

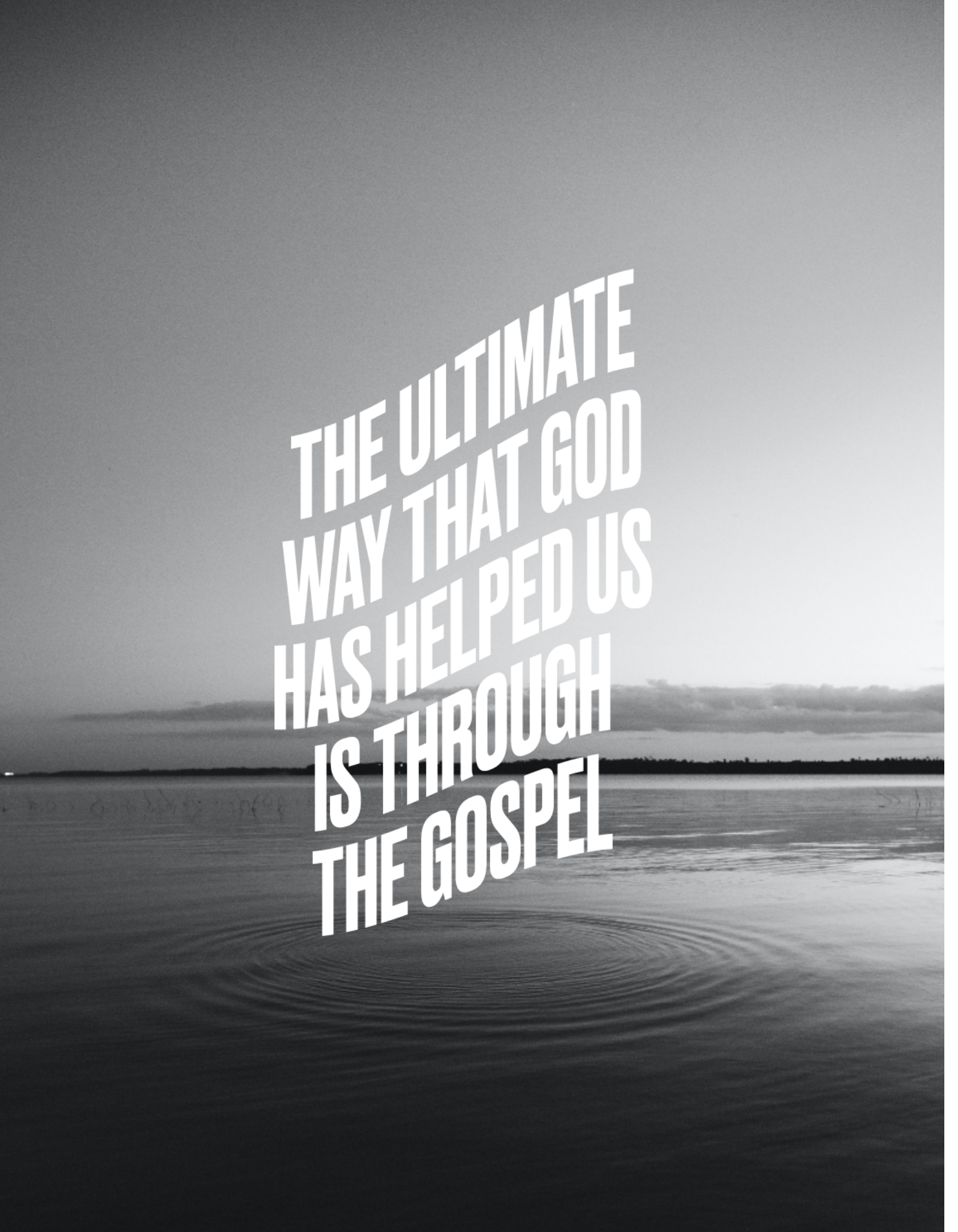
SWIM LESSONS

**Gospel-Shaped Personal Formation
for a Drowning Generation**

BY SAMANTHA BARNES, TIM CASTEEL, AND ANDY CIMBALA

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**THE ULTIMATE
WAY THAT GOD
HAS HELPED US
IS THROUGH
THE GOSPEL**

LESSON 0

A Gospel Foundation

By Andy Cimbala

Have you ever considered how God is the best helper? He has the most knowledge, the best character, and the greatest power to be able to help people. A verse in the Psalms, which was kind of a song book for the people of ancient Israel, says, “Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life” (Psalm 54:4). How do you feel as you hear this?

