

## **Living By Faith And God's Grace**

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At this point in this series, it is especially important to emphasize grace so that we may have a foundation to appreciate better what God's grace means to our salvation. We need to understand grace specifically as seen against the backdrop of God's justice, that is, what God is fully and absolutely justified in doing to us. Truly, without grace, there would be no salvation, considering our careless and sometimes flagrant disobedience against His rule over us within His purpose. Grace is indispensable.

Without it, there would be no calling, no justification, no Holy Spirit given, and no sanctification—let alone, no salvation. We could go as far as to say that there would be no creation! In short, in terms of our salvation, grace is the key element in God's entire purpose.

The previous article linked a series of scriptures to show that it is impossible for God to lie and to misjudge. His every judgment is righteous love. Nadab, Abihu, and Uzzah received what they deserved according to God's code of justice. They were guilty of sin, and the wages of sin is death.

However, we also saw that God sometimes provides mercy, which is non-justice. Non-justice does not violate God's righteousness, for no judgment of God violates His righteousness. This is because God judges according to His purpose, and His purpose is righteousness intermingled with His grace. We are every bit as guilty as Nadab, Abihu, and Uzzah, but God has a purpose for us far greater than He had for them when He justly put them to death for their sins.

We also saw that at the time of our calling we were, in God's judgment, dead to sin, as Ephesians 2:1 states: "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins." Spiritually, we were "dead men walking," and if His purpose for us were to be fulfilled, we needed to be spiritually raised from that state of spiritual death and given life. To impress this on us, we must literally undergo a baptism, a symbolic burial in a watery grave, be raised to spiritual life from it, and receive a new spirit, God's Holy Spirit.

Therefore, at this point in our lives, we must have the determined mindset to live the rest of our lives by faith, submitting to God to fulfill our part in His purpose for us. To complete our course, we will find as we live it that God's grace is supporting and filling our needs all along the way.

However, a cautionary note: Some preach a deceptive doctrine called "Once Saved, Always Saved," which purports that, once one has been justified and has come under the blood of Jesus Christ, it is not possible for him to lose salvation. While this is very appealing, it is incorrect. One can fall from grace.

God shows us through Israel's experiences in the wilderness that many failed to reach the Promised Land. It is a lesson intended to help keep us determined to be aligned with God's purpose and avoid falling from grace. Notice these scriptures that show that it is possible for a Christian to fall away from Christ, just as some Israelites never made it to the Promised Land:

» **II Corinthians 6:1:** We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain.

» **II Peter 3:17:** You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked.

» **Hebrews 3:19; 4:1-3:** So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief. Therefore, since a promise remains of entering His rest, let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it. For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it. For we who have believed do enter that rest, as He has said; "So I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest," although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.

» **Hebrews 6:4-6:** For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

» **Hebrews 10:26-27:** For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins. But a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.

» **Matthew 12:31:** Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven.

Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the denial by the witness of his life that an individual was forgiven, received God's Holy Spirit, and then failed to live by faith, returning to a life of sin.

## "Grace" Defined

It is commonly believed that the word "grace" is derived from the Greek term *charis*, which appears over 100 times in the New Testament. It does, and yet it also does not. "Grace," as it appears in the New Testament, is not directly derived from *charis*. The key word is "directly."

A dictionary will state that the English word "grace" is directly derived from the Latin term *gratia*, which means "pleasing, thanks, or praise." Many people say "grace" before a meal, an action that relates to Latin *gratia*. They are giving thanks for what is given, and by doing so, they are praising God for His providence, which pleases Him because they are acknowledging Him in their lives. It is a right thing to do.

Apparently, the King James Version translators decided to make use of *gratia*. It may or may not have been a particularly good choice, but at least it sounded good. The translators felt that no other single English term was as good a synonym for the biblical Greek word *charis*.

None of this really matters now because, through the centuries, the meaning the apostles attached to *charis* has been superimposed on the Latin-derived "grace." In other words, an evolution of meaning occurred to give *charis* a *spiritual* significance in English translations that it lacked in secular Greek.

*Charis*, in secular Greek, suggests charm and beauty, of being gifted, and by extension, seemingly favored by the gods. *The American Heritage College Dictionary* relates that the Greek sense of grace indicates effortless beauty or charm of movement, form, or proportion. It indicates refinement; a sense of fitness or propriety; a disposition to be generous, helpful, or of good will.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, in its entry on "Grace," adds a few more thoughts:

The first, and perhaps the original sense is the quality of anything that brings delight or pleasure, or that wins favor. A good wine and fine choice of words are examples of *charis*. Persons have *charis* when they are delicate, tactful, or artful. . . . [K]indness, generosity and helpfulness are also graces. One shows *charis* by displaying benevolence to inferiors. . . . [I]n later Greek *charis* also had the sense of force or power.

