Sample Book Review

By Happy Robert (2024)

For Westminster Christian Institute Uganda Students

Duguid, M. I. (2002). *Living in the Grip of Relentless Grace: The Gospel in the Lives of Isaac and Jacob.* Phillipsburg, New Jersey; P&R Publishing.

Iain M. Duguid has a Master of Divinity from Westminster Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge. He is a professor of Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary in California. His other works include: Living in the Gap between promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham and Hero of Heroes, and Seeing Christ in the Beatitudes.

“Living in the Grip of Relentless Grace” is one of the many series with the title: “The Gospel According to the Old Testament” which is series of studies on the lives of Old Testament characters. The premise of these series is that both Old and New Testaments which make up the Bible, is a unified revelation of God, Christ being the theme of this unity. The authors are convinced that the individual books of the Bible contain different forms of literature, styles, and theologies, all pointing forward to Christ. They are persuaded that the whole Bible must be taught and preached to bring Christ to the listeners. Christ is the heart of the New Testament just as he is the heart of Old Testament. Failure to see him there is to render the entire canon useless because the whole canon hinges on promise and reality. And Christ is the promise of the Old Testament and He is at the same time the fulfillment in the New Testament.

The aims of the series as stated in the forward by Tremper Longman III as first, to lay out the pervasiveness of the revelation of Christ in the Old Testament; second, to promote a Christ-centered reading of the Old Testament; and third, to encourage Christ-centered preaching and teaching from the Old Testament. Therefore, the target audiences for this book are pastors and lay people in the church, not scholars. The approach of the series is to discuss individual volumes of Old Testament figures rather than concentrating on books and their themes. This however doesn’t mean that themes of bible books can’t be highlighted, not at all; but the emphasis is given to the major characters in the Bible and themes can only be emphasized in light of those figures.

In this book, “Living in the Grip of Relentless Grace,” Duguid examined the life of two major Old Testament figures in the book of Genesis known as the Patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob. These two comes after the Father of the Faith, Abraham. This approach doesn’t disregard the other major characters in Genesis such as, Adam and Eve, Rebekah, Esau, Rachel, and Joseph etc. He does discuss them but it seems that his emphasis focuses on those in the line of the promised Messiah, Christ the hope of the world. The author wants to show how this promise developed, the challenges that threatened God’s faithfulness in the process until it came to be realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Throughout the book, Duguid shows that God indeed delights in using clay pots to store his treasure. The reason he does that is that His strength is seen more clearly in our weaknesses and His glory most apparent when he uses the least and most insignificant people to bring about his wonderful purposes. This manner of God’s work magnifies the power of the gospel of grace in Jesus Christ. The purposes of God through the gospel will always triumph not because of the worthiness or unworthiness of the messengers but because of the worthiness of God in His relentless grace. Grace will always triumph.

The story of the Patriarchs especially Isaac and Jacob is the story of the triumph of God’s grace in the Old Testament. Duguid shows in this book that the lives of all patriarchs were just wretches. They were enamored with lies, dishonesty, disobedience, and a lack of faith in the God of the covenant. Their story teaches us that reliance on the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses etc. is not an option, but an absolute must. The God who has promised will surely bring his promises to pass because he doesn’t change. God’s promises may be threatened in different ways in my life just as it was in the lives of the Patriarchs, such threats as bareness in the case of Sarah and Rebekah, lies for Abraham and Isaac, favoritism nurtured by Isaac and Rebekah which caused long lasting war among their children, forgetting the fear of God and marriage to the world by Isaac, were all issues threatening the promises of God. Jacob was no less, but a cold-blooded convincing schemer, manipulator and scoundrel.

