

Amazing Grace

It's more than you thought!

by Dr. Ed Neufeld



Grace existed before people ever sinned in Eden. And this grace, this immense current of God's free goodness to all he has made and especially to his own people, will continue through eternity, long after sin is nearly forgotten history.

I would like to show you a kind of *grace* that we don't hear about very much, but first, we will go on a quick tour of the different ways the word *grace* is used in the N.T. (In this article, *grace* in the N.T. always translates the Greek word *charis*, pronounced with a hard "ch" like Christ). I grew up hearing preachers tell us about the *grace* that is a pillar of evangelical faith: the Good News of God's *grace* to sinful people. They meant God's *undeserved loving gift* of salvation through Jesus. If we put *undeserved loving gift* in place of *grace* in the following scriptures, the sentence would not change very much—"...it is through the *grace* of our Lord Jesus that we are saved (Acts 15:11)" and "all are justified freely by his *grace* through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24)" and "it is by *grace* you have been saved, through faith—not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:8-9)." God has acted for sinning people out of his immense kindness, even while the people were His enemies. He reached out and paved the road back to

Dr. Ed Neufeld and his wife Marilyn live in Kleefeld, Manitoba with their four teenage children. Together they part-time pastor the Kleefeld Christian Community. Dr. Neufeld is a Professor of Biblical Studies at Providence Theological Seminary. He can be contacted through www.prov.ca.

Himself. This is many believers' favourite use of the word *grace*, and with good reason.

Grace is used about 150 times in the N.T., and most of these actually occur without any strong link to human sinfulness or forgiveness or salvation. That is, most of them do *not* refer to the *grace* I described in the opening paragraph. Without exception *mercy* describes kindness to sinning people, but *grace* is often active in the lives of people who have already been forgiven and saved, and are not struggling with any ongoing sin. For example, "*grace* and peace to you" opens and closes several N.T. writings, but the writers are not thinking particularly of sin in the lives of their readers or their need for forgiveness. They rather have in mind the huge flood of God's generous kindness and action toward people, of course including our need for redemption, but stretching farther to his daily help and love toward those living in trust and obedience.

The priestly blessing, at the end of Numbers 6, speaks of this wider *grace*—"the LORD make his face shine upon you and be *gracious* to you." That *grace* does include the Israelites' need for forgiveness, but the blessing itself does not occur in the context of their sin, and has no particular interest in their need for forgiveness. The *grace* of the Numbers 6 benediction fits comfortably beside words like bless, keep, God's shining face, and his gift of peace; that is, this great flow of real loving goodness pouring freely out from God. This is the

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kind of *grace* John has in mind in John 1—“From the fullness of his *grace* we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; *grace* and truth came through Jesus Christ.” Jesus, more than any other, teaches about this *grace* (though He does not use that word) and is Himself its clearest and most powerful expression. The *grace* that saves us, by faith in Jesus Christ not by works of Law, is one aspect of this wider *grace* of God.

Grace in the N.T. can also describe a more common attitude of favour from one person to another. In the days right after Pentecost, the first believers were “praising God and enjoying the *favour* of all the people” (Acts 2:47). The Greek word for *favour* is *charis*, that is, *grace*. The general population of Jerusalem responded kindly and with generous respect to the believers in those early days—they enjoyed *grace* from the people.

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And *grace* can also mean *thanks*. Here the speaker means that receiving something makes the one who received it respond with kindness and favour toward the giver. The Greek idiom is “have *grace*.” Jesus asks, “Would a master thank his servant because he did what he was told to do (Luke 17:9)?” That is, “Would a master ‘have *grace*’ toward the servant?” The writer to the Hebrews also uses *charis* in this sense—“since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful” (Heb. 12:28). The Greek behind that last phrase is “let us have *grace*,” in other words, let us respond with kindness and favour to the Giver. In this sense, we are actually *gracious* toward God!

Most of the uses of *grace* in the N.T. have in mind the wider sense of God's free and loving kindness to His

people, especially through Christ. But now let's turn to one particular use of the word *grace*, the way in which God gives special ability to His people when they need it. God's loving kindness and favour produces exceptional effects in the lives of His people.

