

A Biblical View of Grace

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Part I

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Throughout the years of church history there scarcely can be found a more profound herald of God's grace than John Newton's "*Amazing Grace*." What a powerful hymn proclaiming the grace of God. Look at the words.

*Amazing grace--how sweet the sound--that saved a
wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found,
was blind but now I see.*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and
grace my fears relieved; How precious did that
grace appear the hour I first believed!
Thru many dangers, toils and snares I have
already come; 'tis grace hath brought me safe thus
far, and grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me; His word my
hope secures; He will my shield and portion be as
long as life endures.*

*When we've been there ten thousand years, bright
shining as the sun, we've no less days to sing
God's praise than when we'd first begun.*

Newton, born in 1725 and a slave trader, knew he was a wretched man. It was during a violent storm at sea, fearing for his very life, that he cried out to God and immediately received an abundant portion of God's grace. In that hour he became a new creature in Christ Jesus.

Everyone who has received the wonderful salvation Jesus purchased for us has a story of God's marvelous grace. Everyone's story is different! In fact, one amazing thing about grace is that it is so versatile. Look at the various attributes of grace that Newton pointed out.

First, he aptly describes God's grace as amazing.

Grace taught him to fear.

Then grace removed his fear.

Grace ushered in his salvation.

Then he expresses his absolute confidence that this grace will lead him home!

Hebrew Words for Grace

The more I study about the word "grace," the more I see that it is, indeed, an amazing word! Grace, as we Christians use it, is essentially a New Testament word. Yes, we do see in our various translations *grace* used in the Old Testament, but my study revealed that in no sense does the Hebrew language have an equivalent to the New Testament Greek word. In fact, one writer, Burton Scott Easton,⁽¹⁾ wrote, "There is no word in the Hebrew that can

represent all the meanings of [grace]." He goes on to say that there are 3 Hebrew words which are often translated into English as grace. They are: 1) *hn*, meaning "favor," 2) *rçn*, meaning "acceptance," and 3) *heedh*, meaning "kindness, mercy."

The New Testament Word for Grace

When contrasting the Hebrew meanings with the New Testament meanings of grace, Easton goes on to say, "Technically, salvation by grace in the New Testament is opposed to an Old Testament doctrine of salvation by works, or, what is the same thing, by law...." Jesus was born into a time of Jewish history when works and keeping the law was everything. In fact, it had become a bondage to the people. So it is not surprising that this concept of grace that Jesus so freely displayed became one of the biggest stumbling blocks of the religious keepers and teachers of the Law in Jesus' day. While the religious leaders were demanding the keeping of the Law, Jesus came offering a new concept of salvation by grace. Paul stated it this way, "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be *by grace* and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring -- not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all." (Rom 4:16 NIV, emphasis added.)

The New Testament word for grace is always a translation of, or, *charis*. *Charis* occurs approximately 170 times in the Greek New Testament. Giving a brief definition of *charis* is difficult, or even impossible because of its wide and varied use. Again, I turn to Easton: "In secular Greek of all periods it is also a very common word, and in both Biblical and secular Greek it is used with far more meanings than any one term in English can represent."

It is easier to describe what grace does than to exactly define what it is. Therefore I will set forth the various uses of *charis* as they apply in the New Testament. First let's look at the word's common uses, then we will examine its special uses.

Common Uses of *Charis* in the New Testament

The following illustrates some of the common uses of *charis* in the New Testament.

1. Pleasant External Appearance -- the word seems to denote pleasant external appearance of "gracefulness," "loveliness" . . . as found in Luke 4:22. "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the *gracious words* [*charis*] that came from his

lips. . . ." (NIV, emphasis added.)

2. A Mental Attribute -- *Charis* can also be translated as "graciousness," or, when directed toward a person[s] as "favor" as demonstrated in Luke 2:52. "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in *favor* [*charis*] with God and men." (NIV, emphasis added.)

3. The Recipient's Emotions -- *Charis* also denotes the emotion awakened in the receiver of such favor as "gratitude." We see that in Luke 17:9 when Jesus, speaking of a man's attitude toward his servant said, "Would he *thank* [*charin*] the servant because he did what he was told to do?" (NIV, emphasis added.)

These 3 uses of *charis* are simply examples to illustrate how widely used *charis* is in the New Testament.

Grace and Justification

The Apostle Paul uses *charis* in a special sense when writing about our justification. Let me first review the definition of justification from *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*. "Justification [is] in a legal sense the *declaring* one to be just, or righteous. It has two elements, 1) the forgive-ness of sins, 'Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.' (Rom 4:8 NIV), and, 2) the declaring or approving as righteous, 'for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are *justified freely by his grace* through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.' (Rom 3:23,24 NIV, emphasis added.)⁽²⁾

Thus, we see that it is *by grace* we are justified. Paul expresses the same idea in Ephesians.

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast. (Eph 2:4-9 NIV)

Paul again makes it clear in Titus. ". . . he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of

rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been *justified by his grace*, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life. (3:5-7 NIV, emphasis added.)

