

(Amazing) Grace

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A mind for truth. A heart for God.

It is one thing to discuss the theological concept or doctrines of grace and even to understand grace in a cerebral way. It is quite another thing to experience the joy and freedom of grace itself. With that being said, one should understand something you want to experience or what you are presently experiencing.

So, let's start there.

THE DOCTRINE OF GRACE

Generally, the English word for “grace” has to do with beauty, winsomeness, attractiveness or charm. The Latin word for “grace” (*gratia*) literally means “an attractive or pleasing quality” or “favor.”

As is often the case, God, in the Bible, takes a common word, sanctifies it and gives it a new and more profound meaning. The word, “Grace,” as used in the Bible with the Hebrew word (*hēn*) and Greek word (*Charis*), has very little to do with what is commonly understood by our English word. In fact, Scripture says that grace isn't a personal virtue at all; but, rather, undeserved favor lavished on an inferior by a superior.

My pastor, Pete Alwinson, has a great definition of grace. “Grace”, he says, “is doing good for someone when there is no compelling reason to do so and every reason not to.”

That's it! That is the grace God has given to us.

When God says to the apostle Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9) or Paul writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith.

And this is not your own doing; it is a gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9), that is grace. Even the thought of such grace – so big and incredible – will, unless you're dead, bring profound astonishment.

Martin Luther said that we have to preach the Gospel to one another lest we become discouraged. The Gospel is simple – simplicity on the other side of complexity. We are needy, sinful and helpless orphans birthed into a fallen world of darkness and death. God, out of his compassion and love, came himself and made us sons and daughters by the sacrifice of Christ.

I think it was Aquinas who said that the cross did not secure the love of God, but the love of God secured the cross. By trusting in Christ – and him alone – we are given the benefits of heirs. Orphans don't get anything. The news is so good that one can hardly stand it: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God” (John 1:12) and “...for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith” (Galatians 3:26).

That's grace!

There is more. God doesn't just give us his grace for salvation. His grace is the joyous “pool” in which the believer swims now and for all of eternity. In fact, we were given the righteousness of Christ by the grace of God.

The formal doctrine is called “imputed righteousness.” It means that all the goodness of Christ was transferred to our account. “That is why his faith was...‘counted to him as righteousness.’ but the words ‘it was counted to him’ were not written for his sake alone, but for

ours also. It [Christ's righteousness] will be counted ["imputed" KJV] to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Romans 4:22-25).

So, if you are a Christian, God will never be angry at you again. God's wrath has been turned away because Christ's righteousness has been imputed to you (credited to your account). How can God be angry at perfection? "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). Paul then expounds on that theme when he writes: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died — more than that, who was raised — who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:33-35, 37-39).

That's called "grace".

THE EXPERIENCE OF GRACE

There is even more to the experience of grace.

As you may know, the focus of my teaching is grace. That is because I so desperately need grace. In our broadcasts, in my teaching and in my books, I tell God's people that, because of Christ, he isn't angry at them and never will be angry at them.

However, there are those who say that I am encouraging sin by my teaching. Edman, the former president at Wheaton College, used to say, "We don't encourage dating at Wheaton...We don't have to!" Well, I don't encourage sin in what I teach...I don't have to! Christians were doing fine in the sin department long before I was ever born and, I suspect, they will still be sinning long after I'm gone. Not only that, I don't think I've ever met a Christian man or woman who didn't *want* to be better than he or she was.

Trying to be perfect has been, believe it or not, a very good thing for me. At first it took away my freedom, but then it gave my freedom back. Do you know why?

Because of grace.

If I had never tried to be perfect, I would never have known that I couldn't do it. And if I had never tried to be perfect, I would never have wondered if my lack of effort pointed to a problem far more serious than the fact that I couldn't get better. It is one thing to do wrong and to know that it is wrong. It is quite another thing to do wrong and not to know that it is wrong or even to rejoice in the doing of the wrong.

If you had never desired to be better than you are, it is a good indication that there is something missing in your heart. As I

understand it, the Holy Spirit gives the desire. The presence of that desire is, in fact, the sure sign of God's grace and his Spirit. They said that Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:15-18).

The very fact that you want to be better — even perfect — is a sign that you belong to Christ. One of the best ways to find assurance of your salvation is not so much to examine what you do, but to look carefully at what you *want* to do.

I was a pastor long before I was a Christian (or, at least, before I was a *red* hot one). Being a pastor is a wonderful job if you don't know Jesus. I've always had a glib tongue and the church required that I talk each Sunday morning. That was no problem. And then one needed to be nice, to visit the hospitals on occasion, and to look reasonably spiritual. I could do that too. And then, after I had done all that, I was free to fish and to play golf. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I thought, *Is this a great job or what?*

That is when Jesus came and messed up a very good thing. He began to teach me that there was a job description far different than the one I supposed. He put the people on my heart and caused me to love them. He gave me a source of authority in the Bible and commissioned me to teach others about what I had found therein. He showed me his love and, because of that love, I wanted desperately to please him. I blew it a lot. I made a lot of mistakes. I sometimes wish I could go back to that little church I served on

Cape Cod and correct some of those mistakes. The point is this: When Jesus came, I wanted desperately to please him. **And in the wanting of it, I was confirmed in my call by God to be their pastor... and of his grace in my life.**

The wanting of perfection is a sign: There is something in us that has given us that "wanting". It is the Holy Spirit and his presence is felt in the desire.

HOW TO GET FROM HERE TO THERE

But how does one get from here to there? That's right. Grace.

If you know you're loved without exception or reservation, that God's grace covers all your sin and that God's love will never change, the Holy Spirit begins to change you and to make you holy because you no longer have to obsess on your sin... you obsess instead on the love of Christ.

Let me give you a biblical truism: the only people who get better (i.e. those who are being sanctified and becoming holy) are those who know that God's grace will still be there if they aren't. We really are "constrained by the love of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:14).

I've been a pastor for a long time. Let me tell you something I've observed.

Those who live by the law, desire perfection and are even fairly accomplished at creating goodness because of their fear of God's will, at one point or another, hit the wall of their own sin and rebellion. When that happens, they will often "slip into the darkness".

I have also observed that those who first learn about the amazing grace of God do, for a period, sin more than before. They are often like the college student who, finally out from under the parents' strictures, tests his or her new found freedom. These also will slip into the darkness.

But the most important thing about those who understand grace and slip into the darkness is that they *always* come back. Those who were trying to be righteous by their own efforts sometimes never come back.

What's grace? Grace is what saves you, holds you and, finally, gets you Home before the dark.

It's called "Amazing Grace" because when you understand and experience it, it takes your breath away.



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Dr. Steve Brown is one of the most sought after preachers and conference speakers in the country. He served as the senior pastor of Key Biscayne Presbyterian Church for 17 years before joining the RTS faculty as Professor of Preaching. He is the author of more than a dozen books. Dr. Brown has also served on the board of Christianity Today. His TV program, "Hashing It Out", is seen in 25 million homes weekly, and his TV program, "The Late Steve Brown", was widely viewed on Sunday evenings.



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