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GOD'S ASTOUNDING GRACE

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"May the Lord send forth this little booklet with His blessing,
that it may bring the reader to a fuller appreciation of God's grace, and bring glory and honor to the God of all grace."

—D. Scott Meadows

Prologue

Our Topic: Free Grace

Grace! What a wonderful word! What an astounding revelation! Christians of all times have reveled in the astounding wonder of God's grace. John Newton, former slave-trading sailor turned saint, wrote the well-known lyrics, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!" Another hymn writer enraptured with the thought of grace wrote, "Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt." Still another gloried in grace by writing,

*Wonderful the matchless grace of Jesus,
Deeper than the mighty rolling sea
Wonderful grace, all sufficient for me, for even me;
Broader than the scope of my transgressions,
Greater far than all my sin and shame;
O magnify the precious name of Jesus,
Praise His name!*

Grace is central to biblical Christianity. The Gospel of Christ is the Gospel of the grace of God (Act 20:24). Grace is what distinguishes the faith once for all delivered to the saints from "faiths" concocted by human thought. No one can rightly accuse one of "majoring on the minors" when he majors on grace, for the message of grace is found in Scripture from cover to cover, and is interwoven throughout the fabric of the whole Bible. Hence, right thinking on this topic is essential for personal salvation, as well as for holy living, or "growth in grace" (2Pe 3:18). Grace is a topic of supreme importance.

Our Audience: Berean Christians

By the term "Berean Christians," we would include all true believers, not just those who have had formal theological training in Bible college or seminary. Certainly, there is a big difference between loving the truth and having a seminary degree!

Much of the material available in printed form on the topic of grace is inaccessible to some Berean Christians because of theological jargon. This jargon often proves confusing, sometimes even to those who think they understand the terms. Some Berean Christians get discouraged from reading much on the topic of grace because of technical language. Terminology can be terminal! A truly biblical treatment of the topic need not resort to the vocabulary of the professional theologian. All the terms we really need to teach about grace are found within the Bible itself.

One thing all "Berean Christians" have in common is an absolute commitment to Scripture. They know the Bible is God's Word and that its teachings are the final court of appeal. They are willing to abandon previously held ideas about anything, if they become convinced that Scripture teaches otherwise. They seek to let the Bible speak for itself, rather than searching the Bible for support for their preconceived notions. They test everything they hear by the Scriptures and cleave to what is good, rejecting everything else. They "buy the truth, and sell it not" (Pro 23:23); they believe and obey the truth at any cost.

Such were the noble Bereans—they were teachable, but not gullible (Act 17:11).

Oh, dear reader, are you teachable enough to receive whatever God's Word says, no matter how wrong you have been in the past? Are you willing to embrace truth, though it may prove to be unpopular, even among your Christian friends? Are you willing to trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding (Pro 3:5-6)? If so, read on. This booklet is especially addressed to Berean Christians like you.

Our Purpose: Edification

Whenever doctrinal precision is highly valued and displayed in Bible teaching, some will accuse us of improper motives. "You're going to confuse people! You're going to split the church!" However, we firmly believe that people are confused and division is rife in local churches because of doctrinal sloppiness, not doctrinal precision. Our purpose in this booklet is to edify the individual believer by instructing him in the biblical doctrines of grace. Surely the truth edifies! As long as we have spoken the truth in love, we need not fear confusion will result; for God is not the Author of confusion (1Co 14:33).

As the saints are built up individually, spiritual unity among them results as well. Accurate Bible teaching promotes true spiritual unity among Christians. The kind of unity exalted in the New Testament was not organizational unity, or unity enforced from without, but unity which sprang up from common faith and thinking (1Co 1:10). God is the Author of this kind of unity and peace, as in all the churches of the saints (1Co 14:33). That is why two Christians who have never met and who may have very different backgrounds can enjoy precious fellowship together: they have the same Bible! Our

purpose is not to split theological hairs, but to edify both the individual and the Christian community. If we have been true to Scripture, these lofty goals will be attained.

What Is Grace?

Dear reader, would you humbly ask God, right now, to give you insight into His truth as we consider these matters from Scripture together? The words of the psalmist are appropriate: “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” (Psa 119:18). Now let us look into God’s Word for the truth about grace. Please look up all Scripture references and study them carefully, for our appeal is to Scripture alone for the truth of these doctrines.

