

THE GRACE OF GOD

Philip E. Hughes has written, “The doctrine of grace lies at the very heart not merely of all Christian theology but also of all Christian experience. If we have an incorrect or inadequate understanding of the biblical teaching on grace, our whole grasp of the meaning and purpose of Christianity will be deficient in consequence. There is no subject which is more vital for our study and comprehension than this subject of the grace of God.” Many will say, “I already know what grace is. It is the unmerited favor of God.” But it is one thing to be able to quote a correct definition and quite another thing to be overwhelmed by a personal understanding and experience of grace. God’s grace can be defined as three things: his attitude toward us, his action for us, and his action in us.

First, grace is God’s attitude toward us. Because God is love, he looks upon his creatures with an attitude of favor and goodwill. When the goodwill of God considers creatures who are in misery and need, it is characterized as mercy. When his goodwill considers creatures who are sinful and unworthy and unlovely, it is called grace. When we say that grace is the undeserved favor of God, we are emphasizing the fact that sinners are the object of God’s love. We have sinned and turned against God, but he loves us anyway. Though we are against him, he is still for us. The songwriter marvels that “Christ receiveth sinful men.” But this is just what grace is. “Sinners Jesus will receive; sound this word of grace to all.”¹

Grace as undeserved favor seems to be the opposite of justice. If God were to treat us according to justice or law, then he would give us what we deserve. And as sinners, we deserve

¹Erdmann Neumeister, “Sinners Jesus Will Receive” (1718); translated by Emma F. Bevan (1858).

punishment. But we are saved by grace. In other words, God does not treat us as we ought to be treated. We are unworthy of the love he has for us.

I know not why God's wondrous grace
To me He hath made known;
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
Redeemed me for his own.²

This is why grace is “amazing”—that God would save “a wretch like me.”³

God's grace is not only undeserved; it is also free. This means that no compensation can be required for it; it is a gift. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life” (Ephesians 2.8-10).⁴ “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Romans 11.6). Our works are not required as compensation for God's grace. We obey the Lord out of the gratitude of our hearts to accept, not to earn, the gift of grace. The works we do become our way of thanking the Lord for the grace freely given.

No compensation is required for grace, and no compensation is allowed for grace. Let us not insult God by trying to “do enough to make up for” his gifts of grace. It is impossible for us to “pay God back” for all that he has given to us. We must be able to say,

Nothing in my hand I bring;
Simply to thy cross I cling.

²Daniel W. Whittle, “I Know Whom I Have Believed” (1883).

³John Newton, “Amazing Grace” (1779).

⁴Unless noted otherwise, scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (1989).

Naked, come to Thee for dress.
Helpless, look to thee for grace.⁵

Grace, then, as God's attitude toward us, is his free and undeserved love to us as sinners. To stand in the grace of God (Romans 5.2) means to acknowledge and to appropriate (through the obedience of faith) and to enjoy this favor and love.

Second, grace is God's action for us. Everything that God has done for us in order to accomplish our salvation is grace in action. That eternal counsel wherein salvation was planned was a counsel of grace. It was "to the praise of his glorious grace . . . [that] he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love" (Ephesians 1.4-6). The most concrete embodiment of the grace of God, God's action for us, is Jesus Christ. "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1.17). God's grace was "freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Ephesians 1.6). God has showed "the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2.7). "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2.11-13).

Jesus Christ himself is Immanuel, God-With-Us. How is God with us in Jesus. He came to live among us, in the flesh. Furthermore, Jesus Christ is also the certain proof that God is with us and not against us. We are sinners; we are against God. Rightfully, God should be against us. Yet here is the wonder of grace. When God comes among us, he comes not as destroyer, but as Savior. An angel said to the shepherds, "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,

⁵A. M. Toplady, "Rock of Ages" (1776).

who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2.11). The aged Simeon, who was righteous and devout and was looking for the consolation of Israel, when he saw the baby Jesus, he took the child into his arms, blessed God, and said,

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel (Luke 2.29-32; ESV).⁶

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3.16-17).

