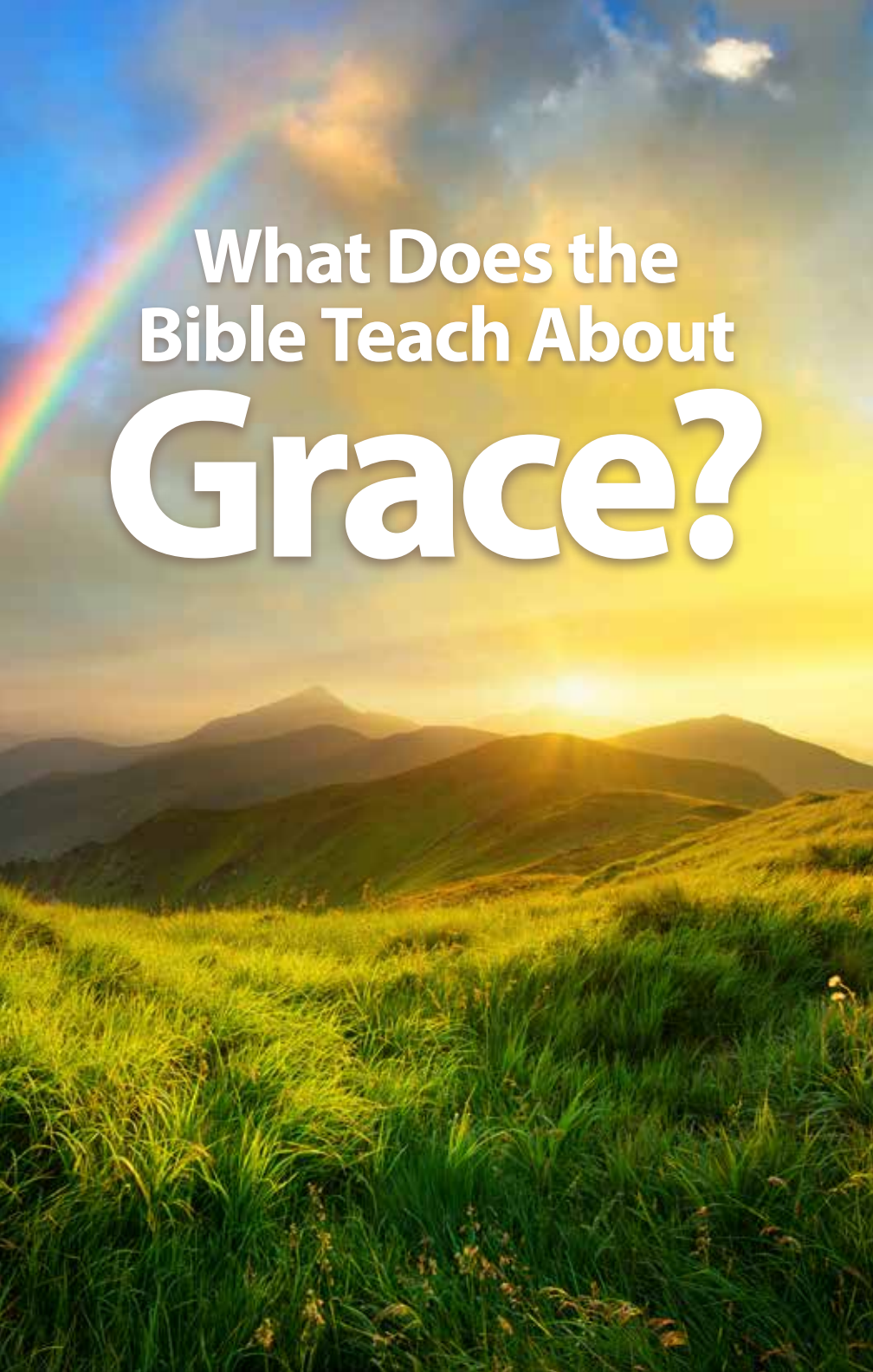


A vibrant landscape featuring a rainbow arching over a sunlit mountain range and a field of tall grass. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm golden glow over the scene. The rainbow is positioned on the left side, its colors clearly visible against the blue and cloudy sky. The mountains in the background are silhouetted against the bright light, and the foreground is filled with lush green grass.

What Does the Bible Teach About Grace?

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What Does the Bible Teach About Grace?

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Introduction

"The LORD will give grace and glory; no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Psalm 84:11).

Grace. It's a word that appears more than 150 times in the Bible, starting in Genesis with "Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:8) to the Bible's final verse, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen" (Revelation 22:21).

But what does *grace* mean? Today the word is rarely used in everyday conversation. It's often associated with religious beliefs or acts. People speak of "saying grace" before meals. They speak of being "saved by grace." They speak of God as being "full of grace," meaning that He is kind and merciful.

Over the centuries the word has migrated into secular usage. We occasionally hear of someone who has "fallen from grace" as a result of his or her actions. We may know of



What is your understanding of grace? Is it grounded in the truths of the Bible or rooted in the ideas and traditions of men?

people who are a *disgrace* because their deeds have *disgraced* them and been *disgraceful*. We may even say that such individuals have no "saving grace" in their favor.

Music composers sometimes add *grace notes* to a musical score—unessential, but adding to the listeners' enjoyment. In the publishing field, subscribers to magazines and newspapers may receive several "grace copies" after their subscription has expired—a process called "*gracing*" in the industry.

Car rental agencies, credit card companies and mortgage lenders may at times give customers a "grace period" before additional fees are applied. People sometimes address royalty as "*your grace*" as a sign of the esteem in which they are held.

Variations of the word *grace* are common in the English language. We may refer to a dancer or nimble creature being *graceful*—elegant or beautiful

in bearing and movement. It's a high compliment to note that a person is *gracious*, meaning kind, courteous and compassionate. Conversely, to call someone an *ingrate* is a deep insult. We are *grateful* when good things happen. When we receive good service we express that appreciation with a *gratuity*, more commonly known as a tip. We *congratulate* others for a job well done. Saying something is *gratis* means it is free.

At times people try to *ingratiate* themselves with others, sometimes with *gratuitous* words and actions. If taken too far they may become, to borrow a Latin phrase, *persona non grata*—literally “a person without grace.”

With so many uses and so many shades of meaning, it's not surprising that *grace* is a concept some find hard to define.

This has led to many misunderstandings—some with extremely serious consequences. In failing to understand grace as it is revealed in the Bible, some have accepted distorted views of God and His plan and purpose. It has even led some to “deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ” (Jude 4)—so yes, the consequences are serious!

What about you? What is your understanding of grace? Is it grounded in the truths of the Bible or rooted in the ideas and traditions of men?

A proper understanding of grace will forever change how you see God. It will also change how you see yourself and how you see others. Through God's grace we get right with Him, and through grace we get right with others. Grace represents a spiritual quality you must have, and one God wants to give you in abundance. When the Bible proclaims that “by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:8), we should see that the word *grace* is critically worthy of understanding!

God's grace can motivate and encourage you in times of trial. Grace is an essential part of who God is and how He works with us. While it includes the extension of undeserved forgiveness and favor to mankind, there is more to it—much more!

We want you to understand the real Bible picture of grace—what the apostle Peter called “the true grace of God” (1 Peter 5:12). It's vital to your future—and to your salvation—that you understand what the Bible reveals. So join us now as we answer the question, *what does the Bible teach about grace?*

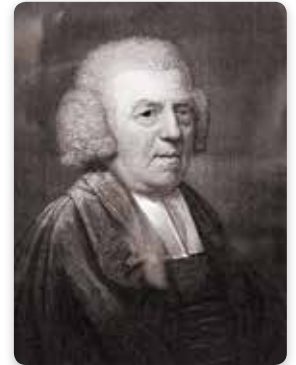
Grace: A Biblical Overview

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 1:3).

Many are familiar with the famous hymn *Amazing Grace*. While its words are known to many, far fewer know anything about the man who penned them and how they came to be written.

John Newton had been a captain of slave ships and had transported cargoes of slaves from Africa to the Americas. In 1748 his ship was caught in a violent storm and began filling with water. When it seemed he would drown with the ship, he cried out to God for deliverance. The ship stopped taking on water and drifted to safety.

Newton surrendered his life to God and began seriously studying the Bible. In time he became a minister and devoted his life to abolishing the slave trade. Later in life he wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace” as a reflection on his prior life



Later in life, John Newton wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace” as a reflection on his prior life and how God in His mercy and grace had delivered him from a life of evil to something far better.

and how God in His mercy and grace had delivered him from a life of evil to something far better. Its famous refrain goes:

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Newton lived to see Britain abolish slavery shortly before his death in 1807.

What does *grace* mean?

John Newton's story could apply to many of us. The subject of grace is vital to our spiritual well-being. Yet it is often misunderstood and at times

even controversial because of the way grace has been abused, leading to permissiveness and lawlessness.

How would *you* define grace? If we asked different people, we would see different focuses put on the subject, different nuances from one person to another.

For some, the definition may be God's goodness to an undeserving person. Others may see it as God's unmerited pardon, the forgiveness of one's sins. Are these definitions correct? Absolutely! But is that all there is to the subject of grace? These are actually only a small part of the entire spectrum of all that is grace.

The biblical study of grace is not too hard to grasp. It does involve looking into the definitions of the Hebrew and Greek words translated into English as "grace" and several related terms in the Bible. But this is not theological "rocket science." It *can* be understood.

The Bible was written and compiled over a period of some 1,500 years, so as the word *grace* appears, which it does in the opening chapters of the Bible, we see different emphases placed on how it comes across and what it means.

The first time the word *grace* appears in the Bible

Grace shows up early in the Bible, where we see that Noah was under or within God's grace. "But *Noah found grace* in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:8, emphasis added throughout).

So grace is not a concept that appears only in the New Testament. It's not something Jesus Christ brought that was unknown before then. In fact, the Old Testament contains *many* mentions of grace, such as Noah finding grace in the eyes of God. What does this mean?

The Hebrew word translated "grace" here is *hen* or *chen* (pronounced *khane*), which has been defined as "favor, grace, acceptance . . . unmerited favor or regard in God's sight . . . The word conveys a sense of acceptance or preference . . . and some special standing or privilege with God or people" (Warren Baker and Eugene Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament*, 2003, p. 354). It is often translated "favor" in various Bible translations.

Digging a little deeper, *chen* comes from the Hebrew verb *chanan*. This root word adds a more visual and more humanly understandable layer to grace's meaning. The first meaning of the word given in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* is "to bend or stoop in kindness to an inferior . . ."

What a definition! Grace is God *bending down—stooping—in kindness* to us, *greatly inferior*. What a beautiful picture of what grace is all about!

We've probably all helped someone up from the ground, whether it was a child, an elderly person or someone who simply fell down. And we've

likely all been helped up before. Think of how you felt when someone reached out a hand to you after you tripped and fell. It's embarrassing to fall, but the other person's hand, extending kindness, makes it all better. And when you take that hand, you are back on your feet and can go about your day.



The *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* adds to our understanding of *chanan*, explaining it as "the response of a person who is able to help another person who stands in need . . . There is the implicit assumption that the one who helps is moved by his feelings and that the one who is helped has no right to expect aid" (Lawrence Richards, 1985, p. 439).

This also greatly helps our appreciation

Grace shows up early in the Bible, where we see that Noah was under or within God's grace. What does this mean?

of the meaning of grace. Although we have no right to expect aid, and we are in deep need, God knows our needs and responds with His help.

Being in "good graces"

Now back to Noah: In this particular case, how can we make the meaning of grace relevant to us? And what does it mean that Noah found grace in the eyes of God?

To put it in more modern terms, we might say that Noah found himself *on God's good side*. There are many people whom we would want to be in good graces with—to *be on their good side*. Those who are married want to be in good graces with their husband or wife. We know if we find favor in the eyes of our husband or wife, things go well. Small things are overlooked. Things don't grind to a halt, but are worked out. We can bring ideas to the fore, discuss them with enthusiasm and reach agreement. Everything works better!

On the other hand, we also don't want to be in a position where we are *not* found in favor. Because then nothing goes right. Small irritations can become a big deal. We want to be in good graces with our spouse!

We also want to be in good graces with our employer. You know what it's like when you go to the job and your boss likes you. You're in good graces with him—in favor. Everything goes right. Small things are overlooked. If you arrive five minutes late for work, your boss may take

the approach of “No problem, you’re a good worker, and you can make it up some other time.”

But if you’re *not* in good graces and you’re five minutes late, it can be a different story. Your boss can get irritated. Things don’t go well. Every mistake can be amplified and blown out of proportion. The situation can and often does go downhill!

Friendship is based on being in good graces with someone. The reason you gravitate toward certain people is because you are favored by them and they are favored by you. You get along. Small problems or differences are overlooked. But if you’re not in good graces with someone, the slightest things may become irritating and upsetting.

God’s grace toward us operates in a similar way. Jesus calls us His friends (John 15:15), and we strive to remain in good favor with Him. We are in a relationship that overlooks small things. You might say that being under grace or being in good graces is being on someone’s good side, and *we want to be on God’s good side*.

When we pray and talk to God, we let him know, “*I want to be on your good side!*” God wants to have a relationship with us. And if we choose to do so, and if our relationship is right with Him, we know we *are* on His good side!

Noah was on God’s good side. In spite of his human frailties, he was still *favored* by God. He was on God’s good side—where, again, we should want to be! In Noah’s case, God’s grace *literally saved his life* and the lives of his family members when the world had become so hopelessly corrupt, violent and evil beyond repair that God essentially had to start over (Genesis 6:11-13).

Noah being saved by God’s grace has important lessons for how *we* are saved by God’s grace too, which we’ll discuss in more depth later.

Understanding grace by how the Hebrew word is used

The problem with some definitions of grace is that they become too restrictive and narrow and pit concepts against one another. This leads to people debating the meaning of words.

An important principle to remember when studying the Bible is that when multiple definitions are possible, it doesn’t mean they are contradictory. It often means they are *complementary*, that *both are true*. When the definitions are biblically sound, different definitions and different ways of defining grace only *add to* the fullness of the meaning.

For example, God liberally uses the word translated “grace” in the Old Testament Scriptures. By looking at how the word is used we can come to better understand its meaning. Let’s notice several passages:

“For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD will give grace and

glory; no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11).

We see here that God is the one who *wants* to give favor. He *wants* to give gifts. He *wants* to help people’s lives. And to anyone who is willing to walk uprightly, He wants to shower even more to them. This is what David was inspired to write about God!

In Proverbs 3:34 Solomon shared his understanding about God, saying, “Surely He scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble.” This is quoted in James 4:6 and 1 Peter 5:5, but it appears first in Proverbs. This assures us that God gives His favor, His goodness and His gifts to those who are humble.

Proverbs 4:9, speaking of wisdom personified as a woman, says, “She will place on your head an ornament of grace; a crown of glory she will deliver to you.”

Grace is one of the most wonderful things God wants to give to us. It is far beyond just forgiveness of sin, which is extremely important and is also a gift that comes from God. Forgiveness is not something we can earn or buy or pay for in some way. It is a gift freely given by God.

