

The Present Hand of God

By Jeremy Lucas

Part One: A Personal Opening

How long has it been...

Since you've enjoyed being a child of God?

Pause for a moment and then ask yourself again.

How long as it been...

Since you've enjoyed the journey?

In this dispensation of the mystery of His grace...

Do you ever wonder if He still works?

Or even more... if He still cares?

This morning, this afternoon, or this evening (whichever time it is that you're reading), I ask that you close off the world for a few moments and spend some time considering the things you're about to read. All of the above questions may or may not be questions that you ask yourself everyday of your life, but they may very well be the questions that someone you love asks everyday of your life... and it's likely that many of us are caught not knowing how to answer.

"Do I enjoy being a child of God?"

"Is there joy in the journey?"

"Does God still work?"

"If He does, then what is He doing?"

"Does He even care anymore?"

And why would we not ask ourselves these questions? We're bombarded with a world of mixed religion, mixed faith, and compromising emotions that give us plenty of sufficient reasons to say selfishly, "What about me?" I do, of course, use the term selfish loosely. For while we are all selfish beings, the selfishness I refer to regards how our Father in heaven, our Lord Jesus Christ, and our gracious Holy Spirit do or do not deal with our lives. And naturally, we're inclined to look around and say, "Did God do that or did it just happen?"

In order to set the stage for what we'll be addressing in this series, let me begin with a personal opening.

Some years ago, a young, dispensationally-minded woman was sitting in her seat on Sunday morning. Week after week, the blend of messages were near predictable. Predictable enough, that is, that you could practically write the sermons before they were spoken.

"We are saved by grace through faith."

A few more words and then...

"We are saved by grace through faith."

Not that this message wasn't accurate, or that it didn't have a powerful impact, but with all the Scripture available to teach, share, and offer insight, these seven words were usually all the young woman (as well as many of you) would hear. That is, until this particular Sunday morning and a new series called, "The Role of the Holy Spirit."

Eager as anyone would be to hear something fresh, something enlightening, and something to offer hope, she listened only to hear the following over a period of several weeks...

"God doesn't care about the details of your life."

"God doesn't care about the details of your life."

"God doesn't care about the details of your life."

Why did I repeat it three times? Because that's the impact that saying it one time has on any listener who loves the Lord. By the third time you read it (if you were able to read past the second time), it probably felt louder than the first.

Do you remember being a child and hearing someone refer to you as something you never quite forgot? Perhaps they immaturely called you fat, or geeky, or stupid. But somewhere, somehow, the things that stick in our minds are those things that go against the grain of our confidence. When we're working so hard as children to feel attractive and someone says that we're fat, the effort we made drops short of our tears. When someone calls us stupid, our efforts to feel intelligent become questionable in our own minds. That's the impact that words have on our confidence.

What this young woman heard were the first three words shouting out...

GOD DOESN'T CARE!

The pastor could have been right, the pastor could have been wrong... but it wasn't his accuracy or fallacy that was remembered... it was the words that rung so loud as to silence an ensemble choir from singing in harmony. Words that rung so loud that it didn't matter anymore whether they were true or false. Everything stopped with, "It doesn't matter what you do, He doesn't care."

And for the years that followed, the heart of this young woman went from joy and love to frustration and doubt.

"Does He care? I really don't know anymore."

Her concerns echo in nearly every "grace believing" dispensationally-minded believer that I encounter along the way. No one wants to seem so extreme that they're camped alongside of charismatics, but everyone is fearful that a discussion of His work, His hand, or His ever-slightest motion would suggest heresy that hurls them far from the Pauline grace movement.

I've been tremendously fortunate, in some ways, to have experienced the early part of my faith outside the grace movement. By this, I don't mean that to "grow up in grace" is in any way better or worse, but rather, that I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was saved before there was, in my understanding, "right division." Essentially, that there was truly a saving grace that existed before the intellectual triggers were orchestrated and carried out in my life and my mind. That to this day, no amount of knowledge or wisdom can remove the grace that the Lord gave to me long before there WAS knowledge or wisdom as it might be said today.

