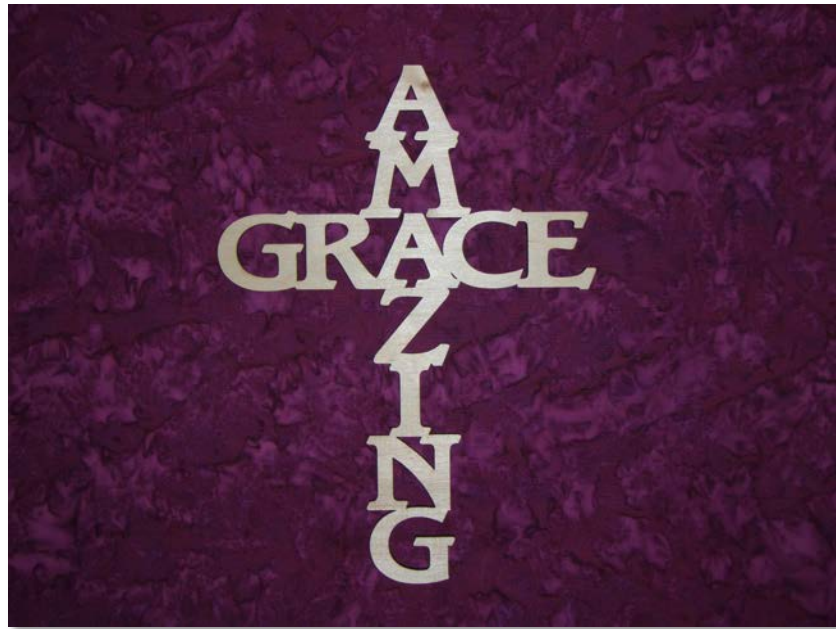


GRACE: WHAT IT ISN'T, WHAT IT IS



GRACE FOR YOUR TIME
OF NEED: PART 1

T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Grace: What It Isn't, What It Is
Grace for Your Time of Need: Part 1
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Welcome to *Grace: What It Isn't, What It Is*

Grace is one of those wonderful words that Christians embrace, use, and rejoice to know.

But do we really know what grace is? Do we know what grace is for? How it operates? How to receive it, and what use to make of it?

In this series, *Grace for Your Time of Need*, we will unpack the broad Biblical teaching about this most important subject. We begin here, by considering what grace isn't, and what it is. Grace is not just something we feel. Grace begins in God and comes to use for power.

In this introduction to our series, we'll describe grace as the Scriptures explain it, and we hope this study will help you grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

And if you find this study helpful, please let us know. How have you benefited from this study? Go to our website, www.ailbe.org, and use the Contact Us button to share your story.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 It's All Grace. Right?

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. Ephesians 2.8, 9

Words without meaning?

During a recent meeting of his leadership team, a pastor friend of mine asked what would seem to have been a good conversation-starting question: "What is grace?"

No one in his group could explain it.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound..." "Grace, grace, God's grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within..." "Wonderful the matchless grace of Jesus..." "More of His grace to others show..." We sing about the grace of God, and feel certain that we stand secure in grace. But if we're not clear about what grace *is*, how can we expect to know the benefits and obligations grace brings with it?

All of which puts me in mind of the scene in that excellent film, *The Princess Bride*, when the Spaniard, having heard the Sicilian exclaim one time too many, "Inconceivable!", remarks, "You keep on using that word. I'm not sure it means what you think it means."

In the Christian community today, we are guilty of the same. Except that we have *many* words, words that we bandy about all the time, the meaning of which I'm not sure we really understand. Words like praise, worship, discipleship, Kingdom of God, salvation, revival, and above all, grace.

We use words fraught with the most important meaning – life-changing meaning, world-transforming meaning – but meaning we don't really understand; and so the reality and power of these words generally evade us.

It's time we stopped using such meaning-full words in meaningless ways. Beginning with the word *grace*.

What we know about grace

Of course, every believer knows something about grace. Just as most people know something about St. Patrick. That he was a great Irish saint. Or that he taught the Trinity using a shamrock, and that he drove the snakes out of Ireland. None of which, of course, is true.

So also with grace. We know just enough about grace to be able to use the word with a measure of confidence. We're saved by grace. We can pray for grace to help in our time of need. God's grace sustains us, and that's a good thing. Certain people seem to have more grace than others. We know just enough about grace like I know just enough about Russian to greet someone and ask them how they are. But just as I would very quickly be at sea trying to carry on a conversation in Russian – missing all the cues and jokes and important points being made – so we are at sea much of the time when it comes to grace. We're just using and hearing a term without really knowing what it means.

Most of what we know about grace is only *partly* true, and *some* of what we know may be entirely *wrong*.

