

WHAT IS GRACE?

A Christian Guidebook 5



T. M. Moore

A *ReVision* Resource from The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *What Is Grace?*

A pastor friend of mine decided to kick off his church's fall ministries with a meeting of his leadership team. He hoped to have a lively discussion about the upcoming ministry year, so he chose a topic that he felt sure would set a positive tone for the meeting.

The pastor asked his leaders, "So, what is grace?"

No one could give a succinct definition, and most of them fell to one or another sort of question-begging: "Well, you know, God's love?"

I have the feeling, after more than 50 years of ministry in a variety of contexts, that my pastor friend's leadership team is synecdochic for the state of things in the Church in general.

With that conviction, we present Part 5 in our *ReVision* series, *A Christian Guidebook* which will address the question, "What Is Grace?"

This *Guidebook* is designed to help us be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within us by reviewing essential Christian doctrines and shoring-up the Biblical foundations of each. Our goal is to lead you into the Word of God so that you can gain a clearer and more lively understanding of what we as Christians believe.

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.

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 we 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?

In the Christian community today, we are guilty of using words without fully understanding their meaning. We have *many* words, words that we bandy about all the time, yet which, if asked to define them, we might stammer and stutter embarrassingly. Words like praise, worship, discipleship, Kingdom of God, salvation, revival, and above all, grace.

It's time we stopped using such meaning-full words in meaning-less ways. Chief among these being 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 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 Latin to understand the derivation of certain English words and translate a few ancient titles. But I would very quickly be at sea amid the pages of a theological tome in Latin, misunderstanding word order and most of the vocabulary. Which is why I never claim to know Latin and seldom use Latin phrases in teaching or writing. Just so, we are at sea much of the time when it comes to grace. We're just hearing and using 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

Our focus in this part of *A Christian Guidebook* is on grace. We will seek to establish a working description of grace as a foundation for a life of grace in the Kingdom of God.

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 do deserve (judgment, wrath, punishment), while *grace* is getting what you don't deserve (forgiveness, eternal life, God Himself). There's a good bit of wisdom in that distinction, especially where grace is

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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 chief 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.

Let's begin with a working definition: Grace is a divine disposition, leading to divine communication, that issues in divine power for living in the Kingdom of God unto His glory.

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? And how can we know if He's communicating grace to us?

(3) Grace brings with it divine power, and divine power always accomplishes holy spiritual work. You cannot work *for* grace, but you cannot do gracious 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 Kingdom living which brings glory to God. The *telos*—the goal, the end—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, and the good works we do provoke us and others to glorify God for His grace.

We want to examine this definition more closely, but before we do, we need to clear up some common misconceptions about grace. We need to see what grace *isn't* before we can begin to understand what it *is*.

Search the Scriptures

1. Meditate on Ephesians 2.8-10. How can you see all three parts of our definition of grace in these verses?
2. Now look at 2 Corinthians 4.15. How does the grace of God work in and through the people of God? To what end?
3. How do you experience the grace of God throughout the day?

Next steps—Transformation: How would you explain grace by referring only to God's work in your life?

2 Not Merely 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 in Jesus understand that His gracious work is for our good, that we might be free from guilt, shame, fear, doubt, and sin, to walk in the newness of life and hope 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—preached another “gospel”. Selfishly ambitious themselves, they appealed to the self-interest of those who heard them, tickling their itching ears with a message aimed at making them feel good.

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). Paul demanded purity, holiness, courage, self-denial, a willing embrace of hardship and suffering, and a bold stand for Christ. 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.

Where’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

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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 (Gal. 3.1-4; Phil. 3.17-19; 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 (Matt. 7.21-23).

The gospel 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.

Search the Scriptures

1. What's the difference between happiness and joy? Which does the Lord promise His people? How would you support your answers from Scripture?
2. Look at John 16.33 and Acts 14.22. What is the role of such things in the Gospel of grace? Should we always expect to be "happy" during such times? But can we know joy? Explain.
3. "Happiness" can become an idol. Explain.

Next steps—Preparation: Spend time in prayer, asking the Lord to search your soul—heart, mind, and conscience—to see whether any elements or aspects of "near Christianity" are lingering there. Confess and repent of these as the Spirit leads.

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 *from* 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. What he doesn't have is the mind of Christ concerning grace.

Two situations

Grace is not a license to sin, as some people might suppose: “Oh, I don't worry about sin; God's grace is sufficient for *all* my sins.” 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 guiding principle for Christian life. 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 chapters 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-Free 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 endorse and 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.”