Diving into this project means, for me, answering some of the heavily broken hearts that have crossed my path in the last number of years. More recently, another woman at G.R.A.C.E. Ministries who asked the question, "What is God doing today?" And at this point, I'm tired of setting these types of questions in the background of discussion and figuring on a later time that's more appropriate. People in our movement, people outside our movement, and people who do not even know the Lord as of yet either have asked, are asking, or will ask them. It's time to be prepared. It's time to have an answer.

This study of God's Present Hand begins in a very unique format that you may not expect. Long before we can address the deeper issues and possible answers for the questions that opened the first session, we need to look at the early stages of our own individual faith. In some ways, this study will offer you a retrospective "look back" into who you were then, who you are today, and how the Present Hand of God does or does not fit into that picture.

Part Two: When We First Believed

Today, as we begin an intriguing dive into "when we first believed," my goal is to encourage you, challenge you, and hopefully remind you of His gracious love for so many others who may have just recently "first believed." However, before we can really go anywhere at all, it seems that there is an essential Scripture topic that needs to be introduced carefully.

Whether you've grown up in the grace movement or been in the most closet corner of Christendom, you've probably heard the following passage:

"And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18:3

Shortly after learning of right division, this passage crept into the back of my mind and somehow found itself dimmed into the shadows of "kingdom truth." While none of us would disagree that this was given to Israel, we often cast not only this verse out of our minds, but the entire concept of being children in our faith. Perhaps it's the reality that we have indeed come to find a deeper truth and thus, as a logical result, do not view ourselves as children any longer. What's unfortunate is that once we discover right division, we typically don't consider anyone ELSE as a child either.

I've chosen to spend quite a bit more time in the next session dealing with "children" and "childhood" seasons, but for now, let's consider the latter Scriptures and what they say about the difference between childhood and adulthood:

"For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which [be] the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. For every one that useth milk [is] unskillful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, [even] those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." Hebrews 5:12-14

Verse 14 is probably the most fascinating in this message because it expresses the most fundamental absolute that we often ignore about ourselves and those whom we try to share right division. "Strong meat" does NOT belong to those who are NOT of "full age." And it gets better...

Those who are of "full age" are those who have exercised their ability to discern good and evil, right and wrong, truth from fiction, knowledge from ignorance. Are all in the Body automatically of "full age?" Who among us would say that this is the case? Who among us could make that argument? And who among us would say that ANY of us were of "full age" in the moment that we came to know the Lord Jesus Christ?

The term "full age" comes from the Greek term teleios {tel'-i-os}, which means "adult," "mature," or "that which is full grown." In order to BE of "full age," one must first not be adult. And yes, it again gets better...

Those who are not yet of "full age" had to first be born. That's correct. In order to become an adult, you had to first be a child. In order to have been a child, you had to have been an infant. In order to have been an infant, you had to be born. And in order to have been born, you had to be conceived and raised in the womb. All of these are part of the NATURAL course of existence.

We do not come into our faith as full grown adults and yet we expect newborns and infants to pick up 66 books, know which translation is THE translation, and immediately accept our conclusions about the past, the present, and the future of our place and our role in Christ. What we forget is that they don't even know how to read yet.

So what I'd like to do, for a little while, is take us into an interesting analysis of the following four stages of pre-childhood. We're going to compare basic facts of natural progression in human development and lay them out next to some things that you've likely known all your life but rarely thought about. The four stages are:

Conception

Nine months of nourishment before birth

Birth

Infancy

None of these are negotiable when it comes to the natural course of human beings because in order for any of us to be who we are today, we had to FIRST go through these stages. If we were being technical, they could each be divided into even greater detail.

"And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD." Genesis 4:1

This story displays the first HUMAN conception. Prior to that, Adam and Eve were designed as full grown beings... something that never happened again. For Cain's parents, there was no conception, no pregnancy, no birth, and no infancy. God simply laid out their form, breathed life into them, and they were functioning adults.