And for a people who claim to be saved by grace, and thus to be a people of grace, that doesn't bode well.

Grace for Your Time of Need

Today we begin a 5-part series (35 installments) on the subject of grace. It will take us 5 parts to begin getting

our minds and hearts around this subject. But first we need to establish a working description of grace, which we can build on for the remaining installments in this series.

The writer of Hebrews encourages us to seek mercy and grace from God for our times of need (Heb. 4.16). A frequently-heard explanation of the difference between these two terms has it that *mercy* is not getting what you deserve (judgment, wrath, punishment), while *grace* is getting what you don't deserve (forgiveness, eternal life, heaven). There's a good bit of wisdom in that distinction, especially where grace is concerned. Grace is entirely undeserved. We can't earn it, as if we could work hard enough or be good enough to deserve it. There is nothing inherent in our being human that demands grace should abound to us. We don't deserve grace, and nothing we could ever do will change that.

And yet there it is, grace abounding to chiefs of sinners such as we. What a wonder! What a miracle! What a mystery! And what an infinite bounty of grace awaits us, if only we know what it is, what it's for, and how we may obtain more of it.

Rather than try to *define* grace, let me begin our series by *describing* it: Grace is a divine disposition, leading to divine communication, that issues in divine power for the good of the world and the glory of God.

Let's just briefly note the following: (1) Grace begins in God, in the deep, secret, mysterious counsel of the divine Trinity, where the thoughts and decisions of God can be known only perfectly and completely to Him. So if we ask, "Why grace?", the answer will always only be "Because God". You cannot know grace – at least, you cannot appreciate grace or increase in it – unless you know God and believe in Him.

(2) God does not keep grace to Himself. He *communicates* it. But to whom? How? And with what in mind?

(3) Grace brings with it divine power, and divine power always accomplishes holy spiritual work. You cannot work *for* grace, but you cannot work *without* it. The people who know God and His grace have been saved unto *good works*, for which incessant and increasing measures of grace are required.

(4) Grace at work results in good for the world – good, defined as God defines it – and brings glory to God. The *telos* of grace, in other words, is worship. Grace is unto worship, because worship is what God deserves and what we're made for as human beings. Because in worship, we encounter grace in a Person, our Lord Jesus Christ, and are fulfilled and renewed in Him and His grace so that we can live for the glory of God in every area of our lives.

But before we unpack the details of this description, we need to clear up some common misconceptions about grace. We need to see what it *isn't* before we can begin to understand what grace *is*.

For reflection

1. Do you agree that Christians often use terms without really understanding them? Explain.
2. For Christians, what constitutes a "time of need"?
3. Review the description of grace provided in this article. In what ways do you see this grace at work in your life?

Next Steps – Preparation: Share this article with a few friends. Invite them to join you in reading and discussing the installments in this series on grace.

2 Not Mere Good Feeling

For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.
Philippians 3.18, 19

The grace of the cross

A useful memory device has it that grace can be understood as “God’s Riches At Christ’s Expense.” This simple acrostic reminds us that grace comes from God, and it comes lavishly, abundantly, and overwhelmingly to underserving people. It further asserts that these riches have been bought, paid for, and secured by the work of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. His death – the unjust murder of the only completely just One – is the tap that opens the flow of God’s riches to our souls.

What joy we know, and what great thanksgiving wells up within us, together with renewed devotion, as we contemplate the gracious work of our Lord Jesus Christ! We want to sing or shout,

*Amazing love! How can it be
that Thou, My God, shouldst die for me?”*

And we would be right to do so.

The grace of God is intimately associated with the cross of Jesus Christ:

*At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light,
and the burden of my heart rolled away!
It was there, by faith, I received my sight,
and now I'm so happy all the day!*

All who believe understand that the gracious work of Jesus is for our good, that we might be free from guilt, shame, fear, doubt, and sin, to walk in the newness of life and grace in our risen and reigning Lord.

But it is precisely because grace is *so good*, and brings us such joy in the riches of our God, that it is easy to make *feeling good* the *summum bonum* and defining mark of true faith. All who make this mistake, choosing mere good feeling over life in the grace of the Lord, become not the beneficiaries of the cross, but its enemies.

Enemies of the cross?

This is what Paul warned the Philippians about in our text. Wherever Paul went, certain people – jealous of his ministry or wanting to subvert his work (cf. Phil. 1.15) – began preaching the “gospel”. Selfishly ambitious themselves (Phil. 1.20), they appealed to the self-interest of those who heard them, scratching their itching ears with a message aimed at making them feel good (2 Tim. 1.3).