But grace is *far more* than forgiveness of sins. Grace is far more than

God’s Grace at Work

Grace is truly a great gift from God. What are some of the things that happen through grace? Let’s consider some that are mentioned in Scripture:

- Through grace God helps us to come to know Him and Jesus Christ His Son (2 Peter 3:18).
- God calls us through His grace (Galatians 1:15; 2 Timothy 1:9).
- Through grace God pronounces us justified, righteous and free of sin as a result of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice (Romans 3:24; Titus 3:7).
- God offers us salvation, His gift of eternal life, through grace (Titus 2:11).
- God saves us by His grace through faith (Ephesians 2:5, 8).
- Through grace Jesus Christ offered Himself so that we might receive eternal life (2 Corinthians 8:9).
- Through grace God gives us mercy and help in time of need (Hebrews 4:16).
- Through grace God gives us not only what we need but enough for us to share with others (2 Corinthians 9:8).
- God forgives us through His grace (Ephesians 1:7).
- Through grace, Jesus Christ came in the flesh in the role of a servant so we could have a Savior and receive eternal life (Hebrews 2:9).
- God gives us consolation and hope through grace (2 Thessalonians 2:16).
- Through grace God grants spiritual gifts to each of His people for the benefit of us all (Romans 12:4-6).
- Through grace we have access to eternal life (Romans 5:21).
- God’s grace is part of the true gospel (Acts 20:24).

unearned or undeserved pardon. Grace is God's continual outpouring to us of knowledge, of glory, of wisdom, of anything you could imagine that is good from God. All these are part of God's grace.

Grace given on a large scale

God extended grace on a large scale to Israel when that nation left Egypt. Notice Jeremiah 31:2: "Thus says the LORD: 'The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness—Israel, when I went to give him rest.'"

So God's delivering Israel from generations of slavery in Egypt and leading them into the Promised Land was an act of great grace—of God favoring them, delivering them, lovingly caring for them and blessing them.

This was exactly in keeping with God's nature and character as He described Himself to Moses when the LORD appeared to Moses in the incident at the burning bush: "The LORD, the LORD God, *merciful and gracious*, longsuffering, and



God's delivering Israel from generations of slavery in Egypt and leading them into the Promised Land was an act of great grace.

abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin . . ." (Exodus 34:6-7). Here we see the "Old Testament God" revealing Himself to be full of mercy and grace!

In the same way that God extended grace on a large scale in the past, He says He will extend grace to many people at a future time. Notice this prophecy of what He plans to do: "I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem *the Spirit of grace* and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced [a specific prophecy of Jesus Christ]. Yes, they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn" (Zechariah 12:10).

While it seems part of this prophecy had a small degree of fulfillment in the first century when God started His Church as recorded in Acts 2, the full context of Zechariah 12 shows that it will be fulfilled on a much larger scale when Jesus Christ returns to earth as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. At that time God will show *great grace* to many, and as a result of that grace they will recognize that their sins are responsible for the death of mankind's Savior, Jesus Christ—and this will lead many to heartfelt repentance over their sins.

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So we see that these are only a few of the examples and uses of the word *chen*, the Hebrew word translated "grace" in the Old Testament. We see God's favor, God's giving of gifts and special attention to those whom He chooses to give to. Two other Hebrew words that fit with the overall meaning of grace are *ratson*, with the sense of acceptance, and *hesed* (or *chesed*), meaning lovingkindness, mercy and devotion.

Charis: the New Testament word translated "grace"

The New Testament Greek word typically translated as "grace" is *charis* (pronounced *kharis*). It is defined as "grace, particularly that which causes joy, pleasure, gratification, favor, acceptance, for a kindness granted or desired, a benefit, thanks, gratitude. A favor done without expectation of return, the absolutely free expression of the loving kindness of God to men finding its only motive in the bounty and benevolence of the Giver; unearned and unmerited favor" (Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1992, p. 1469).

Charis is the root for the English word "charity," which means both love and a gift. It comes from the Greek verb *chairō*, which means "to rejoice." It's also the origin of our English word *charisma* and, less directly, of *grace*. From the range of usage we see that "grace" means to be favored, to be acceptable, to be the recipients of God's blessings and kindness. We also see that it is a gift reflecting God's love. (For a detailed understanding of how *charis* was understood by the writers of the New Testament in the first century, see "What Did 'Grace' Mean in the First-Century World?" beginning on page 68.)

The first use of the word "grace" in the New Testament is in reference to Jesus Christ in Luke 2:40: "And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and *the grace of God was upon Him.*"

When Jesus was a young child there was probably nothing more important to God the Father than to do everything He could for this little Jewish boy—to nurture Him, care for Him, protect Him, and in every way bring Him to fulfill the mission the two of Them had previously planned together.

The grace of God, every possible attention and favor, was on Him. We also see in this case that we can't possibly limit the definition of grace to merely the forgiveness of sins or unmerited pardon, because as God in the flesh (Matthew 1:23), Jesus had clearly never sinned and thus needed no forgiveness.

Forgiveness of and pardon for our sins are only part of the definition of grace. So when we think of ourselves as being under grace, it is not just that God has forgiven our sins, forgiven the things we've said and forgiven us for the wrong thoughts and attitudes we've had. God's grace encompasses far more!

A King Fallen and Restored: a Story of God's Grace

The Bible is hard on its heroes. While it records their great deeds, it also records their flaws and often their worst sins.

David is one such hero. He was Israel's most beloved king, a military leader without equal, a shepherd boy who fearlessly took on a lion, a bear and a giant, author of dozens of the Psalms and a man after God's own heart.

But he was also a sinner. And not just a typical sinner, but a man of God who descended into *adultery and murder*.

It's one of the most striking stories in the Bible. David had been chosen king of Israel and had conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital. Loyal standing by him during his struggles to consolidate his kingdom and defend it from its enemies were his "mighty men," a group of hardened warriors who would do anything for their leader. You can read about them in 2 Samuel 23.

One of them was named Uriah. Curiously, he wasn't even an Israelite, but a Hittite, a foreigner. But Uriah was drawn to David early on, probably recognizing in him a fellow fighter unafraid of anything.

Uriah was a proud warrior and, as we learn from the story, a man of uncompromising loyalty and character. When we come to the key part of the story, Uriah was faithfully fighting for David and Israel against the neighboring Ammonite kingdom in what is today Jordan.

Uriah had a problem, but he didn't know it. He had a very beautiful wife, Bathsheba, and a king who had drifted from God—a king who was no longer as faithful to Uriah as Uriah remained to him.

A king takes a mighty fall

We read the story in 2 Samuel 11. David's army, including Uriah, was battling the Ammonites several days' march to the east. David was in his palace in Jerusalem, and one night he couldn't sleep and took a walk on the roof of

his palace. Nearby he saw a woman bathing at her own house, perhaps thinking no one would see her since it was nighttime.

In any case, David saw her and, captivated by her beauty, sent men to bring her to him. As king, he had grown used to getting anything he wanted—including a number of wives. And again, he had obviously drifted from God, because he felt he could take this woman with impunity. The Bible tells us that David "lay with her . . . and the woman conceived" (verses 4-5).

To compound the tragic circumstances, David knew she was Uriah's wife. To try to cover up his sin, David sent a message to have Uriah return from battle to his wife, assuming they would have marital relations and Uriah would think the child was his. But it didn't work out that way. Although Uriah returned to Jerusalem, he was much too honorable a man and chose to sleep outside like his fellow soldiers rather than in his own bed at home with his wife.

David's plan was foiled by Uriah's honor. Now he had to resort to desperate measures. He sent sealed orders to his commander to have Uriah placed where the fighting was fiercest and then have the other soldiers retreat and leave Uriah to die in battle. Uriah unknowingly carried his own death warrant with him as he returned to the scene of the fighting. The order was carried out in a different way that put even more lives in jeopardy.

David's scheme to cover up his sin with even worse sin seemed to have worked. Bathsheba mourned for her slain husband, "and when her mourning was over, David sent and brought her to his house, and she became his wife and bore him a son" (verse 27).

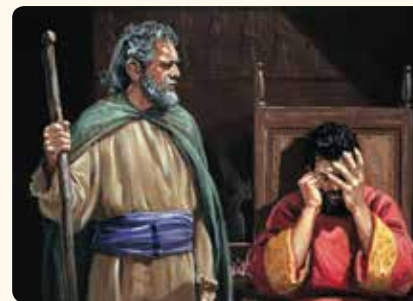
The story doesn't end there

The story could've ended there, but it didn't. If it had, David's story would've been that of just one more greedy, abusive, corrupt king,

one of thousands who have stained the pages of human history.

The story didn't end there *because of God's grace*. Although David had obviously drifted far from God, God wasn't far from him. He didn't give up on David.

God sent the prophet Nathan to David with a story about a poor man who had only a single lamb that he loved as if it were one of his own children. But a rich man who had plenty of



The prophet Nathan confronted King David over his evil behavior. To his credit, David deeply repented—leaving us an example of what true repentance involves.

lambs of his own took the poor man's lamb, killed it and served it as dinner to a guest.

David was understandably outraged at hearing the story. "*The man who has done this shall surely die!*" David raged (2 Samuel 12:5). He knew what a gross injustice this was, and that such a callous, cold-hearted person surely deserved death.

But David wasn't expecting Nathan's response. "Then Nathan said to David, '*You are the man!*'" (verse 7).

Nathan, speaking for God, said that God had given David everything, and that the king already had multiple wives. But like the evil man in the story, that wasn't enough. David wanted more—taking the only wife of an innocent man, and then secretly ordering him to be killed.

David was cornered. He had no excuses. He knew he was condemned by the very death sentence he had just pronounced. He could only admit his heinous sin before God—and he

did. Nathan then revealed that in God's mercy David would not die for this sin, though there would be consequences.

The child recently born to him and Bathsheba would die. What follows is one of the most heartbreaking stories of the Bible. The child became ill, and "David therefore pleaded with God for the child, and David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground" (verse 16). His advisors tried to encourage him and get him to eat, but he refused. This continued for seven days until the child died.

Told that the child was dead, "David arose from the ground, washed and anointed himself, and changed his clothes; and he went into the house of the LORD and worshiped," then ate. When his servants asked him why he was now eating rather than mourning, David gave this heartbreaking response: "While the child was alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who can tell whether the LORD will be gracious to me, that the child may live?' But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (verses 22-23).

This child died because of what David had done. The loss cut him deep and hard. But David needed to be shaken. He had become complacent and callous, and had drifted from God to the point that he had fallen prey to deadly serious sins. A gracious God knew that David needed to learn a painful lesson for his own spiritual well-being. And through a painful loss David gained something much greater—restoration of his relationship to God. This was also an important lesson for the nation at the time—and for all of us to this day.

David would write a very moving and heartfelt reflection, Psalm 51, as a result of this experience. For 3,000 years it has stood in the Bible as a model of what a truly repentant heart and attitude should look like.

Now restored, David would go on to bigger and better things. But none is more important to us today than this story of the grace of God bringing a fallen king to repentance and restoration to a right relationship with Him!

As we grow in grace and knowledge, a concept we'll look more at later, a good way to view grace is not from the standpoint of God *removing* from us what is bad, but God *giving* to us what is good.

Consider a few things He gives us: *The understanding of His plan and purpose for us. The opportunity for eternal life. The opportunity for a loving relationship with Him and His Son. His priceless instruction and revelation for us, the Bible. The understanding of the Kingdom of God and how we may enter that Kingdom. The forgiveness of our sins.* And these are just *spiritual* blessings, not to mention physical blessings. All these and much more are part of His grace!

God's law: part of God's grace

Those who truly know God's Word know that *the law of God* is part of God's grace, too. The law of God is part of His goodness toward us—giving us that light, that direction of how to live, that being able to avoid the pain and heartache and suffering that comes from sin, the breaking of God's law (1 John 3:4).

The misuse of the contrast between being under the law and under grace is a false argument made to confuse people and to finesse away the law of God, which is one of the most beautiful and gracious gifts a loving God could have given. That law guides people in how to live and will be the striking feature of His coming Kingdom in the world tomorrow (Deuteronomy 6:24; 10:13; Joshua 1:8; Isaiah 2:3).

Grace and law actually go hand in hand. The law itself is grace from God, as just mentioned. And without law there would be no *need* for the grace of forgiveness. Grace includes how God extends His favor to repentant sinners by *forgiving* their former disobedience of His law. This is necessary because “everyone who sins *breaks the law*; in fact, *sin is lawlessness*” (1 John 3:4, New International Version, 2011 version used throughout). If there is no law to break, as some argue, sin would not exist (Romans 5:13). And if there is no sin, the very idea of grace as God's forgiveness has no meaning at all. Furthermore, God through grace also gives us the means to obeying His law, as we'll see.

God's law is a *crucial part* of His grace. It is a gift that comes from Him. It is His guide, His instruction manual, for how we are to live. It is a reflection of God's mind, His perfect thinking (Psalm 19:7). What a beautiful gift, what a beautiful guide, what beautiful direction for a peaceful and productive life! Everything good that God gives us is part of His grace. We'll discuss this in greater detail later in this study guide.

Grace was on the early Church

Notice this remarkable statement about the early Church in Acts 4:33:

“And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And *great grace was upon them all.*” This is describing the work of the early Church at the very beginning.

Notice that *great* grace was given to Jesus Christ's followers—not just grace, but *great* grace. With this great grace came *great* power by which “the apostles gave witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.” They had great power because they had great grace. God's graciousness and favor gave them power—just as it can give *us* power today.

If anything could be described as a big help God gave to the early Church, it was His grace—giving them His Holy Spirit and opening unbelievable doors for them to get off to a fast start. The Church was experiencing a great deal of grace from God. The apostles had great power. They gave witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the power of God.

How might that apply to us today? Have you considered praying for the grace, the divine favor, that came on the early Church to be given to God's Church today? Do you regularly ask for God to open doors, for Him to give His power, for Him to give us greater and deeper understanding, for Him to multiply our strength so His work can be done in us and through us and His Church—to better follow and obey Him? Because all this comes through God's grace in giving His power!

Opening the hearts and minds of people who hear the message He has given the Church to proclaim is also an aspect of God's grace—part of the goodness of the gifts that come from God.

Called by God's grace

Let's notice also Romans 5:17: “If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man [the first man Adam], much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ” (English Standard Version).

There would have been no need for God's grace and forgiveness had not human beings, beginning with Adam, sinned and put themselves in the position of needing it. Paul here talks about “the abundance of grace” we have received through Jesus Christ because this grace covered the sins we committed. And we know what would have remained for us if that death penalty had *not* been removed. It is a great gift to have that penalty removed and no longer hanging over us.

Another passage in Romans discusses the fact that God calls and chooses some by His grace. Notice Romans 11:5 (NIV): “So too, at the present time there is a remnant *chosen by grace.*”

Being called and chosen at this time to be part of God's Church and His family is an expression of God's grace. The calling we've received to understand God's truth is by His grace toward us.

