

Salvation According to Scripture

Responding to the Gospel

Zion's Roar Holy Spirit Ministry
Bixby, Oklahoma



Book 2 - Chapter 02 – Study 04

Grace and Mercy Within God's Condition

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READ THIS FIRST

Before you begin this study, I would like you to consider something that most people rarely stop to think about.

There are certain subjects in Scripture that almost everyone assumes they understand. Not because they have personally spent years examining them, but because they have heard them discussed so many times that the meaning seems obvious. Over time, familiarity creates confidence, and confidence often removes the desire to examine things more carefully.

Grace is one of those subjects.

Most Christians have heard the word grace since the very beginning of their walk with God. Some have heard thousands of sermons that mention grace. Others have read books about grace, sung songs about grace, quoted verses about grace, and listened to countless conversations where grace was presented as one of the central themes of Christianity. Because of this, many believers feel very comfortable with the subject long before they have ever taken the time to examine it closely for themselves.

That is not necessarily wrong. There is nothing unusual about learning from teachers, pastors, parents, friends, or fellow believers. In fact, much of what we know begins that way. The difficulty arises when we become so familiar with a subject that we no longer feel the need to examine it. At that point, assumptions can quietly take the place of understanding.

As we have worked through this series, we have already encountered this problem more than once. Certain ideas seemed obvious at first, yet after slowing down and carefully examining the Scriptures, some of those same ideas became far more complex than they initially appeared. In some cases, things we thought were simple required much deeper consideration. In other cases, conclusions that seemed certain became less certain once all of the relevant passages were placed side by side.

Grace deserves that same careful examination.

The purpose of this study is not to argue against grace, diminish grace, or make grace less important. Quite the opposite. The purpose of this study is to understand grace more clearly by allowing Scripture to explain what God means when He uses the word.

As you continue, I encourage you to approach the subject with patience. Resist the temptation to immediately defend what you already believe. Resist the temptation to rush ahead toward conclusions. Instead, allow the Scriptures to guide the discussion one step at a time. If what you currently believe is correct, careful examination will only strengthen it. If correction is needed, honest examination will reveal it.

Either way, there is nothing to fear from the truth.

WHY GRACE MUST BE EXAMINED CAREFULLY

One reason grace deserves careful examination is because it is often used to answer questions before those questions have actually been studied. Throughout the years I have listened to countless discussions about salvation, and I have noticed that grace is frequently brought into the conversation whenever difficult subjects arise. If obedience is mentioned, grace is often introduced. If repentance is discussed, grace soon follows. If baptism, perseverance, commandments, or any other biblical requirement becomes the subject of discussion, many people immediately appeal to grace as though the matter has already been settled.

Yet before grace can answer any question, we must first understand what Scripture means when it uses that word.

The difficulty is that many Christians have become so accustomed to connecting grace with salvation that the two concepts are almost treated as though they are identical. The moment grace is mentioned, thoughts immediately turn toward forgiveness, redemption, and eternal life. That reaction is understandable because some of the most beloved passages in Scripture speak of salvation through grace. However, familiarity can sometimes cause us to assume more than a passage is actually saying.

As I began examining this subject for myself, I found that I had been carrying certain assumptions that I had never seriously questioned. Like many believers, I had heard grace discussed for years. Yet when I attempted to define precisely what I meant by the word, I discovered that the answer was not quite as simple as I had always assumed.

This became particularly important when I considered the story of John Doe. Throughout this series we have watched God working within his life. He has been given opportunities to hear the truth. He has encountered conviction. He has been challenged, corrected, and confronted with questions that demanded answers.

Time after time, he has been given another opportunity to respond. The question is not whether God has been active in his life. The question is whether everything we are observing should automatically be understood as saving grace.

That question may seem insignificant at first, but the answer has the potential to affect how we understand many passages that are commonly quoted during discussions about salvation. Rather than assuming we already know the answer, let us examine the Scriptures carefully and allow them to guide our conclusions.

GOD'S GOODNESS BEFORE REPENTANCE

As I considered where to begin, I found myself repeatedly returning to a passage in Romans.

Romans 2:4 (KJV) Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?

For many years my attention was drawn almost entirely to the word repentance. After all, repentance is one of the central themes of the passage. Yet the more time I spent reflecting upon Paul's words, the more my attention shifted toward everything that precedes repentance.