They preached the “gospel” to satisfy their own selfish desires; and they sought by the same means to attract followers. Paul’s words, they insisted, were weighty and powerful and difficult to hear (2 Cor. 10.10). He demanded purity, holiness, courage, self-denial, a willing embrace of hardship and suffering, and a bold stand for the Gospel. He insisted on the Law of God as the proper outworking of salvation. He demanded that sinful people be confronted and brought to their senses, even if it meant separating them from the Lord’s congregation for a time.

What's the fun in that?

The false preachers who sought to draw Paul's converts to themselves proclaimed an easy "gospel", a message that required only that those who heard it should be happy and free from any discomfiting obligations. "Believe in Jesus, and live free according to all your desires" was the essence of their words. And people from Galatia to Corinth to Philippi listened happily to such drivel, setting aside the Gospel as they had received it from Paul, and turning to another gospel, a form of *near* Christianity, which was easier, less demanding, and focused only on their feeling good.

Thus they became enemies of the grace and cross of Jesus, and not beneficiaries of His Good News.

Examine yourself

So completely ensnared in this false gospel had certain believers become, that Paul rebuked the Galatians, admonished the Philippians, and warned the Corinthians to take a hard look at themselves (2 Cor. 13.5). Had they really understood the Gospel? Had they indeed come under the influence of grace? Or were they seeking merely the good feelings that are associated with forgiveness and the hope of eternal life?

The danger lay in that, by seeking good feelings above all else, they had made a god of their belly, had become enemies of grace, and were on a course of destruction which would only finally be revealed when pronounced against them by the Lord (cf. Matt. 7.21-23).

The god of the belly – of self-interest, most often sought in some form of feeling good about oneself – is not the grace of the Lord. Grace abounds in joy, it's true, but joy and happiness are not the same thing. If you're seeking from your faith mere happiness and good feeling, if you go to church because the singing makes you feel good, the preaching consistently tells you you're "OK" with Jesus, and you enjoy your Christian friends, then you need to examine yourself and make sure you're not worshiping the god of the belly rather than the God Who suffered, died, rose again, and calls us to follow Him in a life of self-denial, sacrifice, suffering, sorrows, and joy.

Happiness will come and go. If you're changing churches or continuing in your present congregation because that's where you're happy, then it may not be grace that's moving you, and it won't be grace that you discover when you finally feel good about yourself. The god of the belly may use the language of grace and the Gospel of the Lord, but whatever "glory" you may realize will be instead your shame, for you will have set your mind on earthly things – mere happiness – rather than on the Lord Jesus Christ and the true, unfading joy of His grace.

For reflection

1. How can we know whether we're seeking the Gospel for Jesus and His joy or for our own selfish interests?
2. What does Paul mean by "the god of the belly" and why is this such a dangerous trap?
3. Grace leads to good feelings, but good feelings – sought or enjoyed – are no reliable assurance of saving grace. Explain.

Next Steps – Preparation: Examine yourself. Why did you become a Christian? Why do you attend church? What are you seeking from the Lord? If it's anything less than His Kingdom and glory, confess your sin, repent, and seek mercy and grace for renewal in the Lord.

3 Not a License to Sin

Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ. Jude 1.3, 4

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! Romans 6.1, 2

Cheap grace

In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against letting anything other than the plain teaching of Scripture serve as the touchstone for our faith.

And that includes grace.

Bonhoeffer knew that, when grace becomes the watchword for all things Christian, grace can easily become misconstrued and misapplied, so that, ultimately, grace becomes corrupted and abused. At such times, rather than being free and glorious, grace becomes cheap and useless.

Grace is important. Our faith is all of grace, and we need grace to help in all our times of need.

But grace does not trump truth. It does not trump Jesus Christ. We need to keep grace in its proper place – *under* truth and *for* Jesus Christ and His glory. Otherwise, grace is cheapened, faith is cheapened, and Christ and the Gospel are betrayed. Anyone who insists that grace is the measure of all things Christian has an axe to grind, an agenda to push, or a preferred practice to protect.

Two situations

Grace is not a license to sin. We see this clearly from two situations in the New Testament, one involving the apostle Paul, and one involving the apostle Jude.

In Rome, apparently some people, claiming to be followers of Christ, had taken grace as the defining principle for Christian life. Then they were redefining grace to make it fit their preferred lifestyles. They were using the idea of grace as an excuse for not pressing on in their faith, not working out their salvation in fear and trembling, and not moving on from their sinful pasts. They even insisted that this was what Paul taught! (Rom. 3.7, 8) They saw themselves as the keepers of grace, and they used their presumed spiritual heritage as a way of treating other believers as second-class citizens.

In Romans 2-6, Paul confronted that perverse and subversive spirituality, and commanded the believers in Rome to get their priorities straight. They needed to put to death everything that stood in the way of progress in faith, and stop using grace as a Get-Out-of-Jail card or a sledgehammer to beat up on others.