Simply Defined

Though the word grace in Scripture has various connotations, we will concentrate upon grace as it relates to salvation. Literally, it means a “gift.” A good, short definition is “the unmerited favor of God.” Note that grace is free, or else it would not be a gift. Notice also that it results in blessing, implied by the word favor. Finally, grace has a downward direction—that is, it comes to us from God Himself. He is the Fountain of every good and perfect gift (Jam 1:17).

However, defining grace so tersely is like describing the Grand Canyon as “beautiful.” Carefully consider this description of grace.

The word grace is a kind of shorthand for the whole sum of unmerited blessings that come to men through Jesus Christ. Primarily, it describes what we, for want of a better expression, have to call a “disposition” in the divine nature; and it means the unconditioned, undeserved, spontaneous, eternal, stooping, pardoning love of God.

Further, this grace comes to sinners who are actually God’s enemies (Rom 5:10), facing His eternal wrath (Nah 1:2; Luk 3:7). This is what we have in mind whenever we use the word grace in this booklet.

A Distinction: Common versus Saving Grace

God, in His grace, blesses mankind abundantly and in many different ways. Scripture speaks of “the manifold grace of God” (1Pe 4:10). So when we speak of the grace that only believers have received versus the grace that everyone receives, we must make a distinction.

God’s grace towards all men is obvious and undeniable. A cartoon once showed the neighbors of a pastor wondering why the refreshing rain was falling only on his lawn while theirs was parched and dry. When he returned from vacation, he explained that he had made arrangements before he left! God does not work that way. He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Mat 5:45).

“The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy. The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works...The eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season. Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing” (Psa 145:8-9, 15-16).

God’s grace to all is evident in the spiritual realm as well as the physical. God has revealed Himself to all men, so that none are completely without a knowledge of Him (Psa 19:1-6; Rom 1:18-20). He grants sinners time to repent even if they ultimately persist to the end in their stubborn rebellion (Pro 1:22; 29:1). We refer to God’s abundant goodness toward all men indiscriminately as common grace.

By saving grace, we are referring to the grace of God that brings salvation (Ti 2:11). This grace is not enjoyed by all, since it is evident that not all men will be saved (Mat 7:13-14). Only believers are saved by grace through faith (Eph 2:8). Unbelievers perish, since they do not receive saving grace.

Our focus will be upon saving grace rather than common grace. We want to learn from Scripture about the grace of God that results in personal deliverance from sin and condemnation.

Our Need of Grace

Before we can fully appreciate the blessing of God’s grace, we must have a biblical understanding and keen awareness of our own need of grace.

A simple definition of sin is “disobeying God, or the inner disposition to disobey God.” As sinners, we are condemned before God. We deserve God’s wrath both now and hereafter. God clearly set forth His requirements to man, and man has flagrantly, repeatedly, and defiantly fallen short of them.

Not only do we practice sin, we are sinners by nature. We do bad things because we are bad by nature. Rebellion against God is ingrained in us. We are in bondage to sin, held captive as its slaves. We cannot free ourselves from sin; only God can deliver us. The only hope for sinners like us is God’s mighty grace. These things are clearly taught in the Word of God.

The Fact of Sin

Of course, our initial rebellion against God began in the Garden of Eden. God permitted our first parents to eat of every tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve ate of it and disobeyed God (Gen 3).

Though God was gracious to Adam and Eve, they still produced corrupt, sinful offspring. “Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one” (Job 14:4). Their first son, Cain, expressed his antagonism toward God by killing Abel his brother (Gen 4). A sinful nature has been passed on to all Adam’s sons. “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Rom 5:12). Even from birth, we enter this world with a sinful nature. “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psa 51:5). “What is man, that he should be clean? and he which is born of a woman, that he should be righteous? Behold, he putteth no trust in his saints; yea, the heavens are not clean in his sight. How much more abominable and filthy is man, which drinketh iniquity like water?” (Job 15:14-16). That speaks of you and me!

“Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child” (Pro 22:15). The word foolishness here comes from a Hebrew word meaning “perverse, quarrelsome, licentious, guilty.” Though children are often thought of as completely innocent and without sin, this is mere illusion. The fire of sin smolders in their little hearts and is fanned into a flame as they grow up, except for the grace of God. The only exception to this, of course, is Jesus Christ our Lord, Who was completely without sin (1Pe 2:22-23; 1Jo 3:5).

