

# **UNSCHEDULED GRACE**

**40 Reflections and Prayers  
for College Students**

**By Matthew J. Marohl  
and Katherine E. Fick**

# TO THE READER

College life can feel completely controlled by schedules. Your classes are scheduled. So are your labs, rehearsals, practices, and study groups. You may feel like you have to schedule everything from eating to spending time with friends—and maybe even time with God. But the grace of God is an unscheduled grace. It is unscheduled because it is constant—it is already and always with you. The unscheduled grace of God can also surprise you. When you are reminded that you are not alone exactly when you need to hear that message the most, that is unscheduled grace. When you realize that you are more than your major, that you are more than your GPA, that is unscheduled grace. Unscheduled because it never fails, unscheduled because it can still amaze.

The book that you are holding, *Unscheduled Grace*, is a collection of devotions and prayers. Each devotion is a short reflection on a verse or section from the Bible. Each prayer is dedicated to a different aspect of life. There aren't any rules when it comes to reading this book. You may want to start at the beginning and methodically work your way through to the end. You may want to open to a page and read whatever you happen to find at that moment. This book can be read alone or with a friend or in a small group.

We wrote this book with students in mind, with *you* in mind. We are pastors at a college. We spend all of our time with students. It is a great joy to listen and to talk, to hear all about average days and momentous moments. It is not unusual for our offices to be places of laughter and tears, often at the same time. This book draws upon the themes that we hear and discuss every day. Love, fear, uncertainty, regret, dreams, and hopes; they are all present in these pages. We know that multiple realities often exist at the same time. The theme that ties the devotions and prayers together is an emphasis on the unscheduled grace of God. With all of its schedules, college life is often unpredictable. It is our hope that this book can bring you unscheduled grace.

May the love of God surround you,  
the grace of Christ attend you,  
and the Holy Spirit keep you,  
this day and forevermore.  
Amen.

Pastor Matt Marohl

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## MATTHEW 28:16-20

# SOME DOUBTED

The Gospel of Matthew concludes with a section that is commonly called “The Great Commission.” The disciples are gathered around the risen Jesus, and he sends them out to continue his ministry. The disciples had watched as Jesus taught. They experienced his care for the sick and his love for the stranger. Now it is their turn.

Moving, right? “But wait—there’s more.” The text also includes one of the most fascinating details in all of the Gospel of Matthew. We are told that when the disciples saw the risen Jesus they worshiped; but some doubted. I love that: “They worshiped; some doubted.” When I am asked by parents to describe daily chapel, I am always tempted to say, “Well, they worshiped; some doubted.”

Besides being funny, there is something very different about this description of doubt. Elsewhere in the New Testament, doubt is described in negative terms, as something to overcome. When Peter is shown to have doubt, he is described as having “little faith.” When Thomas expresses doubt, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and still believe.” Elsewhere in the New Testament, it seems that doubt is the opposite of faith. But here doubt seems to be an aspect of faith.

What does it mean that doubt is an aspect of faith? If I asked you to define doubt, you might say something like “to be unsure of what I believe.” Or “to be suspicious of a truth claim.” In either case, doubt is something that we do in our heads. It is a process of weighing options. It is a process of accepting or rejecting. In the world of Jesus, however, to have doubt meant to “hesitate” or “stand in two places at one time.” In the case of the Great Commission, this is exactly what is happening. The disciples are standing in two places at one time. They had been followers of Jesus. Now they are being sent out as leaders. They have one foot in the past and one foot in the future. What is the

result of this? They hesitate. They doubt. Will they be good enough? Are they ready?

This understanding of doubt relates directly to college life. Perhaps you were active in a church during high school. You may have been a member of a youth group. But in college you are no longer attending your parents' church. This is *your* faith life. Having one foot in one camp and one foot in the other is bound to cause some tension. You are bound to hesitate. Doubt is a very natural result of being pulled in different directions.

You may feel that you have one foot in the world of faith and one foot in the world of the academic study of religion. As many of you have come to know, these are two different things. Discussing the Bible and theology in the classroom sometimes feels very different from worshipping God. Again, the result of this may be tension and doubt.

What I like about this understanding of doubt and its use at the end of the Gospel of Matthew is that the disciples are not shamed for experiencing doubt. In fact, the opposite is true; they are sent out to minister, doubt and all.

**MATTHEW 18:21-22**

# **AM I REALLY FORGIVEN?**

Both theologians and psychologists might agree that forgiving others tends to be easier (and is perhaps more common) than accepting that we ourselves are forgiven. So in this devotion I'll ask, "Why can it be so hard to believe that God's grace and mercy extends even to us?"

There are many reasons why it can be hard to acknowledge our own forgiveness. When we recognize that we have done something wrong, that we have hurt ourselves or others, we may feel a sense of guilt or sadness. If we hear that by God's grace we are forgiven without releasing the accompanying emotions, the forgiveness may not seem real. We wonder, "If I'm really forgiven, why do I still feel so bad?" Accepting that we are forgiven also requires doing the work of processing our own emotional reactions. We need to process our guilt or sadness or shame.

Another reason why it may be difficult to acknowledge that we are ourselves forgiven may be a matter of trust and love. It is often easier to forgive others, especially those whom we love. If a good friend—someone who we trust and love—does something that hurts us, we are more likely to forgive them and to look for ways to continue with the relationship. We look back to the goodness that we have experienced in them and the love that we have for them, and we work on the project of forgiveness. However, if we don't have a loving, trusting relationship with ourselves, we may believe that we aren't worthy of being forgiven. Where we might see others as deserving of grace, a lack of love for ourselves may leave us feeling empty.

