

Death of the Modern SuperHero

How Grace Breaks our Rules

by Chris Lautsbaugh

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Death of the Modern SuperHero
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To recovering superheroes around the world



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Man of Steel or Man of Clay?

'Superman is dead.'

As children we dream of flying through the air like our heroes. Leaping tall buildings in a single bound, running at the speed of light, rushing in to save the day from evil villains in the nick of time. Saving the world would all be in a day's work.

As rational thinking adults we may have ceased to dream in this way, but how often do we feel like we must be a superhero in our Christian faith? With all the dos and don'ts we see in Scripture and those we hear preached from the pulpit, the obvious conclusion is that we must be more than human.

There is just one problem. We are not indestructible like our superhero idols.

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Over the past 10 years, I have been involved with a Bible school that takes students through all 66 books of the Bible in nine months using the inductive Bible study method. At the end of one school we asked the students, 'What truth have you come away with that most influenced your life?' After pouring over every chapter and verse in Scripture one student's response was, 'Superman is dead.' I thought it was a profound statement that summed up the message of Scripture from cover to cover. In fact, it is what makes Christianity different from every other religion and system on the planet.

CLIMBING THE LADDER

From the moment we come out of the womb, we are conditioned to believe that success in life involves climbing the ladder. We attempt to succeed in all areas of life, while avoiding things that make us feel weak. As a child, we are prompted to make the 'traveling' or 'select' sports team or find ourselves in the advanced track in the early schooling years. Parents attempt to coax their children to walk faster, talk sooner, and read well beyond the normal level. As we strive for this level of success, something is ingrained in our subconscious; a belief system is formed. We begin believing popular mottos such as 'nothing is for free' or 'hard work brings happiness.' Over time we become perfectionists.

MAN OF STEEL OR MAN OF CLAY?

Continuing our journey to adulthood, it is nearly impossible to avoid thoughts about climbing the ladder. In business, we speak of the corporate ladder and doing whatever it takes to make sure we continue on it in an upward direction. In education, it is the pursuit of the next level, adding additional degrees of higher education. Athletes seek to rise through the ranks of the amateur leagues to the majors. Even upon reaching this pinnacle, the definition of success rises to becoming an All Star; perhaps eventually a legend or a national hero.

We turn our attention to the church and see a similar picture. Are we content to be in the choir, or must we be the choir director? In Africa, ministers tend to seek as many titles before and after their names as possible. It is not unusual to see a Bishop Apostle Prophet so and so of such and such church. Ministries and missionaries are measured by statistics and newsletter headlines. We often say, 'if only one person believes, it is worth it.' This may be true, but it will not impress the missions committee in their financial decisions. We must be more than ordinary. We must be superheroes!



From the moment we come out of the womb, we are conditioned to believe that success in life involves climbing the ladder.

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I am in no way saying we should strive for something less than the best. I don't believe that this 'perfectionist' worldview has changed the church's perspective of salvation. No solid Christian person would ever say salvation is by works. Scripture is clear. Most of us can quote the following verse.

"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." Ephesians 2:8-9.

We are quick to label people who do not believe this as a cult. We are correct in this labeling! Salvation is a free gift. There is nothing we can do to deserve it or be worthy of it. This is the distinguishing principle that separates Christianity from other religions

In my years of ministry, I continually meet individuals who subconsciously believe the rules change for them after salvation. Salvation was free, yet somehow we feel 'climbing the ladder' is necessary to keep in God's good books. Even our spiritual lives have been affected. We believe we must be spiritual superheroes.

SUPERMAN IS DEAD

This reminds me of something that happened with one of my sons, Garrett. Like many boys, Garrett has a fascination with superheroes. One day my wife, Lindsey, was home

with our boys. She dressed our son up in his cape, and let him head off to the land of make believe. He flew around the house for a while before retreating to the back porch. It wasn't long until Lindsey heard a huge crash accompanied by the sounds of a crying boy. Rushing outside, she found a pile of assorted lawn furniture that had been stacked into a platform, designed to be the launching pad for flight. Initially, she was concerned that he had been hurt as he sobbed uncontrollably. As he calmed down, Lindsey found out the true source of the tears. He had crashed as he was attempting to fly. He had the cape, he built the tower, he believed with all his heart he could; still, gravity took effect and he crashed to the ground. Even with his best effort and all his faith, it did not work. The reality of this crushed his three-year-old spirit. He was not a superhero. Garrett could not fly.



For many of us, the thought of not being a superhero is much worse than the pain of crashing under the weight of our own effort.

For many of us, the thought of not being a superhero is much worse than the pain of crashing under the weight of our own effort. We will try to do the impossible for a long time, before we will admit our weakness. Depression and burnout are growing to epidemic proportions, especially among people 'working for God.' Weakness is something no

one wants. We will put on a false face for a long time before admitting our true need. We will work until exhaustion, take medication, or find ways to escape reality before we ever utter the words 'I can't do it.'