These truths are summarized and expressed in the most universal terms in Romans 3, “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one...For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (vv. 10-12, 23).

The Bondage of Sin

The Bible clearly teaches that men are by nature enslaved to sin. Jesus taught that only His true disciples really knew the truth and enjoyed spiritual liberty (John 8:31-32). The Jews who heard Him did not realize how enslaved they were and how much they needed the freedom of which Jesus spoke (8:33). Then the Lord said, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin” (8:34). From the context, it is obvious that the word servant is used to mean “slave”—one who cannot free himself from his bonds. Sin is the master. That this is the condition of every lost man is explicitly taught in many Scripture texts. For example, Romans 6:16 says, “Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?” We all begin life in this world as servants or slaves of sin. The prophet Jeremiah testified of man, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jer 17:9). Further, we are no more able to do good than an Ethiopian is able to change the color of his skin or a leopard his spots (Jer 13:23).

Referring to Simon the sorcerer, Peter said that since his heart was not right with God, he was “in the bond of iniquity” (Act 8:20-23). Again, speaking of false teachers, Peter taught, “While they promise them liberty, they themselves are servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage” (2Pe 2:19).

Men are also the captives of Satan by nature (2Ti 2:26). He is the god of this world, and all the unsaved serve him, because he has blinded their minds to the gospel, so they cannot see its glory (2Co 4:3-4). Sinful man cannot even know the things of the Spirit of God, since they are spiritually discerned (1Co 2:14).

Sin is so ingrained in us that no human means can remove it (Pro 27:22). The carnal mind cannot obey God’s Law, nor please Him (Rom 8:7-8). Apart from God’s grace, we do not fear Him (Rom 3:18), nor seek Him (Rom 3:11). We have corrupt hearts that inevitably choose corrupt paths. There is no good thing in us (Rom 7:18). These passages are a mere sampling of many in Scripture that unmistakably set forth our utter inability to do good or to turn from sin.

In the light of our natural bondage, it becomes powerfully obvious how desperately we need the grace of God to free us. We not only need God to show us His glory: we need miraculous healing from spiritual blindness that we might see Him. Neither is it enough for God to speak the truth: we need to have our spiritual hearing restored by His Almighty power. God must do more than prescribe the medicine—He must raise us from the dead if we are to live. We need no self-help plan from God: we are utterly dependent upon God to save us and make us what we ought to be.

The Election of Grace

“The election of grace” is a phrase taken from Romans 11:5. No serious Christian can then object to its use. We have heard the question, “Do you believe in election?” Of course we do, for we believe the Bible! A more reasonable question is “What does the Bible teach about election?”

The Fact of Election

There are 48 verses (using three Greek words) in the New Testament alone that make reference to some kind of election. Some use it in a mundane way; others teach deep truths about Christ, Israel, the Church, and our own salvation. To elect means “to choose out of a group.”

This is illustrated well by the election of officers in the church at Jerusalem (Act 6). Certain widows had been neglected in the daily distribution of food; and the apostles, who were busy in the ministry of the Word of God and prayer, exhorted the congregation to choose from among them seven men to take care of this business. “And they chose Stephen...and Philip and Prochorus and Nicanor and Timon and Parmena and Nicolas” (Act 6:5). In other words, they picked these particular men out of the whole church, passing by other men, to serve the widows. It is nonsense to speak of electing all, for then no choice would have been made. Election is discriminatory, i.e., it distinguishes some from the rest. “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Mat 22:14). Certainly, this verse implies that choice has to discriminate individuals from within a larger group.

Another example is Jesus’ choice of twelve men to be His disciples. They are spoken of as “the apostles whom He [Jesus] had chosen” (Act 1:2). Before His ascension, Jesus reminded them of His sovereignty in their choice: “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you” (John 15:16). Christ had by-passed many others in the world that He might have chosen: “I have chosen you [disciples] out of the world” (John 15:19). He did not simply offer a general invitation to become His disciples and then enlist whoever came forward. He called the twelve personally, one at a time.

The Bible teaches that God has chosen some men from among the human race to salvation, passing by the rest. “But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth” (2Th 2:13). Note the emphasis on God’s sovereignty in this text. Paul thanks God for the Christian brethren, because God was the One Who made them Christian brethren! That this was ultimately God’s choice is emphasized by the expression “from the beginning,” in other words, before the world was even created—certainly before the saved people at Thessalonica existed. So obviously, God chose them, not vice versa.