Paul is describing people who have not yet repented, yet he speaks of them as recipients of God's goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering. Rather than immediately bringing judgment, God continues extending patience. Rather than cutting off every opportunity, He continues allowing time. Paul even tells us the purpose behind that patience. God's goodness is leading somewhere. It is intended to bring a person toward repentance.

The significance of that observation should not be overlooked. Many believers think about God's activity beginning when a person finally turns toward Him. Yet Paul presents a picture of God working before that response has occurred. He describes a

God who is already acting, already showing patience, and already extending goodness while repentance still lies ahead.

Most Christians can probably recognize this pattern in their own lives. Few people come to God in a single moment without any previous influence, conviction, correction, or opportunity. More often there is a story leading up to that moment. There are conversations, circumstances, warnings, questions, and experiences that gradually bring a person to a place where he is willing to listen.

The more I reflected upon that reality, the more I found myself asking a question I had never seriously considered before. If God is extending goodness, patience, and opportunity before repentance takes place, how should we understand what we are observing?

The more I thought about that question, the more I realized that many discussions about salvation focus almost entirely upon the destination while giving very little attention to the journey that leads there.

People often speak about the moment they repented, the moment they believed, or the moment they finally surrendered themselves to God. Those moments are certainly important, but Romans 2:4 directs our attention to something that frequently receives far less consideration. It directs our attention to the patience of God that often precedes those moments.

When we look at the lives of people throughout Scripture, we rarely find God interacting with them only after they have responded correctly. More often, we find Him working before that response takes place. He warns before judgment comes. He sends messengers before destruction falls. He provides opportunities before accountability arrives. Again and again, we see a God who is willing to extend patience while calling people toward a different course.

That observation does not answer every question concerning grace, but it does help us recognize something important. God's involvement in a person's life often begins long before that person fully understands what He is doing. In many cases, years may pass before someone finally recognizes how many opportunities, warnings, and acts of patience were placed before him.

John Doe's story is no different.

As we have followed his journey through this series, we have already seen evidence of God's involvement. We have watched him encounter truth. We have watched him wrestle with questions. We have watched him face convictions that could not easily be ignored. None of those things happened in isolation. Each became part of a larger story that was gradually moving him toward a point of decision.

MERCY BEFORE JUDGMENT

One thing that became increasingly difficult to ignore during this examination was how often Scripture portrays God showing mercy before judgment is carried out.

When most Christians hear the word mercy, they immediately think about forgiveness. While forgiveness certainly involves mercy, the biblical idea is often broader than that. Mercy frequently involves God withholding a judgment that could rightfully be imposed.

In many cases, people continue living, breathing, and receiving opportunities even though they have already sinned against God. They are not receiving what they deserve at that moment. Instead, they are being granted time.

That observation seems closely related to what Paul describes in Romans 2:4. God's goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering are not signs of indifference toward sin. Rather, they reveal a God

who is willing to delay judgment while extending an opportunity for repentance.

The more I reflected upon that reality, the more I began to see mercy not merely as forgiveness granted after repentance, but also as patience extended before repentance.

Every additional day that a sinner is given to hear truth, consider his condition, and respond to God is a reminder that judgment has not yet fallen.

That does not mean mercy eliminates accountability. Nor does it mean that God's patience continues forever. It simply means that before judgment arrives, God often extends opportunities that people have not earned and do not deserve.

John Doe appears to have experienced that mercy repeatedly throughout his journey. Again and again, he has been confronted with truth while still being given time to respond.

The more I reflected upon that reality, the more I began noticing similar themes in other passages of Scripture.

One passage that repeatedly came to mind as I considered these things is found in the words of Christ during the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew 5:45 (KJV) ...for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

At first glance, these words may not appear to have much to do with our discussion. Most people read them and simply move on. After all, Christ is describing things that occur every day. The sun rises. The rain falls. Seasons come and go. Life continues much as it always has.

Yet the more I reflected upon His words, the more I realized that Christ was drawing attention to something most people rarely stop to consider.

The same sun that warms the fields of those who love God also warms the fields of those who reject Him. The same rain that nourishes the crops of the righteous also nourishes the crops of the unrighteous. Every day, people awaken to blessings they did not create, cannot control, and have done nothing to guarantee for themselves.

Most of us become so accustomed to these things that we stop noticing them. We expect tomorrow to arrive. We expect the sun to rise. We expect life to continue. Yet Christ reminds us that behind these ordinary experiences stands a God who continues giving.