"So God created man in his [own] image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which [is] upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which [is] the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat." Genesis 1:27-29

Notice something very basic here. For God to say to Adam, "Be fruitful and multiply," there had to be an automatic understanding on his part. He wasn't a child. He wasn't an infant. He was a full grown adult and God spoke to him as such. No need to cater the wording so as to apply terminology to someone who doesn't comprehend.

"And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD." Genesis 4:2-3

This is the first text in which we see human development and growth before the next thing occurs. Rather than speaking of things as just happening or being spoken and done... things now take time. But let's not get too caught up in the growth of childhood because we're still talking about pre-childhood.

What I want to do right now is display the basic transition that has begun to occur in Scripture from the first HUMAN conception.

The term "conceived" comes up just under 50 times in Scripture, but the first two times we have record of human conception, there's an interesting phrase that precedes it.

"And Adam knew Eve his wife..." Genesis 4:1

"And Cain knew his wife..." Genesis 4:17

The word here for "knew" is the Hebrew word yada, which means, "to know, recognize, or perceive by experience." Why not, with all the other recorded conceptions, just follow suit and say, "went into his wife?" If we agree that every jot and tittle of Scripture has some intention, some message, and some purpose, then I'd like you to consider something with me.

Before speaking in Scripture of conception as a sexual thing, could it be possible that the Lord, in fact, intended for His people to recognize the impact that foreknowledge had on the relationship that might produce children? Rather than speaking of conception as simply two people "being" together (as Scripture would later display), would it not be within the mind of God to define the relationship between mother and father? He KNEW her. He did not simply "go into her." It seems, unless we're reading different texts, that knowledge plays a huge part in the conception of a human being.

Come back with me, if you will, to conception and how it correlates to our spiritual salvation and beginnings in Christ. In that spiritual sense, we are not conceived by two parents, but by One God and Father of all. In the absence of a counterpart, His knowledge shifts to the offspring. Those who will be conceived. And even better... His knowledge IS the conception. Think about the alternative meaning of the word...

Conception: Something conceived in the mind; a concept, plan, design, idea, or thought.

While we can often think of conception as the literal zygote being formed, there is an even greater depth to BEING conceived. It begins in the mind of they who conceive. For our Lord, our conception was in His mind as a plan and a design.

"[Even] every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him." Isaiah 43:7

Surely we don't need anyone with a dissertation in grace theology to explain that this is in a larger context of rightly divided truth for Israel. But is there not an absolute here about the design of those called by His name? God does not take lightly what He has created and what He has made.

"According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:" Ephesians 1:4

"For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate [to be] conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren." Romans 8:29

And lest you consider that our Apostle Paul does not believe Body believers to have been formed...

"Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed [it], Why hast thou made me thus?" Romans 9:20

When we get into chapter two and begin discovering the things that God STILL does in this present age, we'll find this as one of the most basic truths. The present hand of God is still forming men and women.

But here's where today's topic comes into play. Conception, when it comes to our salvation, does not mean that WE know we have been conceived. Our salvation conception is the point at which God begins His work on the lives that we have not begun to live yet. Have you ever thought about that?

Before you EVER recognized who you were in Christ, He already knew you and had begun working to prepare you to come out of the womb. But that's just it. Our "spiritual conception" did not begin when something happened in our present lives. It happened before we were actually even conceived. Meaning what?

The Lord had already begun preparing the parents, the womb, the journey, and the path that you would enter. Think about how you came to know the Lord. Did you come to know Him because you randomly decided to know Him or did you suddenly open your eyes, quite possibly weep, and realize that He had ALWAYS been there? It was He who opened your eyes to look in retrospect at the road you had taken to that point.

Truly, He conceived you. He had a "plan" that you were to fit into before your parents ever came to be. That's not just an incredible tidbit of information... That's a wow. His "present hand" was orchestrating the people who would bring you to life.

When you think about the grace believers who have made the most difference in your lives, just take a moment to consider if their parents had never met. Were these men and women who have made a difference for you just created by chance love? By unforeseen circumstance that brought them into being?

NEITHER WERE YOU!

"Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee..." Jeremiah 1:5

Jeremiah was not the only being in all of history that God knew before He formed. The direct purpose and use of Jeremiah (not a pleasant one, mind you) was unique to his own life... but he was a child of God built by the Almighty Hand.