Paul then goes on to say: “And if by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace” (verse 6, NIV). Grace, the goodness of God, is not something anyone can earn or buy. It is *a gift*. It is something that freely comes from Him because you are on His good side, because you have become His friend.

God wants to give you *everything*. His grace is so profound that He even wants to give you an inheritance almost beyond human imagination! That’s what Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 2:9: “This is what the Scriptures mean when they say, ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has imagined *what God has prepared for those who love him*’” (New Living Translation, 2015 version used unless noted).

These verses only begin to scratch the surface of the fullness of what God has planned for us by His grace toward us. The true picture is far greater than we have space to cover here. To learn more, be sure to download or request our free study guide *Why Were You Born?* It will help you understand this marvelous truth in much greater detail.

Grace to help in the struggle against sin

In Romans 7 we see some of the workings of grace in our lives. The apostle Paul here describes his struggles in his day-to-day existence—exactly the kind of battles we all go through in our body, mind and spirit. Paul writes: “But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me” (verse 23, NLT).

Paul was writing these words long after he had become an apostle, probably some 20 years after he had been serving God in spreading the gospel, raising up churches and even performing miracles. Yet he still struggled with the personal battles he had to fight within himself.

He continues in verses 24-25: “Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God’s law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin” (NLT).

Paul relied on the help that came from God the Father and Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. He relied on His goodness. He relied on all the strength Christ gave him to fight the weaknesses of the flesh.

Every day when we pray and ask God to forgive us our sins and weaknesses, and as we ask Him to give us strength to not repeat our mistakes and the evil things we have said or done, it is by God’s grace that we have the desire, will and determination to go on because we are on His good side. He *wants* to give us that help, and He *will give us that help* as we surrender and submit our lives to Him and allow ourselves to be led by His

Spirit. We should be praying for that help every day, so that whatever our fight and struggle is, God through His grace leads us toward change.

Paul expresses a very similar thought in Romans 2:4: “Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that *the goodness of God leads you to repentance*?”

We could easily substitute “grace” for “goodness” here—“not knowing that the *grace* of God leads you to repentance?” God’s goodness and grace are essentially the same because everything good that comes from God is part of His grace. We are likewise told elsewhere that God *grants* repentance (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25).

Repent and *repentance* are the terms used in the Bible for turning from *our own* ways of living and thinking to, instead, seeking *God’s* way of life and thinking as He thinks. This is a requirement for salvation (Acts 2:37-40) and a necessary first step in properly responding to God’s grace toward us.

It is God’s goodness and grace that leads us to repentance. When we receive a good gift we should recognize that He is encouraging us to do things right, to make changes so that we might be reconciled to God, or restored to a right relationship with Him, and draw ever closer to Him. This is the response He expects from us as recipients of His grace!

How Grace Reconciles Us to God

“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Ephesians 1:7).

A psychologist conducted a study in which he talked with inmates in a penitentiary. He asked each of them, “Why are you here?” The answers were instructive. One said, “I was framed.” Another said, “They ganged up on me.” The third said, “It was a case of mistaken identity.” And another, “The police had it in for me.” Not one of them admitted he was guilty; they were all innocent—at least in their minds.

We may not have spent time in prison, but have we lived blameless lives? Have we ever done anything that has affected our relationship with God? Have we ever done anything that sentenced us to punishment as happened with these men? Consider again the example mentioned previously of John Newton, whose years in one of the vilest of sins—slave trading—led him to understand how much he needed God’s grace, mercy and forgiveness.

True freedom comes from God

Following is part of a letter we received from a prisoner in a penitentiary who wrote to express thanks for our *Beyond Today* magazine: “I found your magazine to be interesting, informative and factual in accordance with the Scriptures. Your articles reflect not only the problems of this age but remind me that God’s plan has never changed and inspires me to live in prison in accordance with His laws and commandments.

“I’m incarcerated because I broke God’s laws by my disobedience. Yes, I also broke man’s laws, but man cannot bring about restoration of the soul or a new life. Only my complete surrender to God’s will has enabled me to become a new man through Christ Jesus. Your magazine keeps me in touch with the real world as it emphasizes the imminent return of the Kingdom of God and His fulfilling grace. This is indeed good news . . . I thank God for your ministry.”

What is it like to come to understand, as this prisoner has, that true freedom and restoration can only come from God, no matter how long of a sentence one might serve in prison? Do we appreciate the good news of God’s soon-coming Kingdom and the reconciliation available for us

with Him after breaking His law? Because without this, we’re not only in prison, *we’re on spiritual death row*. It’s vital that we understand how God’s grace makes possible forgiveness and reconciliation to Him!

Whether we realize it or not, sin has affected our relationship with God and cut us off from Him. What is the solution to our alienation from God? How can we be reconciled to Him? And after reconciliation with Him, what does He expect of us? It’s vital that we understand the answers to these questions from the Scriptures!

Changing from enemies of God to friends

How has sin affected our relationship with God? God’s Word tells us that “all have sinned and



Without grace and reconciliation to God, we’re not only in prison, we’re on spiritual death row.

fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Except for Jesus Christ, who was God made flesh, *all people* have sinned and fallen short. And our sin has affected our relationship with God.

Isaiah 59:1-2 tells us *how* sin has impacted that relationship: “Behold the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. *But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.*”

Isaiah’s words are blunt. *Our sins* are what separate us from God, harming our relationship with Him. Our relationship with God has been damaged immeasurably and needs great repair. God didn’t separate Himself from us, but *we alienated ourselves from Him* through our sin—which is disobedience to His law (1 John 3:4).

So what is the solution to our separation and alienation from God? What must we do to begin to have a right relationship with Him?

We find the answer in Isaiah 55:6-7: “Seek the LORD while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.” This takes *clear action* on our part. God expects us to turn to Him, to repent, to change, and then He will have mercy on us.

What does it mean to have mercy? The story is told of a mother who approached the French emperor Napoleon seeking a pardon for her son.

The emperor replied that the young man had committed an offense and been judged guilty and that justice demanded his death. “But I don’t ask for justice,” the mother implored, “I plead for mercy.” To this Napoleon replied, “But your son does not deserve mercy.” The woman begged, “It would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask.” “Then,” Napoleon responded, “I will have mercy,” and he spared the woman’s son.

Mercy is not something we deserve. Mercy is *mercy*. There is a beauty

Living Faith and God’s Grace

Ephesians 2:8 tells us, “For by grace you have been saved *through faith*.” We’re not saved without some action on our part, including repentance and believing, having faith in the supreme sacrifice of Jesus Christ and God’s ongoing work in us.

Colossians 2:11-12 (NIV) tells Christians regarding Christ: “You were . . . buried with him in baptism and raised with him *through your faith in the working of God*, who raised him from the dead.”

Just as we have faith that Christ rose from the dead so we could be saved and likewise raised from death in the resurrection, we also must have faith that this plan *is going to work*. We must have faith that Christ really lived and died for us and that He will change us now and ultimately at the resurrection.

Paul continues in verse 13 (NIV): “When you were dead in your sins . . . God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins.” And so we believe through faith in this working of God in our lives. We believe that we are forgiven and that we will be resurrected to eternal life just as Jesus Christ was resurrected to eternal life. And though obedience is necessary for continued spiritual understanding, this does not mean that obedience *entitles* us to this salvation. God alone, through His grace and mercy, forgives sin, grants us help to overcome and offers salvation as a gift. But He also expects us to do *our* part while He fulfills the rest.

The apostle James emphasized this principle in James 2:21-22, where he described Abraham’s faith in obeying God, up

to the point of sacrificing his son before God stopped him from going through with it: “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works and by works faith was made perfect?”

We see here how faith is involved in accepting the grace of God. Anyone who carefully studies James 2 can see that James teaches that Christian faith is more than just good thoughts; it demands that a Christian believer *prove* his faith *by his actions*. We prove we have faith by how we live after we accept Jesus Christ! This living and active faith involves effort to obey and trusting God to empower us and help us succeed—resulting in works of obedience being produced. Or else, as James concludes, “Faith without works is *dead*” (verse 26). It is useless because it accomplishes nothing.

This is why Paul says in 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12 (NIV): “We constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness *and your every deed prompted by faith*. We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

This all works together in the same equation—faith, works, God’s grace, His forgiveness, His purpose and Jesus Christ being glorified in us. Our faith and subsequent obedience is a necessary part of receiving God’s grace and continuing in it!

and simplicity to God’s way of dealing with us. Yes, we have been alienated from Him because of our sins, but there is a solution and a way we can become reconciled to Him. God shows undeserved mercy to those who forsake their own ways and return to Him.

Jesus told a story of a young man who made a wrong decision, turned his back on his father and wasted all his father had given him—and of what happened to him as a result. We know it as the parable of the prodigal son, found in Luke 15.

You may remember how the story turns out. After the young man suffers the painful consequences of rejecting his father’s wisdom and guidance and loses absolutely everything, he realizes he has hit rock bottom. Humbled, humiliated and hurting, he returns to his father, realizing he deserves nothing, not even to be called a son. But to his astonishment, he is welcomed back with open arms and celebration. (Read more about this story in “A Parable Showing the Magnitude of God’s Grace” on pages 46-47.)

Perhaps you see yourself in the story of the prodigal son, and can appreciate the lesson of the parable—that when we come to our senses and return to God, He will have mercy and pardon us and welcome us to a right relationship with Him. But it doesn’t happen if we don’t turn from our own selfish ways, repent and change, and live according to His ways!

Forgiveness and reconciliation

How can we be reconciled to God? We’ve noted that our sins separate us from our Father in heaven, yet He is willing to have mercy on us if we’re willing to repent and change and return to Him, like the prodigal son. But how is this really possible? How can we be reconciled? After all, Romans 6:23 tells us that “the wages of sin is death . . .”—meaning *death* is what we have earned because of our sins. Our sins require our death; we’re on death row.

Yet notice the last part of Romans 6:23: “. . . but the gift of God is *eternal life* through Christ Jesus our Lord.” Through Christ, God offers a gift to us if we do our part.

Notice also Romans 5: “Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him” (verse 9). The apostle Paul tells us that through Jesus Christ’s sacrifice, through His giving of His own life and pouring out His own blood to pay the death penalty we deserved, that penalty *can be removed*.

Paul continues: “For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation” (verses 10-11).

Moving Forward by God's Grace

Many people struggle with unresolved guilt and feelings of shame over past mistakes and sins. How should our faith in God's grace and forgiveness affect our conscience?

Short of totally rejecting God and His way of life, if we desire to change and repent, all sins can be forgiven. One of the most wonderful truths about the grace of God is that whatever we might have done in life can be forgiven.

We can know that when we repent, our sin is washed away to be forgiven and remembered against us no longer. As Hebrews 10:19-22 tells us: "Therefore brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest [coming before God's heavenly throne in our prayers] by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us . . . and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

We see here that faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ lets us have full assurance and faith that by it we can be washed clean from our sin (as now symbolized by baptism), to have all guilt removed, and to have a pure, clean and clear conscience as we come before God.

Once our old self is symbolically buried through baptism, God wants us to put behind us feelings of guilt over past sins. He wants us to approach our future with confidence that our sins have been forgiven. We are to begin a new life without worry and guilt over the past.

God offers us freedom from the burden of uncertainty so we can know for sure where we stand with Him. Once we have accepted Jesus Christ and been forgiven of our sins (and repent of any further sins), our conscience should be clear and washed clean.

Prolonged and obsessive guilt is often a major but preventable cause of emotional agony. Some guilt is natural and good if it leads to repentance. If we feel bad for something we did, godly sorrow that leads to repentance is a good kind of sorrow (see 2 Corinthians 7:9-11).

The solution to guilt over sin is to go to God in a repentant attitude for the grace and forgiveness He promises, do what we can to make amends with others we may have hurt in some way and focus on being a new person going forward—letting go of who we were before and ceasing to dwell on past mistakes.

As Proverbs 24:16 tells us, "A righteous man may fall seven times and rise again." We just need to get back up and keep going, seeking God's mercy regularly and frequently.

As God promised us in Isaiah 1:18, "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be [white] as wool."

Psalms 103:12 tells us, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."

In Philippians 3:13-15 Paul describes the attitude of a clear conscience that God wants for us: "Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended [or fully achieved what God intends for us]; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things that are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind."

Dwelling on the past is of no help to anyone. We are to press forward toward the goal and not keep looking behind. Trusting God's forgiveness through His grace, we'll also have faith in God's further grace of ultimate salvation in His family. So we strive for that goal, for the prize that God has offered to us as a free gift.

This is something to *rejoice* about, to glorify God for! Yes, our sins have separated us from God, and we earned the death penalty for those sins. But God will have mercy on us, as the blood of Jesus Christ paid that penalty for us—and we can and should rejoice in that!

Paul explains further in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 (NIV): "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: *Be reconciled to God.*"

So God is explaining to us, through Paul, that we can be



Paul's point is that we are all slaves—it's just a matter of to whom or to what we are enslaved. Cut off from God, human beings are enslaved to sin, leading to death.

reconciled to Him, having our severed relationship with Him healed. He implores us to be reconciled to Him through Christ's blood. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ makes it possible for us to have this reconciliation with the Father. Without it we will die *forever* because the wages of sin is death. But we are set free from that penalty if we accept Christ's sacrifice and are reconciled to God.

Forgiveness is possible through God's grace

Here's another letter received at our office. This person writes: "I would like to take this God-given opportunity to thank you for your generous hearts in sending me free copies of your booklets. For the past years of my early adult life (I'm 22 years old), I have felt that I lost my direction. I've realized that during those times when the road I was taking was dark and I was really in desperation and in unfathomable loneliness, God was curving my path back to His arms and He never left my side.

"I'm really inspired and am continually seeking God, and your magazine and booklets and are one of the ways I am certain that will lead me back to our Father. Again, thank you very much. May you prosper more in order to help millions of believers and unbelievers to nourish their whole

being through God's grace. God bless you always."

All this is possible through God's grace. It's not because of anything we can do to earn it. We're reconciled to God through the death of Jesus Christ His Son. As John 3:16-17 tells us: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish

Can Those God Has Forgiveness Reject His Grace?

Some people believe that when a person commits his or her life to Jesus Christ, accepting Him as personal Savior, then eternal salvation is totally assured from that moment on, with absolutely no possibility of ever losing it. This is often referred to as "eternal security" or "once saved, always saved." But does the Bible really teach this? Let's examine the Scriptures to understand the truth.

Those who teach or hold to this belief use several scriptures to try to prove it. Let's look at one passage that is often misunderstood this way, and then see many verses that show this to be an erroneous conclusion.

John 10:27-29 is a pivotal passage used for this teaching: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand."

Jesus made this statement in response to some who had questioned Him as to whether He was the promised Messiah (John 10:23-24). The focus here was not "eternal security" but the recognition of His identity.

He declared that His true followers, drawn to Him by the Father, followed Him as the One through whom they would receive eternal life. They thus recognized Him as the Messiah, and no one could shake them from their God-given conviction. His answer, then, was effectively that people couldn't properly understand His identity and follow Him without

the Father leading them to Him (compare John 6:44, 65).

