

Introduction

Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

ROMANS 5:1-2

“Grace.” The word alone conveys beauty, kindness, and spiritual enlightenment. Everyone has heard the word, and virtually everyone has *appealed* to its excellence in some way or another. People use the word “grace” to convey superior qualities of virtue or elegance. Generally speaking, grace is innately understood as being one of the finest traits to which humans aspire. Spiritually speaking, grace is viewed as a God-given essential, incomprehensible in scope and yet desired by all who realize their need for it. Not surprisingly, then, Christians in particular who have tasted of such divine sweetness write about it, sing about it, talk about it.

We call this grace “amazing,” and we are astounded that His grace is made available to us at all. We say things like, “There but for the grace of God go I,” and similar adages. Preachers regularly cite divine grace as a part of man’s salvation, and the greatest theologians in the world have devoted a great deal of time and attention to this grace. Some include grace as a part of their congregation’s name, and many invoke God’s grace as the sole cure for their troubled lives. As the song says, grace has taken us this far, and grace will lead us home.

With all this pre-existing attention to grace, why then did I feel the need to write a book about it? The short answer is this: while many people may understand the basic concept of grace, I believe not everyone may understand the dynamics and implications of grace within a Christian's heart. I speak from experience: I had been a Christian for nearly twenty years before ever seriously embarking on a study of grace. I had never truly understood grace beyond its most primary definition: "unmerited favor." Grace *is* an unmerited favor, but that short definition is by no means an explanation. It is a great way to define grace for new converts, but ultimately we need to get beyond the "milk" of "elementary teachings" (Hebrews 6:1) and sink our teeth into the meat of God's word. "Unmerited favor" is, after all, vague and overly simplistic. In some ways, it may even sidestep the real depth and essence of the subject. We might ask, "What *is* the favor? *Why* is it a favor, and why must it be unmerited? And what am I supposed to do with that unmerited favor?"

On the other hand, since the subject of grace is seemingly ethereal and incomprehensible, some purposely avoid a deeper study of it. Grace is often consigned to that group of rather mysterious subjects (like the indwelling of the Holy Spirit or how God answers prayers) because we feel we cannot (or simply will not) define them *absolutely*. To some, grace is a nebulous, metaphysical abstract which cannot be explained except through one's own subjective interpretation. Grace is to you whatever *you* want it to be, and likewise it is to me whatever *I* want it to be—or so it may be assumed. This approach does not work for me—not

simply because I dislike it, but because it reduces the reality of God's salvation to a mere emotional experience. I do not want to merely *feel* saved; I want to know I really *am* saved. I hope you desire that same objective for yourself.

The grace of God is not something men confer upon other men. Saving grace comes from heaven, its only source. Things which come *from* heaven are defined and governed *by* heaven. Grace is part of God's truth, which is to say grace is part of God's authority as revealed to man through Scripture. None of us can create truth out of thin air, but we *can* speak truth where God has already spoken it. Grace is an inseparable part of God's doctrine of redemption: with it men are saved and without it they are lost. Since salvation with God is something we must *know* that we have, He is the One who must define it (cf. John 17:17, 1 John 5:13, et al). Grace is not something God has left up to our imagination. My personal feelings or convictions concerning grace are useless if indeed they are not supported by God's revelation, the Bible.

But people who write books on grace typically avoid doctrinal considerations. Such authors seem to gravitate toward heartwarming, sentimental prose rather than an objective exposition of the Scriptures *on* grace. I have read a number of books which were filled with wonderful and powerful stories about those who have embraced and been deeply affected by God's grace. It is not uncommon to find large portions of such books devoted to how a person ought to *feel* because of this.

