

GRACE

*“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.”*

What did John Newton mean by amazing grace? What do we mean by grace? So often we glibly speak this wonderful word “grace.” As Christians we have read the word “grace” in our Bibles hundreds of times; we have heard it taught in Sunday School and from the pulpit, and we have sung the word “grace” in our hymns. But what does it mean?

I am convinced that many Christians never understand the full meaning of grace because they do not understand the depth of their own sinfulness, nor do they see that grace is related to God’s sovereign purposes in election and predestination. Do not misunderstand me, I think that all Christians in their experience know that God saved them through Christ in grace, but they do not understand that it was all of grace.

A few years ago, a man who had been a Christian for some time had just recently come into a Biblical understanding of God’s sovereign purposes in salvation. He said to me, “I have always believed in God’s grace, but until recently, since I have come to believe in election and predestination, I did not understand the real meaning of grace. Now I understand that it is all of grace.”

DEFINITION OF GRACE

There is no song or theological definition which can accurately portray to us the true meaning of grace. It is a truth far beyond all human comprehension. It is interesting to note that neither the Old Testament or New Testament give us a definition of grace nor do they try to explain the concept. However, the Bible does speak much about the grace of God. The Bible clearly teaches that grace flows out from the sovereign character of God who is gracious in His acts.

“ . . . The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished . . . ” (Ex .34:6-7).

“The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness” (Psa. 103:8).

The theological definition of grace is “unmerited favor.” Grace is receiving something when we are not worthy. Grace is the free bestowal of kindness on one who has absolutely no claim on it. Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits on the undeserving.

We will never come into a full understanding of God’s grace in salvation until we understand the depths of our sin before we were converted to Christ. In our unsaved state, we had wrong thoughts and wrong acts towards the holy character and law of God. We were sinners in rebellion to God and enemies of God. We were going our own independent way and deserved absolutely nothing from God but eternal perdition. God owed no obligation to us as His creatures. If He chose to shower kindness on us in Christ, it was purely a gracious act of God. The most important aspect of grace is that it is freely given by God. It cannot be bought, earned or won by man, for if it could be, then it would cease to be grace. Grace cannot be fully understood until a person realizes that he is a sinner and totally depraved.

USAGE OF GRACE

When we examine how the Bible uses the word “grace” as it relates to a sinner’s conversion, we discover that a Christian’s salvation is purely by God’s sovereign grace. Not one person who is saved deserves it, and, if he is saved, it is because God has graciously bestowed this salvation on him.

GRACE CAUSED OUR SALVATION

“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). The Bible makes it very clear that God’s grace is the first and final cause of salvation. The cause is grace and the means of appropriating salvation is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation is all of grace and yet it is not apart from faith.

Over and over again the Bible declares that salvation is not of human works or acts but is of God’s sovereign grace. **“But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace”** (Rom. 11:6). **“For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants (seed), not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all”** (Rom. 4:16).

Salvation is not gained by anything but God’s pure grace. One cannot work for, buy, weep or beg for salvation. It is a free gift from God.

“Sovereign grace, o’er sin abounding;

*Ransomed souls the tidings swell,
Tis a deep that knows no sounding;
Who its length and breadth can tell
On its glories let my soul forever dwell."*

GRACE IS THE BASIS FOR ELECTION

"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Rom. 11-5). God elects or chooses men to salvation because He is a gracious God. No human being deserves to be chosen by God.

GRACE IS RELATED TO PREDESTINATION

"He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us [believers] in the Beloved." (Eph 1:5-6). Christians have been predestined to be adopted into God's family because God graciously moves on us to make us His people.

Perhaps now you are getting a clearer picture about grace. Now you can sing the hymn "At Calvary" with new meaning:

*"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!"*

GRACE PROMPTED OUR CALL TO SALVATION

"(God) who saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity" (2 Tim. 1:9). It was God's pure and sovereign grace that gave us an effective call to salvation in Christ Jesus. God called us to Himself through Christ because He willed to save us when we deserved nothing from God but hell. Do we really believe the words of the song "Saved by grace alone, This is all my plea!"

GRACE IS THE SOURCE FOR OUR JUSTIFICATION

“Being justified as a gift (freely, without a cause) by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). Christians are justified (declared righteous before God) by free grace from God. There was absolutely no cause in us as sinners for God to justify us. This verse, which is part of the inspired Bible, tells us clearly that grace is free and sovereign. Grace is free in that God freely gives it to men in Christ without any conditions whatsoever. If there were any conditions, then it would not be free. Free grace alone can save a sinner from sin and hell. Grace is sovereign in that God bestows His free grace on whom He pleases.

Let us praise God that He has been pleased to justify some, for He was in no way obligated to save any rebellious sinner who willfully chooses to go against Christ and His kingdom. Let us also remember that those God justifies are those whom He graciously decided to save for His own glory.