The verbs "hear" and "follow" are in the present tense in the Greek, so Jesus was speaking of the present and not specifically about the future. In stating that "no one is able to snatch them [the sheep] out of My Father's hand," He meant that no external power (be it Satan, false religious leaders or anyone else) could take them away. Jesus definitely did *not* say that His followers couldn't ultimately fail due to fault of their own. Other verses clearly show it is possible to be once enlightened and then fail to continue in the path of righteousness.

Other scriptures used to establish the "once saved, always saved" doctrine follow the same pattern of being misinterpreted and misapplied. Just one clear scripture that contradicts this teaching is enough to show that the teaching is not biblical. Yet in fact, we can find *many* passages that teach just the opposite of this doctrine, showing that one must meet—and *continue* to meet—certain conditions to receiving God's gift of salvation.

We are assured that God will never leave us or forsake us as Christians (Hebrews 13:5). But the Bible never says it is impossible for us to leave or forsake God and lose out on His gift of salvation!

Let's notice a few of the many scriptures proving this is possible:

- "But he who *endures to the end* shall be saved" (Matthew 24:13).
- "By which also you are saved, *if you hold*

but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

God sent His Son into the world to pay the penalty for our sins so we could be saved—saved from the death penalty. As we're told in 1 John 1:7, "the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin."

fast that word which I preached to you; unless you believed in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:2).

- "Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, *lest we drift away*. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, *how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation . . . ?*" (Hebrews 2:1-3).

- ". . . But Christ as a Son over His own house, whose house we are *if we hold fast* the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end" (Hebrews 3:6).

- "For we have become partakers of Christ *if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end*" (verse 14).

- "For you have need of endurance, *so that after you have done the will of God*, you may receive the promise" (Hebrews 10:36).

- "Look to yourselves, *that we do not lose those things we worked for*, but that we may receive a full reward" (2 John 1:8).

- "And *he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end*, to him I will give power over the nations" (Revelation 2:26).

- "Behold, I am coming quickly! Hold fast what you have, *that no one may take your crown*" (Revelation 3:11).

- "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, *if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance*, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:4-6).

- "For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, *there*

no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries . . ." (Hebrews 10:26-27).

- ". . . Of how much worse punishment . . . will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?" (verse 29).

These are just a few examples of verses that say we must continue in the faith to the very end to be saved. Notice that some verses say, "*if we hold fast . . .*" Salvation is conditional on our continuing to the end. Even such a figure as the apostle Paul did not say he was assured of salvation. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:27, "But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, *lest*, when I have preached to others, *I myself should become disqualified*."

The doctrine of "eternal security" is not found in the pages of the Bible. We must all endure to the end to be saved.

On the other hand, there are many verses that show that as long as we do not through continued neglect or bitterness come to ultimately reject God, we are indeed assured of salvation. We do not need to live in worry, but can be confident that God will see us through. That is what Paul meant in Philippians 1:6: ". . . being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." We just need to stay in the process with God—to continue repenting, growing and overcoming with His help.

Interested readers can also search our website on the topic of salvation for more in-depth information.

God frees us from the guilt we incurred through our sins by accepting the voluntary death of Christ in our place as payment of the penalty we deserved. That's why each of us bears responsibility in the death of Jesus Christ—not any *one* person alone, not any *one group* of people, but *all* of us—for we have all sinned and brought the death penalty on ourselves (Romans 3:23; 6:23).

Redeemed by God

As we read in Isaiah, repentance and returning to God is our starting point for receiving redemption and establishing a lasting relationship with God. “Redeem” and “redemption” are words that appear often in the Bible, and their basic meaning is buying back, securing release or setting free by a payment. And this is exactly what happens for those who genuinely repent and turn to God. They are bought back, released and set free from the death penalty and slavery to sin—redeemed not with money but with the precious blood of Christ's sacrifice (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Paul describes it this way in Romans 6:16-18 (NIV): “Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.”

Paul's point is that we are all slaves—it's just a matter of *to whom or to what we are enslaved*. Cut off from God, human beings are enslaved to sin, leading to death. But having been redeemed from that slavery through Jesus Christ's sacrificial death, we serve a new Master—God, leading to a life of righteousness and eternal life.

Again, this repentance, redemption and reconciliation are all gifts of God's grace made possible by Jesus Christ's shed blood.

Living by every word of God

If we are to be “slaves to righteousness,” as Paul puts it, what does that mean? What does that look like? As we see from Acts 2:38, we are to repent, be baptized and receive the gift of God's Spirit. We do this in faith, trusting in God and in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ as payment for the death penalty we deserved for our sins. Baptism brings forgiveness through the symbolic death and burial of the old self along with our sins and a symbolic resurrection to a new life in Christ (Romans 6:1-11). Through the laying on of hands of a true minister of God we receive the gift of God's Holy Spirit (see Acts 8:14-18).

But once that has happened, then what? Those reconciled to God through faith in Christ's sacrifice must *continue* living in faith—that is, in harmony with the instructions and fundamental beliefs expressed in God's Word. As Jesus Himself said, quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but *by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4). God expects us to be *blameless* after accepting Christ's sacrifice—to live by every word that He speaks.

Some believe that once you accept Christ, it doesn't matter how you live your life from that point forward—you are then saved and can't ever lose your salvation, no matter what. This concept is summed up in the popular phrase “Once saved, always saved.” But this is a satanic lie and deception! (See “Can Those God Has Forgiven Reject His Grace?” on pages 24-25.)

Read what Paul wrote in Romans 6:1-2, immediately after discussing how we are saved by God's grace: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?”

Paul shows the folly of the reasoning that once we are forgiven of our sins, which required Christ's sacrificial death in our place, we could continue in these sins. Since we figuratively died with Christ because of our sins, how could we possibly justify continuing in a life of sin? May we continue in sin? “*Certainly not!*” is Paul's clear response! (We'll explore this more in the chapter “Grace and Law: What Does the Bible Say?” beginning on page 50.)

“Holy and blameless and above reproach”

In spite of what some may teach, we cannot continue a life of breaking God's commandments and expect His grace to continue for us. Paul discusses more of what it means to be reconciled to God in Colossians 1: “And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works . . .” (verse 21). Here again we see, as we read earlier in Isaiah 59:1-2, that our sins—our “wicked works”—*alienated* us from God and made us *enemies* to Him.

Continuing in Colossians 1: “. . . yet now He [Jesus Christ] has reconciled [you] in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy and blameless and above reproach in His sight . . .” (verse 22). So again we see the necessity of accepting and having faith in Christ's sacrifice to have our past sins forgiven, and being reconciled to God through Christ's death.

And what follows next from this? “. . . If indeed *we continue in the faith* [that is, in trusting belief in the truth we've learned and in the practice that goes with it], grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister” (verse 23).

Does God Place Conditions on His Gift of Salvation?

Eternal life is God's gift of grace, not something any of us deserve or can in any way earn. No one will ever be able to boast that he or she has earned or deserves the gift of eternal life. But does God set conditions for us to receive this gift? According to the Bible, *yes, He does!*

If we must do something to receive God's gift of salvation, how can it be a gift?

To use an analogy, if someone offered to send you a \$100 bill if you would send him a self-addressed stamped envelope, he would be offering you a gift. Simply believing that he would send you the money would not actually get you the money. And if you failed to send the envelope, you likewise would not receive the money. You might complain, but you still would not receive the gift because you would not have met the conditions.

On the other hand, if you sent the required envelope and received the \$100 bill, this does not mean you *earned* the gift. *You simply met the necessary conditions.* Without the offer of the undeserved gift, you could've sent hundreds of envelopes and received nothing, as you would have been entitled to nothing. The fact that conditions are attached to receiving a gift makes it no less a gift. Millions of people fail to understand this simple fact, and as a result have a very distorted view of what God requires of those who would follow Him.

Note this statement from Hebrews 5:9: "And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation *to all who obey Him*."

Since salvation is God's gift, what does this passage mean when it speaks of "eternal salvation *to all who obey Him*"? Salvation is clearly a gift. Yet if we must do something to receive it, then it is a gift that *comes with conditions*.

What must we do?

Let's examine a few of Jesus Christ's own

statements that tell us what we must do to receive that gift of salvation.

In Matthew 7:21 Jesus says, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but *he who does the will of My Father in heaven*." Jesus made it clear that merely acknowledging Him as Lord and Master—saying "Lord, Lord"—is not sufficient. To inherit the Kingdom of God, we must *do the will of the Father*, as He clearly stated.

Jesus wants us to understand that there is more to receiving eternal life than just belief or mental acceptance. Our conviction that He is our Savior must be more than just a warm, comforting thought or intellectual concept. Jesus warns that simply calling on His name or recognizing Him as "Lord" is not enough.

Obedience to God's commandments

At one point a wealthy young man asked Jesus how he could receive eternal life. "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" (Matthew 19:16). Christ's reply might shock some who think obedience to God's law is unnecessary—that He has done that for us so we don't have to do anything. Jesus responded, "If you want to enter into life, *keep the commandments*" (verse 17).

Jesus didn't answer that nothing is required other than believing in God or in Him. He told the young man he must *obey the commandments of God* to receive the gift of eternal life. How plain!

As the apostle James points out, belief is pointless unless it is backed up by action and obedience: "You believe that there is one God. You do well. *Even the demons believe—and tremble*" (James 2:19). If we think that belief is all we need for salvation, *we are sorely mistaken*. As James tells us, the demonic spirits fully believe in God and know that Jesus is the Son of God raised from the dead. But that doesn't mean they are saved!

James goes on to explain that faith and obedience go hand in hand, using the example of Abraham, whom God told to sacrifice his son Isaac before stopping him from going through with it: "But do you want to know, O foolish man, that *faith without works is dead*? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?" (James 2:20-22).

James thus explained that works of obedience as a result of our faith maintain our relationship with God and lead to *greater* faith and obedience, as God requires. Without works as evidence and the living out of our faith, that faith is "dead"—worthless and useless.

Baptism and laying on of hands

Jesus gave another condition for God's gift of eternal life in Mark 16:16: "*He who believes and is baptized will be saved*; but he who does not believe will be condemned." Water baptism—by full immersion—is a symbolic act representing the death and washing away of our old sinful self and the beginning of a new life of serving God and striving to avoid sin (Romans 6:1-23). Through this act we symbolically put to death and bury the old person and rise from that watery grave to a new life as a new person.

Baptism is to be followed by the laying on of hands by a true minister of Jesus Christ, which allows us to receive God's Holy Spirit and truly belong to Him (Acts 8:17; Romans 8:9). Unless we surrender our lives to God through baptism and the laying on of hands to receive His Spirit as instructed, we fail to meet His prerequisites for receiving His gift of salvation.

The apostle Peter affirmed these conditions for receiving God's Spirit, declaring, "Repent, and let every one of you *be baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [forgiveness] of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Repentance means to turn from disobedience to God to obeying Him. So again, committed obedience

and baptism are shown as requirements in the salvation process.

To those who would brush aside these and other plain biblical instructions Jesus replies, "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and *do not do the things which I say*?" (Luke 6:46).

In Matthew 10:22 and Matthew 24:13 Jesus gave another condition we must meet to receive God's gift of salvation: "*He who endures to the end will be saved*." As Jesus plainly and directly implied here, we can lose out on salvation if we fail to endure to the end (see also "Can Those God Has Forgiven Reject His Grace?" on pages 24-25).

Once we have committed ourselves to obeying God and surrendering ourselves to Him, *we must stay the course to the end* and not look back (Luke 9:62).

Salvation is free, but not cheap

You may have heard the expression, "Salvation is free, but not cheap"—in contrast to the "cheap grace" so many seem to effectively believe in. God's gift of life to us cost Jesus Christ *His life*. He, the very Son of God, willingly surrendered *His* life so that we might receive God's wonderful gift of eternal life. And it cost the Father, who "gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16).

But God expects us to surrender our lives in return, as Jesus states in Luke 14:33 (NLT 1996): "So no one can become my disciple *without giving up everything for me*."

Accepting God's gift of eternal life comes at the highest cost we can imagine. As Jesus Christ gave His life for us, we must be willing to give our lives to follow Him!

So returning to the question at the beginning, does God place conditions on His gift of salvation? Clearly the answer is *yes*. His Word spells out the conditions. Let us be sure, as Hebrews 2:3 exhorts us, that we not "neglect so great a salvation"! (To learn more about the obligations we have toward God as recipients of His grace, be sure to read "What Did 'Grace' Mean in the First-Century World?" beginning on page 68.)

Plainly we have to *continue in that faith* after accepting Christ's sacrificial death on our behalf. We have to continue, not moving away from what we have learned about the hope of the gospel of the Kingdom of God and how we may enter that Kingdom through Jesus Christ. (To learn more about what this means, download or request our free study guides *The Gospel of the Kingdom* and *Why Were You Born?*)

Living "soberly, righteously and godly"

It's vital that all who trust in God remember that we have to live a life of godliness after baptism, as the apostle Paul reminds us. Notice what he wrote in Titus 2:11-14: "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works."

So does it matter how we live after our sins are forgiven? *Absolutely!* God looks at how we live; He looks at the works of our life; He looks at how we treat people as He redeems us from our lawless deeds. He expects us to be growing, learning and developing.

Jesus set the bar for us quite high! We see it in Matthew 5:48 (NIV): "*Be perfect*, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

The bar Jesus set is that of *our Heavenly Father's divine nature and character*. We are told to *become like Him*—not like the people around us, but to *become like Him*. That's only possible through God the Father and Jesus Christ living in us through the Holy Spirit (see John 14:16-17, 23).

We are expected to become perfect, to put away the sins in our life and grow in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). We have to strive to live a righteous life as we are reconciled with God! We'll see more about growing and striving toward righteousness later on. (And to learn more about how to become like God through His Holy Spirit, download or request our free study guide *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.)

Sins covered by Christ's blood

What sins are covered by Christ's blood? As noted above, at baptism God forgives our past sins—sins we repented of and stopped practicing. And that forgiveness is total. As King David wrote in Psalm 103:12, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us."

As we saw above in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the

glory of God . . ." All of us have sinned and separated ourselves from our Father in heaven, and it's not until we return to Him, become reconciled and accept Jesus' sacrifice that things can change for us.

Paul then continues in this passage: ". . . and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus . . ." (verse 24, NIV). Once again we see that this is all possible by and through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Further: "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished . . ." (verse 25, NIV). So God in His patience and mercy chose not to punish us for the sins we had previously committed.

"He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (verse 26, NIV). So we have to believe and have faith that Jesus Christ's sacrifice will do this for us. He died to pay for our sins and lead us to repentance. He never intended that we misconstrue grace and forgiveness as permission to ignore or disobey the core teachings that God revealed throughout the Scriptures.

Instead He taught, as we've already noted, that man must live "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." We have to live by the Word of God from that point forward!

What if we sin later?

But what happens if we sin after baptism? Can those future sins also be covered by Christ's blood? We find the answer in 1 John 2: "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 . . ." (verse 1). So we are not supposed to sin, as we have seen many times, but if or when we do, Jesus Christ will intercede for us and the Father will continue to accept Christ's blood as atonement for our sins.