These authors usually write with impressive insight and eloquence, and I am certainly not going to detract from the zeal and genuineness of their endeavors. But stories and anecdotes cannot be the foundation of our understanding of grace; a cursory glance into the Scriptures will not do justice in explaining *what grace really is*. A person cannot simply cite Ephesians 2:8—“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God”—and say, “Well then, there you have it: we’re saved by grace and that’s all you need to know.” First of all, this passage was never intended to be a comprehensive definition of grace. Secondly, this approach is very unsatisfying for the one who wishes to delve deeper into the Mind of God, as we ought to be anxious to do. Thirdly, such a surface approach to grace does not explain *how* it is supposed to transform our lives; we need specific examples or applications of how this is to be accomplished. Many Christians are not even aware they are supposed to do anything *with* grace, but think it is only something done *to* them. Such thinking cannot change hearts and transform lives, which is what grace is intended to do. Grace is a gift of God, but He does not give us gifts to hoard or file away in our memory. He gives us gifts which are meant to serve others, bring Him glory and honor, and perfect us in the process. What we do with the gift says a great deal about how we regard the Giver.

Lay Christians often think spiritual subjects or concepts are far too difficult for them to understand. It is enough that the clergy—priests, theologians and doctors of divinity—determine these things for us. (Incidentally, “laity” and “clergy” are men’s terms, not God’s. I use them only because we are familiar with

them, not because they are biblical.) Usually, whatever creed or conclusion the clergy adopts, we nod in approval and recycle it in catechistic conversations with the same results a Buddhist prayer wheel has. But this is no way for a child of God to approach a study of God's Word. Unfortunately, some religious groups essentially teach that Christians do not *need* to study God's Word, but that merely listening to the ecclesiastical authorities is a sufficient path to enlightenment. We cannot properly prepare for eternity by placing our soul's destiny in the hands of mere men who have no more access to God's Word than we do. I value my eternity far too much to let some mere mortal direct my spiritual footsteps. I trust you value yours in this way, too.

The New Testament was never intended to be read and studied only by theologians and professionals. Nor was it written for *churches*, here understood solely as institutional or denominational organizations with man-made hierarchies. Nor was it written for *congregations*, meaning any identifiable group of Christians. Nor was it written to be left unread and untouched altogether. Yet how many churchgoers allow the word of God to gather dust on their coffee tables or bookshelves? What will the grace of God do for those who have little regard for what God has said? The word of God was revealed and preserved *for* you to be read *by* you—by *us*, the common, ordinary, average people.

On the other hand, there really is nothing common, ordinary, or average about being a Christian. Those who obey Him are blood-bought, conscience-purified living souls. You are precious in God's sight. You are given hope—only *by*

the grace of God—to stand in the very Presence of God in His own heavenly realm, a hope of enjoying fellowship with Him which exceeds all human descriptions and defies all physical explanations. If you are *not* a Christian, then you still have opportunity to become one. The grace of God can *make* you one. God Himself wants nothing less.

The Bible was written so that people might believe in God, and upon believing in Him could enjoy salvation by grace (John 20:30-31). Those who are saved by grace are able to become something more than was ever possible apart from this grace. So when we talk about grace, we're really talking about *believing* and *becoming*. This has nothing to do with existential or New Age drivel with which modern religious gurus like to wax philosophically. This refers to a real-world, real-time, absolutely practical and absolutely *necessary* approach to God's word—and thus, God's grace—which *anyone* can understand. If one claims to be a believer, but is not actively and deliberately *becoming* a deeper, more spiritual, more intimate worshipper of God, then he does not understand what “believing” is all about. A real and active belief in God's grace goes far beyond a mere acceptance of church dogmas, denominational creeds, or personal feelings. This kind of believing converts people's hearts, transforms people's souls, and changes people's lives—always for the better.

Grace is admittedly an involved concept, but it is not one that is beyond us. It is not quantum physics and we do not need a college degree or seminary ordination to understand it. We just need to approach it God's way, without pre-

formed or pre-assumed agendas. This is difficult to do, and it is unlikely any of us (including myself) will ever be absolutely objective. Nonetheless we must give this subject our very best effort. Grace directly affects our eternity; that fact alone makes grace an extremely important study.

Unfortunately, not everyone takes seriously the study of God's word. Many preachers seem content to provide oversimplified versions of grace in soft, easy-to-swallow pulpit lessons, and many churchgoers are content to receive such lessons. Sadly, such people—including the preachers themselves—remain unmoved, unchanged, untouched, and still unclear as to *what grace really is* and *what grace is supposed to do* and *what we are supposed to do with grace*.

