

Amazing Grace

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With spring only weeks away, we have once again come to that wonderful time of the year when, because of the meaning of Passover, we are guided to focus more intensively and specifically on how and where we stand before God. In I Corinthians 11:28, written just prior to the spring holy days amidst instructions about observing Passover, Paul writes, "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread and drink of that cup." Earlier, he had admonished, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (I Corinthians 10:12).

God gives us grace so that we might stand before Him. And He gives us grace so that we may *continue* to stand before Him. Grace enables salvation to be possible.

To say that *grace* is simply "a gift" is to fall woefully short of exhausting its meaning. In fact, the English word *grace* is not even derived from *charis*, the Greek word used in the Bible. Instead, it comes from the Latin *gratia*, which in turn comes from *gratus*, meaning "beloved" or "pleasing." *Grace*, according to *Webster's New World Dictionary* closely follows the Latin definition. It means "beauty or charm of form, composition, movement or expression; an attractive quality, feature or manner; goodwill, favor."

Each of these usages shows *grace* to have a fairly close relationship to the secular use of *charis*. In secular Greek, a good wine and a fine choice of words are examples of *charis*. People have *charis* when they are delicate, tactful or artful. In this way, people or things win the *charis* (favor) of others by having *charis* (charm). Another use of *charis* was as thanks for favors bestowed; this has survived in English as the term used of the prayer of thanksgiving before a meal: grace.

Charis was basically used in secular Greek in an aesthetic sense, but it also had an ethical side. The New Testament writers drew upon this usage to formulate part of the biblical grace to which we are accustomed. In secular Greek *charis* could also, but not as frequently, be used to indicate kindness, generosity and helpfulness. And so, even in secular usage, *charis* connotes a benevolence that shows favor to inferiors.

Charis needed one more sense to be ready for biblical use. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* makes this interesting comment:

It may be added that in later Greek *charis* also had the sense of force or power. It could be a spell, or demonic force, affecting human life with supernatural influences. In Euripides, it was a power from the underworld that could convey the virtues of a dead hero to his living family or followers. This sense, too, though set in a new context, was used in the NT: grace became the power of God to enable Christians to live the new life in Christ. ("Grace," vol. 2, p. 548)

It is easy to see why *charis* took on the implication of power. Charming people of beautiful form, people of tact and artful speech, people with kind, generous, benevolent and helpful personalities are people of influence—and influence is power. Such a power can extend even beyond the grave. But even so, the biblical grace is much more because **its foundation and source are in God.**

It would be incorrect to say that the biblical grace has no connection to its secular usage. However, it takes on a vastly greater dimension in two areas: 1) It is the single most important aspect of our spiritual and eternal salvation, and 2) God's giving of it to us is completely and totally unmerited. And even though the grace of God is the foundation for good works, the good works, by themselves, do not and cannot earn us grace.

While most of the New Testament writers use "grace" at some point, Paul makes the greatest use of it. It can almost be said to be his word. The seven other writers together use the word fifty-one times, but Paul alone uses it 101 times. Essentially, his usage of grace has given us its unique biblical application.

No Righteousness Except by Grace

Mankind is faced with a humanly insurmountable problem. Job speaks of this in Job 9:2: "But how can a man be righteous before God?" The problem, simply stated, is that since righteousness is described in Psalm 119:172 as God's commandments, one must obey those commands to be righteous. But from Adam on, all have sinned! Every human being has disobeyed God's commands and come short of His glory (Romans 3:23). Thus, Paul says, quoting Psalm 14:3, "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10).

Sin separates man from God (Isaiah 59:1-2). So, one coming to believe in God faces an excruciating dilemma. On the one side, he feels a fervent and hopeful desire to be close to His Creator and live forever with Him (Ecclesiastes 3:11). On the flip side, he knows that his own present imperfections will not permit him access into God's presence, and further, that he can never live sinlessly and thus be accepted on the basis of his own righteousness. It seems like a hopeless paradox.

A Savior Needed

God, in His merciful wisdom, foresaw this. From the opening chapters of Genesis, He teaches that a Savior must come to release mankind from this impossible situation. Speaking to Satan in Genesis 3:15, God intimates how He will solve this dilemma: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."

Other Old Testament scriptures deal with this subject more explicitly. The sacrifices of Leviticus, especially the ritual on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), fill in many details. Add to this Psalm 22, which plainly refers to Christ's sacrifice, and Isaiah 53, which even more clearly prophesies of One who would come: "But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; . . . and by His stripes we are healed" (verse 5). Verse 12 adds that "He [would pour] out His soul unto death."

Not until the New Testament, however, does a veritable flood of information give us a clear understanding of God's plan for meeting mankind's dilemma.

The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23). If a man pays that wage for his own sins, he dies and the chance to gain access to God and eternal life is lost. This left God with three alternatives:

- » He could simply let each person die for his sins.
- » He could, like an indulgent grandfather, overlook sin and grant mankind access to

Him, all the while hoping for the best.

» As His holy justice demanded, He could allow the death of another to substitute for the payment of sin for the sinner who wanted access to Him and met the conditions.

But this last choice, the one God chose, presented another problem. The substitute had to be a sinless human being, since God cannot die and only a man who lived a sinless life would qualify. Why? Because if the substitute sinned, his death would pay only for his own sins. In addition, this person had to be of such importance and stature in his own right that his vicarious death to pay for other men's sins would never have to be repeated. Once this substitute gave his life, it would apply to all mankind for all time!