Continuing: "And He Himself is the propitiation [or atoning sacrifice that reconciles us to God] for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world. Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (verses 2-6).

As we see here, we're expected to walk as our Savior walked—to live as He lived. He lived a righteous, sinless life, and that's how we're expected to live—in obedience to God's commandments. And if or when we sin,

any new sins must then be repented of to continue living a life of godly righteousness.

We are God's workmanship

So why do we need God's grace? Nothing we can do can earn us forgiveness and salvation. Forgiveness and salvation are gifts from God. We are saved by His grace, as we see in Ephesians 2:8-9: "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."

Then Paul adds in verse 10: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them"—or, as the New Revised Standard Version renders the last part, ". . . which God prepared beforehand *to be our way of life.*" Yes, grace is a gift from God, but we're still expected to live a life of righteousness after accepting that gift. The Bible is consistent and plain in its teaching that salvation is a gift from God, but even though it is a gift, we are expected to obey God if we are to receive that gift.

Notice what Jesus Himself said in Matthew 7:21: "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but *he who does the will of My Father* in heaven." It's not enough to acknowledge God the Father and Christ as Lord—as Master and Ruler—we must actually be under Their rule by obeying!

Certainly forgiveness and salvation are gifts from God. They cannot be earned. As human beings we possess nothing of sufficient value to pay for the forgiveness of our sins and our salvation. Yet Jesus bluntly tells us here that unless we surrender our will to God and commit to doing *His* will, we'll have no part in His Kingdom. And He tells us elsewhere that unless we repent, we will perish (Luke 13:3, 5).

Through repentance we do not *earn* salvation, but repentance is a *prerequisite* for receiving that salvation. We have to seek to have our sins forgiven—and that comes by God's grace. There's nothing we can do of ourselves to bring this about. Then God expects us to act accordingly to receive that gift.

Putting all of this together, we see that a good way to describe God's grace is as His freely given, undeserved favor toward us, motivated by His love and concern for us, especially for those of us who accept His invitation to enter into a relationship with Him. Grace encompasses all of the wonderful gifts God so kindly gives to us!

Grace in Action: Jesus Christ's Example

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14).

Jesus Christ gives us the preeminent example of grace in action. He increased in grace or favor with God and others (Luke 2:52), being a recipient of His Father's blessings as well as the One the Father used to bless the whole world.

In this, Jesus set an example for His disciples to follow. All of us are to be both recipients of God's grace and instruments of God's grace to others, developing the same mindset He had. The apostle Peter instructed Christians, "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10, NIV).

Jesus led the way in this. Again, He was the Father's gift to the world, and He gave of Himself completely. What kind of grace did He personify and teach that He expects us to show, to live by and to be a part of our lives? How was Jesus a person of grace?

Jesus' astounding origin

The prologue to the apostle John's Gospel explains who Jesus was, setting the stage for this. John 1:14 tells us, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Notice how Jesus Christ is characterized here—as "*full of grace and truth.*" Many have recognized "grace and truth" here as a reference to a phrase used repeatedly in the Old Testament in describing the character of God, often rendered "mercy and truth." The Hebrew for "mercy" in this phrase, though, has a broader meaning. It's the word *hesed*, which was mentioned earlier in relation to grace. It has the sense of lovingkindness, goodness, steadfast love, covenant faithfulness and devotion.

Amazingly, the God described this way in the Old Testament was not just the Father but the One who as God interacted with mankind—the Word who became Jesus Christ.

The Word, through whom God created all things (verses 1-3, 10;

Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2), became a human being. We see here that the grace and truth that characterizes God came to us in the form of a flesh-and-blood man living among us.

The apostle John explains to us regarding Jesus Christ in 1 John 1:1-3 (NLT): “We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us. We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard . . .”

John tells us that he and the other disciples beheld the very Word of life: “We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands.” They put their arms around Him. They shared meals with Him. They lived with Him. They were a part of His life. They saw it all. And it was a profound experience to actually be there with Him constantly during that time.

Jesus Christ brought abundant grace

John further explains: “John [the Baptist] bore witness of Him and cried out, saying, ‘This was He of whom I said, “He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.”’ And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace” (John 1:15-16).

The phrase “grace for grace” is a little difficult to understand in English. The meaning is simply that we have received through Him *an abundance* of grace or favor. The New Living Translation says here, “From his abundance we have all received *one gracious blessing after another*.” The New International Version likewise translates this as “From the fullness of his grace we have all received *one blessing after another*.” Green’s Literal Translation renders this, “And out of His fullness we all received, and *grace on top of grace*.”

Another way to put it would be to say that “grace for grace” means *abundant grace*. This is what the apostle John saw in the life of Jesus Christ—favor and blessing superior to all that had come previously, superior to anything that had been available before.

Now, says John, we have grace being extended to us personally by the Word—done in a most astonishing way. The Word, who was with God and was God (verse 1), the One through whom God had created all things including humankind (verse 3), came down from heaven to become a flesh-and-blood human being (verse 14). Now He was a man Himself showing, giving out and pouring forth God’s grace to other people in a way that was undeniably real to them.

What did this grace look like in real life? The Gospels record many

examples, of which we’ll cover a few. The best way to understand grace is to understand this: *What did Jesus do?* How did He extend grace? How was it exemplified in His life? How should we understand what He did? And then we have to ask the all-important question: What, then, do *we* do?

What grace looked like as demonstrated by Jesus Christ

Let’s first look at Jesus’ encounter with a man who was paralyzed in Mark 2:1-12: “And again He entered Capernaum after some days, and it was heard that He was in the house. Immediately many gathered together, so that



The Word, who was with God and was God, the One through whom God had created all things including humankind, came down from heaven to become a flesh-and-blood human being.

there was no longer room to receive them, not even near the door. And He preached the word to them.

“Then they came to Him, bringing a paralytic who was carried by four men. And when they could not come near Him because of the crowd, they uncovered the roof where He was. So when they had broken through, they let down the bed on which the paralytic was lying. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven you.’”

Jesus knew He was going to heal the man. But He went beyond restoring the man’s physical body, saying, “Son, your sins are forgiven you”!

“And some of the scribes [who were part of the religious establishment of that day] were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, ‘Why does this Man speak blasphemies like this? Who can forgive sins but God alone?’”

The scribes were right. Indeed, no one could forgive sins but God alone. They failed to see that God was right there before them at that moment!

“But immediately, when Jesus perceived in His spirit that they reasoned thus within themselves, He said to them, ‘Why do you reason about these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, “Your sins are forgiven you,” or to say, “Arise, take up your bed and walk?”’

“‘But that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins’—He said to the paralytic, ‘I say to you, arise, take up your bed, and go to your house.’”

The scribes must have been startled that Jesus knew exactly what they were thinking. But they were absolutely shocked at what happened next!

“Immediately he [who’d been paralyzed] arose, took up the bed, and went out in the presence of them all, so that all were amazed and glorified God, saying, ‘We never saw anything like this!’”

This was unheard of. A person’s sins were forgiven along with the healing of paralysis right before their very eyes. Now grace was coming through Jesus Christ—being shown through the Word in the flesh who was forgiving and healing them on the spot. The people were rightly amazed!

Another remarkable healing

In Mark 7:31-37 we find the record of another remarkable healing: “Again, departing from the region of Tyre and Sidon, He came through the midst of the region of Decapolis to the Sea of Galilee. Then they brought to Him one who was deaf and had an impediment in his speech, and they begged Him to put His hand on him.

“And He took him aside from the multitude, and put His fingers in his ears, and He spat and touched his tongue. Then, looking up to heaven, He sighed, and said to him, ‘Ephphatha,’ that is, ‘Be opened.’ Immediately his ears were opened, and the impediment of his tongue was loosed, and he spoke plainly.

“Then He commanded them that they should tell no one; but the more He commanded them, the more widely they proclaimed it. And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done all things well. He makes both the deaf to hear and the mute to speak.’” It was clearly hard for them to contain their excitement and amazement.

Here, as in the previous example, we see that Jesus simply extended grace to the man. It was His to give, and He gave it.

Healing of an infirm woman

In Luke 13:10-17 we find another amazing healing. It occurred on the Sabbath, which brought Jesus into conflict with the religious teachers of the time who had imposed severe restrictions on what could be done that day—far beyond the requirements of God’s law. Let’s note what happened:

“Now He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And behold, there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up. But when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him and said to her, ‘Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity.’

“And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God. But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the

crowd, ‘There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day.’

“The Lord then answered him and said, ‘Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound—think of it—for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?’

“And when He said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the multitude rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him.”

A number of things are notable about this healing, but two in particular stand out. One is that Jesus uses this as a teachable moment to show the kind of compassion we should have on those in such sad circumstances. Another is that, as in the two examples covered above, *the woman didn’t directly ask for healing*. Jesus saw a person in need, and did what was within His power to alleviate that need.

Jesus heals a leper

Some of Jesus’ healings become much more revealing and meaningful when we understand the historical and cultural background of the events. One of these is found in Mark 1:40-45 where Jesus healed a leper.

In those days leprosy was considered to be a curse from God as a result of sin. Because it was a contagious disease, lepers were quarantined, required to live “outside the camp”—away from towns and villages and contact with other people. A leper had to visually signify that he carried disease by wearing torn clothing and unkempt hair, covering his mouth and lower part of his face and crying out, “Unclean, Unclean!” when near other people (Leviticus 13:45-46).

Leprosy was a horrible disease, made worse by the fact that lepers were viewed as having done something so evil that God had cursed them in punishment for their sins.

Religious leaders developed strict rules to prevent lepers from having contact with others. Lepers were not allowed to come within six feet of an uninfected person lest contamination or defilement be spread. If the wind was blowing from a leper toward others, he had to stay at least 100 cubits (150 feet) away. These weren’t God’s rules. They were manmade rules added onto what God had said regarding preventing disease.

Lepers were so detested and despised by others that it wasn’t long before the lepers came to detest and despise themselves. They weren’t just physically tormented, they were mentally tormented as well. Many likely would’ve killed themselves, but that would’ve violated God’s commandment against murder so they couldn’t find escape that way.

If you were a leper, you had to live away from other people by yourself or with other lepers. Your skin had open, oozing, stinking sores. No one could touch you—not your husband, not your wife, not your children, not your parents, not your friends—no one. No one could ever hug you, shake your hand or pat you on the back. You were considered an untouchable person.

And because you were cut off from contact with other human beings, you could never go to the temple to offer atonement for your sins, so you were perpetually cut off not only from other human beings, *but also from God*. You were basically one of the living dead—despised, rejected, cut off from mankind and also cut off from God. You would be this way until you died. You were abandoned. You were nameless and faceless. You had *no hope*. This is the desperate situation of the leprous man who came to Jesus.

Again, we should understand that this treatment went far beyond God's intent with the quarantine laws. In fact, the quarantine laws were *part of God's grace*, meant to protect the nation and teach important lessons—and they were given by the One who became Jesus! People could have made an effort to find ways to still associate with lepers, but that was just not done.

Picking up the story in Mark 1:40: “Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, ‘If You are

willing, You can make me clean.’”

Notice that the leper didn't directly *ask* to be healed—he knelt before Jesus and said simply, “If you are willing, You can make me clean.” He expressed his complete faith that Jesus could heal him.

Luke, being a physician, in his parallel description of this event adds the detail that the man was “*full of leprosy*” (Luke 5:12), indicating that the man had a very severe case and may well have been dying of the disease. Regardless, the man's appearance must have been horrible.

Then Jesus did something *unthinkable* in that culture that would've shocked anyone who witnessed it: “Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and *touched him*, and said to him, ‘I am willing; be cleansed’” (Mark 1:41).

Jesus ignored the rule requiring at least six feet between lepers and non-lepers. He reached out and touched this man that others saw as cursed. This would've shocked everyone around, because *no one* touched lepers! But then, right before their eyes, “*immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed*” (verse 42).

The leprosy was gone! This went against everything the people witnessing this would've thought and held to be true about lepers.

And having healed the leper, Jesus told the man to do something. “He

“For the Law Was Given Through Moses, *but* Grace and Truth Came Through Jesus Christ”

John 1:17 confuses some people because of the way it's translated in many Bible versions: “For the law was given through Moses, *but* grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” In the King James Version and New King James Version (used here and most places in this study guide), the word “but” is italicized. This means the word *doesn't appear* in the original biblical manuscripts, but *was added* by translators.

Often such additions help readers better understand the meaning, but not in this case. Here the addition of “but” creates a contrast that never existed in John's original wording.

Translators of various other Bible versions, understanding the “but” doesn't belong here, render this verse differently. In two versions we see it as: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (NIV, English Standard Version). Other versions give something similar

(see, for example, the Christian Standard Bible, New American Standard Bible, Bible in Basic English, New Revised Standard Version, Twentieth Century New Testament and Young's Literal Translation).

The apostle John, being a devout Jewish Christian, certainly understood that grace existed before Jesus Christ came into the world. He knew that Israel's God was *gracious and merciful* (Exodus 34:6; 2 Chronicles 30:9; Nehemiah 9:17, 31; Psalm 103:8; 116:5; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). He also knew that the law God gave through Moses was a great blessing—a gift of God's grace (Psalm 19:7-11; 119:86, 127, 140, 172; Romans 7:14).

For this reason John himself would write of the necessity for Christians to keep God's commandments in passages such as these:

- “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments” (1 John 2:3).
- “He who says, ‘I know Him,’ and does

not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4).

- “And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).

- “Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him” (1 John 3:24).

- “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments” (1 John 5:2).

- “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

- “This is love, that we walk according to His commandments” (2 John 6).

- “Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city” (Revelation 22:14).

John never stated or implied that no form of

grace came through Moses. John understood that everything good has come by God's grace—including the law revealed through Moses. In fact, John explained that Jesus was the Word who acted as God on behalf of the Father during the Old Testament period (John 1:1-3, 14, see also “Jesus' Identity: Who Gave the Law?” on pages 64-65). This means that the law God gave through Moses was given by the One who became Jesus Christ! Yet in coming to the earth Jesus revealed much more about this law—presenting the *fullness* of grace and truth (see verse 14).

God's law was given to mankind for humanity's own good and benefit (Psalm 94:12; 112:1). That of itself was a great blessing, a wonderful bestowal of grace to mankind, made full through Jesus Christ. (To learn more, download or request our free book *The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God's Law?*)

strictly warned him and sent him away at once, and said to him, ‘See that you say nothing to anyone; but go your way, show yourself to the priest, and offer for your cleansing those things which Moses commanded, as a testimony to them’” (verses 43-44).

Since the man was now healed, why did Jesus tell the healed leper to go to the priest and make the required offerings? First, because this was a requirement of the law, which Jesus upheld. But the emphasis on it likely had more behind it, for bodily healing was *only part* of what the man needed. What he needed further was to be *fully restored as a member of the community*. And the healing alone would not accomplish that. Without being officially *pronounced* healed and cleansed by a priest, the man would remain an outcast, cut off from his family and community (Leviticus 13:1-6).