Some preachers camp on the term “grace” as if it were a good-luck charm, powerful amulet, or magic potion: the more often he repeats the word, the more abundant or effective grace allegedly becomes or the more protection against evil it apparently offers. This practice is not based on God's word but is mere superstition and superficial religion. In fact, the use of grace in this way is reminiscent of ancient paganism and mysticism.

On the other end of the spectrum are preachers who stress compliance to law with such rigidity and exactness that they leave no room for grace whatsoever. Indeed, divine grace may be a foreign concept to them. Their focus is on law-keeping, not grace-living, and they cannot figure out how to practice the one without sacrificing the other. Recently I perused several years' worth of Christian publications written by self-proclaimed “conservative” Christians and found not a

single article devoted to grace. *Not a single article.* I found lots of articles on the “issues” (dancing, gambling, short skirts, marriage and divorce, who’s more right than so-and-so, etc.) but *not one article* on what grace is or what we are supposed to do with it. I find nowhere in the Bible that when we stand before God He will ask our position on issues. Yet the Bible is explicit that if we are not a grace-saved and grace-inspired people, we literally do not have a prayer.

Thus we have men on either end of the spectrum—those who preach grace in ignorance and those who fail to preach it at all—and everything in-between. Is it wrong to be enthusiastic about grace? Absolutely not, for one should be passionate about that which he believes. But we cannot explain grace as a mere emotion or passionate feeling. Is doctrine and authority important? Absolutely, for without it we have nothing by which to define and understand grace. But we cannot allow grace to be held captive by legalism and human impositions. There is a way to understand God’s grace within the context of all biblical teachings. A proper balance is needed, and God’s word not only defines that balance but also shows how we are to live it. In fact, the book you are now reading is devoted to exploring that very balance. While reading it, I ask you to consider the things we will discuss with an open mind, an open heart, and an open Bible. Each one of us will make all the final decisions concerning our own relationship with God. But I plead with you: be certain you make such decisions based on God’s wisdom, not mere traditions, subjective emotions, or the arbitrary conclusions of others. Not all decisions, however earnestly made, are equally valid before God.

God wants you and me to learn about His grace. More emphatically, God desires that we hunger and thirst for His grace, fully embrace it, and allow it to permeate our entire heart and soul and being. In fact, God expects us to be *perfected* by His grace. This perfection goes far beyond forgiveness of sin; it involves the reason *why* and *how* we are forgiven. I have not received God's grace merely so that I can be forgiven; I have received His grace so that I can become more like the Christ who forgives me. It does not matter that you may have been a Christian for several years—you can “excel still more” (cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:1). Grace is what makes such excellence possible.

This is a radical approach to some, but then Jesus' gospel is radical in nature. Jesus challenges us to leave ourselves behind and follow something superior to what we have ever known and Someone greater than we have ever been. At the same time, He promises ultimate extinction for every person, organization, community, society, government, nation, and establishment—yes, and every *church*—which refuses to accept His transcendent message. He has divided all of humanity into two groups: those who believe in Him and those who reject Him. Put another way: there are those who are saved by grace and those who are untouched and uninspired (and therefore unsaved) by grace. The gospel—the entire message of Christ's redemption—is all about grace. Indeed, the gospel is inseparable from and impossible without grace, and vice versa. It is, in a very real sense, a gospel of grace.

I like that descriptor, don't you? *The gospel of grace*. It is an expectant expression filled with gifts and anticipation, like an armful of beautifully-wrapped

packages given to you from a very kind and benevolent admirer. Or, it is like a treasure chest filled with the wealth and secrets of some extremely powerful and wise king, and you are poised not only to open it, but are permitted to keep whatever is inside—*and no one can take it away from you*. This is how God intended for us to appreciate the gospel of grace. Furthermore, the phrase “gospel of grace” has biblical support. Paul virtually used the expression himself in Acts 20:24. And if one compares Galatians 1:6 with 1:7, he will discover that “the grace of Christ” and “the gospel of Christ” are used interchangeably.

