaves it.

What You Need to Know

This is the session that makes the rest of the study safe to teach. In Session 7 the group will read hard warnings, and in Session 8 they will learn what mortal sin is. If those sessions land on hearts that think salvation is a wage, they will produce either pride or terror. So before a single warning is read, plant the flag where the Church plants it:

everything is grace. The rescue was staged, paid for, and executed by God while we were incapable of contributing to it. "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Rom 5:6).

Be ready to name the classical error, because someone may voice its modern form. *Pelagianism*, associated with the fourth-century monk Pelagius, held in effect that human beings can take the decisive steps toward God by their own natural willpower, with grace as help for the willing rather than rescue for the helpless. The Church condemned this, and later also rejected the softer "semi-Pelagian" idea that at least the *first* step, the beginning of faith, is ours. The Second Council of Orange (529), whose canons received papal confirmation and shaped all subsequent Catholic teaching on grace, taught that even the beginning of faith comes from the gift of grace. When a modern person says "God helps those who help themselves" as if it were Scripture, that is the old error in a work shirt. It is not in the Bible. Tonight's texts say nearly the opposite: God helps those who *cannot* help themselves, and his prevenient grace then makes their free cooperation possible.

At the same time, do not let the pendulum swing into a different error. Grace does not bulldoze the person; it awakens and frees the person. Ephesians 2:8-10 makes both moves in three verses: salvation is "not your own doing," and yet we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." Grace produces walkers, not passengers. The full grammar of cooperation is Session 5's work; tonight simply refuse to let anyone hear "all grace" as "so nothing matters."

Pastorally, watch for the participant who cannot receive this. Many people find unearned love harder to accept than a to-do list; a to-do list leaves us in control. The father in Luke 15 runs to a son who has rehearsed a wage-earner's speech ("treat me as one of your hired servants") and never lets him finish it. Some in your group are still rehearsing that speech. Let the text interrupt it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Two Old Testament texts carry tonight's weight. **Deuteronomy 7:7-8** gives God's own explanation for choosing Israel: "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples; but it is because the LORD loves you." The reasons God states are his love

and his oath to the fathers (Deut 7:8): nothing about Israel's size or résumé. Love and promise-keeping are the whole ground, and God says so out loud.

Ezekiel 36:25-27 is God's promise to a people in exile precisely because of their sin, and every verb belongs to God: *I* will sprinkle clean water upon you, *I* will cleanse you, a new heart *I* will give you, a new spirit *I* will put within you, *I* will take out of your flesh the heart of stone. Israel's contribution to the passage is a stone heart. Let the group count the "I will" statements themselves; the discovery works better than the lecture. And note the pairing of *water* and *spirit* in God's promised cleansing. Say nothing about it tonight. The group will meet those two words again in Session 3, in the mouth of Jesus, and the ones who notice will feel the floor of Scripture holding together under them.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Augustine of Hippo

Confessions, Book X, ch. 29

"Give what you command, and command what you will."

Augustine's whole theology of grace fits in that one prayer: God's commands are real, and the ability to keep them is itself God's gift, to be begged for rather than assumed. Augustine himself later recounted, in *On the Gift of Perseverance*, that this very line from the *Confessions* infuriated Pelagius when he heard it read aloud: it conceded nothing to human self-sufficiency, and Pelagius knew it.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Ambrose of Milan

On Jacob and the Happy Life

The bishop who baptized St. Augustine teaches, in substance, that the Christian's boast is never his own innocence. He writes that he will not glory because he is righteous or free from sins, but because he has been redeemed and his sins are forgiven. Our standing before God rests on what we have received, not on what we have avoided.

This is worth hearing from Ambrose in particular: a man of formidable moral seriousness, and precisely not a man who thought moral seriousness was the ground he stood on.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH · St. Thérèse of Lisieux

Act of Oblation to Merciful Love (1895)

In the offering she composed and kept with her, St. Thérèse prays that in the evening of this life she will appear before God with "empty hands," asking him not to count her works, because she wants to be clothed in his own justice and to receive from his love the eternal possession of himself.

Empty hands are not empty piety here. Thérèse worked, suffered, and loved heroically; the Church made her a Doctor. But she refused to present any of it as a payment. The hands that hold nothing can receive everything. That is tonight's session in a single image.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1996. "Grace is favor, the free and undeserved help that God gives us to respond to his call." Undeserved is the load-bearing word.