Jude warned of an even more disconcerting situation. Some teachers, using grace as their baseline priority, were going so far as to commend moral practices which were clearly contrary to Scripture. They were turning “the grace of our God into lewdness.” Lexicographers Louw and Nida explain the Greek word, ἀσελγεία, *aselgeia* – lewdness – as “behavior completely lacking in moral restraint, usually with the implication of sexual licentiousness – licentious behavior, extreme immorality.”

In other words, these teachers were endorsing conduct that was, by Biblical standards, immoral. They had put

grace above truth, hoping to create a new standard of truth to justify their moral preferences. They said it was gracious to tolerate practices and lifestyles that were contrary to the plain teaching of Scripture. They were making grace a license to sin.

And by so doing, they were denying the one true God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Grace becomes spoiled manna when we try to make it go further than God intends, putting it in the place of Scripture and Jesus Christ as the defining motif for our views and actions.

Revoking the license to sin

Don't we see similar situations in churches today, where, in the name of "grace", sin is downplayed, certain sins are tolerated, we turn a blind eye to immoral behavior, and in some cases even go so far as to condone practices that are consistently condemned in Scripture?

All in the name of grace. As if to say that where sin abounds, grace should all the more abound, refusing to pass judgment, confront, or correct, and blinking at the obvious presence of vile transgression. Where "grace" like this abounds, you can be sure that sin will all the more abound, truth will turn squishy, and Jesus will turn His face away from His people.

Grace is not a license to sin.

And wherever we have tried to make it so, we need to repent of that mindset, revoke that license, reclaim the true meaning of grace, and plead with God to give us *real* grace to help in our time of need.

Only when we understand and practice grace as God defines it, will we know grace as He intends – wonderful grace, amazing grace, grace that is greater than – and not a license for – all our sins.

For reflection

1. Why must grace be defined by truth and Jesus Christ, rather than the other way around?
2. Review the Scriptures that introduce this article. Do you see evidence of this same abuse of grace in the Christian movement today? Explain.
3. Does the idea of grace as license to sin line up well with the idea of grace as a divine disposition? Explain.

Next Steps – Transformation: Meditate on Psalm 139.23, 24. Seek the Lord concerning His grace in your life. Are you using grace as a license to sin in any way? If so, confess your sin, repent of it, and seek the grace of forgiveness and renewal.

4 Not a Blank Check for Forgiveness

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. 1 John 2.1, 2

“Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.” Luke 17.3, 4

Grace and forgiveness

Of course, the greatest, most amazing and most marvelous aspect of the grace of God, is that it deals effectively with the problem of our sin.

But what’s the problem with our sin? Those who don’t believe the Gospel don’t seem to have a problem with sin. They don’t talk about things like sin or wickedness or evil because to them, morality is relative. They insist that people are basically good, and that, therefore, all moral conduct is in some degree good, or at least, good enough.

There are exceptions of course – murder, theft, rape, enslavement, embezzlement, and so forth – but even among those who practice such evils, justifications are not hard to conjure. And because such morals are relative, we have witnessed constant slippage even in these categories, as in the now-normative status of such previously heinous moral actions as adultery, abortion, prostitution, and lying.

Among the communities of those who believe the Gospel, sin doesn’t seem to be a central concern, either. As we’ve seen, where sin abounds in the churches of the land, “grace” much more abounds – thus ensuring that sin will continue to abound, and we’ll all be just OK with that.

All this notwithstanding, the problem of sin remains. All human beings are born in sin. A law of sin exists in our souls, and inclines us toward rebellion against God and His truth and love for self as the defining virtue. We are stained and corrupted before birth, and even when we want to do what is right and good, we more often than not end up doing what is best for our own interests.

What’s so amazing about the grace that is revealed in Christ Jesus is that it overcomes the sin problem in two ways. First, it deflects the judgment due for our sin away from us, so that we don’t have to bear the punishment our selfishness deserves. And second, it lands that deflected wrath squarely onto Jesus, hanging on the cross. He becomes the sin-bearer for the world, and the scape goat Who takes our sins away and separates them from us as far as the east is from the west. He pays the price of our sin, and He takes our sins away. What a Savior!

But the work of Christ is not a blank check for the forgiveness of sins. There are conditions.

Not for salvation

The work of Christ is not a blank check for the forgiveness that leads to eternal life – salvation. Just because Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the grave doesn’t mean that everyone is going to be saved. At first glance, John’s words might seem to give that impression. If Jesus is “the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world”, then doesn’t that indicate that the whole world will be saved?

Well, no. Jesus Himself warned that many are called to the gift of salvation, but only those *chosen by grace* (a concept we will consider more carefully in future installments) will experience the grace that accomplishes

salvation by faith. The grace of Jesus is *effectual* to save those on whom God sets His love for salvation.

