

God's Grace

God's grace is difficult to appreciate for the human mind because we operate on "the favor principle." We like to think that we deserve the good things in life. We understand life in terms of rewards and punishments. But is this how prayer works? Does God do things for us just because *we* live a certain way. Does He reward us for good behavior? Is answered prayer nothing more than God responding to the good things about us? Does God have to answer prayer a certain way that we expect of Him because in our minds: He promised? There are scriptures that—context aside—seem to suggest as much. Would this not be an act of favoritism which, admittedly, many Christians actually imagine as a consequence of their faith or lifestyle?

Does this perspective on truth adequately describe *grace*? Would this not put *us* in charge of *our own* blessings? This would, then, be a favoritism because God would have *reacted* to what we decided He should do. And even a "No" answer to prayer could be seen as a *lack* of favoritism or disfavor. A blessing could be deserved as a reward for faith or services rendered to God or for pious living, and a discipline would equally be "deserved" for not living a righteous life. This makes sense to religious minds because of the way our logic seems to work but is it grace?

Paul testified that after his conversion he went into the Arabian desert—for how long, we do not know—and didn't see Peter and the other apostles until 3 years after returning [Galatians 1:17]. God was teaching him about the message of grace that necessarily had to embrace the non-Jew or those who knew nothing about Mosaic laws or what righteousness was all about! If grace is, indeed, *unearned and undeserved*, it has to be made available to all, otherwise, we are back to talking about a divine favoritism that would contradict this principle! Do we really understand and appreciate in our Christian walk what grace is?

We should also ask how Paul decided on the word "grace" to describe what God told him about salvation! The word in the language of the poets and Classics spoke of *kindness* [Ephesians 2:7]. For the one receiving it, grace is *gratitude* because, if you think of it, there is nothing unwelcoming about kindness.

The word never lost its idea of favoritism, however, because kindness is always *pleasurable* or pleasing to whomever receives it. And to believe that the one receiving the kindness must deserve it for some reason is a logical conclusion. (All these ideas in Greek writings describe the Greek word *grace* but is this the Biblical understanding?)

Look closer at the logic of the Classical authors. If something was done *for* someone, it was said to be "*for* grace" and it was always free. It was a kindness. Kindness that is real kindness is never compelled or required—no more than love is. Keep in mind that the person showing kindness might still feel compelled, constrained, or impassioned within themselves to do so for some very personal or private reason—like love. If something is done "*with* grace" it is said to be "pure good will." To decide anything or judge a matter "*in* grace" was interpreted as partiality—perhaps, it is humanly impossible to decide anything without bias.

Paul was given a divine revelation about grace that elevated the word to a higher and eternal level of significance as an expression of God's great heart! Said another way: understanding the love of God is understanding His grace. The problem here is that God's Word chose to introduce the word AGAPE (love) into the language because God *is* love. 1 John 4:8 teaches "He that loves not knows not God; for God is love." (Our logic allows us to flip this: Whoever knows God, knows love because God is love!) One scholar pointed out that "...words often contain a witness for great moral truths—God having impressed such a seal of truth upon language, that men are continually uttering deeper things than they know..."

Perhaps, a simpler way of looking at this: grace engenders gratefulness while favor is an entitlement. God's grace is undeserved because it is unearned. Let's not qualify this statement or define it conditionally. Let God be God. Let Him show mercy on whom He will show mercy [Exodus 33:19; Ephesians 2:7].

Let's theologize a bit. God acts; God doesn't *react*. This is to say: God does not crisis manage, He does not need to *discover* what He already knows (He is omniscient). Nor does He change His mind in an act of remorse—even though such language is used in describing His dealings with man in an historical context *for our admonition*.

We might get tangled up in a theological net of determinism talking about omniscience when our logic works its magic in our minds that if God knows the future, it is already decided and cannot change, else God would know a lie which cannot be because He cannot lie; so, all things are predetermined and we are predestined for heaven or hell regardless of what we do or think—and that is, for the Christian, God's grace! [Wow! This sentence was brought to you compliments of human reasoning.]