JARS OF CLAY AND SKUBALON

Society exalts displays of strength, telling us we must be superheroes. This is not something new to the twenty-first-century; Paul dealt with these very things in Second Corinthians.

Corinth was a leading first-century city, steeped in the Greek worldview. This view exalted all things outward, such as knowledge, physical strength, wealth, and eloquence. According to these standards, Paul fell woefully short. Many scholars portray Paul as a short, balding, annoying sort of fellow, perhaps with stomach issues or bad eyesight (these are some of the options for the thorn in the flesh in 2 Cor. 12:7). He was not a skilled speaker and bore on his body the marks of many shipwrecks and beatings. Yet, he knew the true source of his ministry was not his personal talents and abilities. It was to this effect he encouraged the Corinthian believers when he said, "*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.*" 2 Corinthians 4:7

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Clay jars were as ordinary as grocery sacks are today. They were everywhere and had no inherent value. The uncommon thing was what filled them. In this illustration, the jars are filled with the Spirit of God. By Paul's definition, a true minister was not one outwardly, but inwardly. This illustration represents what he wanted to occur in the mindset of Corinthian believers. He desired them to know they qualified as ministers, even without all the outward things society told them were necessary.

Paul takes it one step further in Philippians 3:4-9. Philippi was a Greek colony and so the same worldview was prevalent. Look at the radical, counter-culture statements he makes here.

"...though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through

faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."

We see Paul listing all the outward attributes and qualifications he could boast of. He speaks of his culture, his passport, his religious training and accomplishments. Look at how he explains these things that could be considered



Skubalon is what is thrown to the dogs, or dung. Paul is saying that his long list of outward accomplishments is worthy of the sewer.

'gain.' In verse 8, the word he uses to describe these qualifications is 'rubbish.' The Greek word for this is "skubalon."¹

I don't know many Greek words, but this one is quite memorable. Skubalon is what is thrown to the dogs, or dung. Paul is saying that his long list of outward accomplishments is worthy of the sewer. Flush them down the toilet! Our

greatest human accomplishments stink when compared to the work of Christ. Righteousness does not come from striving or living a privileged life but through faith and is a gift of God. We can never add to the work of Christ by our own efforts.

The picture that comes to mind with the meaning of skubalon is one where I gather all my best efforts at doing

¹ *Strongs Concordance* #4657.

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the right thing. I pile these high on a silver platter, lifting it heavenward in an act of showing God how committed I am.

'Surely God will look at this great offering and be pleased,' I think to myself.

What I often fail to recognize is that what I am holding up to God is merely a silver platter piled high and deep with dung! No serious Christian would ever consider giving God a gift of sewage; yet, this is what Paul equates our finest efforts at earning God's favor to.

Poop!

It is a disgusting picture, and it smells. Our best attempts to please the Lord emit a foul, foul smell!

My point is this. After receiving the gift of salvation, we turn our attention towards living a godly life. The focus quickly turns from the cross and moves to our responsibility and our 'part.' Yes, God has saved us by grace, but now 'we better live right!'

Methods in which this is communicated can range from subtle to outright manipulation. Even the best-intentioned believer, with the purest heart, can easily find themselves slipping back to the cultural norm of climbing the ladder.

As believers, we desire to live a life of obedience and holiness. Yet, the reality of the Christian walk is that sin does not disappear the moment we receive the precious gift of grace. As we journey in our newfound faith, questions begin arising in our minds.

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'How much is enough?'

'What does it take to make it to heaven?'

'Is it once saved, always saved or does our eternal destiny hang in the balance with every thought and choice?'

'What is required to hear those words "*well done, good and faithful servant*" on Judgment Day?' (Matthew 25:21)

In my 19 years of ministry I have met many solid believers who ask these questions deep in their hearts. Most are afraid to voice this for fear of the repercussions. These kinds of feelings do not go over well in newsletters or ministry reports.

Moments after a new convert prays the prayer of salvation, we begin telling them the rules. We 'disciple' them in how to work hard at being a 'good Christian.' Often we end up telling them to don the cape and become a superhero.

GRACE OR KARMA?

Bono, the lead singer of the Irish rock band U2 and global humanitarian, relates a conversation he had with writer Michka Assayas in the book *Bono on Bono*². As he attempts to explain the beauty of the gospel, Bono gives one of the most culturally-relevant presentations of the gospel I have heard. He does this without using religious words or catch

² *Bono on Bono* by Michka Assayas, Hodder & Stoughton Ltd (2005).

