

Grace of God

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GRACE IS A PERFECTION OF THE DIVINE character which IS exercised only toward the elect. Neither in the Old Testament nor in the New is the grace of God ever mentioned in connection with mankind generally, still less with the lower orders of His creatures. In this it is distinguished from “mercy,” for the mercy of God is “over all His works” (Psa 145:9). Grace is the sole source from which flows the goodwill, love, and salvation of God unto His chosen people. This attribute of the Divine character was defined by Abraham Booth in his helpful book *The Reign of Grace* thus:

Divine grace is the sovereign and saving favor of God exercised in the bestowment of blessings upon those who have no merit in them and for which no compensation is demanded *from* them. Nay, more; it is the favor of God shown to those who not only have no positive deserts of their own, but who are thoroughly ill-deserving and hell-deserving. It is completely unmerited and unsought, and is altogether unattracted by anything in or from or by the objects upon which it is bestowed. Grace can neither be bought, earned, nor won by the creature. If it could be, it would cease to be *grace*. When a thing is said to be of “grace,” we mean that the recipient has no claim upon it, that it was in nowise due him. It comes to him as pure charity, and, at first, unasked and undesired.

The fullest exposition of the amazing grace of God is to be found in the Epistles of the Apostle Paul. In his writings “grace” stands in direct opposition to works and worthiness, *all* works and worthiness, of whatever kind or degree. This is abundantly clear from Romans 11:6, “And if by grace, then it is no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace, otherwise work is no more work.” Grace and works will no more unite than an acid and an alkali. “By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph 2:8,9). The absolute favor of God can no more consist with human merit than oil and water will fuse into one (see also Rom 4:4,5).

There are three principal characteristics of Divine grace. **First**, it is ETERNAL. Grace was planned before it was exercised, purposed before it was imparted: “Who hath saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus *before* the world began” (II Tim 1:9). **Secondly**, it is FREE, for none did ever purchase it: “Being justified *freely* by His grace” (Rom 3:24). **Thirdly**, it is SOVEREIGN, because God exercises it toward and bestows it upon whom He pleases: “Even so might grace *reign*” (Rom 5:21). If grace “reigns” then it is on the throne, and the occupant of the throne is sovereign. Hence “the *throne* of grace” (Heb 4:16).

Just because grace is *unmerited* favor, it must be exercised in a *sovereign* manner. Therefore does the Lord declare, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious” (Exo 33:19). Were God to show grace to all of Adam's descendants, men would at once conclude that He was righteously compelled to take them to heaven as a meet compensation for allowing the human race to fall into sin. But the great God is under no obligation to any of His creatures, least of all to those who are rebels against Him.

Eternal life is a *gift*, therefore it can neither be earned by good works, nor claimed as a right. Seeing that salvation is a “gift,” who has any right to tell God on whom He ought to bestow it? It is not that the Giver ever *refuses* this gift to any who seek it wholeheartedly, and according to the rules which He has prescribed. No! He refuses none who come to Him empty-handed and in the way of His appointing. But if out of a world of impenitent and unbelieving rebels, God is determined to exercise His sovereign right by choosing a limited number to be saved, who is wronged? Is God *obliged* to force His gift on those who value it not? Is God compelled to save those who are determined to go *their own way*?

But nothing more riles the natural man and brings to the surface his innate and inveterate enmity against God than to press upon him the eternality, the freeness, and the absolute sovereignty of Divine grace. That God should have formed His purpose from everlasting, without in anywise consulting the creature, is too abasing for the unbroken heart. That grace cannot be earned or won by any efforts of man is too self-emptying for self-righteousness. And that grace singles out whom it pleases to be its favored objects arouses

hot protests from haughty rebels. The clay rises up against the Potter and asks, "Why hast Thou made me thus?" A lawless insurrectionist dares to call into question the justice of Divine sovereignty.

The distinguishing grace of God is seen in saving those people whom He has sovereignly singled out to be His high favorites. By "distinguishing" we mean that grace discriminates, makes differences, chooses some and passes by others. It was distinguishing grace which selected Abraham from the midst of his idolatrous neighbors and made him "the friend of God." It was distinguishing grace which saved "publicans and sinners," but said of the religious Pharisees, "Let them alone" (Matt 15:14). Nowhere does the glory of God's free and sovereign grace shine more conspicuously than in the unworthiness and unlikeliness of its objects. Beautifully was this illustrated by James Hervey, (1751):

Where sin has abounded, says the proclamation from the court of heaven, grace doth much more abound. *Manasseh* was a monster of barbarity, for he caused his own children to pass through the fire, and filled Jerusalem with innocent blood. *Manasseh* was an adept in iniquity, for he not only multiplied, and to an extravagant degree, his own sacrilegious impieties, but he poisoned the principles and perverted the manners of his subjects, making them do worse than the most detestable of the heathen idolators (see II Chron. 33). Yet, through this superabundant grace he is humbled, he is reformed, and becomes a child of forgiving love, an heir of immortal glory.