What makes that observation particularly interesting is that God does not limit these provisions to those who faithfully serve Him. Instead, He speaks of God's continued generosity toward people who respond to Him in very different ways. Some honor Him. Some ignore Him. Some seek Him. Some reject Him. Yet day after day He continues providing things that none of them could provide for themselves.

As I thought about that, I found myself returning to the same question that arose while studying Romans. What exactly are we observing in passages like these?

If God continues extending patience, opportunity, provision, and kindness even before a person has responded properly to Him, how should those gifts be understood?

Rather than rushing toward an answer, I think it is worth allowing that question to remain before us as we continue examining the Scriptures.

As these passages accumulated in my mind, I began to realize that they were forcing me to reconsider something I had long taken for granted.

Like many Christians, I had become accustomed to thinking about grace almost exclusively in connection with salvation. Whenever the word grace appeared, my thoughts immediately moved toward forgiveness, redemption, and eternal life. While those connections are certainly biblical, I began wondering whether they represented the entire picture.

The passages we have examined thus far seem to describe God actively working in the lives of people before salvation ever enters the discussion. In Romans, His goodness leads men toward repentance. In Matthew, His provision extends to both the just and the unjust. In both cases, God is giving something before the desired response has taken place.

The more I reflected upon that reality, the more difficult it became to ignore. If God's goodness can be experienced before repentance, and if His provision can be enjoyed by people who do not yet belong to Him, then perhaps there is a distinction that many believers overlook. Perhaps not every gift that comes from God is describing the same thing.

That thought does not diminish salvation. Nor does it diminish the grace by which men are saved. If anything, it helps us appreciate the subject more fully. Before we can properly understand the grace that saves, it may be necessary to first recognize the many ways God works in a person's life long before salvation is finally realized.

With that thought in mind, let us continue our examination.

One passage that helped me think about this subject from a different perspective is found in Paul's address at Athens.

Acts 17:25 (KJV) Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things;

There is something wonderfully simple about Paul's statement, yet the more I reflected upon it, the more profound it became.

Paul does not speak merely of rain, crops, food, or material provisions. He goes much deeper. He speaks about life itself. Every breath that enters a person's lungs, every heartbeat that continues through the night, every morning that begins with another opportunity to live, all of it ultimately traces back to God.

Most people rarely think about life in those terms. We become so accustomed to breathing that we forget every breath is a gift. We become so accustomed to tomorrow that we assume it will arrive. Yet Paul reminds his listeners that life itself is not something mankind sustains independently. It is something continually given.

What makes the passage even more interesting is its audience. Paul is not speaking to a congregation of faithful believers. He is addressing people who largely do not know God. Yet even while speaking to those who remain outside of a saving relationship with Him, Paul still declares that God gives them life, breath, and all things.

The more I considered that reality, the more difficult it became to view God's activity as something that begins only after salvation. Long before a person repents, believes, or obeys, he has already spent every day of his life dependent upon gifts that originate with God.

When viewed together, Romans, Matthew, and Acts seem to present a consistent picture. God is not absent from the lives of those who have not yet come to Him. He is patient. He provides. He sustains. He gives opportunities that many people never stop to recognize until much later.

That observation brought me back to the question that first started this examination.

If God is already giving so much before salvation, how should we understand those gifts, and how do they relate to the grace that Scripture connects to salvation?

That question brings us to an important turning point in our study. Up to this point we have examined passages that describe God's patience, provision, and goodness toward people before salvation is realized. We have seen that God gives many things long before a person enters into a saving relationship with Him.

The next question is whether Scripture also speaks of a grace that is directly connected to salvation itself.

To answer that question, we must now examine passages where grace is discussed in connection with salvation.

When Scripture speaks specifically about salvation by grace, what exactly is it describing?

To answer that question, we must now turn our attention to passages that connect grace directly to salvation.

One of the most frequently quoted passages concerning grace is found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians 2:8-9 (KJV) For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Few passages have shaped Christian discussions about salvation more than these words. For many believers, this is the first verse that comes to mind whenever the subject of grace is raised. Because of that, it deserves careful attention.

Notice first what Paul is actually discussing.

Unlike the passages we previously examined, Paul is not speaking about sunshine, rain, patience, longsuffering, or the ordinary provisions of life. His subject is salvation itself. The grace being discussed here is directly connected to the salvation of man.

