SAVING GRACE

A 4-WEEK STUDY

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CONTENTS

WEEK 1

THE HUMAN CHASE

I like theological movies. A theological movie is not necessarily an overtly Christian or religious movie but simply one that is cut from the cloth of the biblical narrative. My wife says I can't watch a movie without performing a theological autopsy on it. Having spent much of my life studying and preaching the Christ story, I do tend to interpret anything I see through the lens of this grand life narrative. I see the movie characters as humans who are on a quest for something—and that something, even if they don't realize it, is their own humanity. They are trying to figure out how to live in their own skin as fully human creatures—the people they were meant to be.

Deep within us all, there is a sense of destiny, calling, purpose, and meaning. We grouse about trying to find this key to life. I call it "the human chase." One of the best movies about the human chase is *Groundhog Day*. Bill Murray stars as a reporter who is assigned to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to cover the appearance of the nationally famous groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil. While there, Murray's character gets stuck in a loop and is forced to relive the same day over and over and over. Every morning when he wakes up, it is Groundhog Day all over again.

Here he is, this fragile creature stuck in time and feeling the futility of trying every way he knows to get into a meaningful tomorrow, but nothing changes his circumstances. He tries a variety of approaches throughout the movie: using people, avoiding people, manipulating people, hurting people, hurting himself, and more. Even-

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tually he decides to try a new tactic, and he awakes to the joy of serving, the beauty of giving, the love of music and art, and the capacity to love. Only then does he succeed in waking up into tomorrow.

Groundhog Day and its concluding moral remind me of the God who stands on the threshold of tomorrow, waiting as we chase our meaning until we run headlong into the grace that was there waiting all the time. We could also view *Groundhog Day* as a modern-day parable of Ecclesiastes. In his translation of the book of Ecclesiastes in The Message, Eugene Peterson has explained his translation choice for the word "Ecclesiastes" itself, which is traditionally translated as something like "preacher" or "teacher": "Because of the experiential stance of the writing in [Ecclesiastes], giving voice to what is so basic among men and women throughout history, I have translated [the word 'Ecclesiastes'] 'the Quester.'"[1] He also writes in the Ecclesiastes introduction about the ultimately futile human impulse to search for and make our own meaning out of life:

> Ecclesiastes is a famous—maybe the world's most famous—witness to this experience of futility. The acerbic wit catches our attention. The stark honesty compels notice. And people do notice—oh, how they notice! Nonreligious and religious alike notice. Unbe-

1. Eugene Peterson, "Introduction: Ecclesiastes," *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2002), 1163.

lievers and believers notice. More than a few of them are surprised to find this kind of thing in the Bible.

But it is most emphatically and necessarily in the Bible in order to call a halt to our various and futile attempts to make something of our lives, so that we can give our full attention to God—who God is and what he does to make something of us. Ecclesiastes actually doesn't say that much about God; the author leaves that to the other sixty-five books of the Bible. His task is to expose our total incapacity to find the meaning and completion of our lives on our own.

It is our propensity to go off on our own, trying to be human by our own devices and desires, that makes Ecclesiastes necessary reading. Ecclesiastes sweeps our souls clean of all "lifestyle" spiritualities so that we can be ready for God's visitation revealed in Jesus Christ. Ecclesiastes is a John-the-Baptist kind of book. It functions not as a meal but as a bath. It is not nourishment; it is cleansing. It is repentance. It is purging. We read Ecclesiastes to get scrubbed clean from illusion and sentiment, from ideas that are idolatrous and feelings that cloy. It is an exposé and rejection of every arrogant and ignorant expectation that we can live our lives by ourselves on our own terms.[2]

2. Peterson, "Introduction: Ecclesiastes," *The Message*, 1162–63.

Eugene Peterson's translation of Ecclesiastes begins like this:

> These are the words of the Quester, David's son and king in Jerusalem: Smoke, nothing but smoke. There's nothing to anything—it's all smoke. What's there to show for a lifetime of work, a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone? One generation goes its way, the next one arrives, but nothing changes—it's business as usual for old planet earth.
>
> What was will be again, what happened will happen again. There's nothing new on this earth.
>
> Call me "the Quester." I've been king over Israel in Jerusalem. I looked most carefully into everything, searched out all that is done on this earth. And let me tell you, there's not much to write home about. God hasn't made it easy for us. I've seen it all and it's nothing but smoke—smoke, and spitting into the wind. (1:1–4, 9, 12–14)

How's that for good news? Cynicism and the futility of the human quest for meaning are the largest themes in the book of Ecclesiastes. The writer's favorite word is the Hebrew word *hebel*, which is translated "smoke, fog, vapor," "vanity," or "meaninglessness." *Hebel* is the idea that you reach for something of substance only to find that, when you catch it and close your fingers around it, it has already disappeared into thin air. Chasing the meaning of life on our own is like trying to hold fog in our hands. It is here to-

day and gone tomorrow. Like *Groundhog Day*, the author in Ecclesiastes says we keep repeating the same chase day after day and waking up with nothing of substance.