At the same time, the work of Christ, and the grace that work embodies, is *sufficient* to forgive the sins of every person who ever has lived or will live. All who desire to know the grace that leads to salvation can turn to Jesus, receive grace and forgiveness, and believe in Him for eternal life. But not all will do this. Many, as Scripture testifies over and over, will die in their sins, and this will have been their own choice. Rather than follow-up on the knowledge of God embedded in their very being, to seek Him and find in Jesus the grace that leads to salvation, many people reject that seed of knowledge, burying it under the concrete of unbelief and unrighteous lives, and daily adding to the denial of the knowledge of God by their continuing worship of self-interest (cf. Rom. 1.18-32; Acts 17.26, 27). Such people are still the recipients of grace, as the God of grace continues to woo and strive with them by His abundant goodness; but by rejecting the *saving* grace of God in Christ, those who will not believe consign themselves, by their own choice, to eternal perdition. The grace of Jesus is *sufficient* to pay for their sins, but it will not be *effectual* thereunto in those who refuse to believe.

Not for sin

Nor is the grace of God a blank check of forgiveness for those who sin and do not repent. Here is an area where Christians, out of the best of intentions, sometimes contribute to the watering-down of grace by their too-ready granting of forgiveness to those who sin against them.

We need to make a distinction between forgiveness and love. God loves all human beings. He lavishes His grace upon all people, even those who deny or despise Him, even His enemies (Matt. 5.45-48). God loves all because He is love, and this is what love does.

But God does not *forgive* everyone. Forgiveness is a transaction in which wrong is admitted, justice is satisfied, reconciliation is achieved, and God and His glory and truth are vindicated. As we've seen, those who will not admit wrongdoing and receive the grace of forgiveness that is free and available through Jesus, choose to remain unforgiven and are thus condemned. God continues to love them. But He does not forgive them.

We should follow the divine example. Jesus said that when someone sins against us, we should forgive him *when he comes to us seeking forgiveness* (Lk. 17.3, 4). We must continue to *love* those who sin against us, but we overstep the bounds and function of grace if we *forgive* those who are unrepentant, and whose subservience to the law of sin thus makes it impossible for justice to be satisfied and reconciliation to be achieved.

So if grace is neither mere good feeling, nor a license to sin, nor a blank check for forgiveness, what is it?

For reflection

1. What's the difference between saying that the grace of Jesus is *sufficient* and that it is *effectual*? How do each of these aspects of God's grace apply to you?
2. Why is it inevitable that some people will never realize the saving grace of God? What is our responsibility toward such people?
3. What's the difference between love and forgiveness? Why is it important to understand this distinction?

Next Steps – Demonstration: Who are the people in your Personal Mission Field (Don't know? Watch [this brief video.](#)) How will you show the grace of God to each of them today?

5 A Divine Disposition of Favor

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: "The LORD bless you and keep you; The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace."'" Numbers 6.22-26

Grace begins with God

We have said that grace is not merely a good feeling that we get, related somehow to our faith in God. Nor is grace a license to sin, as though grace flows toward sin like water toward a house fire. And grace is not a blank check to forgive everybody who may offend against God or us.

Certainly grace includes aspects of assurance, joy, long-suffering, and forgiveness. But we can only really understand grace, and what it is unto and for, by beginning with God Himself. For grace is of God, by God, and unto the worship and glory of God. Grace is all about God before it is all about us.

The Old Testament idea of grace is captured in the word, *תּוֹנָה*, *chesed*, which means goodness or kindness, and is often translated "steadfast love". Grace is God's unchanging, unfailing, all-sufficient love. In the New Testament, the word, *χάρις*, *charis*, conveys the same idea of grace as a favorable attitude toward someone or something, a disposition of favor and good will.

Grace is thus first of all a divine disposition of favor. Grace indicates an attitude in God, if we may speak in such terms, which is focused on His creatures in a variety of ways. God's favorable attitude extends to *all* His creatures, everything He has made or has allowed to come into being. God looks favorably and kindly upon His creatures, including people, and is disposed toward them for good. We see this throughout Genesis 1, where, as God unfolds His work of creation, He stops to assess it at every stage, to make sure His good – and ultimately *very* good – intentions are in place. The entrance of sin in the world in Genesis 3 did not alter the disposition of God toward His creatures, although it radically changed their circumstances and prospects.

I suppose most of us realize this brief description of grace as a divine disposition of favor toward us. But in order to grasp the unfathomable *greatness* of God's grace, we need to consider two other aspects of the divine Being.