GRACE IS THE ROOT OF TRUE SAVING FAITH

“And when he wanted to go across to Achaia, the brethren encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him; and when he had arrived he helped greatly those who had believed through grace” (Acts 18:27). The most common misunderstanding of grace is as it relates to man’s response in faith to Christ. The objectors to sovereign grace will say, “It is true that salvation is by grace but it is conditioned on the free will of man, for man must believe before God will move in His grace to save.” Let’s think through that statement for a moment. While it is true that no one will ever be saved apart from faith in Jesus Christ, faith is not the cause of salvation. Grace is the cause of salvation which includes faith in Jesus Christ. God’s sovereign grace allowed us to believe in Christ, and had not God been gracious to us, we would yet be in our sins and rejecters of Christ. The Scriptures are clear, for we are saved **“By grace through faith in Jesus Christ”** (Eph. 2:8).

Recently I heard a well-known radio Bible teacher say he could not understand the common definition of grace which is “unmerited favor from God.” He said he could understand his own definition which is “God giving and my receiving.” He stressed the words “my receiving” but this de-emphasizes grace. Even “my receiving” is caused by God’s grace and anything less than that is not grace.

CONFUSION ABOUT GRACE

It is my personal conviction that every true child of God through faith in Christ Jesus knows he has been saved by grace. That is, he knows it in his heart even though he may deny it in his head. Most Christians have a practice that is far superior to their theological understanding. For instance, all Christians thank God for their salvation and not one would ever claim he saved himself. Christians know intuitively from the Holy Spirit that God’s grace saved them, even though they may be confused as how to put this all together with man’s response to Christ.

Every Christian, whether free will or free grace oriented, knows that God did a previous work of grace in him before he actually trusted in Christ. The problem always lies in the place of the human will in response to Christ. Did that response initiate from God or man? Notice the following poem:

*“O my God, what must I do?
Thou alone the way canst show;
Thou canst save me in this hour,
I have neither will nor power;
God, if over all thou art,
Greater than my sinful heart,
All thy power on me be shown,
Take away the heart of stone.”*

*“Take away my darling sin,
Make me willing to be clean;
Make me willing to receive
All Thy goodness waits to give:
Force me, Lord, with all to part,
Tear these idols from my heart;
Now thy love almighty show,
Make e’en me a creature new.”*

*“Jesus, mighty to renew,
Work in me to will and do;
Turn my nature’s rapid tide,
Stem the torrent of my pride;
Stop the whirlwind of my will;
Speak, and bid the sun stand still;
Now thy love almighty show,
Make e’en me a creature new.”*

*“Arm of God, thy strength put on,
Bow the heavens, and come down;
All my unbelief o’erthrow,
Lay the’ aspiring mountain low;
Conquer thy worst foe in me,
Get thyself the victory;
Save the vilest of the race,
Force me to be saved by grace.”*

Notice how this writer says things like “You can save me!” and “I have neither will nor power.” Over and over again he says “Make me willing.” And then he says, “Force me to be saved by grace.” This sounds like the writings of some fatalist or hyper-determinist, but in actuality they are the words of John Wesley, a staunch free willer. Why these strong words? Because in his heart and practice, Wesley knew God had to work sovereignly before a person could ever be saved. This is all a person who believes in sovereign grace believes and holds - that God must make a man willing by His grace to respond to Christ and be saved.

THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS CONNECTED WITH GRACE

Does Not The Bible Teach That God Gives Grace To Everyone?

It is interesting to observe that “grace” is never mentioned in connection with all mankind but is always mentioned in relation to the true people of God. There is no such thing as universal saving grace, but there is particular grace to all who are true believers in Christ.

The astute Bible student may object to my statement that grace is only related to true Christians in light of Titus 2:11 which says, **“For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men.”** (KJV). The objector says, “See grace has appeared to all men, so all men must have grace enough to exercise free will and trust Christ.” One answer to the belief that all men have grace is found in a proper translation of Titus 2:11. This could be translated, “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared for all men.” This translation tells us that Christ’s salvation is for all men if all men will lay hold of it by faith. A second possible answer is to put Titus 2:11 in context and it is obvious that it is referring to believers. The “all men” refers to all who believe in Christ, for Titus 2:12 says, “Teaching us (Christians) that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly, in this present world.” Therefore, we may conclude that God does not give grace to everyone, but He gives grace to whom He pleases in Christ Jesus; and He pleases to give grace to those who truly believe in Christ.

Does Sovereign Grace Destroy One’s Desire to Live a Godly Life?

Some Christians illogically reason that if God has a plan, then there is no need to try to live the Christian life because what will be will be. That is faulty reasoning. The fact that God has a plan does not destroy one whit human responsibility. Responsibility is the divinely appointed means to attaining God's sovereign ends. God has purposed that a man shall reap but He has also purposed that a man shall sow.