That distinction is important because context determines meaning. The fact that God gives life, breath, and daily provision does not

mean every passage about grace is discussing salvation. Likewise, the fact that Ephesians 2 is discussing salvation does not mean every mention of God's goodness or generosity is automatically describing saving grace.

Paul is addressing something very specific. He is explaining how salvation comes to man. He leaves no room for boasting, self-glory, or the idea that anyone can place God in debt through personal merit. Salvation is God's gift. It originates with Him. It is made possible by Him. Without His intervention, no amount of human effort could ever rescue mankind from sin.

That truth should not be controversial. In fact, everything we have examined thus far should make it easier to understand. The same God who provides life, breath, patience, and opportunities to repent is also the God who provides the means by which men may be saved.

The question before us is no longer whether salvation is by grace. The question is what Paul means when he says that salvation is by grace through faith.

As I continued reflecting upon Paul's words, I realized that another question needed to be answered before moving any further.

Why is saving grace necessary at all?

That question may seem obvious, but sometimes the most obvious questions are the ones we examine the least. If salvation is by grace, then grace must be rescuing mankind from something he cannot rescue himself from.

The answer, of course, is sin.

Sin separates mankind from God, and no amount of human effort can remove that guilt. While God's patience, provision, and

goodness may lead a person toward repentance, none of those things solve the problem of sin itself.

Something more is needed.

Scripture teaches that God provided that solution through Christ. This is where saving grace stands apart from the many blessings we have already examined. Saving grace is not merely another day of life or another opportunity to repent. It is God's provision for the forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with Himself.

The more I considered these things, the more I realized that salvation by grace is not simply a statement about God's character. It is also a statement about God's action.

God did not merely look upon sinful mankind and feel compassion. He did something.

This is where many discussions about grace become disconnected from the very thing that makes grace possible. We speak about grace as though it exists independently, yet Scripture repeatedly connects grace to the work of Christ.

The grace that saves did not appear because God decided to ignore sin. It did not appear because His standards changed. It did not appear because mankind somehow became less guilty.

Sin remained a problem, God remained holy and justice still mattered.

The question was how a holy God could reconcile sinful people to Himself without compromising His own righteousness.

The answer is found in Christ.

The New Testament repeatedly directs our attention to His life, His death, His burial, and His resurrection. These events are not

merely details within the Christian story. They are the very foundation upon which the hope of salvation rests.

Without Christ, there is no saving grace.

Without Christ, there is no forgiveness.

Without Christ, there is no reconciliation.

Without Christ, there is no salvation.

This is why Scripture never presents saving grace as something separated from Him. The grace that saves is inseparably connected to what God accomplished through His Son.

As I reflected upon that truth, another question naturally followed.

If saving grace is found in Christ, how does a person come into a saving relationship with the One through whom that grace is offered?

LET US NOW RETURN TO JOHN DOE

Throughout this study, we have examined God's goodness, patience, provision, and involvement in the lives of people before salvation is fully realized. We have seen that God gives life, breath, opportunity, and time even to those who have not yet responded to Him as they should. We have also seen that Scripture speaks of a grace that is directly connected to salvation through Christ.

This brings us back to the question that has followed John Doe throughout this series.

Where does he currently stand?

There can be little doubt that God has been active in his life. John Doe has heard the truth. He has been confronted with questions that demanded answers. He has been given opportunities to repent, opportunities to learn, and opportunities to obey. Like every person who has ever come to God, he has benefited from God's patience long before reaching the end of his journey.

Yet our purpose is not merely to determine whether God has been working in John's life. Our purpose is to determine whether John has responded to God in the way Scripture requires.

This is where we must be careful.

It is possible to receive opportunities without responding to them.

It is possible to hear truth without obeying it.

It is possible to experience God's patience without reaching the destination toward which that patience was leading.

For that reason, we must distinguish between the opportunities God has provided and the response that God requires.

Let us now compare what we have learned with what we presently know about John Doe.

Bring your check marks forward from the previous studies.

Based upon the evidence examined so far, which of the following statements can be verified from Scripture?

- ☐ John Doe has experienced God's goodness and patience.
- ☐ John Doe has been given opportunities to hear and respond to the truth.
- ☐ John Doe believes Christ is the Son of God.
- ☐ John Doe believes Christ died for his sins and rose again.
- ☐ John Doe has confessed Christ.
- ☐ John Doe has repented of his sins.
- ☐ John Doe has received God's continued mercy and provision.
- ☐ We have established that God has been working in John's life.
- ☐ We have established that salvation is by grace through faith.
- ☐ The evidence examined thus far does not establish that John Doe has entered into the saving grace connected to salvation.
- ☐ Additional biblical requirements remain to be examined before a final conclusion concerning his salvation can be reached.
- ☐ At this point in the investigation, John Doe remains unsaved.