God, indeed, is all-knowing. He knows the end from the beginning of all things, and one of the most inspiring truths of Scripture is found in Acts 15:8 where God is called the *heart-knower* (This is a word found only in the Bible and subsequent church writings). A God Who already knows *us* knows how to deal with us, knows if and when we will respond to His grace without denying us the freedom in relationship with Him to do just that. God does not react to our circumstances, let alone, put us in charge of our own futures. In an eternal sense, He embraces our entire life in every moment in dealing with us.

Grace, then, is God acting for reasons within Himself. In theology the word is *aseity* or the property by which God exists of and from Himself. It refers to the Christian belief that God does not depend on any cause other than Himself. This represents God as absolutely independent and self-existent.

God is the Creator—not the creation. His respond to our prayers is not out of favor though faith (trust) is a necessary part of our relationship with Him. He does not do for us what He does because we had a good idea for Him or as a consequence of how we live but because *His* plans are good for us because *He* is good. Said another way: We were created for and by His love. God did not decide to love us after He made us; He created us *to be loved* by Him! Now, if one gives this salient point its proper force, one begins to see grace. Nothing God does is for a reason outside of Himself. Everything He does, He does as an expression of who He is and

what pleases Him. God's actions encapsulate all His attributes in a single eternally significant personal choice.

God's reasons for doing what He does are always eternal because He is eternal. His actions are the working out of His plan which has to do with His coming Kingdom and our citizenship in that Kingdom. His dealings with us are always expressions of His mercy—as even Ancient Israel understood it. Righteousness, scholarship teaches, is best understood, then, as God's "Covenant Faithfulness."

The problem with some theologies is that they are static rather than dynamic. (I just had to say this and now try to explain it.) We affirm that salvation is a *relationship*, not a religion. But the natural exercise of logic is based on knowing something about a thing because it is stationary or in a state of being rather than growing or changing. Concrete examples of a truth are easier to understand than the truth itself which is abstract and might have as many applications as there is the need to express it. How I love my wife is quite different than how I love other Christians or my enemies, for example.

We see salvation as a *condition* of the soul, and I get it: You cannot be partially saved. When John wrote [John 1:12] "as many as believed on Him these have now the right to be the children of God," he wasn't describing a process but one's position now in relation to God. (This is good New Testament Greek.) But salvation is not just a state of being; salvation is a relationship with God. When we think statically, *righteousness* must be either total [made righteous] or, for the time being, declared [declared righteous] instead of what it really is the "covenant faithfulness" of God in relationship with each believer and, subsequently, in christian community [Ephesians 4:16]. We know this as the "New Covenant" in Christ [Jeremiah 31:31; Hebrews 12:24]. Even sanctification ends up being describe as a "*second definite work*" of God's grace, referring to a particular experience, rather than *progressive* or a dynamic aspect of a *submission* to the Spirit or the act of *following* Jesus wherever He leads, or a *growing relationship* with Him.

So, when Paul encourages us to "work out our own salvation" [Philippians 2:12] and adds "with fear and trembling" we are at a lost to reconcile this with grace—and yet it is the very essence of grace at work in us because it is (and there can be no better definition of grace than this) "*God who works in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure.*"

Understanding God's Grace is not a requirement for salvation—only accepting it. A definition of Divine Grace must wait while we spend lifetimes in theological debate to just describe it. When John the Baptist, imprisoned, inquired of whether or not Jesus was the Messiah to come, Jesus did not tell him, He showed him! [Luke 7:22]. So with us, we learn about God, Who He is, by observing the move of the Spirit of God among us, the miracles of the Father's touch upon us and the change Jesus and salvation makes in our lives. Experience is indeed knowledge as the language of Scripture makes clear. There is no word for academics. And so with Grace. It is the continuing record we get to observe and study of His working in us.