Ephesians 1:4 is perhaps even more explicit: “According as He [God the Father] hath chosen us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world.” “In Christ” is an expression that denotes our salvation as believers. To be “in Christ” is to be saved. No Scripture bases election relating to salvation on man’s choice. Men are not the choosers, but the chosen of God (Col 3:12; Ti 1:1; and many other similar texts).

John 1:12-13 unmistakably teaches that the efficient cause of the new birth is God’s sovereign choice, not man’s will. “But as many as received Him [Christ], to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood [i.e., not by racial or family privilege], nor of the will of the flesh [i.e., not by a human father], nor of the will of man [i.e., the new birth cannot be caused by man’s will], but of God.” Yes, men believe the Gospel and are saved; but they believe because God chose them, imparts faith, and makes them new creatures in Christ Jesus (Phi 1:29; Eph 2:8-9; 2Co 5:17).

The Need of Election

Considering man’s natural bondage to sin, it is evident how necessary God’s election is. Left to himself, man inevitably wanders from God. Even when God calls man to fellowship by the Gospel, apart from His enabling grace by the Spirit, man will not respond.

Those who reject God’s sovereign choice of the elect have a very difficult, if not impossible, question to answer: Why is it that some sinners respond in faith to the Gospel and others perish in unbelief? Are the sinners who come to trust Christ more spiritually minded than the others? Are they less blinded by Satan to the glories of the Gospel? Are they drawn to Christ by some innate goodness within them? Clearly, the biblical answer to all these questions is “No!” The unsaved are described as “carnally minded” (Rom 8:5-7). All unbelievers are blinded by Satan (2Co 4:4); not one possesses any inherent goodness (Rom 3:10-18). In fact, in describing the Christians before conversion, Paul classes them together with the mass of sinful humanity, like those yet unconverted in every way (Eph 2:1-3). So we cannot take any credit for the fact that we are saved while others perish.

Apart from God’s election, the only other explanation that some offer to answer the question is blind fate. One who rejected God’s sovereignty in salvation tried to explain this with an analogy: “Why do some people like chocolate cake while others do not?”, as if that solved anything! Do we really believe that the God of Scripture would thus play Russian roulette with each man’s soul?

The Bible reveals God as King over all His works; that is, all creation is made, ruled, and supported by Him (Psa 145). The Lord does whatever He pleases, not only in heaven, but in earth (Psa 115:3; 135:6). Even seemingly random events, such as the casting of lots, are under His control, as Jonah learned in his experience (Pro 16:33; Jon 1:7). God has planned the universe from eternity, and now He is irresistibly bringing about His plan (Isa 14:24, 27; 46:10-11; Dan 4:35; Eph 1:11; 3:11). God’s sovereign control includes the free acts of men, both in restraining their sins (Gen 20:6) and using their sinful acts to further His divine purpose (Act 3:13, 17-18; 4:27-28). God did not create everything and then just permit time and chance to take its toll! As the old hymn says, “This is my Father’s world—O let me ne’er forget that tho the wrong seems oft so strong God is the Ruler yet.”

Gracious Election

At the root of the doctrine of election in all the Scriptures is God’s unmerited favor. God has not chosen any individual or nation to receive blessings, temporary or eternal, based on merit (Deu 9:6-8). Those who are saved must attribute their

personal favor with God purely to His sovereign grace—not to their own “free will” or to chance. Some have taught that God’s choice is based on foreseen faith in the sinner. They say, “God chooses those who choose Him.” There are several insurmountable problems with this view. First, it is without a shred of Scriptural support. Appeal is often made to Romans 8:29 and 1 Peter 1:2 that mention “foreknowledge” as preceding predestination or election, but these texts fall far short of teaching foreseen faith in the sinner as the basis of God’s choice. Rather, they are emphasizing that God’s choice of some sinners to be saved sprang from His particular love for them, each one personally and individually, from eternity. In Romans 8:29, the inspired text says, “For whom he did foreknow” (emphasis mine), not what He foreknew would happen by an act of their own free will. Here it is saying God foreknew people, not events; though of course He knows all things. These particular people whom God foreknew, and these alone, He predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, as Romans 8:29 clearly teaches. Thus, the word foreknow cannot merely mean an intellectual knowledge about them, for all people without exception are included in God’s omniscience. The use of the word foreknowledge in 1 Peter 1:2, dealing with the same general topic, ought to be understood in the same sense as in Romans 8:29.