The aseity of God

Aseity is a term, deriving from the Latin *a se*, "to" or "in" or "of Himself", that refers to the fact that God is complete and perfect, lacking nothing, and needing nothing outside Himself. Paul refers to the aseity of God in Acts 17.24 and 25: "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Nor is He worshiped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, since He gives to all life, breath, and all things."

Put succinctly, God does not need you and me. God knows all purpose, meaning, satisfaction, completion, contentment, and joy in and of Himself. He does not need us. He doesn't even need to look upon us with favor. If we didn't exist, or the entire vast cosmos never came into being, God would be unaffected and unchanged. He depends on nothing external to Himself for everything that He wants or needs.

So complete and perfect and satisfied in Himself is God, that He is not moved even by our most pure worship or most devoted and sacrificial works. Our worship and devotion to God – which are enabled by His grace, as we shall see – are only what are *due* to Him, and what enable us, as His image-bearers, to realize the full hope and promise of our existence, as we enter through worship and good works into the presence, promise, pleasure, and power of God as He is *in and unto Himself*.

And yet, God, out of the fullness of His joy and goodness, wisdom and power, majesty and compassion, holiness and justice, looks on us His creatures with favor, intending to do us good. Amazing grace!

The transcendence of God

The idea of the *transcendence* of God refers to the great distance that separates us from Him. The New Testament translates Psalm 8:5 as referring to humankind's being made "a little lower than the angels" (Heb. 2:7), or, as some translations have it, "the heavenly beings". Even though the word in Hebrew is the same as that for God, this translation is correct. Translations which state that human beings are created "a little lower than God" miss the point entirely.

We are not created "a little lower" than God. We are created "*infinitely* lower" than God. We make a mistake in thinking that God is like us, only bigger, better, wiser, more powerful, and so forth (Ps. 50:21). God is *not* like us. There is *nothing in all the vast cosmos* like God. He is *sui generis* among all beings, a Being unique within Himself, completely and entirely separate from all other beings, and *altogether beyond their reach or grasp*, save for His grace.

Yet because we are created in the image of God, the *desire* for God persists in the soul of every human person. God would be cruel, putting such a trait in each of our souls, if He did not also provide the means for us to connect with, know, enjoy, delight in, worship, and devote ourselves to God for His glory and our good.

And this is precisely what the *grace* of God accomplishes. Grace bursts through the veil that separates the uncreated and the created, overcomes the limitations of sinful flesh and the corruption of sinful desires, lavishes the goodness of God upon all His creatures, and floods the souls of His chosen ones with the revelation of His glory and the power that brings salvation.

And all this begins in God, in the communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Who together have determined to look down upon us and all creation with favor undeserved, unfailing, and incomparable in its scope and benefits.

For reflection

1. Why do we need to understand God in order to understand grace?
2. How does the idea of the *aseity* of God help us to appreciate the greatness of His grace?
3. How does the *transcendence* of God help us to appreciate the greatness of His amazing grace?

Next Steps – Preparation: In your morning prayers, add a few moments of meditation on the grace of God as a disposition of favor toward us. Praise God for His aseity and transcendence. Resolve to worship and serve Him by His grace. Then go forth in the power of grace to show His grace to the world. At the end of the day, thank God for the ways His grace was evident to and through you.

6 Divine Communication

*He causes the grass to grow for the cattle,
And vegetation for the service of man,
That he may bring forth food from the earth,
And wine that makes glad the heart of man,
Oil to make his face shine,
And bread which strengthens man's heart.* Psalm 104.14, 15

*He declares His word to Jacob,
His statutes and His judgments to Israel.
He has not dealt thus with any nation;
And as for His judgments, they have not known them.* Psalm 147.19, 20

Love letters

God's grace, we have seen, is a disposition which arises solely from within God Himself – unprompted and undeserved – whereby He looks upon His creatures with favor, determining to treat them kindly, do good to them, and care for them continuously. God is love, and the love He knows within Himself, among the Persons of the Trinity, overflows in love for all that He has made. His love is unbounded; nothing can stop it (Lk. 6.26).

But grace would be of little value to us, as the objects of God's favoring disposition, if God did not somehow let us know of this wondrous and unfathomable attitude. Thus, the grace which begins as a disposition *within* God, issues in communication *from* God, designed to inform us of His loving kindness and move us to seek and respond to Him in worship.

Grace thus includes the various means whereby God *communicates* His favor to us. Just as a love letter is precious because it communicates the attitude of the sender, so the means whereby God communicates His grace are themselves aspects of grace to inform us of His love. If we would know and enjoy the grace of God as fully as possible, we must open and read and treasure all the love letters He sends us every day, and which are more numerous and varied and magnificent and beautiful than we could ever entirely comprehend or adequately respond to.

The means of God's communicating His grace to us are three: creation, the Word of God, and Jesus Christ our Lord.