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phrases such as 'washed in the blood.' Bono explains the world has two main forces - grace and karma. Karma by definition is getting what you deserve. If you do good, good things will happen. Similarly if you do wrong, you can expect a negative result. Climbing the ladder is all about karma. If you work hard, you will succeed. The Christianized version of this says if you pray the right prayer or stay away from sin long enough, you can 'move' the hand of God to get what you want. This almost sounds like a spiritual form of manipulation, but the one being manipulated is God himself! Grace, plays by a different set of rules. Grace stands in opposition to karma. We deserve nothing less than hell. Instead God pours out abundant blessings on us. This does not make sense. It can often seem too good to be true. Surely a grace this big would be abused.

A few years back, I was listening to Philip Yancey, author of the fantastic book *What's So Amazing About Grace*³. He was speaking on the same idea as Bono. Instead of wording it 'grace and karma', he chose the terms 'grace and gravity.' Gravity speaks of weight and rules. Grace is set as the opposite. As I listened to him describe these concepts, it brought a smile to my face. These ideas were different from everything I had ever known to be true. I literally inhaled deeply the fresh air of grace as tears came to my eyes. It was so out of the ordinary, so counter culture; so refreshing.

³ *What's So Amazing About Grace* by Philip Yancey, Zondervan (1997)

Grace takes the rules society makes and turns them upside down.

I have often imagined what I would do if I ran a new believers class at a church. The stereotypical convert is told to 'cut his hair, change his music, stop chewing tobacco, drinking alcohol, and stop going out with girls who do these things' right after salvation. These are often good, Biblical suggestions taught by sincere saints. However almost overnight, it transforms a relationship with God into a list of dos and don'ts. Immediately we put the new believer on the ladder and prod them to climb with quotes of Biblical commands. Christianity has now taken on the work-based culture of our world (not to mention every other religious system on the planet). You need to grunt and groan to succeed. Get your hands dirty and make your own success.

WHAT IF...

What if we really taught new believers the reality of sin, the extent of the gift of the salvation, and the appropriate response of holiness to that gift?

What if we taught them that success is not a checklist but a relationship?

What if we told them it was okay to not be a superhero?

That is the goal of this book.

MAN OF STEEL OR MAN OF CLAY?

After we come to terms with the bad news, that we are not superheroes, we will be able to fully explore the good news. God has given us grace, our salvation. As the problem of sin is fully understood, salvation becomes more clear as well. The world is broken and has been since Genesis 3. Everyone starts in this broken state, everyone is in need of a rescuer. We must first understand sin and the way God deals with it throughout history. I can say with confidence that you will come away with a greater view of God's grace and the gift of salvation as you read these pages. Our journey wouldn't be complete unless we spoke of what a believer does after salvation. How do we live and grow? We don't want our grace to be 'sloppy agape' or 'cheap grace.' So we will spend a great deal of time looking at holiness and sanctification in response to salvation. We cannot separate these three things; sin, salvation, and sanctification. The Biblical writers often dealt with these three issues together and we will do that as well.

Christ is now the Superhero, we are not. Even when we attempt to look good, our best efforts add up to skubalon, worthy only to be flushed into the sewer. The days of us attempting to be a superhero are over. Superman is dead. Grace turns things upside down.



QUESTIONS for discussion

In what ways can you identify with 'climbing the ladder' or trying to be a superhero? How does that thought pattern creep into our Christian lives?

Which view do you prefer in your life - karma or grace? Do you want to get what you deserve or unmerited favor?

List several ways your relationship with God looks like 'karma' or 'gravity?' How can you change these?

Encourage yourself with the areas in your life where you find yourself walking in grace.



Interested in hearing more about *Death of the Modern SuperHero* and the topic of grace?

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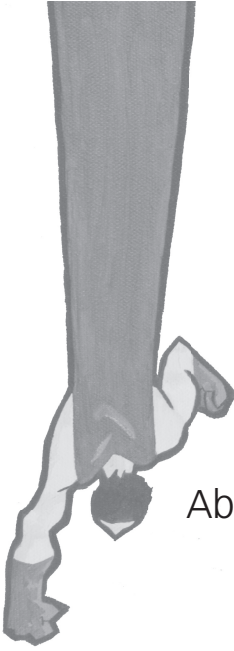
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About the Author

Chris Lautsbaugh has been in ministry and missions for twenty years now, teaching and ministering in over 35 countries. He is currently living and serving in South Africa with Youth With a Mission. He has spent years training international students in discipleship and Biblical training as they prepare to be missionaries. Together with his wife Lindsey, and two sons, Garrett and Thabo, they formed Project Grace. This is a non profit ministry designed to help train and equip African nationals to reach the world. He has also published a series of 24 discipleship devotionals in *La Biblia del Discipulado* (The Discipleship Bible). Chris enjoys coffee, sports, and traveling to new places. You can follow him and this book on the Facebook group “Death of the Modern Superhero” or at www.nosuperheroes.com.



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