CCC 1998. Our vocation to eternal life is *supernatural*: it exceeds anything our nature could produce or claim. Not a boost to our efforts.

CCC 1999. Sanctifying grace is the gratuitous gift God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into the soul to heal it of sin and sanctify it. The study returns to this paragraph in Sessions 4 and 6; plant it now.

CCC 2001. The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace. The Catechism here quotes St. Augustine on our collaboration: God works in us so that we also work. This is the bridge paragraph to Session 5; you may quote it if the cooperation question surfaces early.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH · leader only, never read aloud

Ezekiel plant. Water and spirit in Ezekiel 36:25-27 pay off in Session 3 when the group reads John 3:5. Do not connect them tonight; if a participant does, congratulate them and move on without developing it.

Cooperation line (plant, do not develop). The phrase "grace produces walkers, not passengers" and Ephesians 2:10 both point at Session 5 (faith working through love). If someone presses "so do our works matter or not?", write it on the parking lot list for Session 5 and keep tonight on grace's priority.

Exodus map check-in. If anyone connects tonight to last week (rescue at the sea came before any wilderness obedience), affirm it: that is exactly the map. Sequence matters: rescue first, response after.

Sealed guesses. They stay sealed. If the group asks, tell them Session 8 and enjoy their impatience.

Session Goals

1. The group can state, from the texts, that God's saving initiative precedes any human deserving.
2. Participants discover the all-divine verbs of Ezekiel 36:25-27 for themselves.
3. The group can distinguish "salvation is all grace" from "nothing we do matters," and knows the second question is coming in Session 5.
4. Participants can name why "God helps those who help themselves" is not Scripture and not Catholicism.
5. Each participant identifies one place they are still rehearsing the hired-servant speech.

Time Note

Plan for 75 minutes: Win 12, Build 45, Send 12, prayer 6. If running long, cut **Build question 3** (John 6:44 still appears in the answer to question 6) and compress the **Dig Deeper** box to one spoken sentence. Never cut the Ezekiel discovery or the Luke 15 reading; they carry the session's heart.

PART 2 · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, you loved us before we were lovable and sought us before we were looking. Quiet in us tonight every voice that says we must earn our way to you. Give us the honesty to come with empty hands, and the joy of finding them filled. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · Opening Questions

- What is the biggest thing anyone has ever done for you that you could not repay? What did it feel like to receive it?
- Some people find it easier to give help than to receive it. Which are you, honestly, and why do you think that is?

BUILD · Into the Text

Leader: have someone read Romans 5:6-10 aloud, slowly. Ask the group to catch every word Paul uses to describe what we were when Christ died for us.

1. What three words does Paul use in Romans 5:6-10 for the people Christ died for? What do they have in common?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Weak and ungodly (v. 6), sinners (v. 8), enemies (v. 10). Each is worse than the last, and none of them can merit, initiate, or purchase the rescue; even our later cooperation is itself enabled by grace. "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." The rescue was staged entirely from God's side, timed by God, aimed at people who could not ask for it properly, let alone earn it.

Draw out verse 8: "God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." The proof of the love is its timing.

2. Read Deuteronomy 7:7-8. Israel asks, in effect, "why us?" What reason does God actually give for choosing them, and what reasons does he explicitly rule out?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Ruled out: size, impressiveness, merit ("you were the fewest of all peoples"). Given: "it is because the LORD loves you," and because he keeps the oath he swore. The reason for the love is the love. God goes out of his way to prevent Israel from ever constructing a résumé explanation for their election.

If someone finds this circular, agree cheerfully: it is. Every truly free gift is. The alternative, love with a reason underneath it, is a wage.

3. Read John 6:44 and John 15:5. According to Jesus, what can a person do toward salvation without God acting first?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (Jn 6:44): even the approach to Jesus begins with the Father's drawing. "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5): not "less," not "little," nothing. The initiative and the enabling both belong to God.

Hold the balance: being drawn is not being dragged. The Father draws; the person still comes. How our free response and God's grace work together is a question this study will honor properly in Session 5; tonight settles only who moves

first.

Live discovery. Say: "Now watch God describe a future rescue in his own words. Turn to Ezekiel 36:25-27. Read it twice. First time: count how many times God says 'I will.' Second time: find what, if anything, the people contribute." Let them work.