2 Corinthians 8 begins this way—“And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the *grace* that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability.” God's *grace* to the Macedonian churches (largely the Philippian and Thessalonian believers), that is, His free outpouring of kindness on them, gave them the ability to be richly generous with other believers, even though the Macedonians themselves were poor and in some intense distress of their own. Take the word *grace* seriously. The real hero here is God, not the Macedonian believers. Without God's *grace* they would never have done this. I began with the Macedonian congregations to show that God does not give this kind of *grace* only to famous people, like Stephen and the Apostle Paul. God gives it also to ordinary believers and ordinary churches. He strengthens and empowers churches for obedience that honours Him.

“Now Stephen, a man full of God's *grace* and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people” (Acts 6:8). God's *grace* and power gave Stephen the ability to do miracles. *Grace* means much the same as *power* here, according to the description of miracles that follows. Except this—the word *grace* shows that Stephen's power came from God's kindness and favour. Stephen does not have this as his own power, at all, and we must stubbornly resist the temptation to make his miracles the result of him being a godly man living at a higher or more spiritual level than the rest of us. If we do that, we neutralize the word *grace*. Why would we do that? God's *grace* was on Stephen, and that is why Stephen could do these miracles. Let *grace* have its full sense of undeserved loving gift.

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In Acts 3, after Peter heals a lame man he says to the crowd, “Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?” We normally assume that Peter's and Stephen's exceptional godliness was somehow the reason why they had such power. If we could be as godly as they, if we prayed as much or trusted as much or risked as much, we also would do miracles.

Wrong. When Peter denies that his own godliness produced the healing, why not take him seriously? He makes the same point in his words that Luke makes in Acts 6 when he says that Stephen, full of God's *grace* and power, did miracles. It is *grace*, the same flow of God's undeserved kindness that bought our salvation and covers us with His favour. The real hero is not Stephen or Peter, it is God. Stephen was full of God's *grace*, and that explains his miraculous powers.

In 1 Cor. 3 Paul gives the Corinthian believers some perspective on his work there, as compared to Apollos and Cephas, a.k.a. Peter. "By the *grace* God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it." Paul was the one who first brought the gospel to Corinth and who began the church there. He knew that he had done a good job, that he had been "an expert builder" in beginning that church.

"Yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."

Why was he so good? Was he smarter, or more perceptive, more devoted, or better trained? No, it was a *grace* that God had given him, an ability that came out of nothing from Paul but entirely from God's kind favour. Paul knew that he had done well, and he also knew that this came from God's *grace*, the strength and ability given to him by God.

"I am the least of the apostles," writes Paul (1 Cor. 15:9-10), "and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the *grace* of God I am what I am" Here "the *grace* of God" conveys the common evangelical understanding of *grace*—God's kindness in freely forgiving and adopting sinners, even Paul the persecutor. But as Paul goes on, *grace* takes a different sense, that of giving strength—"His *grace* to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the *grace* of God that was with me." Paul understood, as we can sense as we read through Acts and through Paul's letters, that he lived an exceptional life. He worked tirelessly, as we say, though he certainly got tired. He traveled and preached and made tents and endured frequent persecutions and many other hardships along the way. How did he manage to live like that for years on end? Make no mistake, it was hard work, and it felt to him like hard work. He writes of wrestling with fear and discouragement. But Paul knew that his own energy and

strength could not account for his life—"Yet not I, but the *grace* of God that was with me." God gave *grace* for the work He called Paul to do, and gives *grace* for what He calls us to do. That does not mean we don't tire. We do tire, and it takes persistence and endurance to continue, and we honour God by resting regularly. (God's *grace* is no excuse to ignore the precedent for rest in the first chapter of the Bible, and that based on the rest of Almighty God Himself, the one who gives this *grace*!) All of that work, though, does not properly account for what we do. God gives *grace*, His strength and power, for us to do His work, sometimes hard work. Again I say it—do not equate this *grace*, this immense undeserved helping power from God, with the experience of being tireless and feeling empowered. Do not assume from the experience of exhaustion and weakness that this *grace* is somehow bypassing you. Paul was working harder, and it felt like he was working harder. And, he also knew that this all happened by God's effective *grace*.