So Jesus here performed two acts of grace toward this man: He not only healed him of a horrible disfiguring disease, but He also made sure to emphasize to the man the way to restoring him to family, friends and society—to no longer being viewed as a cursed outcast.

The woman with a flow of blood

The healing of the leper has parallels with a healing recorded in Mark 5: “Now a certain woman had a flow of blood for twelve years, and had suffered many things from many physicians. She had spent all that she had and was no better, but rather grew worse” (verses 25-26).

As with the leper, it’s easy to read over this and not really grasp what this meant for the woman. What did this mean in the first century? She had an ongoing flow of blood. That meant she was unclean and untouchable (Leviticus 15:25). If she were married, her husband could not touch her lest he also become unclean. If she had children, they also could not touch her, nor she touch them.

Again, these laws that the One who became Jesus had given as part of God’s grace were being misapplied, with ceremonial defilements magnified above the need for compassion. The law had merely required that a person who had contact with someone with a flow of blood bathe and wait out a short period of uncleanness until sunset. People could easily have routinely contracted that brief impurity for the sake of spending time with those suffering—or they could have often just taken steps to avoid direct contact. But sufferers came to be regarded as cursed and repulsive—and so were avoided.

This had been this woman’s lot in life *for 12 excruciatingly long years*. Perhaps she hadn’t felt a human touch for all that time. She probably hadn’t been hugged, or kissed, or held—not by her husband, not by her children, not by family, not by friends. She was unclean and an outcast.

And she was not getting better. She was getting worse. And to add to the indignity, she had spent all the money she had on doctors trying to find a cure for her condition, and nothing had worked. She was in a very dark and desperate place. She was almost out of hope.

Her tragic circumstances seem very much like those of the leper, who also was hopeless and without the kindness of human touch. But Jesus Christ helps the helpless and gives hope to the hopeless.

“When she heard about Jesus, she came behind Him in the crowd and touched His garment. For she said, ‘If only I may touch His clothes, I shall be made well.’ *Immediately the fountain [or outflow] of her blood was dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of the affliction*” (verses 27-29).

This is astounding! She touched Jesus’ garment and immediately felt that she had been healed. Perhaps it was like a shock of electricity that went through her. But she wasn’t the only one who sensed this—Jesus felt it too.

“And Jesus, immediately knowing in Himself that power had gone out of Him, turned around in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched My clothes?’

“But His disciples said to Him, ‘You see the multitude thronging You, and You say, “Who touched Me?”’ And He looked around to see her who had done this thing.

“But the woman, fearing and trembling, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell down before Him and told Him the whole truth. And He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well. Go in peace, and be healed of your affliction’” (verses 30-34).

Again we see a remarkable story of God’s power and grace at work in the life of Jesus Christ!

Jesus’ concern for children

The Gospels record how Jesus often concerned Himself with the needs of others. In His day children were rightly viewed as a blessing from God (Psalm 127:3-5), but were at times overlooked when it came to adult matters such as spiritual discussions.

Jesus, however, went out of His way to show concern to even very young children. We find this recorded in Mark 10:13-16: “Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them.

“But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.’ And He took them up in His arms, put His hands on them, and blessed them.”

Jesus was fully dedicated to and involved in the most important mission

in the history of humankind. But what did He do when parents brought their little children to Him? He took time out of His day to not only pay attention to them, but to “bless” them—to ask God for His blessing on them.

To Jesus Christ, no one was too little or too unimportant for His time—even the youngest and tiniest of human beings. He would treat them also

Rescued Through God’s Grace: Mary’s Story

Many are not aware that the words translated “save” and “savior” in the Bible can refer to more than ultimate salvation in the spiritual sense. The original Hebrew and Greek terms (and their variations) also have connotations of “rescue” and “deliver”—to save in an immediate sense, to rescue from dangerous or hopeless circumstances or situations.

Both God the Father and Jesus Christ are called our Savior in the Bible, and rightly so. We cannot receive God’s gift of salvation by grace without Them. But we should also consider that They are our Rescuers and Deliverers from hopeless situations during this life.

Sometimes we must be rescued and delivered from desperate situations before we can move forward on the path toward God’s spiritual salvation. We encounter a number of such individuals in the Bible.

A woman in desperate need of rescue

Miriam, a Jewish woman living in the first century, was one such person. Better known to us today as Mary Magdalene, she lived in the small fishing village of Magdala on the shores of the Sea of Galilee about a five-mile walk from Capernaum, where Jesus Christ lived after relocating from Nazareth.

We know little about her background. We don’t know her age, we don’t know whether she was married or single, we don’t know if she had children, we don’t know what ultimately happened to her. But we do know that *she desperately needed to be rescued*.

Mary, you see, was *possessed by seven demons* (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2).

Today in our supposedly enlightened age it’s easy to dismiss demonic influence and possession as some kind of superstition or misunderstanding of mental illness rooted in myths. But the Bible is firm on the existence of a very real spirit world paralleling and overlapping our own and inhabited by evil, fallen rebellious angels—the chief of these being Satan the devil.

At times, as Scripture shows, demons may inhabit human beings—leading to bizarre, unpredictable, dangerous and often self-destructive behavior. What was Mary’s life like in this condition? We aren’t given the details, but under the best of circumstances it must’ve been a kind of living hell. We sometimes speak of the lives of generally unstable people today with such phrases as “a train wreck,” “off the rails” or “a disaster waiting to happen.” And no doubt this was her life.

Demon possession makes a person dangerous, delusional and difficult in ways the average person can’t begin to comprehend. This is evident in biblical examples where individuals possessed by demons mutilated themselves, threw themselves into fire, tore off their clothing, randomly shrieked and screamed, and lived in tombs among dead, decaying bodies. The picture is understandably bleak, because such people are no longer in control of their lives and actions. More than anything, they need to be rescued!

A powerful rescue and the grateful response

The Bible doesn’t tell us when, where or how, but Mary *was rescued*. Jesus taught and

with grace and concern, just as He treated all others.

Feeding of the multitudes

While many of Christ’s miracles were one on one, as in those noted above, in some cases they affected thousands at a time. These were the

healed in the towns and synagogues all around Galilee, including casting out demons. No doubt He visited Magdala, and no doubt people from Magdala made the short walk to Capernaum to hear Him teach and to be healed. Somewhere during that time Mary the demoniac became “Mary . . .

out of whom He had cast seven demons” (Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2).



Mary of Magdala, commonly known as Mary Magdalene, was rescued by Jesus Christ when He cast seven demons out of her and gave her a normal life. Her story is a powerful example of God’s grace and how He can rescue people from hopeless situations.

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Jesus was a living example of grace in action, and in that grace He first became Mary’s Rescuer and then her Savior in the ultimate sense. In her grateful devotion she became one of His most dedicated and loyal followers. Notice what the Gospels tell us about her:

• She was part of the group that followed Jesus from place to place, which included her and several other women who “were helping to support them out of their own means” (Luke 8:3, NIV).

• Faithful to the end, she was a witness to Jesus’ crucifixion and burial after most of Jesus’ male disciples had abandoned Him and fled (Matthew 27:55-61).

• After Jesus’ body was entombed, she was

one of the women who bought and prepared spices to anoint His body (Mark 16:1).

• She and some other women were the first to come to the tomb, where they saw the stone rolled away and an angel told them to go tell the other disciples that Jesus had risen from the dead (verses 2-7).

• She told the others this dramatic news, but they didn’t believe her (Luke 24:9-11).

• She was the first of Jesus’ followers to whom He appeared after His resurrection from the dead (Mark 16:9; John 20:11-17).

Of the many individuals we encounter in the Gospels, Mary is one of the very few of whom nothing negative is written—other than the fact that at one time Jesus had cast seven demons out of her. But even that is simply stated as a way of differentiating her from the several other women named Mary in the Gospel accounts. In no way is that meant to impugn her character.

In the story of Mary we see a wonderful example of the working of grace. Through circumstances beyond her control, she was in a dire and desperate place. Jesus recognized that and delivered her from that demonic possession and influence in a loving act of mercy and grace.

In her gratitude (a word rooted in *grace*, in the sense of returning benevolence for benevolence received), she became a devoted follower of her Rescuer whom she came to know as her spiritual Savior, Master and Lord. As a result, the Gospel writers hold her up as a role model for all others who have been recipients of God’s gift of grace. We, too, should be devoted followers, dedicating our lives to serving the Giver of so much good to us—just as Mary did!

feeding of the multitudes, a miracle Jesus performed twice. (For accuracy's sake we note that Jesus said the miracles were done *through* Him, giving credit to God the Father, saying in John 5:30, "I can of Myself do nothing," and in John 14:10, "the Father who dwells in Me does the works." Still, it's proper to speak of Jesus doing miracles, since Scripture itself states that "He healed" various people.)

We find the first instance of feeding thousands in Mark 6. Feeling the pressures from the multitudes following Him, Jesus and the apostles "departed to a deserted place" for some quiet time alone (verses 31-32). The story then picks up in verses 34-44 when the crowds catch up with Him:

"And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things."

Notice here what motivates Jesus. Although He had slipped away to a deserted area for some much-needed rest and privacy, when the crowds caught up He "*was moved with compassion for them.*" He was a naturally compassionate and empathetic person.

"When the day was now far spent, His disciples came to Him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and already the hour is late. Send them away, that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy themselves bread; for they have nothing to eat.'

"But He answered and said to them, 'You give them something to eat.' And they said to Him, 'Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give them something to eat?'"

Two hundred denarii was more than half a year's wages, so this was a huge crowd to feed—so large that it would've required the equivalent of many thousands of dollars! Besides, it was now late in the day, and it would've taken time for the apostles or the crowd to disperse to nearby villages to find enough food to eat—if that were even possible at this late hour.

"But He said to them, 'How many loaves do you have? Go and see.' And when they found out they said, 'Five, and two fish.'

"Then He commanded them to make them all sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in ranks, in hundreds and in fifties. And when He had taken the five loaves and the two fish, He looked up to heaven, blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to His disciples to set before them; and the two fish He divided among them all.

"*So they all ate and were filled.* And they took up twelve baskets full of fragments and of the fish. Now *those who had eaten the loaves were about five thousand men.*"

From five loaves of bread and two fish, Jesus fed about 5,000 men—not counting women and children (Matthew 14:21), which may have brought the crowd to about 15,000 people. And not wasting anything,

they collected 12 baskets of leftovers!

What was a big part of Christ's motivation for this incredible miracle of generosity and concern? He "*was moved with compassion*" for those assembled. He truly and deeply cared for others. He was unwilling to see anyone go away hungry for the night.

This is expressed even more deeply in a near-repeat of the miracle in Mark 8. There Mark says in verses 1-3: "In those days, the multitude being very great and having nothing to eat, Jesus called His disciples to Him and said to them, '*I have compassion on the multitude*, because they have now continued with Me three days and have nothing to eat. And if I send them away hungry to their own houses, they will faint on the way; for some of them have come from afar.'"

As before, He is motivated by compassion because He truly cares about people. All this time He shows His and the Father's care by healing and teaching large numbers of people, but He also notices something—He sees that they are hungry. So again He multiplies a few loaves and fishes to feed the crowd, this time about 4,000 men (verses 4-9)—again, not including the women and children (Matthew 15:38).

So once more we see God's care and grace in action, personified in the life and actions of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus resurrects a widow's son

Jesus Christ's compassion led to other acts of grace, kindness and love—including raising people from the dead! We read of an example of this in Luke 7:11-17:

"Now it happened, the day after, that He went into a city called Nain; and many of His disciples went with Him, and a large crowd. And when He came near the gate of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her.

"When the Lord saw her, *He had compassion on her* and said to her, 'Do not weep.' Then He came and touched the open coffin, and those who carried him stood still. And He said, 'Young man, I say to you, arise.

"So he who was dead sat up and began to speak. And He presented him to his mother. Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen up among us'; and, 'God has visited His people.' And this report about Him went throughout all Judea and all the surrounding region."

Here again we have a dramatic miracle *where Jesus wasn't even asked to perform one*. As Luke records, Jesus and many of His followers are about to enter the city when they meet a funeral procession bearing the only son of a widowed mother. Jesus had compassion on the woman who

A Parable Showing the Magnitude of God's Grace

As we see repeatedly in the surrounding chapter, Jesus exemplified God's grace again and again in what He did while on earth. And the Gospels are filled with many other such examples. But Jesus also told a remarkable *story* that illustrates the magnitude of God's grace toward us. Commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son, it's found in Luke 15:11-32.

Jesus began: "A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood."

In the culture of that day, it would've been extremely insulting for a son to treat his father like this. To ask for one's inheritance while the father was still alive meant rejecting the father—in effect wishing he were dead and out of the picture. It was virtually unheard of for anyone to dishonor his father in this way. This illustration would've been shocking to Jesus' audience, leading them to pay close attention.

He continued: "And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living"—a reckless and wild lifestyle.

To Jesus' Galilean Jewish audience, the far country and another factor we'll note shortly would've brought to mind the gentile area to the east of the Sea of Galilee, the pagan area of the Decapolis where the Greeks had founded a number of cities a few centuries earlier. The culture there was thoroughly pagan and sinful, characterized by idolatry and sexual sins of all kinds. Essentially the young son took off and wasted his inheritance on wine, women and song. A modern equivalent might be going to Las Vegas and blowing hundreds of thousands of dollars on gambling, girls and partying.

This story is quite poignant, for who does the father symbolize in this story? *God the Father*, of course. And who is the lost son? That's *each of*

us, those who at some point in life determined to go our own way apart from God. The father in the parable, representing God, is utterly heartbroken and grieving over the foolish actions of his child. But he knows he can't live the son's life for him or force him to change his mind.



The parable of the prodigal son illustrates the love God has for all of His children, even those who foolishly reject Him.

Back to the parable: "But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine."

This is how we know the son went to a pagan gentile area, because he ends up feeding swine—which were commonly raised for food and also for sacrifices at the many pagan temples. The son has hit rock bottom. Once the money of his inheritance had run out, his newfound friends had run out too. Now he has nothing. The money is gone, the friends are gone, the fun is gone, and the party's over. Reality has set in—he's hungry, and the only job he can find is feeding the pigs in this pagan land.

He was so desperate that what he was feeding the pigs started to look good: "And he would

gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger!'"

Here's the key—"when he came to himself." He's been lost, and now he begins to come to his senses. He realizes that his father's hired workers have it better than he does, so he makes a life-changing decision.

"I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'"

He acknowledges that he has sinned, both against God as well as against his own father. He knows he has lost all claim and rights to be called a son or to receive any inheritance—he gave that up long ago. Now he just wants a job as a servant, which is better than he has it now.

"And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, *his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him.*"

The father, picturing God Himself, has been looking down the road, hoping and waiting for this son to one day return, and now he sees him far off and *runs to his long-lost son and showers him with affection and love!* This is before the son has even made it all the way back and given his rehearsed speech.

"And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

The father, however, would have none of it. "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet.'"

The robe and ring were symbols of being accepted back into the family as a son. He was not being accepted back as a servant—the best he could've reasonably expected, and likely not even that—but as a full son again.