QUESTIONS THAT STILL REMAIN

At this point, some readers may feel ready to reach a conclusion concerning John Doe. After all, we have already established that he believes certain things about Christ. We have seen evidence of repentance. We have observed God's patience, mercy, and continued involvement throughout his life.

Yet if there is one lesson we have learned from this series, it is that Scripture often requires us to continue examining a subject long after we believe we have found the answer.

For that reason, several important questions still remain before we can determine where John Doe ultimately stands.

If John Doe believes what Scripture teaches, has he openly confessed it?

Is belief alone the same as confession?

Does Scripture connect confession to salvation?

What does it mean to confess Christ before men?

Is confessing Christ different from merely believing in Him?

Must a sinner acknowledge his condition before God?

And perhaps most importantly, does the evidence examined throughout this series support the conclusion that John Doe has entered into the saving grace found in Christ?

At this point, the answer must be no.

While we have clearly seen God's patience, mercy, provision, and continued involvement in John's life, we have also learned that salvation is by grace through faith. In the previous study, John Doe was found deficient in the faith associated with salvation.

Therefore, while John Doe has clearly experienced God's goodness and mercy, the evidence presently before us does not allow us to conclude that he has received the saving grace connected to salvation.

These are not small questions.

In fact, the answers to these questions may determine whether John Doe's current condition is one of salvation already possessed, salvation still being approached, or salvation that has not yet been obtained.

For that reason, we must continue our examination before reaching a final conclusion.

FINAL THOUGHTS

As we conclude this study, it may be helpful to reflect upon what we have actually learned.

Throughout this examination, we have seen a God who is far more involved in the lives of people than many realize. Long before salvation is obtained, He gives life, breath, opportunities, patience, instruction, correction, and countless expressions of kindness. None of those things should be taken lightly. Every one of them reveals something about His character and His desire that people turn to Him.

We have also seen that Scripture speaks about a grace that is directly connected to salvation through Christ. This is not merely the provision of another day, another opportunity, or another blessing. This is God's answer to mankind's greatest problem, the problem of sin and separation from Him.

Yet one important conclusion now stands before us.

Earlier in this series, we examined the subject of faith and compared John Doe's condition to the faith described throughout Scripture. That examination revealed deficiencies that prevented us from concluding that John possessed the complete faith associated with salvation.

In this study, we have learned that salvation is by grace through faith. We have also learned that not every expression of God's goodness, patience, mercy, or provision should automatically be understood as saving grace.

Therefore, while John Doe has clearly experienced God's goodness and mercy, the evidence presently before us requires us to conclude that he has not yet received the saving grace connected to salvation.

God's goodness toward a person should never be mistaken for proof that salvation has already been obtained.

At this point in our investigation, John Doe remains unsaved.

The studies that follow will continue examining the remaining requirements associated with salvation and whether John Doe ultimately fulfills them.

You Should Have Already Verified and Tested:

B2-C01-S07 - A Common Salvation Story Examined

B2-C01-S08 - Why Feelings Cannot Be Trusted for Salvation

B2-C01-S09 - When Doubt Is a Call to Examine, Not to Fear

B2-C01-S10 - Believing Nearer to Salvation, Not Saved

B2-C02-S01 - The Gospel of Christ and the Authority of His Name

B2-C02-S02 - Repentance: A Complete Change of Direction

B2-C02-S03 - Faith That Leads to Salvation

You Are Here:

B2-C02-S04 - Grace and Mercy Within God's Conditions

Your Next Study:

B2-C02-S05 - Confessing Christ According to Scripture

And Then:

B2-C02-S06 - A Good Conscience Toward God

B2-C03-S01 - Remission of Sins When God Erases the Past

B2-C03-S02 - Baptism God's Appointed Moment of Remission

B2-C03-S04 - Answering the Objections to Baptism and Salvation

B2-C03-S05 - Examining Your Salvation According to Scripture

B2-C03-S06 - Conversion from Belief to a Changed Life

B2-C03-S07 - Enduring to the End Salvation Maintained by Faithfulness

B2-C03-S08 - Measuring What You Once Believed Against Scripture