Oh, the love that drew salvation’s plan;
Oh, the grace that brought it down to man!
Oh, the mighty gulf that God did span—
At Calvary!⁷

Could there be a clearer demonstration of grace?

It is the cross that reveals grace in its sharpest focus. “Mercy there was great and grace was free.” Where? At Calvary. Here it was that God “for our sake . . . made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5.21).

Jesus suffered the penalty for our sins, that we might escape that penalty and be saved.

Was it for crimes that I have done
He groaned upon that tree?
Amazing pity! Grace unknown!
And love beyond degree!⁸

⁶English Standard Version (2001).

⁷William R. Newell, “Years I Spent in Vanity and Pride” (1895).

⁸Isaac Watts, “Alas! And Did My Savior Bleed?” (1707).

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt,
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured,
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.⁹

The grace of God is his attitude toward us that is demonstrated in his action for us, that is, the cross of Christ. But the activity of grace does not stop here. Grace is, thirdly, God's action in us. To those who respond to God's grace, he gives more grace. In the life of the believer, God works powerfully and graciously. By grace, God forgives and releases us from the burden of guilt. We are "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3.24). In Christ, "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us" (Ephesians 1.7-8). Thus, we sing, "Wonderful grace of Jesus, greater than all my sin."¹⁰ And we confess, "Plenteous grace in thee is found, grace to cover all my sin."¹¹

By grace, God leads us into the paths of righteousness and gives us the power and ability to do his will. "For it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2.13). "But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 5.20-21). Grace works in us to give us the power to overcome sin. The hymn says, "I need Thy presence every

⁹Julia H. Johnston, "Grace Greater Than Our Sin" (1910).

¹⁰Haldor Lillenas, "Wonderful Grace of Jesus" (1918).

¹¹Charles Wesley, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" (1738).

passing hour; what but Thy grace can foil the tempter's power?"¹² And what gives us strength?

"Through days of preparation, Thy grace has made us strong?"¹³

The work of grace also fills us with Christian graces that enrich and equip us for service.

"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear" (Hebrews 12. 28; NKJV).¹⁴

Paul often spoke of his ministry as a gift of grace. "For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Corinthians 15.9-10). We too, can say, "Consecrate me now to Thy service, Lord, by the power of grace divine."¹⁵

The virtues of meekness and humility are most consistent with the character of grace. To know that we are saved by grace teaches us humility. Ephesians 2.8-9 says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Humility is recognizing our emptiness before God, the unworthiness of even our best. Even our righteousnesses (not just our sins) are as filthy rags before God (Isaiah 64.6). Not the self-righteous Pharisee, but the humble tax collector who knows his worthlessness and confesses it to God is the one who is forgiven and accepted by God (Luke 18.9-14).

¹²Henry F. Lyte, "Abide With Me" (1847).

¹³Ernest W. Shurtleff, "Lead On, O King Eternal" (1887).

¹⁴New King James Version (1982).

¹⁵Fanny J. Crosby, "I Am Thine, O Lord" (1875).

Naught have I gotten but what I received;
Grace hath bestowed it because I believed.
Boasting excluded, pride I abase;
I'm only a sinner saved by grace!¹⁶

It is also grace that upholds us in times of trial. Concerning the apostle Paul's thorn in the flesh, the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12.9).

When darkness veils his lovely face,
I rest on his unchanging grace;
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.¹⁷

When we finally reach our heavenly destiny, it will have been because "grace has brought [us] safe thus far, and grace shall lead [us] home."¹⁸ "Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed" (1 Peter 1.13). When we consider all these ways in which the grace of God is poured out upon us unworthy creatures, we must say, "Oh, to grace how great a debtor daily I'm constrained to be."¹⁹

¹⁶James M. Gray, "Only A Sinner" (1912).

¹⁷Edward Mote, "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less" (1834).

¹⁸John Newton, "Amazing Grace" (1779).

¹⁹Robert Robinson, "Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing" (1758).