By creation

All aspects of divine creation communicate the grace of God. Contrary to the teaching of modern science, the creation is not a self-perpetuating machine. It has no inherent power, either to continue or to operate on its own, but depends on the upholding power of the Word of God for all its operations (Heb. 1.3).

The creation abounds with things beautiful, nutritious, useful, and beneficial to the creatures of the earth, especially to human beings. These daily blessings are more than we could ever tally, and every one of them is a love letter of grace from God. The psalmist mentions God's ruling the plants so as to allow men to provide food for themselves (cf. Acts 14.17). We would have no benefit whatsoever from plants or other creatures, if God did not make and arrange and sustain them so that we could make good use of them. Jonathan Edwards explained it this way: "It is by the immediate influence of God upon things according to those constant methods which we call the laws of nature, that they are ever obedient to man's will, or that he can use them at all." (*An Humble Attempt*)

Thus, all of creation – the air we breathe, light from the sun, the many and varied flora and fauna, topographies and ecosystems, and even the weather – all these are love letters of divine grace whereby the Lord invites us to seek, know, and worship Him, and thus find our fullest happiness and purpose in life (Rom. 1.18-21).

By His Word

For those who know the Lord, who have responded to His grace and seek Him earnestly, God further reveals His love in the Scriptures. There He unfolds the story of creation, the fall, redemption, and restoration in cycles, stages, and narratives that declare His lovingkindness in every generation and unto the end of the world.

What person who was really in love would allow unopened letters from the beloved to accumulate in the mail box, aware of their being there, but too distracted or uninterested to read, study, and pore over them? Would we not question the protestations of love made by such a person, who doesn't care to hear what the beloved desires to communicate?

And yet how many of those who claim to be descendants by faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who fancy themselves believers in Jesus Christ and lovers of God – how many of us leave our Bibles unread, unstudied, and only consulted under the tutelage of one who, very likely, is guilty of similar neglect?

God's Word is a bottomless fountain of His grace, communicated in a wide variety of genre and styles, to convey His love for every area of our lives. They who know that love will read those letters over and over, always discovering in them something new and exciting and comforting about the grace of God.

By our Lord Jesus Christ

The creation – which exists by, and entirely consists and holds together in Jesus Christ (Col. 1.16, 17) – and the Scriptures – which are in their entirety about Jesus Christ (Jn. 5.39) – point us to the quintessential means whereby God communicates His grace to the world: Jesus Christ. Jesus embodies the love of God. Consider Jesus, and you will see grace at work, grace exceedingly abundant for even our deepest needs, grace that gives and sustains and transforms, even as we behold and receive it.

God has not left us to figure out for ourselves what His grace is or is for. He communicates His grace to us at every moment, by an infinite variety of means and prompts, revealing His grace in creation, and explaining Himself and declaring Himself and love in His Word and by His Son.

Grace communicates. And in communicating, grace conveys not merely a divine disposition, but divine *power*.

For reflection

1. What are some ways that you can see the grace of God reaching to you through the things God has made? What do you learn about His love for you from these?
2. Why is it shameful to neglect reading, meditating in, and studying the Word of God in Scripture? How can believers help one another, so that we don't fall into the shameful neglect of these divine love letters?
3. God's grace is most clearly, most pointedly, and most convincingly communicated in Jesus Christ. Explain.

Next Steps – Transformation: Make a point of jotting down every awareness or experience of God's grace that comes to you today. Take a few moments to meditate on what this "love letter" says to you about God's grace. At the end of the day, pray these encounters with God's grace back to the Father, Who loves you.

7 Divine Power

He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. 1 Thessalonians 5.24

Grace with us

The epistles of Paul begin and end in the same place – grace. 1 Thessalonians is typical of Paul's other writings: "Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1Thess. 1.1); "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen" (1 Thess. 5.28). Each of his letters unfolds from and toward and by the grace of God. Each letter is thus composed in the form of an *inclusio*, which is a literary device emphasizing a primary idea by opening with it and circling back to it at the end.

And in the case of Paul's epistles, grace is that primary idea.

We can see that this is true of all Scripture as well. It begins in a garden where grace abounds in all its goodness (Gen. 1, 2); and it ends in a new heaven and new earth, where the Tree of Life bears the fruit of grace and goodness for the renewing of all things (Rev. 21, 22). Paul's epistles – as messages of grace – are thus a microcosm of the entire Bible.

In his epistles Paul *reminds* his readers of the grace of God, of His amazing and wonderful disposition to look upon us kindly and with our good in mind. His letters are also a means of God's *communicating* His grace to His people, so that they may always know how much He loves and has loved them.