The Bible repeatedly uses the word know in a figurative sense to denote an intimate and particular love. “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived” (Gen 4:1). Obviously, this was more than a casual acquaintance with her (cf. Gen 19:8)! This meaning of intimate and particular love carries over to God’s relations with His people. To Israel, chosen out of the Gentiles to be holy to the Lord, He said, “You only have I known of all the families of the earth” (Amo 3:2); and so their sin was even more offensive to Him, as an unfaithful wife’s would especially be to her own husband. Jeremiah heard the Lord say, “Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations” (Jer 1:5, emphasis mine). In typical Hebrew parallelism, “knew” is practically equated with “sanctified” (set apart). Before Jeremiah even came into existence, God had an intimate and particular love for him and decreed he should be set apart for the holy ministry of a true prophet—a lofty grace and rare privilege in Israel.

Therefore, “elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” (1Pe 1:2), far from teaching that God’s love is conditioned on some foreseen response of faith in us, instead insists that God chose certain sinners for salvation on account of His intimate and particular love for them from eternity. His divine choice (election) is founded upon His particular and intimate love for some sinners (foreknowledge).

Second, the Bible teaches faith is a gift from God (Phi 1:29) and not all men have faith (2Th 3:2). If men cannot have faith apart from God’s grace, then it makes no sense to speak of God foreseeing man’s faith, as if he brought himself to the point of believing the Gospel. A third problem with this view is that a number of passages teach clearly that the basis of God’s election of particular individuals is merely His sovereign pleasure. While the motivation for His choice is not arbitrary, it has not been revealed to us.

Consider Ephesians chapter 2: Paul says believers were “by nature the children of wrath even as others” (2:3). We lived just as they do. We had the same evil lusts they do. The same Devil that energizes them used to move us to sin. The only difference between believers and unbelievers is the grace of God! God made the difference in us, not we ourselves. “But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened [made alive] us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) and hath raised us up together, and made us to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:4-6). God quickened us! God saved us! God raised us up together! And God made us sit together with Christ! To this, all Bible believers agree, but we must ask why? Because God is good (rich in mercy, great in love and full of grace). We were helplessly lost except for the powerful, sovereign grace of God!

In Acts 13:48, we read, “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” The Lord opened Lydia’s heart, so that she believed the Gospel Paul preached (Act 16:14). The same God who spoke light into existence in His original creation also shines the Gospel light in men whose hearts were previously darkened by sin (2Co 4:6). Jesus taught that the Father in heaven is the One Who hides truths about judgment to come from the wise and prudent and reveals them to babes because it seems good in His sight (Mat 11:25-26). To the arrogant church members at Corinth, Paul addresses the searching question, “For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not receive it?” (1Co 4:7).

There is nothing that brings true evangelical humility to the heart more than these doctrines of grace. We desperately need grace because of our sin; and we receive grace through God’s pleasure, not our own choice. We have no one to praise for our salvation but God!

The Price of Grace

God’s grace is free to us, but it was costly to Him. In order for God to bestow His grace freely upon us, it was necessary for a terrible price to be paid on our behalf.

The Wages of Sin

Sin against God must be punished, “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). We have “earned” death because of our disobedience to God. The universal testimony of Scripture is that the penalty of sin is death (e.g., Gen 2:17; 3:19; 20:7; Num

14:29; Eze 18:4, 20; Jam 1:15). God's justice must be satisfied, as well as His mercy. The only way this can be accomplished is if the penalties of God's Law are met. Ultimately, no one's sins against God can go unpunished.

Christ in Our Place

This brings us to the very core of the Gospel message: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1Co 15:3). The sacrifice of Christ on the cross was a substitutionary, voluntary payment for sins on behalf of helpless sinners, that God's grace might be offered freely and sinners might be rescued from His just wrath.

That Christ died as a Substitute for others cannot be denied by sincere Bible-believers. He Himself was completely innocent of any sin; He was absolutely righteous in every way. Death had no claim on Christ since He was completely blameless, the perfect Example Who pleased His Father in all things (Joh 8:29, 46; 1Pe 2:21-22). The Scriptures clearly teach the substitutionary nature of Christ's death in many passages (e.g., Isa 53; Rom 5:7-8; 1Pe 3:18). We who believe in Christ deserved to be punished as Christ was. We were guilty. We merited God's wrath, not Jesus. Yet Christ, Who loved us so much, willingly stepped between the sinner and God's wrath and bore the just punishment for our sins.