The ultimate way that God has helped us is through the gospel. This word, gospel, is a word that Christians often use, and if you didn’t grow up hearing it talked about, it may be a confusing word for you. Even for those who grew up in the church, “the gospel” is usually assumed and rarely defined. *Gospel* simply means “good news.” But what is that news? And why is it good? To answer that, read Titus 3:3-7. This is from the New Testament of the Bible, and describes how God has helped us:

³For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. ⁴But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, ⁵he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

» What sounds like “good news” here?

» Verse 3 contains some strong assertions about humanity. Can you see yourself in any of these descriptions? How so?

Verse 4 tells us that God's goodness and loving kindness moved him to show us mercy (that is, to withhold from condemning us, and instead to treat us as we don't deserve). The passage goes on to say that he justified us (that is, deemed us worthy of standing before him as righteous and without fault), and that this justified status isn't something we earn, but that God gives.

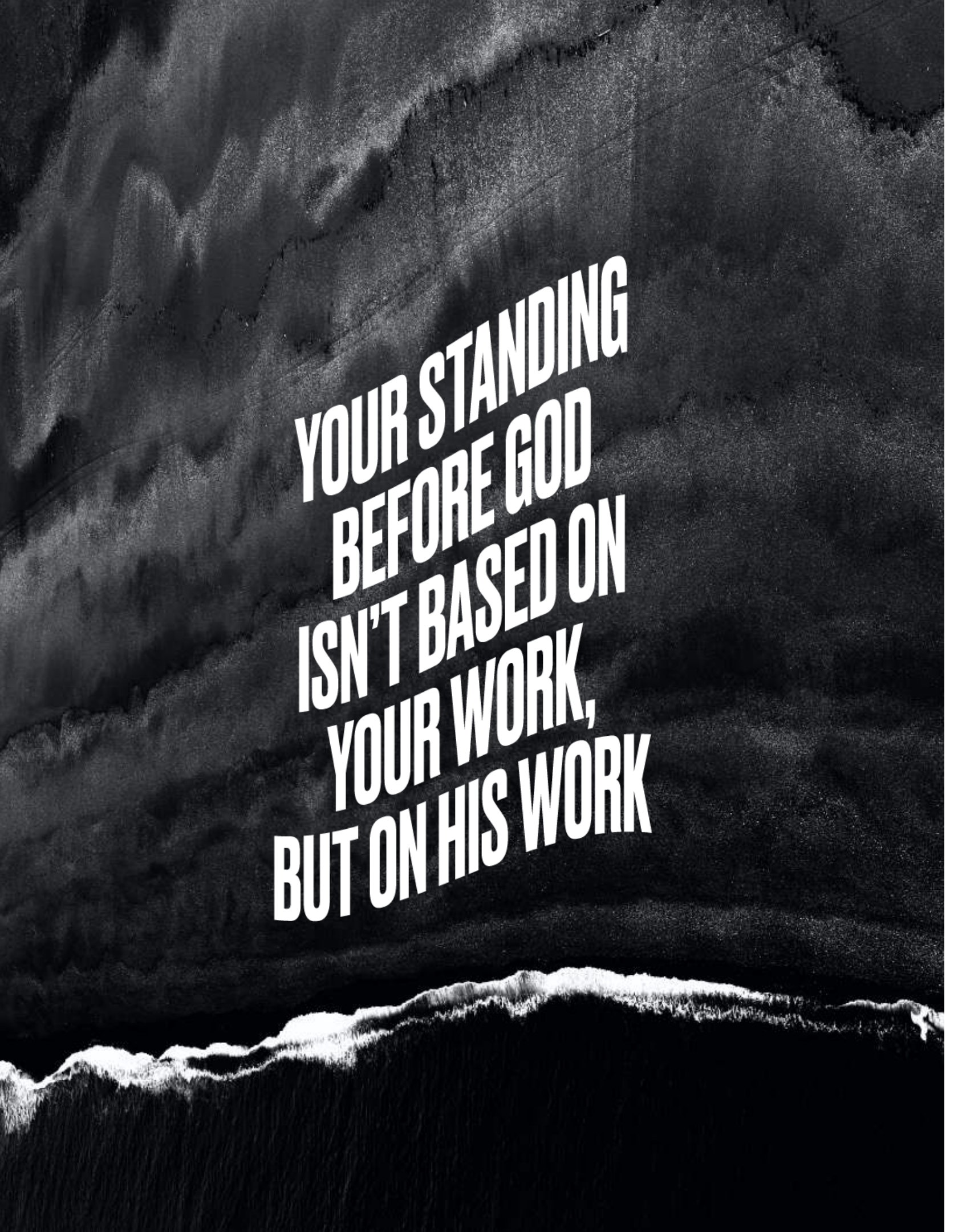
» When you consider your faults and imperfections, how does this news of God's mercy resonate with you? Is the idea that you don't earn God's love, but that he offers it freely, comforting or difficult to swallow?