Why power? Apparently, it is because people observed that those so gifted tended to be quite persuasive and influential. This influence or power is still used today by advertisers. Understood secularly, *charis* illustrates those qualities expressed by the handsome men and beautiful ladies we see in ads selling products, be they automobiles, insurance, soap, medications, clothing, or electronics.

*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* states that in classical Greek *charis* had three basic uses: "(1) a charming quality that wins favor, (2) a quality of benevolence that gives favor to inferiors, and (3) a response of thankfulness for the favor given." In brief, people with *charis* are gifted and tend to be influential. However, the second sense—"a quality of benevolence that gives favor to inferiors"—motivated the apostles to use it so frequently to indicate the benevolence of God toward sinners.

The apostles, especially Paul, took this delightful Greek term and anointed it with wonderful spiritual significance by using it in contexts where it clearly indicates unearned favor and gifts bestowed by the Creator God.

Here is the theological definition of *grace* from *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, brief and to the point: "The unmerited divine assistance given humans for their regeneration or sanctification." This meaning covers literally scores of different applications in both Old and New Testaments. Key to this definition is "unmerited," meaning that grace, the divine assistance, is in no way earned. In terms of our spiritual well-being, this is vital to understand.

From beginning to end, our salvation is by means of divine benevolence, gifting by God. In no way is grace given because God is obligated, compelled, forced, or duty bound to us to do so. He gives grace freely, not by constraint. All He truly owes us is the death we have earned through sin (Romans 6:23). He gives grace because that is the way He is; it is His character. He gives it because of what He is working out in His purpose, not because He owes us for what we think we have earned or for what our pride is demanding in the mistaken belief that we are entitled to what we desire.

It would be incorrect to say that biblical grace has no connection to its secular usage. However, spiritually, its application takes on a vastly greater dimension in two areas:

- 1) God's grace is the single most important aspect of our spiritual and eternal salvation.
- 2) His giving of it to us is completely and totally unmerited.

These two facts are critical to our getting a strong hold on our pride and keeping it rightly depressed, and at the same time, they strengthen our humility before Him in that He owes us nothing, regardless of circumstance. There are no automatic entitlements.

Every sin we have committed is personally against Him and His Son, and still He gives grace. He is our Creator; He has given us life. He has given us the hope of something far, far better than we now have. Without what He freely gives, we are nothing—we would not even exist.

### **Grace in Relation to Salvation**

Two series of verses from the apostle Paul will suffice to prove these two assertions. He writes in Ephesians 2:4-8:

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God.

In the space of these five verses, he twice asserts that we were saved by grace. It is indeed written in the past tense because the period of time Paul is writing about is that time immediately following justification. His audience was within the sanctification process. Salvation occurs because of what God freely gives, but salvation can be lost when one refuses the gifts that God freely gives.

Salvation is not unconditionally guaranteed. That fact is clearly shown in Hebrews 3:7-19. The Israelites refused God's gifts and died in the wilderness because, all along the way, they would not believe Him.

This issue of failing to appreciate and use God's gifts is a simple process to understand. It is a common problem in human families. Children will not believe their parents. This really comes to the fore when children hit their teen years, thinking that their parents are old fogies and "out of it."

If a person insists that Paul is saying that faith is the gift of God, his biblical understanding is clearly missing a central fact. Note what Paul immediately adds in Ephesians 2:9-10: "Not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them."

Logic demands that Paul cannot be referring to faith because in these verses, the exercise of faith *is* a spiritual work. Our salvation, though, is not of works—not of *any* works, including the works of faith. God, the real Author, would not contradict Himself by suddenly giving approval of any work of faith as a means of salvation. Grace, a merciful gift, preceded our having faith in Him. Without His

gift of grace, we would never have godly faith, *the* faith, in the first place. Faith, our trust in God, is a fruit of the grace God freely gives.

A second passage, also from Paul, proves this firmly:

For this is the word of promise; "At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son." And not only this, but when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls), it was said to her, "The older shall serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. (Romans 9:9-16)

Our calling and election by God preceded even the slightest fragment of saving knowledge of God and thus our having faith in Him. Therefore, we could not possibly earn any grace of God, even as Jacob could not. As a vivid illustration for us, God deliberately chose to do this *before* Jacob could possibly do any works pertaining to salvation.