Grace demanded that an infinite price be paid—the sacrifice of Christ—because of who was offended by our sins, even an infinitely holy God. The next logical question begging to be asked is, "Who receives the benefits of Christ's death?" In other words, for whom did Christ die? Having established the biblical purpose of Christ's death, let us consider the biblical extent of it.

For Whom Did Christ Die?

This is not a simple question, and neither is the answer simple. Many devout believers have affirmed that Christ died for the whole world, while others, no less devout, have argued that Christ died only for His people, that is, the elect. Another reason this issue is difficult is that there seems to be Scriptural support for both answers.

The Bible says Christ died for "the world," for "all men," and other such expressions. Consider, for example, Isaiah 53:6; John 1:29; 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 5:19; 1 Timothy 2:4-6; 4:10; Titus 2:11; Hebrews 2:9; 2 Peter 2:1; 3:9; 1Jo 2:2; 4:14. Admittedly, some of these are more impressive as proof texts for universal redemption than others are; but advocates of the other point of view must take account of these and many other similar passages.

In the light of such texts, what are we to make of other passages that teach that Christ died particularly for the church, also called "His people" and His "sheep"? These kinds of texts include John 10:11, 15-16, 26-29; Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25-27; Romans 5:8-10; 8:32-33.

Let us think about a few more direct questions and the answers Scripture provides. The answers to these specific questions should be just about self-evident to any thoughtful Christian, but we will provide proof texts for each. Does Christ's death actually save anyone? Yes (Rom 3:24; 5:9). Does Christ's death actually save everyone? No, or else you must admit that everyone will ultimately be saved and enter heaven, which is not true (Luk 13:23-24). Is Christ's death of sufficient value to save the whole world, meaning every individual? Yes, for it has infinite worth (1Pe 1:17-19). Did Christ die especially for His people (i.e., the elect) in order to secure their salvation? Yes (see above texts). Can Christ fail to accomplish His determined purpose to save His elect? No (John 6:44). Should the Gospel be preached universally, indiscriminately? Yes (Mark 16:15). Will anyone who believes on Christ be turned away? No (Mat 11:28-30; John 6:37). Can any sinner justly blame his condemnation on a deficiency in Christ's work on the cross? No; unbelief is the foul culprit (Heb 3:19).

These specific questions are a much fuller way to answer the complex question, "For whom did Christ die?" The biblical perspective on this issue is that Christ's death delivers only the elect from their sin and guilt, but Christ is promised to all who will believe on Him. If you will believe on Christ, then you can be sure that He already paid your sin-debt in full. Scripture never directs us to go tell specific sinners that Christ died for their sins in particular, but to preach that Christ died for sinners; and if they will repent and believe, He will save them. Christ did not die for a mere possibility; He died for His people.

The Attraction of Grace

Can God conquer the stubborn human will of an unsaved man and bring him to faith and obedience? Does God force people to be saved against their will? Essentially, these are the two questions this section is designed to answer from Scripture.

God's Power to Save

"The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will" (Pro 21:1). Just as God directs the streams to flow one way or the other, so He turns men's minds to one course or another. That is manifestly the sentiment of this proverb. Similar statements are found in Proverbs 16:1 and 16:9. God is able to change men's minds. Scripture gives us many case histories where this happened.

Take Artaxerxes, King of Persia, for example. This man was not known for his sensitivity to the Spirit of God! Yet he decided to send the Jews of his kingdom back to Jerusalem with a fortune out of his own treasury to rebuild the Temple of the Lord! And why did he do such a thing? Ezra, with spiritual discernment, explains the cause: “Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this into the king’s heart, to beautify the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem” (Ezr 7:27). God put it in Artaxerxes’ mind to show this favor to the Jews, though naturally he would have resisted such an idea.

When Israel strayed from God, He turned the hearts of the Gentiles against them as a rod of correction. Such was the case when Israel had become numerous in Egypt. The Lord knew how to arouse the Egyptians’ wrath against Israel, so that she would cry unto Him for deliverance. Incredible as it may seem, Scripture teaches us that God inspired the anti-Semitism in the people of Egypt, right up to the Pharaoh. “Israel also came into Egypt; and Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham. And he increased his people greatly; and made them stronger than their enemies. He turned their heart to hate his people, to deal subtilly with his servants” (Psa 105:23-25). We can see how effective God’s influence was when, even after Pharaoh saw the Red Sea part, he rushed into it in his madness to slaughter the Hebrews.

