



FEED MY SHEEP

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Grace for the Race

Part 2: Good Works, Spiritual Bankruptcy and Grace

As we commenced this new series of essays on grace as the underpinning for understanding the fruit of the Spirit, we were exploring the usage of the word grace in both Old and New Testaments. We left off with the special case of Noah.

Genesis 6:8 But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.

Many theologians speak of God's grace as sovereign grace. I, too, have noticed in my studies how closely related God's grace is to His sovereignty. Take this simple statement about Noah. You can argue this both ways, but God's sovereignty always trumps everything in the final analysis.

In other words, Noah and his family were the only ones saved from death by the flood (and we are not going to discuss the extent of the flood here; that is not the issue in this essay). So Noah was saved by the grace of God. Saved by grace. THAT is certainly a so-called New Testament (NT) principle and yet here it is in one of the very earliest chapters of the Bible.

But what do I mean by 'you can argue this both ways?' I mean it has to do with answering the question: why did Noah find grace? Was it because, as it says in verse 9...

9 These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God.

The word *just* there means *righteous*. We know that

all have sinned so it obviously did not mean that Noah was without sin, but perhaps it had reference to him keeping his family line unimpaired from cross-breeding. The word *perfect* in that verse means unimpaired or without blemish.

So, one side of the argument would be that because of that merit, because of that work of Noah in not mixing his seed, that God saved him, and therefore the grace given to Noah was earned by his own merit. That is arguing it one way.

The other side of the argument, which I favor, is that God's sovereignty is always the trump card, because even if we allow the preceding statements as true, that Noah chose of his own will to keep his bloodline pure, then we would simply point out that it was God in the first place who *caused* Noah to desire to keep his family unmixed, and then it was God's grace which enabled Noah to actually carry out that desire.

And so it was God's grace in the first place which brought about the result that Noah quote "found grace in the eyes of YHWH." God's sovereign grace always reigns supreme.

What we have just seen in the case of Noah is an example of the absolute right that God definitively proclaims when he speaks to Moses on Mt. Sinai. I like to visualize this as God arrayed in all His majesty and with unquestionable authority His voice booms out unchallenged—and it is the last half of the verse which is pertinent here, where God says:

5a) KJV Exodus 33:19 And he said, I will make

all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before thee; and [I] will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

God chooses of His own sovereign free will those to whom He will show grace or mercy. It has nothing to do with us insofar as *initiating* the process of grace or no grace. Whatever we do is a response to God's choosing.

Noah's righteousness was a response to the enabling grace of God. We will talk more of enabling grace later. Now let us turn to Joshua 11 for an example of God *purposely* withholding and denying grace to an entire nation of people. This passage we will read is kind of a summary of the conquests of the Canaanites by Joshua.

Joshua 11:18 Joshua made war a long time with all those kings.

19 There was not a city that made peace with the children of Israel, save the Hivites the inhabitants of Gibeon: all *other* they took in battle.

20 For it was of the LORD [YHWH] to harden their hearts, that they should come against Israel in battle, that he might destroy them utterly, and that they might have no favour, but that he might destroy them, as the LORD commanded Moses.

Here again, God's sovereignty reigns supreme. It says that God deliberately hardened the hearts of the Canaanites so that they would go to war against Israel. Consequently, they would *not* receive the grace of physical salvation, but would instead be killed in war. That was God's plan and He put it in their hearts to do what they did.

Do you think the Canaanites could have chosen of their own free will to override God's hardening of their hearts? Not on their life, as history records. God chooses who receives grace. We don't earn it and we don't decide if we get it. We simply respond accordingly as God has already chosen before the ages began.

I should make note that the word *favor* there in Joshua 11 is a different Hebrew word. It is also used in Ezra 9. This word in Hebrew is H8467 תִּתְנַחֵם {tekh-in-naw'}

It is used almost always (23 out of 25 times) with the meaning of supplication, or a request for favor; but it is obviously translated correctly as the favor or grace itself in these two occasions of Joshua 11 and Ezra 9.