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In other words, these teachers were endorsing conduct that was, by Biblical standards, immoral, perhaps to justify their own conduct. 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, robbing it of its power to save.

Thus 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—and using a *semblance* of grace 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.

Search the Scriptures

1. In Matthew 16:21, 22 Peter seems to have been trying to do something gracious. Explain. In verse 23, how did the Lord respond to Peter?
2. In verse 23, how did Jesus describe Peter's sincere attempt to spare Him suffering? How do such "things" find their way into our own lives?
3. Jesus explained that the "things of God" have precedence over whatever we might think to be a good or gracious idea. What are the "things of God"? How can we make sure that the "things of God" have priority of place in our thinking, planning, and living for Jesus?

Next steps—Preparation: What is your current practice of becoming steeped in "the things of God"? How can you improve this? Seek the Lord in prayer, asking Him to review your time in His Word and to guide and direct you if in any way you need to improve your study of "the things of God".

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, a semblance of 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 scapegoat 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 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.

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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 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 the sins of the world, 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, behaviors are changed, 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, repentant and seeking forgiveness*. 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?

Search the Scriptures

1. Meditate on Matthew 7.21-23. Who was not forgiven? Why?
2. Grace comes to lost sinners as a gift of God. But it does not come to all lost sinners. Why not? This can be a difficult question to sort out. How does Paul teach us to regard it in Romans 9.19-23?
3. What is repentance? How can we know when repentance is real?

Next steps—Preparation: Spend time in silent prayer, listening for the Lord as He searches your soul for any unrecognized and unconfessed sin. As the Spirit leads, confess your sin, repent of it, then seek the Lord for the proper path of repentance.

5 A Divine Disposition

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, **חֶסֶד**, *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, in the first instance, 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 unfolded His work of creation, He stopped to assess it at every stage, to make sure His good—and ultimately His *very* good—intentions have been realized. 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. But 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." Preachers and writers who aver or insinuate that God somehow needs us, needs us to love Him and worship Him, are simply and dangerously wrong.

Because, to be succinct, God does not need you or 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

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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*.

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

The transcendence of God

The enormity of grace is also magnified by the transcendence of God. This 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 a disposition of favor undeserved, unending, and incomparable in its scope and benefits.

Search the Scriptures

1. How does the aseity of God make the fact of grace so wonderful?
2. How does the transcendence of God make the fact of grace so amazing?
3. What is our proper response to such amazing and wonderful grace? When should we make this response?

Next steps—Conversation: Share with a Christian friend—in person or by text or email—your response to God's grace as His disposition of favor toward 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.

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 lovingkindness and move us to worship and serve Him.

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, communications 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. 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 to allow men to provide food for themselves. 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

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Lord invites us to seek, know, and worship Him, and thus find our fullest happiness and purpose in life.

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 mailbox, 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 demonstrates such little interest in 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 us. 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—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 grace 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 His love in His Word and by His Son.

Grace is divine communication which conveys not only the divine disposition, but divine *power*.

Search the Scriptures

1. What does Psalm 19.1-4 teach about creation as divine communication?
2. Why has God given us His Word? How do 2 Timothy 3.15-17, John 17.17, and John 5.39 guide our answer?
3. Read John 1.14 and 2 Corinthians 5.20, 21. How does Jesus communicate grace to us?

Next steps—Conversation: Share with a Christian friend—in person or by text or email—your response to God's grace as the ways He communicates His love for us.

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” (1 Thess. 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 microcosms 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). 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 powerful 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 to 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.

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And then the Spirit uses that gracious encounter with glory to fit us—even if only slightly—to be more like Jesus and 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 restoring it according to the original good purpose of God. He has established His Kingdom on earth as a reflection of the holiness, righteousness, peace, and joy that exist 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. He is the great Architect and Prototype of salvation; 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 unto 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, in creation, 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.

Search the Scriptures

1. In what ways do you experience the *power* of grace at work in and through you?
2. Read 2 Corinthians 4.15. How do you see that process at work in your life?
3. In what areas of your life would you like to know more of the power of grace?

Next steps—Preparation: Spend some time in prayer reviewing your life during a typical week. Talk with the Lord about each person and activity in your life. Thank Him for the grace He supplies. Seek Him for more grace so that the power of the Kingdom may be more present in and through you.

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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?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned about grace from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work?

For prayer:

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The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.