It can also be hard to confess our sins and receive the promise of forgiveness if we are burdened with some form of self-deception. Exceptionalism is when we hold ourselves accountable or blameworthy in ways that we would never hold others. It's when we maintain a standard for ourselves that is far higher than one we would use for

those around us. This is a cousin to perfectionism and the belief that if things go wrong, it is likely a result of our actions or inactions. Expansionism is when we expand the realm of our responsibility to just about everything. If we see ourselves as responsible for everything, we will always encounter what we believe to be our failures or mistakes. Confirmation bias is when we operate with the assumption that only someone like us (insert your own negative judgment here: lazy, unlovable, and so on) could be responsible for the problem. Every perceived misstep, then, seems to confirm our sense of inadequacy. If we hold ourselves to impossibly high standards, believe that we are responsible for everything, or believe that everything about us is bad, this will reinforce the view that we don't deserve forgiveness.

As Christians, we are called to the discipline of self-examination and repentance. If faithfully receiving God's promise of forgiveness is a stumbling block for you, I invite you to think critically about the ways that you understand yourself and God, and to live into the free gift of God's grace.

# EXODUS 5

# ENOUGH

How much is enough?

Think about your life as a student. When will you have worked hard enough on that paper? Studied enough for a test? Spent enough time with friends? Called your parents enough times? Exercised enough, eaten well enough, partied enough, spent time in prayer enough, volunteered enough, gotten enough sleep or thought enough about your future?

We live in a world of endless requirements. There is always more to do, and there are always things we could do better. We spend our lives striving because as soon as we meet goals, there are new ones to shoot for. There is always more we can learn, more to produce, more money to be made, more things to buy and more to give. And there is never enough time or money or resources. More is always needed, as if everything in life is scarce and you have to get what you can.

This is Pharaoh's world. The people of Israel are enslaved, and they make bricks. And they will never make enough of them. Their job will never end. When Moses and Aaron come to the king of Egypt in Exodus and ask him to let the Israelites go and worship God in the wilderness, Pharaoh says they cannot possibly stop working. He then piles on more work—not only making bricks but also gleaning straw—and when they can't meet this new, impossible requirement, he calls them lazy. Lazy!

For Pharaoh, the Israelites are commodities, hands in a production line, and what they produce will never be enough. But that is not God's world. God's world is a world of abundance, not scarcity, where there is more than enough for all if we wisely use what we have been given. A world where people are people, not brick-making machines.

God frees the people of Israel, leads them out to a mountain, and gives them God's laws—the most famous of which are the Ten Commandments (you'll find those in Exodus 20). Most of the time people look at them and think they are simply a list of rules, but they are really a glimpse into what God's world is like. In those laws, God invites people into relationships with God and each other that are both faithful and life-giving. We are meant to see ourselves and each other not as producers but as neighbors, as people of worth and value who are to be treated well. And the people are even given a holy day of rest.

God's world is a place in which people are valued not because of what we can produce, how much money we make, or what kind of degrees we have, but because we are God's creation and are loved as God's children. God then calls us to love each other, to recognize each other as siblings.

You will work hard while you are in college, in the classroom and out, and this is a good thing. But your worth is not determined by grades or student organizations or how busy you are. You are a beloved child of God. In God's eyes, that is already more than enough.

# **TIRED**

I am tired.

I am exhausted.

My schedule is full  
and assignments  
weigh heavy on my mind.

Grant me rest, O God.

O God, grant me peace.

Restore me.

When this day is over  
and a new day has broken,  
bless me with energy  
and a renewed sense of purpose.

But for now,  
slow my body,  
slow my mind,  
and let me sleep.

Amen.

## ROOMMATE PROBLEMS

Holy God,

things are really hard with my roommate right now.

We are not communicating well.

We irritate each other.

I try to compromise but it just doesn't seem to  
be working.

We're too different.

We can't accommodate each other.

You, O God, are gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Please grant me some of your graciousness,  
patience, and forgiveness.

Guide us in how we might work through  
our problems,  
and give us wisdom to know when we  
might need help.

Send friends to support us,  
and fill us with your love.

Amen.



## FEELING LONELY

God of all, I feel alone.

It seems like no one really knows me.

I can be surrounded by people at lunch

but feel like I am not really connecting.

My family is far away.

Sometimes it feels good to be alone,

but these days, it feels like there's something wrong.

Lift me out of this hole, God,

and help me look around and see the people

who care about me. Remind me of your

abiding presence,

and renew my spirit to initiate relationships,

knowing that you created us to be in community.

Amen.

## GETTING HOMEWORK DONE

God of wisdom, sometimes I can't wait to work  
on a paper,  
to do the reading, or get into the lab.  
Other times, I dread opening a book.  
I get frustrated with group projects because  
others aren't putting in the time.  
It's hard to get everything done,  
especially when some of it seems like a waste of time.

You have called me here, O God, to be a student.  
Continue to nurture me as I learn.  
Build up my perseverance for studying  
when I am uninspired,  
and spark my imagination for further study in the  
work I love.  
Help me see how all of it is shaping  
the person I am becoming.  
Amen.