Elements of this are prefigured in the Old Testament. When Abraham was about to sacrifice his son Isaac, God stopped him and provided a ram as a substitute. This same picture is symbolized in the offerings of Leviticus. Though Hebrews 10:4 clearly states, "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins," God had the Israelites perform the ritual sacrifices as a "tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). Thus, the offerings teach us a great deal about the life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

All of the elements necessary to solve mankind's dilemma were gathered together in Jesus of Nazareth. He was God but born like every other human being—through a woman (Genesis 3:15; Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18, 23). He was born subject to law and "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). The Scriptures add in I Peter 2:22, "Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth."

II Corinthians 5:21 adds another very weighty factor: "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Jesus, the sinless One, had our sins placed upon Him, and when this occurred, the penalty of death fell upon Him just as it would any other human being. I Peter 2:24 confirms this, "Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed."

Grace NOT Without Cost!

The elements of this glorious picture are coming together, but we must still add some things to make the picture complete. Paul writes, "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6, 8). The apostle John expands on this in I John 2:2: "And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."

Many more scriptures could be added, but these are sufficient to show that God has clearly provided us with the substitutionary sacrifice of His own Son, who, born as a man, lived a sinless life and died in our place to satisfy the justice of God that we might have the hope of eternal life.

Christ's death on the stake thus becomes the instrument which enables God to give us grace. ***But do not be misled into thinking that grace is without cost***. Nothing could be further from the truth! It could easily be the most expensive gift you will ever receive. Not only did grace cost the life of Jesus of Nazareth, but it also costs us our lives if we are to receive it!

Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? . . . Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but

alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. . . . And having been set free from sin, *you became slaves of righteousness*. (Romans 6:3, 11, 18)

Recall again Peter's words in I Peter 2:24: "Who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, *might live for righteousness*—by whose stripes you were healed." Upon giving us grace, God expects us to give the rest of our lives in obedience to Him.

No external force constrains God to give us His grace. He gives it only because of what is within Himself—His love for us or His purpose. He owes us nothing. What have we ever done to earn His forgiveness? All our lives we have ignored, blasphemed and sinned against Him—sometimes even knowing better. We have desecrated His creation in our own bodies, in other people or in nature. This whole creation is His, yet some of us have taken others' lives, abused others' bodies and minds to control them and pursued mindless pleasure with drugs, perverse sex and degenerate entertainments. Our envy and jealousy drive us into contentious competition, and when our vanity is pricked, we explode into self-centered anger even over trivial matters.

Almost endless variations on the themes of idolatry, Sabbath-breaking, stealing God's tithe and others could be recited, but the point is plain. In our vanity we like to think of ourselves as good people, but God sees us as we really are. There is no hiding from His scrutiny in any or all aspects of our life (Hebrews 4:13). None are righteous, no, not one!

He owes us absolutely nothing. We owe Him every breath of air we breathe, every bite of food we eat and every drop of water we drink. Every beat of our heart that pushes life-giving blood through our body and mind is a tribute to His creative genius and His providence. He gives us everything we need to make the most of our one opportunity to live our lives before Him.

Grace Gives Access

Only by means of His grace can we stand in God's presence. Grace aligns us with God's law and imputes to us the perfect, never-even-once-tarnished righteousness of the sinless Jesus Christ! This imputed righteousness is the reason why we then have access into the holiest of all, into His very presence!

Jesus says, "Most assuredly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep" (John 10:7). In a slightly different way, Paul says the same thing in Ephesians 2:18, "For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father." This leads us to the apostle's exultant statement in Romans 5:2: "Through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

Here, grace is expanded from "merely" unmerited forgiveness of sin to include the entire range of benefits we receive by gaining entrance into the very presence of God. These benefits are not named here, but the Scriptures reveal that grace enables us to receive the love of God, to overcome, to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, to be healed, to be delivered from our persecutors, to receive gifts to serve God and the church, to grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ, to receive mercy and strength in time of need, to be forgiven when we sin and to be given salvation when Jesus Christ returns.

The word "stand" in Romans 5:2 is translated from the Greek *histemi*, and in this context it means "to continue, endure or persist." Our calling, election (Romans 11:5-6), repentance (Romans 2:4) and

justification enable us to stand before God in the sense of being given access into His presence. After that, receiving the gift of His Spirit and continuing on to salvation itself are accomplished by means of grace.

Our part in this whole process is mighty small indeed. It is, without doubt for those of us who are sincerely striving for the perfection Jesus commanded us to seek (Matthew 5:48), a difficult path. Jesus warned us it would be so. Many times it seems as though we are making the whole effort by ourselves. "Where is God?" we may cry out in our frustration. We are constantly humbled by our failures and have to go to the Father through Jesus Christ many, many times for forgiveness, strength and encouragement to go on.

But God has *not* given us an impossible task. He never tries us above what we are able, and Jesus says in Hebrews 13:5, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." He is always aware (Psalm 139). This, too, is an aspect of His grace.

Grace Is Continuous

Because grace's applications and ramifications to individual lives in their particular situations over time are virtually endless, there is no end to this subject. The apostle Paul summarizes it best when He writes in Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace you [are being] saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God."

Grace is not a one-time application of God's mercy, but a continuous outflowing of His gifts to His spiritual children. It is, all things considered, the most important aspect of our hope for salvation through the resurrection. He owes us nothing, yet He freely gives of His love and powers that we might share glorious, powerful, fulfilling and unending life with Him and Jesus Christ.

Amazing has as its synonyms "astounding," "astonishing," "dumbfounding," "flabbergasting," "staggering" and "surprising." Words fail to convey the vast difference between what we present to God in ourselves and what He provides in return from the depths of His concern for us. Which of us is able to measure the value of living eternally in fulfilling abundance and accomplishment as part of our Great Creator's Family? Perhaps "amazing" will have to suffice until a better word is found.