A farmer does not stop sowing seed just because he is sure there will be a crop. On the contrary, he plants because he is sure there will be a crop! Do we stop giving people food when they are hungry or medicine when they are sick because we know that God has appointed the time and manner of every man's death? Absolutely not! We use all the means at our disposal to prolong life, knowing full well that God will take people in death at the appointed hour.

The Christian is guaranteed great success from God if he will avail himself of the means of faith, obedience and perseverance. The Christian knows that ultimately he will win the battle over sin and death. Both reason and experience teach us that the greater one's hope of success, the stronger becomes the motive to action. The person who is sure of success in the use of appropriate means has the strongest incentive to work. The Christian, then, who has before him the definite commands of God, and the promise that the work of those who obediently and reverently avail themselves of appointed means shall be blessed and successful, has the highest possible motive for action. Christians have already positionally won the war with sin and death, but they are still fighting mop-up battles until the war is actually over when they receive their new bodies.

A belief in sovereign grace gives the Christian great confidence. He begins to feel that he is an instrument of destiny. A person who regards himself as predestined to achieve some great goal acts with dynamic force and discipline to attain it. He is not divided by doubts or weakened by scruples or fears. He believes fully that he will succeed and that belief is the greatest assistance to success. Great men of history such as Caesar, Attila the Hun, Napoleon and many others all felt they were men of destiny. The Christian is a person of destiny and a thorough understanding of this destiny steels his nerves, redoubles his courage and fixes his purpose upon glorifying Christ on this earth, knowing that with faith, obedience and perseverance he will succeed.

The same grace which saved us is working sanctification in us as Christians (Phil. 1:6; 2:12-13). We work because God is at work in us. God began our salvation by grace and continues it by grace (Col. 2:6). We need as much or more grace for sanctification (Christian living) as we do for initial salvation.

I. EXAMPLE OF GRACE

“For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit 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 did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me” (1 Cor. 15:9-10).

The Apostle Paul is the supreme example of one who was touched by and overwhelmed with God's grace. Paul before his conversion was a hater of Christ and persecuted the followers of Christ in the name of God (Acts 8:1-3). On the road to Damascus, God intervened into Paul's life and he was converted to Christ (Acts 9:1-18). God moved in sovereign grace to save Paul, so as to break his will that he might follow the Savior. There was never a question in Paul's mind that God chose him to salvation and service.

"For I am the least of the Apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." -- No one ever had to tell Paul he was a sinner. He knew it. He had intentionally and intensely persecuted the Church, the body of Christ. Because of this persecution, Paul called himself the "chief of sinners." Paul before conversion was an enemy of God and in rebellion to God's moral law. He understood that he was totally depraved.

"But by the grace of God I am what I am," -- Paul knew too well that all that he was and had in Christ was due to the grace of God alone. Paul knew his salvation was of the Lord. He clearly understood that he did not seek and choose God, but that God chose and sought him. God gave Paul salvation, the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, position in His family and even the faith to trust in Christ. Paul deserved nothing from God but punishment, but God in His sovereign grace saved Paul and made him the greatest Christian of all time. Why did God take a rotten sinner like Paul and save and use him to the glory of God? I do not know! But I do know it was grace that saved Paul.

"And His grace towards me did not prove in vain; but I labored more abundantly than all of them." -- God's grace motivated Paul to great action for God. Out of deep appreciation for his salvation, Paul worked diligently for Christ. Sovereign grace did not make Paul a cold, hard, critical fatalist but it caused him to move out for God. Paul makes what seems to be a bragging statement, for he declares he labored more than all of the other Apostles. He labored to the point of mental and physical exhaustion to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to sinners.

"Yet not I, but the grace of God with me." -- Now Paul clarifies what men seem to be a boasting statement and says that it was the grace of God that allowed him to do as much as he did for Christ. Paul did nothing of himself and it was all of the grace of God. The Apostle Paul found no room for human boasting because he understood much about God's sovereign grace.

Why don't Christians labor more for Christ? They do not appreciate their salvation. Why don't they appreciate salvation? Because they do not understand grace. Not until we understand that every phase and facet of our salvation is from God will we really grasp grace. There are two kinds of people who claim to believe in the doctrines of election and predestination to salvation - those who intellectually believe in election and predestination and those who have been deeply touched by sovereign grace. There is a world of difference between the two. Only those who experiential grasp sovereign grace can say, "But by the grace of God I am what I am."

CONCLUSION

Someone may say, "What if God will not grant me grace even if I want to trust Christ and be saved?" Friend, you would not even desire to be saved unless God was working in your heart to

trust the Savior. God does grant grace to the elect sinner to believe that Christ died for his sins and was raised from the dead to declare him righteous. His responsibility is to trust Christ, and when he does he will realize that it was God's grace that enabled him to make the decision. God gives grace, but God does not exercise faith. It is our faith, not God's faith. It is our responsibility to believe. We must trust the Savior for ourselves, and God must grant grace for us to be saved. Great is the mystery of salvation, but oh, how wonderful it is!