 Yet, God in His grace used these wretches to bring his purposes to fruition. The list is long for the lessons gathered from this book. Most of the lessons are illustrated by the wretched patriarchs. Their lives show the lesson I made earlier that God delights in storing his treasures in clay pots. These men and their wives were mere pieces and arts of clay that God was shaping every time to accomplish his will in their lives. Over and over again, they learned to believe God even when it is less likely. They learned from their experience that God doesn’t give us all we need in this life nor does he answer all of our questions. God’s ways are not our ways, his choice not our choices. He chooses the evil people in the world to demonstrate his righteousness by transforming them first. Isaac who was not a man of faith, believed God just as Abraham did Gen. 26:2 and it was accredited him as righteousness. Jacob was chosen over Esau not because there was any intrinsic goodness in him but because of God’s sovereign mercy which mercy and grace began to transform him over time.

“Living in the Grip of Relentless Grace” is therefore a book about God’s grace in motion especially in the lives of Isaac and Jacob. It is an excellent pastoral book drawing critical lessons from characters in Genesis about God’s grace in Isaac and Jacob. I say pastoral, because I believe that every Pastor must have one on his desk. I also believe that a study on the major characters in the Old Testament is fitting first before exegesis of the passages can be done. On the other, there cannot be proper exegesis of the OT narratives without studying the characters. Understanding Old Testament characters in their context is cardinal to the exegesis of OT stories.

This book is written in simple English and easy to read. In other words, it has clear sentence structure, manageable paragraphs, and short chapters which afford easy and attractive reading. It is realistic in its comments, and practical in its applications. It answers the pressing need for a young student of the Old Testament who is seemingly confused with the idea of how the many parts of the Bible fit together to make the one story that culminates in Jesus Christ our Lord. By and large, Duguid points his readers to Christ from the principles he digs out of the failures and strengths of the Patriarchs described herein.

This book has helpful reflection questions which facilitates further personal application of content. It is theologically sound and biblically based. However, more of the New Testament would have been referenced. In addition, the book is consistent to proper principles of biblical hermeneutics especially the interpretation and application of the Old Testament narratives as every character is often linked to Christ.

According to this book, professor Duguid is not just a scholar but a gifted preacher and teacher. The content of the book is of a gifted teacher whereas the applications to life are of a gifted preacher; Christ being the center of every sermon. He reminds his readers that Grace is not always soft as many of us are used to think of it, it is also aggressive and compelling to sinners. Hence the Reformers called it irresistible grace of God. It is irresistible because it always conquers God’s enemies. The compelling power of grace is attested by Jacob wrestling with God overnight. Even when Jacob was knocked left and right and he was unable to walk, he clung on God for a blessing. God’s grace points sinners back to himself as the source of their strength.

I cannot agree more with Tremper Longman when he states in his forward that this book is intended to reach out to Pastors and laypeople. Rightly so! The book can be helpful as preaching series on the major characters in Genesis especially the life experiences and encounter of Isaac and Jacob with God. It is also helpful for adult study groups in the church, individuals studying Genesis, and College students preparing for church ministry. Teachers can learn from this book how to make relevant applications of the lessons herein to their lives and the lives of their students. However, a new book of such nature would require illustrations as windows for the applications made to resonate well with readers from different audiences.

The book is not burdened with references, yet the minimal well-chosen and balanced bibliography gives credence to the work. Furthermore, though Duguid devoted a great deal of thoughts to explain Christ the second person of the Trinity, and the Father first person of the Trinity in the life of Isaac and Jacob in fulfilling the plan of salvation in our time, he doesn’t explore the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the patriarchs. I would have expected this book to factor the Holy Spirit in Genesis 1-4 in the discussion of the contents and Abraham in the development of these two patriarchs but it seems the design was not to do that. Perhaps, another book has been written to address these issues. If not, I would recommend that the second version of this book includes this aspect.

However, my recommendation of this book to all pastors and teachers, students and all laypeople in the church of Jesus Christ is undisputed. It is down to earth, heart exposing and life transforming. In comparison to “Genesis 1-4” by Collins, this book is more practical and not burdened with Hebrew. I recommend it wholeheartedly.