Part of me wants to argue with the author when he writes about "nothing new under the sun" (v. 9). He just doesn't understand the progress of humanity! We have coffee that is fresh when we wake up; we have self-driving cars; we have lights that go on when we enter a room; we have entire libraries on a flash drive. There's something new every day! There has never been a time on the planet when humans were more surrounded by new things. Yet we still wake up every morning believing there is something more we must chase and catch and consume that will bring fulfillment. Our friend in Ecclesiastes, the Quester, tells us he chased money and power and work and pleasure and knowledge and youth; caught them, owned them, consumed them—and woke up the next morning clutching fog. Is the human meant to be nothing more than a restless chaser?

Genesis 2:7 says, "Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed [*ruach*] into his nostrils the breath [*ruach*] of life, and the man became a living being [*nephesh*]." We begin as lumps of clay, the dust of the earth. God, in the language of Genesis, leans over our inanimate bodies and blows divine breath into our nose. The Hebrew word for "breath" is the same as the word for "spirit" or "wind." Throughout our story, divine wind, or breath, is the energizing activity of God. It is what comes upon prophets. It is what falls upon the baptized

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Jesus. It is what fills the upper room in Acts. It is divine wind and breath—or Holy Spirit. Human life exists as the gift of God's breath.

I have been in birthing rooms and dying rooms. When a child emerges from a mother's womb, the first instinct is to gasp for air. The instant the baby breathes for the first time, skin color changes, lungs expand, a body cries out. The first gulp of air is always *in*—as if waiting for God to blow life into the nostrils. In the dying rooms, as saints take their last breath, the final breath is always out. No one inhales and then dies. We exhale when we expire. The breath returns to the God who gave it. We are sustained not by something we chase and catch but by the gift of God.

The Genesis text says that humanity became "living beings" (*nephesh* in the Hebrew) when God breathed life into us. *Nephesh* is an interesting word that basically means "throat." The throat is a passageway from inside to outside. And it is located in the most vulnerable part of the body—the neck. Through this portal passes all that is needed to keep us alive: water, air, food. In a sense, the human is a walking hunger, a talking thirst, an aching need. We are not self-sustained but needy creatures. To be human is to be vulnerable, needy, dependent, desiring, hungry, fragile. And, like our friend in *Groundhog Day*, we chase anything that fills the gnawing in our gut—money, position, fame, power, sex, acclaim, body image, attention, anything. We are desiring beings.

Christians have at times forgotten the essence of our human neediness and have preached a gospel that says our desires are wrong and should be suppressed or denied. But we can't do that because desiring is the very *essence* of our humanity. Our problem is not *that* we desire but *what* we desire. Our desires, when we live apart from God, are twisted, bent inward, and focused on self-saving quests.

Let's talk about another old Bill Murray movie, *What about Bob?* This time Murray plays Bob, a fragile human who has every phobia, mental illness, and problem he can think of. He is a walking mess. He has driven one counselor from the profession entirely and is referred to Dr. Leo Marvin, a self-assured therapist who has written a book, *Baby Steps*, that is supposed to solve all human problems. His clients simply need to take baby steps out of their problems and into wholeness. Bob latches onto Dr. Marvin as his new hope. When he learns that Dr. Marvin has gone on a family vacation, he conspires to find out where he is. Bob's arrival at the vacation site coincides with Dr. Marvin's exit from a store on Main Street. Bob is scolded for inappropriately interrupting the family and is told to go home. He drops to his knees and becomes the best demonstration of a human that I have ever seen. He simply says, "I need. I need. I need." This is what it means to be human.

When John Wesley was asked what is the most perfect creature of all, he supposedly responded, "A void, capable of being filled with God, by God." We are made

with the capacity to receive life as a gift from God, not only in the form of physical breath but also in the form of saving grace. "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God" (Psalm 42:1–2a). Thus we sing in the hymn "O Worship the King": "Frail children of dust and feeble as frail, in thee do we trust nor find thee to fail. Thy mercies how tender, how firm to the end! Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend."[3]

3. Johann Michael Haydn (music, 18th c.), William Gardiner (music arr., 1815), and Robert Grant (words, 1833), "O Worship the King," *Sing to the Lord: Hymnal* (Kansas City, MO: Lillenas Publishing Co., 1993), #64.

JOURNALING AND REFLECTION

Pause to reflect on what you have read. What did you hear? Restate it in your own words. Make it your own. What is God pointing out in this chapter for you to think more about? What is God saying to you?

PRAYER

Thank God in your own words for creating you with the capacity to receive divine breath and life. Express your utter dependence on God. Embrace your fragile, needy humanity.

DISCUSSION

1. At the end of *What About Bob?*, the therapist who did so much to help Bob, Dr. Marvin, ends up constrained in a straitjacket in a psych ward while Bob ends up full of life. What do you think this ending is trying to say?

2. How is our world perfectly wired to enable a lifetime of chasing?

3. How would you explain saving grace to someone who struggles with the human chase?

4. Why are money, sex, power, attention, success—and whatever else we chase—never enough?

5. What does it mean to "be at home in our own skin" and what does that have to do with saving grace?

NOTES