As you realize, even though we have not looked at grace in the NT yet, (except as Jesus used it in the common Greek vernacular) we have already, in fact, been learning much about the so-called Pauline conception of grace in the NT. We are seeing that Paul didn't really invent anything new. These things were hidden below the surface in the OT all along. But it was by God's grace that Paul was enabled to see these things about grace, to bring them to light and to set forth the doctrine of grace as the sparkling jewel of Christian doctrine as he did in the books of Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, etc. In Ezra 9, the prophet is offering a prayer and in it he recounts how they had gone into Babylonian bondage—verse 8..

Ezra 9: 8 And now for a little space grace hath been shewed from the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant to escape, and to give us a nail in his holy place, that our God may lighten our eyes, and give us a little reviving in our bondage.

Here again the word *grace* is H8467 תִּתְנַחֵם {tekh-in-naw'} and again it is very much in line with the NT theology of grace. It was pure, unmerited favor bestowed on the remnant of Judah who were permitted to leave Babylon and return to the land of Judah.

Grace in the New Testament

Let's move our study of grace into the NT now. We have already given you the simplest definition of God's grace, as the term is developed by Paul. Grace is the unmerited favor of God. Let me read a more expanded definition now. This is for the Greek word G5485 χάρις charis {khar'-ece}.

By the way, we get our words *charisma* and *charismatic* from this word. When someone has charisma, it is really a form of grace in the sense of these first several definitions. And remember, these first definitions are the common, secular Greek meanings of the word. Grace is:...

1a) that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, sweetness, charm, loveliness: grace of speech 2) good

will, loving-kindness, favour 2a)

And now here is the definition formulated and emphasized by Paul. Grace refers to...

the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to the exercise of the Christian virtues.

Then there are these other definitions more or less related to that.

3) what is due to grace 3a) the spiritual condition of one governed by the power of divine grace 3b) the token or proof of grace, benefit 3b1) a gift of grace 3b2) benefit, bounty 4) thanks, (for benefits, services, favours), recompense, reward.

Now, I do not expect that we will be able to retain or regurgitate those definitions on the spot, but I give them to you to give you a sense that this word really is a very broadly used word. And I would like to follow up by quoting from the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 1292; where it says in summary of its article on grace:

“Most of the discussions of the Biblical doctrine of grace have been faulty in narrowing the meaning of “grace” to some special sense, and then endeavoring to force this special sense on all the biblical passages. For instance, Roman Catholic scholars, starting with the meaning of the word in (say) 2 Cor. 12:9 {Let me just quote part of it to you-JWB...}

[9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.]

So, Roman Catholic scholars, starting with the meaning of the word grace in 2 Cor. 12:9, “have made Rom. 3:24

[24 Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus:]

state that men are justified by the infusion of Divine holiness into them, an interpretation that utterly ruins St. Paul’s argument. [Emphasis mine-JWB]

“On the other hand, Protestant extremists have tried to reverse the process and have argued that grace cannot mean anything except favor as an attitude, with results that are equally disastrous from the exegetical standpoint. And a confusion has resulted that has prevented men from seeing that most of the controversies about grace are at cross purposes. A rigid definition is hardly possible, but still a single conception is actually present in almost every case where ‘grace’ is found— [and this is the part I (JWB) wish to emphasize] the conception that all a Christian has or is, is centered exclusively in God and Christ, and depends utterly on God through Christ.

“The kingdom of heaven is reserved for those who become as little children, for those who look to their Father in loving confidence for every benefit, whether it be for the pardon so freely given, or for the strength that comes from Him who works in them both to will and to do.”

Among evangelical Christians one of the most well known Scriptures is

Ephesians 2: 8 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:

9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.