Paul explains in Philippians 2:13 "God working in us both to will and to do of His good pleasure." Each word is important here: It is God and God alone that is at work, and He does His work *in* you and me. He does what He does because it *pleases* Him. In the language of Scriptures the words, counsel, or willing, or pleasure, are completely overarching [comprehensive; all-embracing; a single overarching principle]. Their meanings often collide and become indistinguishable. If this be so about God, there is no second best with Him. His perfect will is His only will! God's intentions and His desires come from the same great heart of love. Isaiah 46:9-10 "Remember what I accomplished in antiquity! Truly I am God, I have no peer; I am God, and there is none like me, who announces the end from the beginning and reveals beforehand what has not yet occurred, who says, 'My plan will be realized, I will accomplish what I desire,'"

We also consent as reasonable that *Grace means God acting for reasons within Himself*. [It is the term aseity]. *This represents God as absolutely independent and self-existent.*" Exodus 33:19 "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy." Much is clarified about grace here. God does not do anything, even for Moses, based on Moses' prayer when that prayer contradicts God's desire in the matter before them. Answered prayer is always dependent on a divine consent that makes it perfectly clear that God's answer was God's intention all along. Prayer is a gracious invitation for us to join Him in the victorious answer He already purposed before we asked. The primary New Testament reason for prayer, as I observe it, is "to join God in a solemn commitment" to see something happen, or an answer enacted. Prayer is also helping carry God's burden [Genesis 18:17; Daniel 2:28].

The actual word *proseuchomai* breaks down this way: "*Pros*" means toward. Our prayers are directed toward God. In John 1:1, John heralds Christ's advent with this opening, "the Word was *with* (pros) God" There is a union of thought and heart nuanced in this preposition. "*Euch*" is a vow, and vows are commitments! Acts 18:18 speaking of Paul, "He had his hair cut off at Cencrea because he had made a vow." Even the word "because" in this verse offers an explanation as to why He cut his hair: he made a vow! And "*omai*" is a spelling used to reflect back upon the subject. Prayer connects us to God! Prayer is not our way of getting God to do something. Prayer is God's way of getting us to recognize what He is doing and has done! We do share our own needs, of course, but even here this is our opportunity to commune with Him and hear from Him while He responds to our requests.

Grace is God doing what God wants to do and He gets great pleasure out of doing it

because it brings Him and us closer or as part of a covenant relationship. Additionally, as must be stated unequivocally, God wants no one lost. This is not just the message of the New Testament [2 Peter 3:9 “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”] but the Old as well [Romans 10:19; Isaiah 65:1 “I am sought of them that asked not for me; I am found of them that sought me not: I said, Behold me, behold me, unto a nation that was not called by my name.”].

We add one other important detail of grace: God is the heart knower [Acts 15:8]. Jeremiah 17:10 “But I, the LORD, search all hearts and examine secret motives. I give all people their due rewards, according to what their actions deserve.” When Lydia heard the message of the cross from Paul God opened her heart [Acts 16:14]. The great heart knower saw her heart, like David of old, she had a heart after God’s [1 Samuel 13:14] and He knew this. There is something about each person which God only can discern or recognize about their reception of His message and grace that supports or challenges His interest in them [Hebrews 4:12]. When the church’s witness glorifies God as at Corinthian we can anticipate “The secrets of [the] heart are disclosed, and in this way [they] will fall down... to the ground and worship God, declaring, ‘God is really among you.’” [1 Corinthians 14:25].

We recognize that even faith which is our belief in the revelation of Jesus’ death and resurrection [Romans 10:9-10] is a gift of God [Matthew 16:17; 2 Peter 1:1] and we know that God’s grace is God’s independent interest in our salvation even before we knew about it [Romans 5:10]. We also know that God does not desire anyone to be lost [Matthew 25:41], and we know that we are commissioned to share in the joyous harvest of souls through our prayers and our witness. Sowing seed [John 4:37] is scattering the seed because our witness is broadcast into all ears [Acts 17:20] and before all eyes. God knows who will be open to the message. [Acts 17:32].

But what about the generations of aborigines and pagans who never heard? {Romans 10:14, “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?”} I hear again a brief conversation Peter had with Jesus John 21:21-22 “So when Peter saw him, he asked Jesus, ‘Lord, what about him?’ Jesus replied, ‘If I want him to live until I come back, what concern is that of yours? You follow me!’” Peter learned a new word “busybody” [1 Peter 4:15]. And we best understand that we are commissioned to bear witness and to pray, as, these are our way of participating with God in His great work for the souls of men. Leave everything else to His grace.