But Paul has more than this in mind for the grace of God. His desire – reflecting God's own – is that the grace of God should be *with* those who have come to know that grace in Jesus Christ. And the reason this is so important is that grace *with us enables and empowers us* to realize the fullness of God's gracious intentions for us.

For grace is not only a divine disposition and divine communication, but it is divine *power* to accomplish the good and glorious purposes of God.

Called to the Kingdom and glory of God

In 1 Thessalonians 2.12, Paul makes the astonishing claim that God has called us to His Kingdom and glory. God rules in His Kingdom, a vast and all-encompassing spiritual domain, with Jesus Christ at His right hand (Ps. 110). And He rules *in glory and unto His glory*, doing everything in every corner of creation to declare His glory (Ps. 19.1-4).

God has called all who believe in Jesus Christ to enter His Kingdom and His glory (Col. 1.13), and to take up the good works by which they may glorify Him and make His glory known in the world in everything they do (Eph. 2.10; 1 Cor. 10.31; Hab. 2.14). How can this possibly be? How can puny, fallible, material creatures such as we, enter a spiritual domain, where Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords, is furthering His dominion of righteousness, peace and joy on earth as it is in heaven? How is it possible for sinful, spiteful, selfish people to become citizens and ambassadors in this new Kingdom of our risen and exalted Lord? And how can we enter His glory and not be crushed by the weight and annihilated by the radiance of it?

Only by grace. By the grace of God, He sends His Spirit – Who is the operative power of His Kingdom – to dwell in our hearts, reorient our thinking, and empower us act in ways that line up with the pleasure of God (Ezek. 36.26, 27; Phil. 2.13). The Spirit begins a work in us that brings us into the presence of God's grace and glory – in His Word, in creation, and in our Lord Jesus Christ – where we see God as He is, and are

enfolded by His all-transforming grace. And then the Spirit uses that gracious encounter with glory to fit us – even if only slightly – to live more consistently for the glory of God in every area of our lives. The grace of God, working by His Word and Spirit, empowers us to fulfill our calling to the Kingdom and glory of God, making our bodies vessels of grace and truth by our words and deeds.

This is the divine power of grace *with* us, at work *in* us, from glory to glory.

Grace that enables and empowers

We might be inclined to ask, “But to what does this apply?” The short answer is, “All things”.

Jesus is making all things new (Rev. 21.5). By His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus has reconciled the entire creation back to God (2 Cor. 5.18, 19). Jesus has purchased the creation out of its captivity to sin, and now He is in the process of developing it according to the original good purpose of God (Gen. 1.31). He has established His Kingdom on earth as a reflection of the holiness, righteousness, peace, and joy that exists in heaven; and He is advancing that Kingdom through the Church, which is the sign and outpost of the Kingdom, and the Lord’s new garden. He has enlisted us, as He did Paul and the other apostles, as both the materials of His new creation and the builders of what He has designed (cf. 1 Pet. 2.4, 5; 1 Cor. 3.9-11). He is the great Architect and Prototype of faith; as we consider Him, bask in His Word, and live toward His promises and glory, He fulfills His glorious recreating project in and through us, and fills the world increasingly with Himself.

God has called us to His Kingdom and glory so that His rule and honor may be established and maintained over all the earth – in every life, through all culture, in every society and community, throughout the creation, by every means, in every situation, at all times, for the benefit of people and the creation and the glory of God.

And all this is the *work* of God’s grace, Who by the power of His Word and Spirit, makes all things new in and through and for His Church (Eph. 1.19-23).

God, Who has called you to His Kingdom and glory, will faithfully be at work in you to enable you to realize the righteousness, peace, and joy of His calling. His grace is sufficient, and it will be with you. But you must present yourself, in the Spirit of God, before His glory – in His Word and in Jesus Christ – and wait in faith and prayer for the power of grace to make all things new in you.

For God’s grace cannot fail to accomplish His purposes.

For reflection

1. Why do we need to have the grace of God present *with* us? Isn’t it enough to know God looks upon us graciously, and tells us so? Explain.
2. How does grace work in a believer to make all things new? How do you experience this?
3. Why can we liken the Church to the Lord’s new garden? What is the role of grace in this?

Next Steps – Transformation: How many ways can you see that grace has been at work in your life since you came to know Jesus? Offer these back to God with thanksgiving, and commit yourself to growing in His grace each day (2 Pet. 3.18).

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. Why is it important that we understand the true nature and function of grace?
2. What do we mean by saying that grace is a divine disposition?
3. In what ways does grace come to us as divine communication?
4. To what ends does grace work as divine power?

What's the most important lesson you've learned about grace from this series? How are you putting that lesson to work? Share your experience of this study by going to our website, www.ailbe.org, and using the Contact Us button. Let us rejoice with you over what God is doing in your life.

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Thank you.