» Finally, the passage mentions that God "poured out" this mercy on us through Jesus. How did he do this? What role does Jesus play?

As we start our series through these six modules, we'll return to the gospel as our foundation. Much of our modern culture assumes that there is no God, so we are on our own to help ourselves with our problems. Yes, you can follow your dreams, but the pressure is on you to make your dreams come true. This might be exciting for a while, but when doubt or failure creeps in, it can become too heavy to bear. But the gospel announces a comforting rescue! The gospel declares that God has provided the help we need when we can't help ourselves. We simply need to receive it. If you look back at Titus 3, verse 7 says "justified by his grace." Wow! We are declared to be in good standing with God, through what Jesus has done on our behalf, and this favorable position is undeserved. The grace of the gospel means you have value that is given, not earned! This is truly good news.

» How would you define "grace" in your own words?

» Have you ever received this grace by accepting Jesus's invitation to enter into your life? If so, when? If not, what barriers or questions might stand in the way of doing so?

The background is a dark, almost black, textured surface that resembles a rough, weathered wall or a piece of old paper. At the bottom of the image, there is a horizontal, jagged white line that looks like a tear in the paper, revealing a lighter, fibrous material underneath. The overall mood is somber and dramatic.

**YOUR STANDING
BEFORE GOD
ISN'T BASED ON
YOUR WORK,
BUT ON HIS WORK**

LESSON 1

From Anxiety to Grace-Inspired Peace

By Andy Cimbala

STARTING THE DISCUSSION

The Common Rule book trailer (book by Justin Whitmel Earley)

The Identity You're Looking For (excerpt of a message by Pastor Timothy Keller)



» How do these videos help explain the subject of this module and/or make the subject relatable to you?

THE BIG IDEA

As a student or young adult, you have a lot to worry about. Classes, relationships, family, summer plans, internships, jobs, the future, managing money, and much more. Anxiety seems to be the persistent background noise for everyone, but it's more complex than we think. There's the *experience* of anxiety, but far more important is the *reason* for anxiety. The many tips that help us handle the feeling of anxiety in the moment can help, but the harder and more transformative work is discovering *why* we are feeling anxious in the first place. In this module, we will speak to both the experience and the deeper reason.

We live in an anxious world. Philosopher Byung-Chul Han describes it as an "achievement culture" in his book, *The Burnout Society*.¹ We feel pressure to perform, to get the grade, to get the good job, to make a difference in the world, to become someone of significance, and on it goes. Alan Noble, in his book *You Are Not Your Own*, identifies these pressures as coming from the societal belief that *you are your own, and you belong to yourself*.² Therefore you need to create your own identity, meaning, and values, to show the world that there is a reason for your existence. This leads to the anxious experiences of FOMO and FOBO, the Fear Of Missing Out and the Fear Of Better Options. So you might feel worried about an upcoming test, but that anxiety is part of a thread that runs deeper: you're anxious because academic achievement is tied to a good life and feeling valuable in the world. All of this is a crushing burden and can leave you feeling burned out.

Many pop-psychology or self-help solutions to this deep anxiety are only surface level: self-care, coping,

and self-medicating. These tips attempt to further optimize life and squeeze out anxiety through better technique. At times these practices can help, to a degree, but their helpfulness is limited. Worst of all, they all depend on *you* to do them. This only adds to anxiety, because if you're not doing well, it feels like it's *your* fault for not applying the solutions properly.

