

Grace Abounding

If the Bible could be reduced to one word, that word would be “grace.” Grace is God’s unconditional love for his people and His willingness to forgive all their sins and grant them eternal life. God’s grace lives and breathes throughout the entire Bible. In the Hebrew of the *Old Testament* grace was called “chesed” which referred to God’s lovingkindness toward the Israelites. Though they were a rebellious and “stiff-necked” people, God loved them and did everything he could to forgive their sins and turn them away from sinning. In the *New Testament* grace is called ΧΑΡΙΣ (Karis), from which we get the English word “charity” and it too referred to God’s love and willingness to forgive the sins of mankind. John Bunyon, who wrote, *pilgrim’s progress*, referred to it as “grace abounding to the chief of sinners.” Yet as many times as the grace is mentioned in the scriptures and is preached from the pulpit, many Christians fail to grasp its full meaning and don’t understand the power that it can have in their lives. So let’s take a careful look at what the Bible means when it talks about “grace.”

The first thing to understand is that grace comes from God and from God alone. God is love and grace is how He shows us His love by forgiving our sins and drawing us away from sinning. Grace is not God’s response to anything we do: it is completely independent of human action and finds its source only in God’s will. God made his grace visible and tangible to all mankind through his son, Jesus Christ, who came into this world to offer up his life as an atonement for the sins of mankind by dying on the cross. When we receive Jesus, we receive God’s incarnate grace and we are saved from our sins. Jesus doesn’t merely **help** us to be saved, he saves us. And so, as the reformers put it, we are saved by grace alone through Christ alone. But while Jesus is a blessing to those who receive him, he is an offense to those who reject him. The thought that they can do nothing to save themselves is offensive to them because it means that they are helpless in their sins and completely reliant upon the mercy of another—of Jesus. And so ironically, God’s grace drives them away from Jesus instead of drawing them to him. In the Bible they are called “fools,” because to their own destruction they reject the freedom from sin that Jesus offers them and prefer to themselves over to the sinful desires of their own hearts.

This is sometimes called the scandal of the Gospel: that although it saves some people, it drives others away. But God has said, “as surely as I live...I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, o house of Israel?” (*Ezekiel 33:11*) God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, but he has given men the right of refusal and many choose to exercise it. So all we can say is that if we are saved it is by God’s grace and if we are not, it is our own choice.

As C. S. Lewis succinctly put it: “in the end there are only two groups of people: those who say to God, “thy will be done,” and those to whom God reluctantly but finally says, “thy will be done.”

But the one who says to God, “thy will be done,” rejoices in his salvation. As to his past life—the life he lived before he was saved—in God’s eyes it doesn’t exist: his old man is dead and buried and a new man rose out of the ashes to live and grow in a relationship with Christ. With the Holy Spirit as his counselor and guide, his life begins to change and he begins to think in new and different ways. God’s word becomes his source of truth and spiritual knowledge. To his joy he discovers that even though he sinful and unworthy of being loved, God loves him—not because he is loveable, but because God **is** love. As Paul wrote, “...God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (*Romans 5:8*) The new man learns that resolutions and vows of self-correction are worthless because they depend upon his strength rather than upon god’s strength. Gradually he begins to realize that there is far more power in god’s grace than in his own strength. Luther said it beautifully: “God gives his grace to one who is humbled, and a man is not truly humbled until he realizes that his salvation is utterly beyond his own powers and depends upon the will of God. As long as he is persuaded that he can make even the smallest contribution to his salvation he remains self-confident and cannot despair of himself and be humbled before God. But he who depends entirely upon the will of God and despairs entirely of himself receives abounding grace.” We are saved and sanctified by grace alone, “...not by works lest any man should boast.”