Since God has such complete and awesome control over the minds of men, it should not be surprising to us when we read that God induces men to believe the Gospel and be saved. He takes away spiritual blindness, grants repentance from sin and faith in Christ, and imparts eternal life to those dead in trespasses and sins.

We read of Lydia, the first European convert to Christ, in Acts 16:14. “[She] heard us: whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended (i.e., responded) unto the things which were spoken of Paul,” which was, of course, the Gospel of Christ. Lydia’s heart was closed to the Gospel before Paul came. God opened her heart, and so her heart was open. God did not merely invite her to open her own heart—He opened it. Lydia’s response was a result of God opening her heart, not vice versa. And what God did for Lydia, He can do for anyone, no matter how stubborn. He is mighty to save.

To know God and Jesus Christ truly means to be saved, to have eternal life (Joh 17:3). We all are born without the saving knowledge of Christ. According to Jesus, it pleases God to hide that knowledge from some and to impart it to others, resulting in their salvation (Mat 11:25-27).

Realizing that man is in bondage to His sin, how could it be any other way? Man cannot free himself from the chains of Satan and sin; only God can free him. And if God delivers a man, he is delivered! Salvation is of the Lord (Jon 2:9). Christ is the Author and Finisher of our salvation (Heb 12:2). He does not just bring us halfway to salvation and leave the rest to us: He Who began a good work in us will complete it (Phi 1:6).

God is the One Who grants repentance to the self-willed and faith to the unbelieving (2Ti 2:24-26). If God grants repentance, we are penitent; if He grants faith, we are believing; if He grants salvation, we are saved! What could be more simple?

What About Free Will?

No doubt, many reading this will think, “Well, what about man’s free will? Does not the Bible present man with a choice, either to receive God’s grace, or to reject it? Is not our salvation dependent upon our choice?”

When we speak of free will, we must define our terms carefully. If by “free will” we mean that man is morally neutral and might just as easily choose the good as the bad, we reject it completely. Man was innocent before the fall of Adam; but after that, we are born in sin with a sinful nature, or a predisposition to sin, and with a natural enmity against God. Apart from God’s grace, man is naturally corrupt and sinful, and unable, of himself, to choose the good, but tenaciously clings to that which is evil because this is his strong preference. We have already shown these concepts to be biblical under the heading, “Our Need of Grace.”

Biblically, man’s will is free in the sense that he may choose what he pleases. However, before conversion, we are pleased with sin and hostile to God. Therefore, unless God changes our hearts, we could never desire what is holy and true, for it merely exposes our sin and condemns it (Joh 3:19-21).

So God does not passively wait for our choice before He begins to effect our salvation, or else He would wait in vain. Neither does God coerce us to be saved against our will. Rather, He knows how to turn the will, so that those who were previously unwilling to believe on Christ now turn to Him with full consent of their will. A children’s song captures the truth so well:

*When God wanted the Canaanites out of His land,
He sent wild hornets, you know.
He did not compel them to go against their will,
He just made them willing to go!*

*When God wanted Jonah to go preach His Word,
And old Jonah fled and said, “No,”
God did not compel him to go against his will,
He just made him willing to go.*

*God never compels us to go, oh no,
He never compels us to go.
God does not compel us to go against our will—
He just makes us willing to go!*

The regeneration of each saved person is expressly attributed to the will of God. Our willingness to receive Christ is the result of the new birth, not the cause of it. This is clearly the truth set forth in John 1:13. Those who receive Christ “were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” The efficient cause of regeneration is God’s will, not natural descent (not of blood). Nicodemus had to learn that being Jewish did not guarantee him a place in God’s kingdom; he had to be born again. Neither is the new birth caused by a physical impulse (not of the will of the flesh). Neither is it caused by human decision, or “the will of man.” Yet many professed Bible-believers go on teaching that in becoming a Christian, everything depends on your “decision.” According to them, God just patiently waits for you to make the first move, and then God responds to you. No! The efficient cause of the new birth is God’s will, not man’s. James 1:18 should settle that beyond all dispute: “Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.” The God Who purposed the salvation of each one He has chosen also regenerates each one according to His sovereign pleasure!