An almost overwhelming nugget of truth may be gleaned from these verses. If God is revealing here His general pattern which He follows to call *all* of those He is choosing to save at this time, then it shows that our personal calling and election into His spiritual creation is in no way random but very specific, even as Jacob's was.

Perhaps we, like Jacob was, are called from the womb so that, like him, there will never be any doubt that even the tiniest of our works had a part in saving us. There is precedent for this in Jeremiah 1:5 about Jeremiah's birth and calling; in Luke 1:11-17 about John the Baptist; and in Psalm 139:14-16 about David.

We might think that these were really great personages, people important to God's purpose. They were indeed, but are we not part of the same spiritual Body and part of the same Family as they are? Does not God say that there is no partiality with Him in Romans 2:11? Every part of the Body of Jesus Christ is important. Enough is revealed in Scripture for us to give this serious consideration.

### **An Even Clearer Translation**

One of the most renowned Greek-language scholars, A.T. Robertson, interpreted Ephesians 2:8 to mean that, concerning salvation, grace is God's part, faith is ours. He was wrong. If he were correct, salvation would be conditioned by our *use* of faith, but this directly contradicts Paul's statement that we are saved by grace. Grammatically, because the Greek language uses neuter, male, and female genders, the phrase, "it is the gift of God," refers to the masculine "saved," not to the feminine "faith."

One might think that would completely clear the matter up. However, a problem exists because the New Testament's writers did not always write grammatically correctly. There are some instances, in fact not just a few, where the genders of words do not properly match.

A second answer, supported by more scholars, has the verse translated to make it more correctly understandable: "And this being saved by grace through faith is not of yourselves but is the gift of

God." The positioning of "not of yourselves" is helpful. This version thus links both grace and faith as God's gifts, which is more accurate and clearer.

Properly understanding grace solves the issue, and the correct answer must be that the phrase must refer to salvation being the gift, not faith. As mentioned earlier, if it refers to faith, then faith becomes a work, and salvation is then given because of the work of faith.

The *Baker New Testament Commentary on Ephesians*, p. 122, provides a paraphrase of Ephesians 2: 4-8 by A. Kuyper, Sr., a Dutch commentator who provided an extensive analysis of these verses. It is endorsed by many of the "big names" that virtually everyone who spends much time in commentaries would recognize. Think of Paul saying this to us, knowing that he was speaking on God's grace and our salvation:

I had the right to speak about the "surpassing riches of His grace" for it is, indeed, by grace that you are saved, through faith; and lest you should now begin to say, "But then we deserve credit, at least, for believing," I will immediately add that even this faith (or, even this exercise of faith) is not of yourselves but is God's gift.

In this paraphrase, both grace and faith are given clear consideration. Both are gifts. Salvation is in no way earned.

Kuyper uses this paraphrase to show—as the entire doctrine of grace shows, as seen in other portions of the New Testament—that every aspect of our salvation, including faith, is a gift of God. To reinforce this, in verse 10, Paul uses *erga* ("works") in such a way that we know that he means *any* works of *any* kind. He means any amount or any level of human effort. He thus removes any semblance of room for self-congratulation. Works have an entirely different purpose than that of saving us.

## **Grace and Power**

Paul writes in I Corinthians 1:26-31:

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence, but of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord."

Paul inserts this truth to help the proud Corinthians—and us—to understand with humility who and what we are. Where could we possibly acquire the spiritual power to live a righteous life that would be pleasing to and glorifying of God? It most certainly is not in us as a natural result of being born human.

Recall that a suggestion of power exists in the word *charis*. The apostles noticed this and set it in a New Testament context in such a way that grace becomes the power of God to enable Christians to live the new life in Christ. I Corinthians 4:5-7 provides interesting insight into this usage:

Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God. Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?

In other words, Paul applies grace, not merely to faith and salvation, but to every aspect of Christian works in the Lord. All Christian works are the fruit derived from God's grace. Even though the grace of God is the foundation for good works, they, by themselves, do not and cannot earn us grace.

Much of the book of James is concerned with Christian works. He confirms that the grace of God enables them:

But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. (James 4:6-10)

Grace is the source of power that enables a person to do these spiritual things.

### **An Old Testament Pattern?**

Most New Testament writers use "grace" at some point, but Paul uses it 101 times, more than twice as many times as all other writers combined. Did the apostles have a biblical pattern that they followed in the use of *charis*?