The rich antidote to this deep-seated existential anxiety is the glorious good news of *grace*. The gospel reveals that Jesus accomplishes the perfect performance for you. He forgives all your failings, and he purchases for you a solid new identity. He secures for you a right standing with God that isn't subject to the ups and downs of your daily successes or mistakes. The foundation of your new life is this comforting truth from the Preface: *you have value that is given, not earned*. You are loved beyond compare, forgiven, adopted into God's family, treasured by him, set apart, and set free!

Do you see how this can undermine your anxiety? You were working so hard to achieve an identity, yet Jesus has graciously given you the identity you were anxiously chasing. You already have it! You performed and achieved, because you were terrified of failure, of falling behind, of not measuring up. And yet in the gospel you can now admit your failure and be forgiven. Your standing before God isn't based on *your* work, but on *his* work! You feared losing your status, but in Jesus you now have a secure standing before God that can never be lost. You are a beloved child of God and that can never be taken from you!

UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPEL AND THIS LIFE SKILL

We might feel guilty about our anxiety. But Jesus invites us to share our anxiety with him, and offers forgiveness and freedom from all our guilt. First Peter 5:7 says, “casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.” We often feel anxious about our performance, but Jesus reassures us that our standing before God is based on *his* performance, not ours (2 Corinthians 5:21). We often feel anxious about having provision for the things we need in the future: a job, a spouse, finances, health, and so on. But as we look to the Cross, we see God’s commitment to provide for our greatest need, so we can be comforted by Romans 8:32: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”

DISCUSSION SECTION 1

As our experience with anxiety is present and in our faces, we first need to explore how to respond to the *experience* of anxiety.

Philippians 4:4-9 says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”

» What practical methods does this passage give us to help overcome anxiety?

» What thoughts should we starve? What thoughts should we feed?

***Important Note:** We all experience worry, but some people experience it at such intensity that it can be medically diagnosed as an anxiety disorder, or depression, or something clinically similar. If you or someone else in your group is experiencing anxiety that is persistent or greatly affecting his or her life, or has been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, please remember this thought: “Yes, please pray and read God’s Word. But also seek professional help to find the sufficient care that you need. If an anxiety struggle is persistent (it doesn’t just go away), the best thing you can do is to take it seriously and receive help and support. You are not alone. There are numerous counselors or psychiatrists trained to help with this.”*

» How are rejoicing and thanksgiving good antidotes for anxiety?

» What promises are we given in this passage?

DISCUSSION SECTION 2

What is behind our anxiety? Why do we experience it so frequently, and so powerfully? As we saw in the Big Idea section, anxiety is often tied to identity or security. And the good news is that the gospel of grace directly addresses both.

Ephesians 2:1-10 says, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

» Based on this passage, what work do we do? What do we contribute to our salvation?

» What work does God do? Why does he do it?

» If your worth and status rides on your own achievement, that weight is crushing, and any normal person would feel intense anxiety. How does God's grace begin to turn down the volume on our anxiety?

» Why is it critical to let the grace and forgiveness of God be the foundation and catalyst for our "good works?"

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Applications related to the experience of anxiety:

- *Every time you feel worry this week, let it be a springboard to prayer.* Entrust the worry to God, and seek to replace that worry with truth from the gospel and the Bible. Consider how you might replace your anxious thoughts with thoughts that are holy, true, lovely, praiseworthy, and thankful. (Philippians 4:4-9)
- *When you notice yourself becoming anxious, reach out to a friend to ask for prayer.* Anxiety often makes us turn inward. Choosing to turn outward for help from God and from others is a healthy counter-response. Be as specific as you're willing to be about what you are fearing.
- Right now, would you be willing to write down what you are feeling anxious about this week? Would you be willing to share it with the group? Pray together for the anxieties your group mentions.

Applications related to the deeper reason of anxiety:

- *Every morning, as soon as you wake up, make your first thought, "what is the gospel of grace?"* Maybe set that question as the alarm message on your phone, or write it on a post-it and stick it to your phone, alarm clock, nightstand, or bathroom mirror. Take a moment to meditate on that truth. Let that shape the start of your day, instead of anxiety about upcoming events.
- *The next time anxiety pops up, slow down and analyze the deeper roots it might be springing from.* Get some paper or create a note on your phone to answer these questions: What am I most fearing? What do I really value? How do I already have what I need in the gospel of grace?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Sermon: *Releasing Anxiety*, by Ben Stuart

Book: *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*, by Dane Ortlund

Book: *Pressure Points: A Guide to Navigating Student Stress*, by Shelby Abbott