The Triumph of Grace

Shall Christ die for sinners and yet see no sinners saved? Could it have been possible that His death would be in vain? Will God begin to save someone and then see them perish after all? Is it possible that a truly saved person could become unbelieving again or lose favor with God? Could God lose the war with Satan over any soul He intends to save? Scripture gives us God’s guarantee that grace shall triumph at last!

Unfailing Promises

God’s Word is a treasure chest of precious promises to those who believe it, and they are absolutely trustworthy and sure to be kept. Many of these relate to the triumph of grace in keeping us saved unto the end. Let us note just a few.

Describing His disciples as sheep, the Lord Jesus Christ promised them the gift of eternal life and stressed the security this granted them (Joh 10:27-29). They are secure in Christ’s hand, as well as the hand of the Father. This striking picture denotes God’s powerful protective care.

No one admires a quitter. People who are always starting new projects and never finishing any display a lack of character. Could we possibly imagine God leaving His work undone? It is ludicrous to contemplate that after three days of creation, God could procrastinate at all, much less indefinitely. Salvation is God’s work in man. Once He begins by grace to save us, He will not rest until He completes the work that He began! That is the thrust of Philippians 1:6: “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” This day of the Lord is the time of our glorification, when we enter our eternal state without sin, as children God.

Because God is not a quitter, neither are His people. It is true that we all need to “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2Pe 3:18), but we also have the assurance of being “kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1Pe 1:5), not His faith but ours, given and sustained by His grace. “For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1Jo 5:4). The classic biblical text about the relationship of God’s work in us and our work as the fruit of His grace is this:

“Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Phi 2:12-13).

If there was ever a formal statement of the absolute triumph of grace in the salvation of God’s elect, it is Romans 8:35-39. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The rhetorical questions of verse 35 all imply and require answering in the negative. Paul admits that tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword are not unlikely experiences of true saints and finds his proof in the Old Testament. Will these things, terrible as they are, destroy the souls of believers? No—a thousand times no! In fact, they merely give the true Christian a chance to demonstrate how mighty God’s conquering power in him is! Not merely conquerors are those whom God foreknows, predestinates, calls, justifies and glorifies (see 8:29-30), but more than conquerors, or “super conquerors!” No conceivable contingency will thwart God’s ultimate purpose in their lives, that is, displaying His mercy, love, and grace

to them, since they are “in Christ Jesus.” This expression, as we already noted, signifies all those who are saved. Being saved, they shall always be saved!

Grace from Beginning to End

Our salvation is by God’s grace from beginning to end. By grace, God planned to save us. By grace, He chose those that would be saved. By grace, He became a man to live a sinless life and die a sacrificial death. By grace, He rose from the dead for our justification. By grace, He brought the Gospel message to us. By grace, He convicted us of our sin and Christ’s sufficiency as a Savior and Lord. By grace, He imparted repentance and faith to our hearts. By grace, He quickened us who were dead in trespasses and sins. By grace, He sanctifies us. By grace, He will complete that work. By grace, He will glorify us with Christ. By grace, He will fellowship with us eternally in heaven. God’s astounding grace is one thing that everyone needs to understand and for which everyone ought to praise Him!

Epilogue

A Call to Faith (Believe the God of Grace)

Though Scripture is plain enough to keep us from confusion with the Spirit’s help, many sincere Christians have resisted fully embracing the biblical doctrines regarding grace. I am sure that the truths proclaimed in this booklet will be somewhat foreign or regarded as untrue or exaggerated by some who read its contents.

Let me ask you, reader, have we misquoted any Scripture text? Have we interpreted any verse in a way that disagrees with its context? Have we failed to grapple with the difficult points in this issue? Have we built our case on what “theologians” or other fallible men have said? In all soberness, we believe these questions must fairly be answered “no.”

Let us believe the truth revealed in Scripture, no matter how much it may contradict our previously held notions, no matter how unpopular it may make us even among our brethren, no matter how incredible it may seem. God’s Word is trustworthy.

A Call to Worship (Adore the God of Grace)

After contemplating God’s glorious attributes and His wonderful plan, Paul could not help bursting out into rapturous doxology:

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)

I know of no other doctrines more conducive to a joyful, reverent, humble, and energetic response of worship from us than the doctrines of the grace of God. Let us praise our gracious God!