“Gospel” literally means “good news,” so when we say “the gospel of grace” we are really saying *the good news of God’s grace*. His grace is incomparably good news, especially to a lost world set apart for destruction. It is extremely good news to me—the best I have ever been given!—and I hope it is to you, too. God’s grace takes the vilest sinner and transforms him into a humble and effective child of God. God’s grace makes the guilty person innocent, so that he no longer has to fear divine punishment for his former crimes. God’s grace gives refuge to the storm-ravaged soul, direction to the lost wanderer, and hope to the one who has never known hope. God’s grace is not just a bit of “good news” as though there were something more or better. Rather, His grace is the very best of heaven, the very manifestation of His deep love for every single living soul. It is good in the sense that whatever God creates is good (cf. Genesis 1:31), since “every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow” (James 1:17). God’s

grace supersedes any person's attempt to save himself—something which has always been humanly impossible to do.

In order to approach the subject of grace in an organized manner, this book has been divided into three major sections. **Part One** deals with the doctrine of grace, where we will examine grace as it is defined and expounded upon in the Bible itself. I make no apology for appealing directly to Scripture, but I am also sensitive to how people may react when coming face to face with the gospel for what may be the first time. You may even find some disagreement between what you believe personally (or what your church teaches) and what the scriptures actually say. Nonetheless, I assume that you accept the Bible to be the sole and complete authority for mankind and agree that any relationship made *with* God must be founded upon the word *of* God. Be prepared, therefore, to let God speak to you through His word—and be courageous enough to accept whatever it says.

Part Two deals with the problems some will have with grace, what I call people's *resistance* to grace. Just because God gives us something as wonderful as grace does not mean everyone will immediately embrace it. We all must learn to overcome our selfish human nature (which opposes God's prescription for life) and our human doubts in God's ability to save. Those who resist God's grace will most certainly not benefit from it. It is necessary, then, that we identify and overcome whatever resistance we may have toward God's will.

Finally, **Part Three** reveals where grace is supposed to lead us and what we are supposed to do with it. Grace is designed by God to *inspire* us to do what we

did not do before and to *abstain* from what we never should have done in the first place. The ultimate objective of grace is not just to deal with our sins (atonement), but to bring us into an ever-deepening, holy relationship with God the Father (consecration). This last section is perhaps the most practical and rewarding of the entire book. It is necessary, however, to first lay the groundwork with the other sections before leaping into the work itself, just as a chess player does not jump into tournament play but first devotes himself to the moves and strategies of the game and its masters. Our Master in this case is Christ Himself, and He has much to teach us.

The gospel of grace is ready to transform and take you to a higher level than wherever you are presently. Is your heart prepared for this journey? I hope so, and I am confident you will find it a most rewarding one. But before we begin, I would like you to consider some questions regarding grace that we will address throughout the course of this book.

- What exactly *is* grace?
- Is Jesus Himself grace? Or is grace something He *gives* to people?
- Is the graciousness Jesus showed to people while carrying out His earthly ministry the same as saving grace?
- Is grace just another word for God's love? Or, is God's love predicated upon His grace? Or, is grace possible *because* of God's love?

- Does everyone who claims to be a Christian receive grace, or is grace itself conditional—and if so, who determines the conditions and what are the conditions?
- Once we have received grace, can we still be eternally lost, or are we sealed in redemption without the possibility of apostasy?
- In emphasizing grace, don't we run the risk of abuse? In other words, won't there be those who take advantage of this? If so, how are we to safeguard against such abuses?
- How do we balance grace with doctrine (law)? How do these two opposite concepts peacefully coexist with each other in God's eyes—or is this even possible?
- Since we are “saved by grace,” what is the motivation for doing good works?
- Must we *share* grace with others? Or, is it enough that we ourselves are saved by grace?
- How do we take grace from abstract, conceptual understanding to practical, hands-on implementation? In other words, how is grace to affect our everyday lives? How then are we supposed to live, if indeed we are a grace-saved and grace-inspired people?

And now, let the journey begin.