4. What did you count, and what did you find? Who does everything in this passage, and what is the people's contribution?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Every saving verb is God's: I will sprinkle clean water upon you, I will cleanse you, a new heart I will give you, a new spirit I will put within you, I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone, I will put my spirit within you. The people's contribution to the passage is the heart of stone. God even promises to "cause you to walk in my statutes": obedience itself will run on his gift.

Notice, without pressing it, that the promised rescue comes through *water* and *spirit*. File that pairing away; it returns next week.

5. Read Luke 15:17-24. The prodigal son rehearses a speech on the road home. What kind of arrangement is he proposing, and what does the father do with the proposal?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

He proposes a wage arrangement: "treat me as one of your hired servants." Sonship is gone, he assumes, but employment might be negotiable; he will work off the debt. The father never lets him finish the speech. He runs (undignified for a patriarch), embraces, kisses, and orders the robe, the ring, and the feast: the regalia of a *son*, not a servant's contract. The son came proposing wages; the father restored a relationship.

Ask a follow-up if the room is warm: which speech are you still rehearsing with God?

Build, Then Press

Leader: present this at full strength.

A sincere voice, maybe inside your own head, says: **"This is beautiful, but be practical. God helps those who help themselves. Surely we take the first step, show some good will, clean up a little, and then God meets us. Otherwise, why would anyone even try?"**

6. Where does that sentence, "God helps those who help themselves," actually come from? And what do tonight's texts say to it?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Not from the Bible. It is a proverb of self-reliance, popularized in English by Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanack, with roots in older Greek sayings, and it expresses almost exactly the error the Church condemned in the Pelagian controversies: that the decisive first step is ours.

Tonight's texts answer it directly. Christ died for us while we were *helpless*, not while we were helping ourselves (Rom 5:6). No one comes unless the Father draws (Jn 6:44). Even the new obedient heart is something God gives, not something we bring (Ezek 36:26). The true sentence is: God helps those who *cannot* help themselves, and his help arrives first. And to "why would anyone try?": grace does not remove the trying, it creates it. "Created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph 2:10). More on that in Session 5.

DIG DEEPER · The Council That Guarded Grace

In 529, a council at Orange in southern Gaul, whose canons were confirmed by the pope, settled a question that had simmered for a century after St. Augustine: is at least the *beginning* of faith our own unaided doing? The council

answered no. Even the first movement toward God, the initial desire for faith, comes from the gift of grace. If anyone says we reach for God first and grace responds, said the council in substance, he contradicts the Scriptures.

The Catechism carries the same teaching today: "The preparation of man for the reception of grace is already a work of grace" (CCC 2001). The Church has been guarding this door for fifteen centuries.

SEND · Taking It Out

- Where in your life are you still proposing the hired-servant arrangement: trying to earn what God wants to give? What would it look like to let him finish his sentence instead of yours?
- Who in your life believes they are too far gone, too "helpless," for God to want them? What could you do this week to carry Romans 5:8 to them, in deed if not in words?

Live It This Week

Empty hands. Begin each day's prayer with thirty seconds of thanks for graces you did nothing to earn, before you ask for anything.

Catch the proverb. If you hear or think "God helps those who help themselves" this week, silently answer it with Romans 5:6.

One undeserved gift. Do something kind this week for someone who has not earned it and cannot repay it. Notice what that teaches you about how God loves.

Closing Prayer

PRAY TOGETHER

Father, while we were still far off, you saw us and ran to meet us. Thank you for a love that came first. Take from us the heart of stone, give us the heart of flesh you promised, and teach us this week to receive before we earn. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us."

Romans 5:8 (RSV2CE)

PART 3 · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in this session, in order.

Passage	Where it is used in this session
Romans 5:6-10	Opening reading: helpless, sinners, enemies (Build Q1)
Deuteronomy 7:7-8	God's reason for choosing Israel (Build Q2)
John 6:44	No one comes unless the Father draws (Build Q3, Q6)
John 15:5	"Apart from me you can do nothing" (Build Q3)
Ezekiel 36:25-27	Live discovery: the all-divine verbs; water and spirit (Build Q4)
Luke 15:17-24	The prodigal's wage speech and the father's answer (Build Q5)
Ephesians 2:8-10	Not your own doing; created for good works (leader background, Q6 answer)
Romans 5:8	Memory verse