In 2 Cor. 12, Paul tells the Corinthians about his "thorn in the flesh," some severe ailment, probably physical but perhaps not, that made his life a trial. Paul endured hardships regularly, and I cannot imagine what kind of discomfort it took to put Paul at wits' end, but this thorn did that. Even the Lord agreed that this thorn made Paul a weak person. "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me," he writes, "but he said to me, 'My *grace* is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" Here again, *grace* has nothing to do with sin or forgiveness or salvation, but still everything to do with God's loving kindness and generosity. *Grace* is the Lord's power, which does not, and let's make sure we get this, does not need a strong

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vessel. It actually works better in a weak vessel. The words of the Lord changed Paul's perspective, but nothing indicates that they changed his experience. The thorn continued to bring Paul distress. But Paul changed the way he viewed it. If the Lord thought His *grace* was enough for Paul's weakness, if the Lord thought His *grace* could work perfectly in that environment, then Paul was encouraged. Instead of something that put handcuffs on his ability to serve the Lord, the thorn actually increased his ability to serve the Lord, *without reducing his weakness*. The Lord's *grace* works nicely in somebody weak and hampered by ailments. This empowering *grace* of God does not reduce the cost to us human servants, or take away suffering, or give us a feeling of power. By it, however, God uses weak and troubled people to accomplish remarkable things for His kingdom, tasks that would never occur without His empowering *grace*.

James the Lord's brother quotes Prov. 3:34 in his letter (James 4:6), a proverb that uses *grace* in this sense—"God opposes the proud, but gives *grace* to the humble." In this sentence "gives *grace*" is the opposite of "opposes." God opposes the proud, he works against them, resists them, brings them down; but He gives *grace* to the humble, He helps them, strengthens them, and supports them. This sounds like much the same *grace* that the Lord gave Paul to help him with his thorn, to help him work harder than others, and the *grace* that enabled the destitute Macedonian believers to give generously to a collection for even poorer believers in Jerusalem. In the immediately following words, James tells his readers how to receive this *grace*. "'God opposes the proud, but gives *grace* to the humble.' Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you." Submit to God, resist the devil, draw near to God—these are the basic posture of any child of God, even if we waver at times. God has not limited empowering *grace* to the spiritually elite, but to all with a basic interest in living like His children.

Peter also was impressed enough with Prov. 3:34 to cite it in 1 Pet. 5. Peter tells readers how to receive this *grace*, but where James' context aims us toward loving God, Peter's aims us toward loving each other. "Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives *grace* to the humble.'" So this *grace* comes to those who live humbly with other believers. Perhaps putting up with frustrating believers is worth it, even if, for no other reason than receiving this *grace*. Peter continues with words much like James—"Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that He may lift you up in due time." In these sentences in James and 1 Peter, *grace* has no direct relation to these people's sins, or their forgiveness or salvation. *Grace* is God's help, support, and empowering so that they (and we) can continue on in what God has set out for His children to do. He opposes those working against His purposes, and gives *grace* to the humble, those who submit to Him and are humble before other believers. And in the sense that James and Peter use the proverb, this *grace* does not come into play only for special events or needs, but is as steady as our submission to God and our resolve to obey him.

This *grace* is for whoever can pray the beginning of the Lord's Prayer honestly while thinking about their own lives—Our Father in heaven, *your* Name be honoured, *your* kingdom come, *your* will be done. As we

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say that genuinely, and as we make choices in our daily lives based on that posture before God, God's helping and strengthening *grace* is always on us to carry these things out. In Philippians 2 the scripture says "It is God who works in you both to will and to do what pleases him." This perfectly describes the *grace* we've been talking about. God works in us so that we want to do and decide to do what pleases Him. That work is His *grace*, a free and undeserved help. God also works in us as we actually carry out what pleases Him, and that work also is His *grace*. This *grace* occurs side by side with our struggles to choose the right thing, and our weaknesses in the obeying. The *grace* does not take away either the struggle or the weakness. The point is, and this is crucial, that without this *grace* we would not do what pleases Him. We'd not even choose it. Without this *grace*, none of it would happen. This *grace* empowers every right choice, and this *grace* empowers and sustains every obedient act. "It is God who works in us both to will and to do what pleases him." This is His *grace*, *His undeserved loving gift to us.* *f*