Behold that bitter and bloody persecutor, *Saul*; when, breathing out threatenings and bent upon slaughter, he worried the lambs and put to death the disciples of Jesus. The havoc he had committed, the inoffensive families he had already ruined, were not sufficient to assuage his vengeful spirit. They were only a taste, which, instead of glutting the bloodhound, made him more closely pursue the track, and more eagerly pant for destruction. He is still athirst for violence and murder. So eager and insatiable is his thirst, that he even *breathes out* threatening and slaughter (Acts 9:1). His words are spears and arrows, and his tongue a sharp sword. 'Tis as natural for him to menace the Christians as to breathe the air. Nay, they bled every hour in the purposes of his rancorous heart. It is only owing to want of power that every syllable he utters, every breath he draws, does not deal out deaths, and cause some of the innocent disciples to fall. Who, upon the principles of human judgment, would not have pronounced *him* a vessel of wrath, destined to unavoidable damnation? Nay, who would not have been ready to conclude that, if there were heavier chains and a deeper dungeon in the world of woe, they must surely be reserved for such an implacable enemy of true godliness? Yet, admire and adore the inexhaustible treasures of grace— *this* Saul is admitted into the goodly fellowship of the prophets, is numbered with the noble army of martyrs and makes a distinguished figure among the glorious company of the apostles.

The *Corinthians* were flagitious even to a proverb. Some of them wallowed in such abominable vices, and habituated themselves to such outrageous acts of injustice, as were a reproach to human nature. Yet even these sons of violence and slaves of sensuality were washed, sanctified, justified (I Cor 6:9-11). "Washed," in the precious blood of a dying Redeemer; "sanctified," by the powerful operations of the blessed Spirit; "justified," through the infinitely tender mercies of a gracious God. Those who were once the burden of the earth are now the joy of heaven, the delight of angels.

Now the grace of God is manifested *in and by and through the Lord Jesus Christ*. "The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). This does not mean that God never exercised grace toward any before His Son became incarnate—Genesis 6:8, Exodus 33:19, etc., clearly show otherwise. But grace and truth were fully revealed and perfectly exemplified when the Redeemer came to this earth, and died for His people upon the cross. It is through Christ the Mediator alone that the grace of God flows to His elect. "Much more the grace of God, and the gift of grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ...much more they which receive abundance of grace, and of the gift of righteousness, shall reign in life *by* one, Jesus Christ...so might grace reign through righteousness, unto eternal life, *by* Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 5:15,17,21).

The grace of God is *proclaimed in the Gospel* (Acts 20:24), which is to the self-righteous Jew a "stumbling block," and to the conceited and philosophizing Greek "foolishness." And why so? Because there is nothing whatever in it that is adapted to the gratifying of the pride of man. It announces that unless we are saved by grace, we cannot be saved at all. It declares that apart from Christ, the unspeakable Gift of God's grace, the state of every man is desperate, irremediable, hopeless. The Gospel addresses men as guilty,

condemned, perishing criminals. It declares that the chastest moralist is in the same terrible plight as is the most voluptuous profligate; and the zealous professor, with all his religious performances, is no better off than the most profane infidel.

The Gospel contemplates every descendant of Adam as a fallen, polluted, hell-deserving and helpless sinner. The grace which the Gospel publishes is his only hope. All stand before God convicted as transgressors of His holy law, as guilty and condemned criminals, who are not merely awaiting sentence, but the execution of sentence already passed upon them (John 3:18; Rom 3:19). To complain against the partiality of grace is suicidal. If the sinner insists upon bare justice, then the Lake of Fire must be his eternal portion. His only hope lies in bowing to the sentence which Divine justice has passed upon him, owning the absolute righteousness of it, casting himself on the mercy of God, and stretching forth empty hands to avail himself of the grace of God now made known to him in the Gospel.

The third Person in the Godhead is the *Communicator of grace*, therefore is He denominated “the Spirit of grace” (Zech 12:10). God the Father is the Fountain of all grace, for He purposed in Himself the everlasting covenant of redemption. God the Son is the only Channel of grace. The Gospel is the Publisher of grace. The Spirit is the Bestower. He is the One who applies the Gospel in saving power to the soul: quickening the elect while spiritually dead, conquering their rebellious wills, melting their hard hearts, opening their blind eyes, cleansing them from the leprosy of sin. Thus we may say with the late G.S. Bishop:

Grace is a provision for men who are so fallen that they cannot lift the axe of justice, so corrupt that they cannot change their own natures, so averse to God that they cannot turn to Him, so blind that they cannot see Him, so deaf that they cannot hear Him, and so dead that He Himself must open their graves and lift them into resurrection.