"And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is

found.' And they began to be merry."

The primary lesson of this parable is that our God is a loving Father who doesn't give up on His children. Even when we foolishly reject Him and turn our backs on Him, He still loves us and desperately wants us to return to Him.

However, He will not *force* us to turn back to Him since He has given us freedom of choice, and all of us must at times experience consequences from our mistakes to grow in wisdom and judgment, learning love and all God's ways above the ways that seem right to us.

And when we *do* turn to God—regardless of the seriousness of our sins and mistakes—He is there to figuratively throw His arms around us, smother us with love and affection and welcome us to His family. *It's a strikingly beautiful picture of His love toward us!*

There's another lesson here too. The parable goes on to describe the very different reaction of the other son who had been faithful and never left. The other son doesn't even acknowledge his own brother. To the father he calls him "this son of yours." He doesn't accept his own brother back, but rejects and resents him and is angered at his father's love for his brother who has now returned.

The father gently responds: "Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours. It was right that we should make merry and be glad, for your brother was dead and is alive again, and was lost and is found."

This also is a powerful lesson for us. No one should act like this other son, ready to cast the first stone at someone we might view as a sinner, but rather we should love them as God loves them and rejoice whenever a person turns to God. Yet note that the father is also merciful to this upset son in going out to him, being gentle with him, assuring him of blessing and in teaching him the proper attitude and way of life.

In all this, we see that God loves us deeply and forgives us far more than we could ever deserve—and that we must learn to also be merciful and forgiving toward others, as Jesus Christ taught again and again throughout the Gospels. *This is grace in action.*

had lost her son, stopped the procession and raised the son to life on the spot—*without being asked*.

He showed God's grace by unexpectedly giving life to the woman's son—just as He had led His prophet Elisha to do in nearly the same place centuries earlier (2 Kings 4:8-37), and Elijah before that (1 Kings 17:17-24). This was especially important for a widow in this culture, since her only son would've been expected to care for her in her old age. Jesus knew this and gave her a double blessing—blessing her at that moment by giving her back her son, and blessing her in the future by restoring the son who would care for her in her later years.

The woman caught in adultery

Many times Jesus' enemies tried to trap Him and accuse Him, even when it came to matters of forgiveness and mercy. We find a striking example of this in John 8:2-11:

"Now early in the morning He came again into the temple, and all the people came to Him; and He sat down and taught them. Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?'"

"This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, 'He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.' And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground."

They were trying to trap and discredit Jesus, but He turned the tables on them, causing them to be convicted by their own consciences.

"Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, 'Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?'"

"She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said to her, 'Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.'"

The woman had escaped death by stoning by the slimmest of margins, and she knew it. She had been caught in her sin and was obviously guilty. She deserved the penalty the law demanded. And it would likely have been carried out except for God's saving grace through the intervention of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Himself had given the judgment on adultery in the Old Testament.

But this situation was a total mockery, with those guilty under the law set to mete out "justice." Jesus confounded them, leaving no witnesses for a conviction, and thereby saved this woman's life. But Jesus also had the authority of judgment from the Father (John 5:22) and the power to forgive sins—and He expressed God's mercy. In fact, He would soon take the penalty she deserved on Himself.

Does this woman's story have anything to do with us? It does, because *her story is our story*. Each of us was also a sinner, caught dead to rights in our guilt and sins. We deserved that same death penalty. But Jesus stepped in and said to us by His actions, "*Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.*" Jesus gave His life for us that we might be forgiven and have that awful penalty removed—and then live the right way!

Learning grace from Jesus Christ's example

As we have seen, the Gospels repeatedly show Jesus Christ exemplifying grace in His thoughts, actions and teaching. We encourage you to regularly read the Gospels to learn more from His example.

If we are to be good stewards of God's grace in ministering that to others as Peter admonishes us to do (1 Peter 4:10), this is the kind of compassion, mercy and love that we must continually demonstrate in our lives.

If we were to sum up what we have seen in this chapter, we might say that *grace is the very nature and character of God that He expects us to exemplify in our lives*.

Jesus Christ is the perfect example of this grace in action. May we all follow His example in every way!

Grace and Law: What Does the Bible Say?

“They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (Jude 3-4, NIV).

If there’s one thing that should be fully evident by now in our look at what the Bible teaches about grace, it is that *grace personifies the nature and character of God*. Grace is who and what He is. Grace is how He thinks and acts. Grace defines and characterizes Him. And we should be very grateful for that!

How, then, does grace relate to God’s law? Many people get confused in their thinking over this. They may not have critically examined their thinking to realize that they may hold *inconsistent and contradictory* thoughts about God.

What about you? Are your beliefs about God really rooted in truth, or rooted in wrong ideas that for centuries have *masqueraded* as truth?

Many people, based on misunderstandings of some of the apostle Paul’s writings, have wrongly been taught or come to believe that God’s law is some kind of curse or punishment. Yet Paul himself clearly stated that “the law is *holy*, and the commandment *holy and just and good*” (Romans 7:12).

Paul also wrote, “*I delight in the law according to the inward man*” (verse 22)—or, as the New Living Translation puts it, “*I love God’s law with all my heart.*”

Grace and law both reflect God’s perfect mind and character

What too many people fail to realize is that just as *grace* is a perfect reflection of God’s mind and character, *so is God’s law a perfect reflection of God’s mind and character* (see “God’s Law Reflects His Mind and Character” on page 51). This is why King David, a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22), wrote, “*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul*” (Psalm 19:7).

God’s law reveals His thinking and way of life—a way that leads to great blessings. As He told ancient Israel through Moses: “You shall therefore *keep His statutes and His commandments* which I command you today, *that it may go well with you and with your children after you, and*

that you may prolong your days in the land which the LORD your God is giving you for all time” (Deuteronomy 4:40).

This promise is repeated in slightly different form in Deuteronomy 12:28: “Observe and obey all these words which I command you, *that it may go well with you and your children after you forever*, when you do *what is good and right* in the sight of the LORD your God.”

Through Moses, God told the Israelites that if they obeyed His law, they would be respected and admired by the nations around them: “Surely I have taught you statutes and judgments, just as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should act according to them in the land which you go to possess. Therefore be careful to observe them; *for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples* who will hear all these statutes, and say, ‘*Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.*’

“For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him? And *what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?*” (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

God’s Law Reflects His Mind and Character

God’s law is a reflection of God’s mind, nature and character. His character is summed up in 1 John 4:8: “God is love.” And 1 John 5:3 tells us, “This is the love of God, that we keep His commandments.” Furthermore, *God and His law share the same characteristics*. We might say that His law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, is *His character in written form*. In the same way, Jesus Christ showed God’s character, mind and nature in perfectly keeping God’s law, which is His pattern for a holy life. Just as God doesn’t change in the way He thinks and deals with people (Malachi 3:6), neither does His law change (Matthew 5:18), because it is a reflection of God’s unchangeable character and eternal values.

	GOD IS . . .	THE LAW IS . . .
Holy	Isaiah 5:16	Romans 7:12
Love	1 John 4:8, 16	Romans 13:10
Good	Luke 18:19	1 Timothy 1:8
Perfect	Matthew 5:48	Psalm 19:7
Pure	1 John 3:2-3	Psalm 19:8
True	John 3:33	Psalms 19:9
Just	Deuteronomy 32:4	Romans 7:12
Righteousness	Jeremiah 23:6	Psalm 119:172
Faithful	1 Corinthians 1:9	Psalm 119:86
Upright	Deuteronomy 32:4	Psalm 111:7-8
Unchangeable	James 1:17	Matthew 5:18
Everlasting	Genesis 21:33	Psalm 111:7-8

Psalm 119—the Bible’s longest chapter—is a lengthy praise of thanks for God’s law and the blessings it brings to those who live by it. Those who

“You Are Not Under Law, but Under Grace”

Many people point to Romans 6:14, which says, “You are not under law, but under grace,” to argue that Christians, being under grace, no longer need to obey God’s law.

But is that what the verse means? We need only to read the next two verses to see that the apostle Paul ridicules that idea! He writes: “What then? *Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!* Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (verses 15-16, NIV).

Some people had assumed that grace meant they could continue in a sinful lifestyle. Paul scorns that idea, saying sin is a form of slavery that leads to death.

But what does Paul mean by “under law” and “under grace”? When the meaning of a Bible passage is unclear, we should first read the context—the verses before and after. That will usually help clear up any confusion. At times we will need to read the entire chapter or even the entire book or how certain language is used elsewhere to see the context.

Interestingly, the epistle to the Romans—the letter that misguided theologians cite the most in arguing that Paul dismissed the Old Testament as being valid for Christians—actually has the largest number of Old Testament quotes that Paul uses to support his teachings! Paul quotes or paraphrases the Old Testament *84 times* in this letter—an average of more than five times per chapter!

So it’s nonsensical to argue that Paul in Romans is arguing against the validity or authority of the Old Testament or the laws of God written there. In all, Paul quotes or paraphrases 184 Old Testament passages in his writings (not counting another 83 in the

book of Hebrews, which he likely also wrote), and this figure doesn’t include his additional dozens of references to people, places and events in the Old Testament. Who in his right mind quotes from a source as a primary support of his teachings while simultaneously arguing that this source is no longer valid or authoritative? Clearly that makes no sense. (This is addressed in detail in our free book *The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God’s Law?*)

What subject is Paul addressing?

But back to the context of Romans 6—what subject is Paul actually addressing? In verses 1-2 Paul tells us: “What shall we say then? *Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?* Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?”

The issue or question he is addressing is simple: Can a Christian who has “died to sin”—by recognizing that his or her sin deserves the death penalty, and has sincerely repented, been baptized as a symbol of burying the old person in a watery grave and been symbolically raised to a new life as an entirely new person now led by God’s Spirit—continue in a life of sin? Paul’s answer is blunt and simple: “*Certainly not!*”

In no way does grace nullify, invalidate or negate God’s law. As explained in this chapter, God’s law is actually another gift of God’s grace toward mankind—it reveals the thinking, character and mind of God and shows us the way He wants us to live! The longest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119, is one long hymn of praise and thanks to God for the wisdom of God’s law and the blessings it brings to those who obey it. Grace and law don’t *contradict* one another, they greatly *complement* each other!

After the first few verses of Romans 6, Paul goes into a detailed discussion of two ways

view God’s law negatively would do well to read and carefully consider the words God inspired to be written here!

of life. One is our old way of living that led to slavery to sin, suffering and death (sin being the breaking of God’s law, 1 John 3:4). The other, continuing in Romans 6, is to “die with Christ” (verse 8), accepting His sacrifice to pay the death penalty we deserved, symbolically dying and being buried with Him in baptism, then rising from that watery grave “in newness of life” (verse 4), now “alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (verse 11).

Now living a new life led by God’s Holy Spirit, we are to “not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts” (verse 12), but to “present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead” (verse 13).

The crux of the matter

Then we come to Paul’s pivotal statement in verse 14: “For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.”

With the background leading up to this, Paul’s meaning is clear. For a Christian, “*sin shall not have dominion over you*”—because Christians are freed from slavery to sin (from being under sin’s “dominion”) by Christ having died for us and are now “dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (verse 11). Sin no longer has us enslaved. We have escaped its power and its penalty of death.

“For you are not under law but under grace.” Throughout the chapter up to this point Paul has been comparing and contrasting a sinful way of life that leads to death and a way of receiving and accepting God’s gift of grace and mercy that leads to a new way of life that will ultimately be *eternal* life.

Now he compares and contrasts two very different outcomes. “Under law,” in this context, is referring to being *under the penalty* of the law—which, as he has mentioned in nearly every verse up to this point, *is death*. The law required death as punishment for sin. *That never changed*. What changed is that through

God’s grace, Jesus Christ emptied Himself of the glory, splendor, majesty and power that He shared with God the Father and came to earth as a physical human being to take that awful penalty on Himself in our place (Philippians 2:5-8; 1 Peter 1:18-19).

Because of that supreme sacrifice on our behalf and His resurrection from the dead—also mentioned in nearly every verse in this chapter up to this point—we are no longer under the penalty of death, but “under grace.” In God’s grace He has called us to His truth, forgiven our sins by the sacrifice of His Son, and offers us resurrection to eternal life just as Jesus Christ has been resurrected to eternal life.

Paul goes on to explain the only logical response in the lives of those who experience and recognize this great gift of God’s grace: “But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, *you became slaves of righteousness*” (verses 17-18).

In deep gratitude our response to God is to become “slaves of righteousness”—totally committed and dedicated to our new Master and totally rejecting our old master of sin and death. Thus, being under grace does not mean out from under obligation to obey God’s law. Being under grace means out from under the penalty of the law for breaking it so that we may be empowered with new life to live in obedience to it in following Jesus Christ as Ruler of our lives!

Paul summarizes the point of this discussion in the last verse of the chapter, verse 23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” “Gift” here translates the Greek word *charisma*, closely related to the word *charis*, meaning “grace.” And *charisma* means “gift”—the gift in this case being “eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”—the ultimate gift of God’s grace!

Longstanding bias against God's laws

These and many other passages make it clear that *God intended His laws to be a blessing for individuals and nations*. In two long chapters of the Bible, Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, God lists many great national blessings that would come on a people for obeying His laws—as well as the consequences (in the form of curses) that would fall on those who rejected and disobeyed those laws.

In light of the fact that God so often promises blessings for obedience to His laws, how did they come to be viewed so negatively—even among churches and denominations that call themselves Christian?

The short answer is found in Romans 8:7: “The mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God *because it does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it is unable to do so*” (Christian Standard Bible).

Faith Puts the Law on “Firmer Footing”

A comment by Paul that many lift out of context and misinterpret is Romans 3:28: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith *apart from* the deeds of the law.”

What did he mean by “apart from the deeds of the law?” Was he saying that one who follows a pattern of life that is apart from—or contrary to—the teachings of the law is pleasing to God?

Let's carefully follow his reasoning. Only a few verses later he asks and answers a crucial question: “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law” (Romans 3:31).

The New Revised Standard Version renders Paul's powerful words: “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.” The New English Bible translates Paul's meaning even more clearly: “Does this mean that we are using faith to undermine law? By no means: *we are placing law itself on a firmer footing.*”

Biblical scholar Dr. Brad Young explains: “The words ‘place on a firmer footing’ is a far better translation of the meaning of the words in Greek. The Greek term *histemi*, ‘stand’ or ‘place on a firmer footing’ is the equivalent of

the Hebrew word *kiyem*, ‘cause to stand’ or ‘make to stand through proper interpretation.’ Paul desired to place Torah [the law] on a firmer footing through faith” (*Paul the Jewish Theologian*, 1997, p. 97).

Paul is in complete agreement with how the Bible defines sin—that sin is disobedience to God's law (1 John 3:4). He explains that “by the law is the knowledge of sin”—it tells us what sin is (Romans 3:20). He summarizes the matter in these words: “Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12). And in explaining that faith in Christ is needed to be forgiven of sin, he shows that the law is still valid.

The validity of the law, however, does not take care of the problem that people will not obey it. God lamented of ancient Israel, “Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!” (Deuteronomy 5:29).