*Charis* obviously never appears in the Hebrew Old Testament, but Paul adapts it to express what was already a major Old Testament concept. Two frequently used Hebrew terms make a strong statement regarding God's character in His relationship with us. However, we will deal with only one of them, the strongest, most detailed, and most specific word: *hesed*.

*Hesed* is most frequently translated in English Bibles as "mercy," "kindness," "lovingkindness," "goodness," and even "pity," but in many modern translations it may appear as "steadfast love." In context, it suggests strength, patient steadfastness, and love in wonderful combination, and it therefore shows His faithfulness in actual day-to-day practice. Regardless of how it is rendered in English, *hesed* always expresses God's freely given commitment to faithful covenant love.

Recall that, in the Old Covenant, God is married to Israel. Therefore, *hesed* expresses God's character and conduct typical of Him in the covenant relationship that He freely made with Israel, as Ezekiel 16 clearly illustrates. Noticing this, the apostles combined it with the aspects of power and benevolence in the Greek *charis* to express the covenant love and patient, forbearing faithfulness of God, much as *hesed* does in the Old.

The second commandment clearly reveals this:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those that hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments. (Exodus 20:4-6)

Notice how He clearly shows the vast difference between His punishments for sin, which are confined to three or four generations, but His lovingkindness ("mercy") continues for a thousand generations.

Exodus 34:5-7 provides another example. *Hesed* is translated as "goodness" in verse 6 and "mercy" in verse 7:

Now the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. And the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation.

Deuteronomy 7:7-9 adds a further instance. *Hesed*, as used here, indicates strong, steadfast love that never fails.

The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments."

Lamentations 3:22-23 puts a different and important slant on the effect of His faithfulness. "Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness." This is why we have hope; this is why we can be saved: His grace is continuously flowing. His love is not up and down, here today and gone tomorrow. James 1: 17 tells us that with the "Father of Lights . . . there is no variation or shadow of turning." Hebrews 13: 8 reminds us, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

Despite how the Israelites conducted themselves, God always acted with *hesed*—mercy, kindness, goodness, and strong, steadfast love. Thus, *hesed* is an almost perfect complement to Paul's use of *charis*, "grace," in the New Covenant made with the church. Please understand that *charis* is *not* derived from *hesed*. In the latter word, though, the apostles had a strong, Old Testament example of God's faithful character within the Old Covenant. They used *charis* in the New Testament to illustrate specific ways and means that God's character is expressed to us in His plan of salvation.

### **Grace in the Book of John**

The book of John uses "grace" only four times, and all four appear in the same tight context:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. John bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, "This was He of whom I said, 'He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.'" And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (John 1:14-17)

The way John uses them is important. Notice in verse 14 that Jesus is described as "full of grace"—suggesting lovingkindness and benevolent gifts—"and truth." Then, verse 16 says that from that fullness of grace we receive grace. In other words, it is from *our relationship with Him* that we receive many beneficent gifts toward salvation.

Other Bibles translate the phrase "grace for grace" as "grace on grace" or "grace upon grace." In a paraphrase, it may be rendered as "blessing after blessing." The phrase pictures grace as if it were objects being stacked one on top of another or endlessly linked if side by side.

As we have seen, our calling is an act of God's grace, a gifting completely apart from any merit on our part. We tend to think of grace primarily in regard to justification and the forgiveness of sin, but that is far, far too limiting. John is showing us that our relationship with God through Jesus Christ is a connection that supplies us with a *continuous* flow of grace, blessings, gifts, favor, powers, forgiveness, knowledge, understanding, wisdom, healings, protection, and more through God's loving concern.

He is not supplying our every desire but our every need as His spiritual creation of each of us moves toward His conclusion. Again, remember that, for this truth to be more fully appreciated, it must be understood that He does not owe us one tiny jot or tittle of it. Just as surely as the manna physically appeared to the unconverted Israelites every morning in the wilderness and the cloud was in the sky by day and a pillar of fire by night, God is supplying our every *need* in relation to His salvation and purpose.

It is all freely given toward His glorification and His purpose of creating us to fill a position, a place in His Kingdom. The apostles used *charis* in many other situations, but they applied it most especially to mean the powers given by God to meet our spiritual needs.

We have seen a firm definition of and foundation for appreciating the importance of grace to salvation. Without it, there would be no salvation to give hope to our lives in Christ. Along the way, through God's creation of us into the image of Christ, His giving of grace becomes the source of power that enables us to overcome and glorify God.

Next time, we will trace the unfolding of this wondrous gift in further detail.