Perhaps it is in this sense that the common, widely accepted definition of grace as "God's unmerited favor" was born. But that phrase is inadequate as the sole definition of grace. Grace is indeed God's unmerited favor, but it is so much more. Accepting the definition of grace as "God's unmerited favor" alone is akin to describing a Beethoven symphony as "a piece of music." Ironically, according to Easton, this definition of grace came out of the secular Greek usage of *charis*. It appears that Paul seized on this definition when he expressed, "So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace." (Rom 11:5,6 NIV)

1. Grace versus Works

What about the idea of works? The teaching of connect-ing God's grace or favor with works was inherent in the question a man asked Jesus, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" (Mat 19:16 NIV) By this question we see clearly that in the minds of people familiar with the Law, the idea of works earning favor with God was ever present. As I have already said, God's grace *is* unmerited. We do not earn it, nor in any sense does anyone *deserve* God's grace. Paul makes the strong argument that, ". . . when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." (Rom 4:4,5 NIV) In fact, Paul's argument to the Romans actually contrasts grace against works. Works can never earn God's favor but grace grants it freely by faith.

In order to fully understand God's grace / justification connection versus works, we must imagine the vilest, most wicked person imaginable who comes to a saving knowledge of Christ Jesus and becomes born again. Then recognize that grace literally covers over *all* of his sin and stands him before God the Father in a spotless, sinless state! Humanly speaking, he was the least deserving person on earth of such grace, yet God's amazing grace covers his sin.

It's quite easy for us to think of some pleasant, charming, "good" person receiving God's grace, isn't it? Somehow in our humanity we think of *this* person as deserving God's grace. But the very nature of His grace excludes any thought of its being deserved. If it were possible to deserve it, then it would cease to be grace.

Now let's put works in their proper place. We

work *because* we are saved, not in order *to be* saved. Make no mistake, we are destined to work in God's kingdom. Paul wrote, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *to do good works*, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Eph 2:10 NIV, emphasis added.) Indeed, much of the Book of James reminds us that faith without works is dead faith.

2. Antinomianism

There were people in the first century church who seized on this teaching of grace and pushed it to the extreme. They felt that the freedom from the Law they enjoyed in grace allowed them to do anything they wanted. They took out of context the passage that Paul wrote in Romans when he said, "The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more . . ." (5:20 NIV) These believers said that if sin increases grace, then let us sin more so that grace may increase more!

This is the same issue Jude addressed when he wrote, ". . . I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord." (3,4 NIV)

This heresy continued down through the centuries, but it was Martin Luther who finally gave it its name. He called it "antinomianism" from two Greek words; "*anti*" meaning against and "*nomos*" meaning Law. Unfortunately, antinomianism is still alive today.

I find this idea expressed occasionally by some Christians, determined to commit some sin, who say, "But God will forgive me. I know His grace will cover my sin," then go ahead and enter into the sin they willfully purposed to do. Or they may say, "Aren't we glad we are under grace and not the Law?" But, of course Paul answered that argument by writing, "What shall we say, then. Shall we go on sinning that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (Rom 6:1 NIV)

Grace and Sanctification

When we look at the word "sanctification," we must first determine the sense in which it is used. In the Old Testament sense, sanctification simply means something or someone set aside for God's purposes. Certain people and items were considered to be dedicated for holy use. Thus, the Old Testament priests were sanctified and the articles of worship in the Tabernacle were sanctified. There is no mention of personal holiness.

The person or objects were not thought of as holy.

The concept of sanctification in the New Testament is expanded to encompass the *process* by which God makes a Christian holy and conformed to the image of Jesus. Note I said expanded. We still have the word "sanctification" used as the setting aside for holy or sanctified use in the New Testament. The New Testament's expanded concept of sanctification has two phases, 1) separation from sin, and 2) conforming to the image of Christ.

Why is it that God sanctifies us? Jesus is preparing a holy bride. "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as *a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless*." (Eph 5:25-27 NIV, emphasis added.) Jesus *will* have a holy bride!

1. The Power of Grace

God's grace has supernatural power to transform our lives. That's what sanctification does. It transforms lives. Paul credits grace as the energy or power that transformed his life from a vile persecutor of the church to a servant of God. "For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But *by the grace of God* I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them--yet not I, *but the grace of God that was with me*." (1 Cor 15:9-10 NIV, emphasis added.) Paul makes it abundantly clear that it was God's grace that effected the mighty change that took place in his life. The NIV says, "his grace to me was not without effect" while the KJV says, "was not in vain."

2. Suffering Soothed by Grace

We need to recognize that there are times when God uses suffering to effect sanctification in a believer's life. This suffering may be physical, emotional, relational, social, or financial. Here is Peter's view on suffering: "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." (1 Pet 4:19 NIV)

But even in suffering God has provided His grace as both a comfort and a means of overcoming. The writer of Hebrews wrote, "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and *find grace to help us in our time of need*." (Heb 4:16 NIV, emphasis added.) So, even in the midst of suffering, God invites us to His throne of grace to help us through our trials and sufferings.

Lord, we are overwhelmed by your wonderful

grace. Your love and mercy are boundless. Thus your grace is also boundless. Thank you, Father, for the grace that saved us, comforts us, sanctifies us, sustains us, and empowers us. Blessed by the holy name of Jesus!

In Part II of this teaching, we will examine the call to ministry on every Christian and how to release God's abundant grace into our lives and our ministry.

1. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI., Vol 2, page 1292.

2. Excerpts edited from an exposition on Justification written by John Alfred Faulkner, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI., Vol 3, page 1784.

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