The new man learns to expect to be blessed. Like Jacob at Bethel, he “goes to sleep” in God’s grace and God blesses him even as he sleeps. He stops looking for a cause and effect relationship between the things he does and the blessings he receives. He comes to understand that he can’t **earn** grace, he can only receive it as a gift because if he could earn it, it wouldn’t be grace. As St. Augustine put it, “grace is not grace unless it is grace.” He learns that God doesn’t love him for what he is or what he does: he loves him **in spite** of what he is and what he does.

Gradually there is born in the new man’s heart the desire to share God’s grace. He learns to show forth a cheerful heart even when things are going south—and he gives the credit for his cheerfulness to God. Jesus said, “let your light shine before men so that they will see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” Your light is the light of Christ so when you do your good deeds, give Christ the credit and let Him be glorified instead of yourself.

I have to confess that I struggle with this.

When someone tells me that they have enjoyed one of my sermons, I find myself saying “thank you” and taking the credit, rather than saying “praise the Lord” and giving the credit to God. The next time I do that, please call me on it.

The new man learns that God always keeps his promises.

In the scriptures this is called “hope.” It doesn’t mean “wish for,” as it does when we say, “I hope it doesn’t rain.” Hope means believing that God will do what he has said he will do. Hope is simply faith applied to the future. It means to believe that “...in *all things* God works for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose.” In good times and bad, in riches and in poverty, in sickness and in health—in all things God works for our good.

The new man comes to understand that the woes that come upon him are not punishments, but opportunities for him to allow God’s powerful grace to help him grow in the nourishment and admonition of the Lord. The author of *Hebrews* wrote, “endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons...no discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness for those who allow themselves to be trained by it.” The Good Shepherd trains us with both his rod and his staff: with his rod he urges us on when we stumble and with his staff he restrains us when we’re about to go where we shouldn’t go. The new man learns that God will work good out of the setbacks that come his way and to believe that there can be grace even in woe.

Before I was saved I had a friend who was a believer and he was always trying to convert me. I wasn’t buying it but he kept on trying and I kept on refusing. On one occasion we were going back and forth in the presence of a friend of his who was also a believer. In the midst of our discussion his friend said something I will never forget. He said, “when a man becomes a believer, he enters a state of grace.” I had no idea what a “state of grace” was, but it intrigued me and I even felt a slight sense of jealousy toward him for having experienced it. Many, many years later after I had been converted, what he said came back to me and I began to understand what I think he meant. I think he meant that when a man lives in a state of grace, his eyes are opened by faith and he understands things to which he was formerly blind. As the hymn goes, “I once was blind but now I see.”

For example, he learns that a focus on yourself hinders your relationship with Christ. That quests for self-reliance, self-esteem, self-actualization and self-confidence are misguided because they look for the solution to the problem in yourself, and your self is the problem, not the solution. Yourself will disappoint you, but Christ will never disappoint you. He begins to understand that feeling discouraged is doubting God’s grace but that hope can reconnect him with God’s grace.

He learns that pride is blindness and always goes before a fall. That in and of ourselves we have no standing before God, but in Christ we are accepted and loved. That our inability to discern the potential for divine blessing in the woes that besiege us comes only from unbelief in the inmost heart. And that we should always pray: "I believe, Lord help thou my unbelief." That love for God doesn't come from self-effort, but is simply our response to God's overwhelming grace.

The doctrine of salvation by grace alone through Christ alone is the foundational doctrine of the Christian faith. It is the crucial doctrine that Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wycliffe, John Hus, Ulrich Zwingli and the rest of the reformers resurrected from the wreckage of the doctrine of salvation by human works. On other points these men had their differences, but in asserting the helplessness of man in sin and the sovereignty of god in grace, they were of one mind. The crucial issue is whether Christianity is a religion of reliance upon god for salvation, or reliance upon human effort.

As usual, one of our hymns says it best:

'twas grace that taught my heart to fear
and grace my fears relieved
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed.
Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come
'tis grace that brought me safe thus far
and grace will see me home.

There is infinite power in the abounding grace of God.

Amen