Before Jeremiah was formed, God knew him. And who was it who formed him? The credit of formation goes to God. Imagine that... imagine those Hands... imagine that touch... imagine that picture. A baby growing in the womb with no knowledge of his life, his purpose, his journey, his challenges... a baby totally dependant on the protection of someone other than his or herself.

From there we move into the image of nourishment. From the time of human conception, a mother has only nine months to prepare this little one for the bright world that will soon be seen. From the time of spiritual conception, our Father has no time limit on how to prepare the right place for you to be born. He had it in mind to give you life from the foundations of the earth... meaning that the time between then and now has been preparation.

When your parents saw each other for the first time, no doubt there was a glorious moment in heaven for the nearing life that you would soon enjoy.

"In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:" Ephesians 1:11

All things after the counsel of His own will.

"For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether [they be] thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him:" Colossians 1:16

All things. And in order to create all things that seem to be moving quickly on a ticking clock, He reaches INTO time to orchestrate the people who are necessary to bring us birth. What's most fascinating is that because He conceived us, His purpose and intention is to give you life... essentially... to bring you to Himself and open your eyes to see Him.

"For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father." Romans 8:15

When do we receive this Spirit?

"In whom ye also [trusted], after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise," Ephesians 1:13

Upon the moment you believe, you receive the Holy Spirit and, for lack of a more politically correct grace-accepted term, are "born." Whether or not we want to say "born again" is really irrelevant because that's not the issue. In the moment you recognize your Father, you are beginning a walk that had not begun prior. Everything leading up to that recognition and belief was God's preparation for your journey.

Do you remember it? Do you remember how, after all the days, months, and years of not knowing Him... you finally knew Him? Were you a confident, mature, and meat-chewing adult in that personal image or did it look something like this?



What child is born that is not exhausted? What child is born that does not long for anything familiar? The above picture symbolizes the security a child's mother can offer when they're new to the great big world that has been opened to them. Eyes now see things that were never before possible. Colors, light, perspective, faces, people.

When you first believed, how many things seemed new? And as you branched out into the world, how quickly did you sometimes lean back into the arms of your Father as He was your only confident security?

So many of us were likely able to forget this period of our lives because it actually happened during our human childhood season. We became infants during childhood when we were led to see the Lord through our parents or our pastors or through those precious friends who cared enough to keep trying. Still others were adults when they became infants. The greatest challenge they faced were the expectations of every believer they came into contact with.

"You don't see it that way? Why?"

I don't know.

"Hasn't anyone taught you that yet?"

Um...

When we first believed, there was excitement, there was fear, there was emotional security. All we had to go on was the vague realization that we knew our Father by way of Christ Jesus. We didn't know anything else.

About ten years ago, myself and four friends went out late to a 24-hour diner for some coffee and hot chocolate. One of the young men with us was a new believer of about six months. He absolutely loved the Lord with all his heart and chose to join us on this night for some good company. As we each began to talk, the direction of our conversation made its way to predestination and free will. Clearly a discussion that has gone on for centuries, but we all chose to think ourselves intelligent and bring new perspectives to the dialogue. During the conversation, our young friend got relatively quiet and began drawing something on his napkin. After about an hour or so, our meal was finished and we were thinking to conclude our discussion since it appeared to not be bringing anyone to new perspectives. Seemed we were getting no where and that's when our young friend spoke up...

"You see this?"

He pulled out the napkin that he'd been drawing on.

"This is what it's all about."

What he had drawn was a detailed picture of the cross.

The four of us who had been discussing theology looked at each other and smiled graciously. A child had reminded us of the simple joy that gives us life. He hadn't said anything profound... nothing provocative... nothing deep. Just a word of what he knew.

Have you ever been in a room with 3 adults and one newborn baby? Perhaps you're in an "adult" conversation and suddenly the baby begins to look directly at you. Eventually, you look back and acknowledge that it's actually pretty cute. Then the child smiles. You light up along with every other adult in the room.