We all have probably heard it hundreds of times and one would think that surely we understand what it means, ...don’t we? But we also recognize that there is a difference between *head* knowledge and *experiential* knowledge...experiential knowledge meaning putting into practice and living by what we say we believe. That is where the real difficulty comes in, doesn’t it?

As we know from our studies of the tabernacle, salvation is a three-phase process: outer court, holy place and holy of holies—representing justification, sanctification and glorification; the salvation of our spirit, soul and body. We have been saved (justification), we are being saved (sanctification) and we will ultimately and finally be completely saved (glorification).

Most of us seem to have no difficulty understanding that our initial salvation—our justification—is a free gift, and we cannot earn it by works. And we have no difficulty understanding that when God raises us from the dead and gives us glorified bodies, that too is without any work on our part.

After all, when we are dead, how can we have any part in raising ourselves from the dead? So we can easily see that our glorification phase of salvation is purely by God's grace alone. But when it comes to that middle portion where "we are being saved," our sanctification phase, which extends from the time we come to Christ until we die, that is where many of us lose sight of the fact that we live and walk our Christian walk all by the grace of God.

It is not just grace on the front end and grace on the tail end, but then it's up to us in the middle—no! It's a grace job all the way! But it has been my general observation of Christians that many of us are in effect living by works. We seem to base our relationship with our heavenly Father on how well we think we are performing. If we feel we have been doing pretty well lately: we haven't had any arguments with our spouse or family members in quite a while, we've been pretty diligent about Bible study and we've helped out a Christian brother in financial need—then we are likely to expect some nifty blessings from the Father in return.

If on the other hand, we are pretty disgusted with the state of our spiritual life right now for whatever reason; well then we might feel like we need to be constantly looking over our shoulders and just waiting to get zapped. In this sense, we are living by works.

This "good works" mindset is often reinforced by our fellow Christians as we encourage each other to strive harder to be successful in our Christian life; as though it is basically up to us, with some help from God's grace, of course, to get us through the rough spots. We often and perhaps even subconsciously think that it's our self-discipline, our commitment, our performance, our diligence, our zeal and our dedication that defines our success as a Christian. This is not the case. It is all of grace!

I would hasten to add that I am not saying that we are not to do good works and so forth, and we will address that issue later. But what I am trying to emphasize here is that our total salvation package: justification, sanctification and glorification are all *totally* due to God's grace. We have done and can do absolutely *nothing* to earn any portion of our salvation. In one of the resources I've read on the subject of grace, the author uses the analogy of bankruptcy to illustrate one of the fundamental aspects of how we ought to understand God's grace. Let me summarize it for you.

The word bankruptcy even today has a certain stigma and shame attached to it. When we hear of a business going bankrupt, it usually carries with it the connotations of failure, mismanagement, inability, lack of intelligence and so forth. That's financial bankruptcy. We also hear of moral bankruptcy where a person is exceedingly wicked and possesses virtually no positive moral character qualities.

However, a person can be very successful financially and be a pillar of the community morally and yet be spiritually bankrupt. In fact, every person who ever lived—except Jesus Christ—was spiritually bankrupt. How do we know that? Paul tells us.

Romans 3:10 As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:

11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.

12 They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

That is spiritual bankruptcy. We are sinners deserving of death. Now usually when a company goes belly up, they have at least a few assets that can be sold off to help pay something on their debts. But even our best works are as filthy rags in the sight of God, according to Isaiah 64. We have absolutely nothing to offer God that can earn or merit anything from Him.

Then we learn that Jesus Christ paid off all our debts and that we can appropriate salvation simply by accepting this free gift (this grace) by faith. There is nothing more we can possibly add to it; it is not of our works, lest we would boast. And so we admitted that we were so far in debt spiritually, that we could not possibly save ourselves, and when we came to faith in the merits of Christ alone, we were in effect declaring spiritual bankruptcy. But now comes the rub: what kind of bankruptcy did we declare?

(To be continued)

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