

The Power of Grace

By Steven Harper

Grace is, without question, a central theme of the Bible story. Brethren have repeated, for as long as I can remember, the definition of grace being “unmerited favor,” but grace should mean a lot more to us than a simplistic definition that is merely regurgitated when someone asks us what it is. Grace should be to us much more than a definition; it should be the very reason for our being and the purpose in our lives as disciples of Christ.

As a disciple of Jesus Christ, I should “always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks [me] a reason for the hope that is in [me]” (1Peter 3:15), which means I better be able and ready to explain what grace is — not just the ‘dictionary definition’ of grace, but what it means to me, and how it applies to me. If I cannot quickly or easily explain in simple terms what grace means to me and what part it plays in my salvation, I probably won’t convince many people that God is worth following because I will be leaving out a major factor in the plan of salvation even existing!

Paul reminds us it was God’s grace and love that sent His Son to die for us when he wrote, “For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6), and “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (v. 8). Though God’s grace is not mentioned explicitly in these passages, we can certainly see it in action; God helped us while we were helpless, and sent His Son to die for us while we were called “sinners,” all of which demonstrates the actions of God on our behalf while we were unable to do anything towards our salvation and in spite of what we had done. He didn’t “owe” us salvation, by any stretch of one’s imagination, and we certainly didn’t earn it. That is, after all, why it is called grace.

When someone asks me a reason for the hope that is in me, it is to this point [God’s grace, as described in Rom. 5:6] that I refer the questioner. I have hope because God showed me grace; that is, He loved me in spite of who I was and what I had done, and provided a means of salvation I could never have hoped to achieve without Him, and which I had not merited. God’s act of grace is described by the apostle Paul in this way: “But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:4-7). It was by His mercy and because of the grace He was willing to show towards us that we are saved — not because we have done some great things that obligated Him to save us.

Now, with all that said, how do you feel now about God’s grace? When you understand that He has done all this for you, for me, and for every man on this earth, how does that make you feel towards God? What will you do — or what have you done after hearing that God was “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2nd Pet. 3:9), and has sent His Son to die for your sins that you might not be lost? Does it make you feel indebted to Him for Him having demonstrated such mercy towards you? Do you now feel a greater love towards God because of this great grace?

Speaking only for myself, I cannot comprehend how someone could turn away from such grace, or simply ignore it; I certainly cannot comprehend those who ungratefully, arrogantly, and foolishly reply, “I didn’t ask Jesus to die for me!” I simply cannot fathom the heart that hardens itself against such an act of mercy and love and refuses to humbly submit to such a loving God. I confess I do not understand such thinking, but I also acknowledge that many, in fact, do turn away from God, even after hearing of how much He loves them.

It is mystifying to me how we can read the story of the unforgiving servant (Matt. 18:21-35) and be righteously indignant at his ungratefulness, and then turn around and reject the mercy and grace of God. I find it incomprehensible to see people weep at the stories of men who have been shown great mercy by others who, by all rights, could have condemned, and then be cold-hearted towards, and uninterested in, the mercy God has shown us. How can we be touched by stories of unusual compassion shown in difficult situations, yet be untouched by the greatest mercy that has ever been shown?

The apostle Paul was once known as Saul, the persecutor of Christians. By his own words, he once “persecuted this Way to the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women” (Acts 22:4), and admitted, “I myself thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth...many of the saints I shut up in prison...when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities” (Acts 26:9-11). As a disciple of Jesus Christ, though, Paul did not forget the grace shown to him. He remembered, “by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain” (1Cor. 15:10). He was clear in noting, “although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man...I obtained mercy,” and boldly, but humbly, declared, “the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant” (1Tim. 1:13, 14).

Paul never forgot who he had once been, but he also never forgot that it was by the grace and mercy of God that he was who he came to be, as a disciple and as an apostle of Jesus Christ. He knew that he did not ‘deserve’ salvation, or even the opportunity to become a follower of Jesus. By all rights, God could have eliminated Saul from the face of the earth and who would have argued Saul’s case and pleaded for mercy with any realistic expectations?

But such is God’s grace. By definition, it is unmerited; no one deserves salvation. No one has done anything that would obligate God’s mercy. Nothing we have done or could do would compel God to conceive of the plan for our salvation. To top it all off, God had this plan in place before we existed (2Tim. 1:8-10; 1Peter 1:18-20). God’s grace was in place before we were created. God’s grace was at the ready before we ever sinned. God was ready to forgive from the first time man sinned, and sought to make things right. All who are saved are recipients of God’s greatest gift — eternal life (Rom. 6:23b); none of us deserved it. But will you accept the gift?