Infants and newborn babies, as this young man had been, are the individuals who can light up a room with their smile. They're bright. They're excited. They're not sure where to project their emotions.

What we DO know about these newborn babies is that they need to be raised. And that requires responsible parents.

"And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Ephesians 6:4

Bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

The word for nurture here is very insightful. It means, "whole training and education of children...by correcting mistakes and curbing passions." Admonition, in another sense, is a constant reminder that they belong to the Lord. This is a careful task that doesn't happen immediately and doesn't happen with assumption.

Looking at an infant, what might provoke them to wrath? If you abandoned them, right? If you threw up your hands when they made a mistake, when they cried, or when they needed you most. When you assumed that they "should have figured it out by now."

When we first believed... we needed all the help we could get. We had just been born and new hardly anything about the world anymore except that we belonged to the Lord.

When we first believed... we went through an experience that many are going through right now. But somewhere in our perceived wisdom, we often are fearful of infants never getting past childhood. Surely we have a Biblically righteous concern for this possibility, but that's the dilemma we're forced to deal with.

When do we push a child to make a mature decision? Will they be ready? If they don't make the right decision, will it mean that they'll never get it? Should we give up on certain children?

These are the issues that we'll address in the next session. But the last phase of discussing infancy requires that we speak about the difference between children who can chew meat and newborns who don't even have the teeth to try.

When Paul spoke to the Corinthians, he spoke to them about the content of food he was able to feed...

"I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able [to bear it], neither yet now are ye able." 1 Corinthians 3:2

This was their condition. Could they be further along? Quite likely. But here he describes the realistic difference between milk and meat. He has fed his audience with milk because they were NOT ABLE to eat meat. Why? Because they have no teeth. How does one grow teeth? Basic nourishment.

When we teach little children (those who come to know the Lord when they're 6 and 7 years old) about Christ, we're not giving them theology... we're giving them Scripture verses. We're giving them the nutrition of God's Word... not the depth that exists inside of it. Paul continued giving his audience, regardless of their foolish decisions, any nourishment that he could give them. So he gave them milk.

Milk is the first catalyst of nutrients for the body. Likewise, basic nutrition is essential for a newborn before they can begin to grow teeth and start chewing on meat that will give them gradual maturity. Infants can be safely described as needing an incredible amount of love, affection, and coddling. It's not until they reach the age of toddler and early childhood that certain attachments can begin to be pulled away as they figure out the steps of life that they are going to take. That infancy stage is one that we've all been in.

As a parent, what would you do if your newborn threw the bottle of milk on the ground and began to explain the law of gravity? So why, when so many of us come to know the Lord, do we push away the milk that's essential for our early growth? Let me give you my perspective.

Because, somewhere deep inside, we don't want children in our grace churches. We want people who can "keep up" with our conversations, our sermons, our messages, and our perspectives. Children simply don't fit into that perfect picture. What's worse, infants are the farthest thing from what we anticipate. The more "baby Christians" we have in our midst, the more it might appear that we're not a mature group. So, in an attempt to protect the image of our assemblies, we take the infants, shove 15 full ribeye steaks into their throat (not even bite-size), and wonder why they don't enjoy being with us.

Is it pride? I'd imagine so.

What intelligent man typically surrounds himself with little children? Not many. He typically puts them in a corner to engage the dialogue of other similar men with full grown intellectual capacity. Problem is, the more children get pushed into a corner and infants are not allowed to drink milk before eating meat... the fewer TRUE adults we're going to have in the end.

In the next session, we're going to address "that childhood season" and what it means to BE a child in the Lord. With so many passages, both for Israel and for the Body, that speak about "the children of God," I hope that you'll join me for a careful look into what it means to be His child, what it means to have a season of immaturity, what it means to make early mistakes, and what it means to allow others their childhood season.

"As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby:" I Peter 2:2

There is indeed meat in the Word that is essential for adults, but there is "sincere milk" in the Word for the growth of newborn babes.

May the Lord encourage and remind you of what it meant to "first believe" that you might have greater compassion on others who are presently "newborn babes" in Christ. May you not forget that the "newborns" are just as much the Lord's as the children and the adults.