Yet under the New Covenant, a new mind and heart (that comes through the indwelling faith of Christ through the Holy Spirit) makes true obedience possible (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:7-13; Galatians 2:20). Faith thus enables obedience!

Given this ingrained hostility to God's laws, men and women—including many who view themselves as deeply religious—try to rationalize around the need to live according to God's laws.

This is nothing new—it goes all the way back to the early decades of the Church. Even though Jesus Christ had plainly told people *not to think* He “came to destroy the Law or the Prophets” (referring to the portion of the Bible we know as the Old Testament), and that He said, “. . . Till heaven and earth pass away, *one jot or one tittle* [small strokes in the Hebrew letters the Old Testament was written with] *will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled,*” and further, “Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew



Some people twist Jesus Christ's words about God's law to mean the exact opposite of what He said.

5:17-19), some people twist even these words to mean the *exact opposite* of what Christ said.

Abusing God's gift of grace

One way people have tried to do away with any need to obey God's law is the argument that grace has made it unnecessary. Since God's grace has brought forgiveness, they've reasoned, one can continue sinning—with God always forgiving.

Jude, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, understood that this makes a mockery of God's grace. “I felt compelled to write and urge you to *contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God's holy people,*” he wrote regarding those who were teaching a very different message. “For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are *ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord*” (Jude 3-4, NIV).

By viewing God's grace as permission to continue a life of unrepentant sinning, these false teachers were abusing God's mercy and forgiveness. Continuing to live a sinful life makes a mockery of Jesus Christ's sacrifice to pay the penalty for sins—effectively denying our

The Apostle Paul: an Example of God's Grace in Action

The word *grace* had deep meaning for the apostle Paul. His letters form the bulk of what we today call the New Testament, and in those letters he used the Greek word *charis*, most often translated “grace,” approximately 100 times. Remarkably, the subject of grace shows up multiple times in every one of his letters that has been preserved for us.

When we understand his story, we begin to understand why!

Of the many individuals mentioned in the Bible, Paul is certainly one of the most intriguing. He committed his life to serving God early on and studied under one of the most famous rabbis of the day, Gamaliel—a teacher whose reputation was such that other rabbis and scholars would quote him for centuries. This was no small accomplishment, because a rabbi of that stature would accept only the best and brightest students as his disciples.

As a young man everything was going well for Paul. As he put it, “I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:14). He was well on his way to becoming a famous rabbi himself, “taught according to the strictness of our fathers’ law, and . . . zealous toward God” (Acts 22:3).

Misdirected zeal with dire consequences

But zeal, as history and the Bible show, is not always a good thing.

Zeal can be either good or very destructive, depending on the cause for which one is zealous. In Paul’s case, his misguided zeal in support of the religion of his people led him to horrible acts, including murder of Christians. Let’s read it in his own words:

“I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it” (Galatians 1:13).

“I persecuted this Way to the death, binding

and delivering into prisons both men and women . . . and went to Damascus to bring in chains even those who were there to Jerusalem to be punished” (Acts 22:4-5).

“Many of the saints [or Christian believers]



As a vengeful and violent man, Paul vigorously persecuted members of the early Church, leading to the imprisonment and deaths of many. But after he was miraculously struck down on the road to Damascus, he became a powerful figure in the spread of Christianity.

I shut up in prison . . . and 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 26:10-11).

By no stretch of the imagination was Paul, at that time known by his Hebrew name of Saul, a nice person. He was a vengeful and violent man who persecuted and killed those with whom he disagreed—in this case Christians, both men and women. Due to his actions, wives were left widows. Husbands lost their wives. Children were orphaned. Families lost their homes and businesses. Some became fugitives, fleeing for their lives. The first time Paul is mentioned in the Bible, the martyr Stephen was brutally stoned to death by an enraged mob while

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Paul stood by “consenting to his death” (Acts 7:58-8:1).

When he next appears, he is “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” seeking authorization to travel to Damascus to arrest any Christians he might find there to “bring them bound to Jerusalem” for trial and possible execution (Acts 9:1-2).

A divine encounter on the road to Damascus

But Paul experienced God’s grace in a powerful and life-transforming way. While traveling to Damascus to carry out this mission, he was suddenly struck down and temporarily blinded. As he groveled in the dirt of the roadway, a voice said to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?”

Stunned, he replied, “Who are You, Lord?”

The shocking response was, *“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting . . . Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do”* (verses 4-6).

Paul was then baptized. Empowered by God’s Spirit, “immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God” (verse 20). Later he would spend three years being personally taught by Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12, 17-18).

Paul grew spiritually to become a deeply converted man. The zeal he had once directed at exterminating the Church of God was now directed toward building it.

His efforts did not come without a steep personal price: “From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; [I have been] in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness . . .” (2 Corinthians 11:24-28).

How often during such times was Paul haunted by the faces of innocent men and women he had rounded up, torn from their families and sent to prison or to their deaths? We don’t know, but we do know that Paul knew he was a “wretched man” deserving of death (Romans 7:24).

He wrote to his dear friend and disciple Timothy that “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—*of whom I am the worst*” (1 Timothy 1:15, NIV).

A grateful teacher of grace

He also told Timothy: “Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. *The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly*, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (verses 13-14, NIV).

Paul came to thoroughly understand the workings of and marvelous gift that is grace. After repenting of his previous misdeeds, he was used in a powerful way. He knew that God could and would forgive even the seemingly unforgivable. Thus he wrote, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:1).

Paul fully understood that Jesus had given His life as a sacrificial offering for our sins and that, despite what Paul had done, he was no longer condemned. For Paul, God’s grace had conquered sin and death (Romans 3:24-26). Having been saved by grace, he now lived by grace, dedicating his life to “the gospel [good news] of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).

It’s no wonder, then, that Paul wrote so much about God’s grace and goodness. He was a living and profound example of God’s grace in action! As he wrote further in 1 Timothy 1:16 (NLT): “But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.”

Master and Lord who had given His life for them.

The book of Hebrews issues a scathing condemnation of those who would abuse God's grace on the assumption that it allows us to continue in sin:

"For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries."

"Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. *How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has spurned the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace?*" (Hebrews 10:26-29, English Standard Version).

Clearly God's grace does not allow us to continue in sin!

Saved by "faith alone"?

A major theological phrase that emerged from the Protestant Revolution five centuries ago was *solo fide*—"by faith alone." The Catholic monk

Grace, Faith and Law

Paul taught that salvation is a gift from God by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8). The Greek word for "grace" is *charis*, meaning a gift or favor. Paul makes it clear throughout his writings that God's grace leading to salvation is "not of works, lest anyone should boast" (verse 9). But Paul's overall perspective toward Christian works is generally ignored by opponents of obedience to God's law.

Look at Paul's perspective in the next verse: "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (verse 10). Those who ignore the reasons for our being God's "workmanship," who ignore why we are "created in Christ Jesus for good works" and why we are to "walk in them," miss a major part of Paul's message.

Notice the correlation Paul draws between our obedient works related to salvation and God's work within us to accomplish His purpose in us: "Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own

salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13).

Certainly forgiveness and salvation are gifts from God. They cannot be earned. As human beings we possess nothing of sufficient value to pay for the forgiveness of our sins and our salvation. Yet Jesus bluntly tells us that "unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5). Through repentance we do not *earn* salvation, but repentance is a *prerequisite* for salvation.

Repentance is simply turning away from sin, forsaking lawless behavior (1 John 3:4). We can't receive God's Holy Spirit and be converted unless we are willing to repent and live as law-abiding people (Acts 2:38).

Faith is another prerequisite for salvation. We read that "without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Hebrews 11:6). We must be "justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith" (Romans 3:24-25). But simply because faith is required by God

Martin Luther strongly opposed certain unbiblical and corrupt teachings and practices of the Roman church he was part of, particularly the sale of "indulgences" based on the idea that people could, by deeds such as financial payments, gifts or service to the church, lessen their or their loved ones' punishment in a supposed "purgatory" in the afterlife. He condemned these sales as a deceitful means to filling the coffers of the church and its leaders.

Luther's goal was to reform the Catholic Church. However, his protests against Catholic practices and teachings took hold among many other people, and the more the Roman church tried to stamp out dissent, the more dissent grew. Luther's protests in time spawned the Protestant Reformation—a protest movement that did lead to reform, albeit principally through the rise of many new Protestant churches where previously there had been one major dominant and universal (the meaning of "catholic") church.

Luther's catchphrase *solo fide*, "by faith alone," summed up his opposition to not only practices such as the sale of indulgences and the notion

doesn't mean we *earn* salvation by having faith.

Neither do we earn salvation through works. But, as the many scriptures cited in this study guide show, God clearly expects faith *and* obedience in those to whom He will extend the gift of eternal life. Those who oppose the need for obedience to God's laws choose to emphasize certain statements Paul makes and totally ignore others that clarify his intent.

Paul's discussion of faith and works in Romans 3 is one such passage. In verse 28 we read, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." Paul is here discussing initial justification—Christ's death covering our previous transgressions and God accepting our repentant resolve to change. Paul is showing that we could never *earn* forgiveness.

But that is a different subject than the importance of God's law as the guide to our behavior and how we are supposed to live. Paul is talking only about how "sins that were previously committed" can be "passed over" (verse 25) so we can get on with our lives as obedient servants of God.

To make sure we understand this, Paul says

in verse 31: "*Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.*"

Paul wants us to understand that he is not even hinting that God's law was voided or abolished. On the contrary, without the law we would have no way of understanding what sin is or is not because "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (verse 20). Remember, for sin to exist there has to be law because "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4).

Therefore, on one level Paul is saying that the concept of God's "grace" or forgiveness establishes that *His law is still in effect* and that sin is breaking that law. God's grace through faith *requires a law* that defines the sins that are to be forgiven. On another level, we should recognize that faith is what makes proper obedience possible. So, repeating Paul, "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law." (Be sure to also read "Faith Puts the Law on 'Firm Footing'" on page 54.)

To learn more about this subject, request or download our free book *The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God's Law?*

Repentance, Forgiveness, Power and Understanding Through Grace

The Bible describes sin as the deadly enemy of all mankind (Romans 6:23). Our corrupted human nature has a powerful compulsion to sin (Romans 8:7). But to receive God's gift of eternal life, we must forsake sin—a process the Bible calls *repentance*.

True repentance is the first step on our way out of sin—putting us, by God's grace, on the road to eternal life. But our human efforts are far from enough.

Without God's help, we cannot accomplish this difficult task of coming to freely admit to Him with shame and regret that we have been totally wrong in our defiance of Him and that we seriously intend to change our ways.

The apostle Paul challenged Christians in Rome with this crucial question: "Do you despise the riches of His [God's] goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that *the goodness of God leads you to repentance?*" (Romans 2:4). Indeed, God must grant us repentance (see Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25).

Acts 2:38 is one of the most crucial passages in the Bible. The apostle Peter cut to the core of what God expects from us when he told his convicted listeners: "*Repent and be baptized*, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins*. And you will receive *the gift of the Holy Spirit*" (NIV).

This passage critically shows that our repentance and God's merciful forgiveness and empowerment are all necessary parts of the overall salvation process. And these all come through His grace.

Since repentance has to occur before forgiveness, let's look at repentance first.

Repentance in action

The book of Acts covers about 30 years of early Church history. In one sense it is also a record of the repentance of God's people during the first century.

Paul, like Peter, continually preached the importance of repentance. He testified "to Jews, and also to Greeks, *repentance toward God* and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

He emphasized that promises to turn away from sin had to be reflected in obvious good works. He stated that men and women "*should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds*" (Acts 26:20, NIV).

Paul and Barnabas urged the people of Lystra to "turn from these worthless things to the living God" (Acts 14:15, NIV). Those who are truly being called by God normally feel a strong sense of urgency to move forward—taking the biblical steps our Creator requires.

Procrastination—putting off God's clear command to repent and be baptized—gets us nowhere! We have to *act* on the truth God has revealed to us. Then He will bless us by revealing more truth and helping us to follow Him. This is further pouring out of His grace.

God views sin seriously

God does not view sin lightly! He is deadly serious about it—hating the transgression of His law in any form. When King David broke the Ten Commandments through adultery and murder, the Creator asked him through Nathan the prophet: "Why did you *despise the word of the LORD* by doing what is evil in his eyes?" (2 Samuel 12:9, NIV). The shaken king responded, "I have sinned against the LORD."

But notice Nathan's reply: "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die" (verse 13, NIV). David's sincere, heartfelt repentance is detailed for us in Psalm 51. You should read this psalm to recognize the kind of heart and attitude God wants to see in us.

Our Creator hates what sin does to human beings—the harm it inevitably produces for anyone caught in its clutches. But God has mercifully provided us a way out of sin—at

great cost to Himself. Once we really grasp the greatness of God—and really begin to see ourselves in comparison to our Creator like Job did—we are on our way to genuine, heartfelt repentance.

Notice what this ancient patriarch said in reply to God's personal revelation to him: "I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted . . . My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:2, 5-6, NIV).

God's merciful and compassionate forgiveness

King David expressed God's gracious nature in Psalm 103: "Praise the LORD, my soul . . . and forget not all his benefits [which are through grace]—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases . . . The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love . . . He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.

"For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (verses 1-14, NIV).

Once you have truly repented of your sins, God's forgiveness is total and complete. He applies the sacrificial blood of His Son Jesus Christ to you personally. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

In His grace and mercy God blots out our transgressions of His law through the sacrifice of Christ, "in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:14).

Christ's atoning sacrifice can and will provide a way to clear our troubled consciences and rid

us of guilt: "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God" (verse 14, NIV).

Empowerment and instruction to eternal life

After repentance and water baptism, we receive God's Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). This begins a completely changed life for the true Christian. Once this bridge has been crossed, our salvation is sure—provided we keep to the path of God's law. As the psalmist wrote, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalms 119:105). Spiritual empowerment and instruction here are still further aspects of God's grace, continuing on to everlasting life.

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him [the Father] who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he [or she] has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24, NIV 1984).

The apostle John repeated this encouraging truth in 1 John 5:11-12: "And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life."

After His resurrection, Jesus, speaking of Himself in the third person, told the apostles that "repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" as a key component of the mission He gave His true followers (Luke 24:47, NIV)—to be accomplished through the promised "power from on high," the Holy Spirit (verse 29).

Now we can see how genuine repentance, followed by God's merciful and compassionate forgiveness through His grace, along with spiritual empowerment and teaching—all blessings of grace—converge to impart to us true conversion and put us firmly on the road to eternal life!

that people could effectively buy their way into heavenly salvation, but even the idea that *any* kind of *works* were required for salvation, including obedience to God's law.

Luther insisted that *faith alone* was required for salvation—adding “alone” even though this idea appeared nowhere in the Bible. He read this idea *back into* the apostle Paul's writings from 15 centuries earlier, ignoring what Paul's words had meant to his original first-century audience. In fact, the book of James explicitly states that “a person is justified [made right with God] *by works and NOT by faith alone*” (James 2:24, CSB)—and for this Luther called it “an epistle of straw” and argued it should be excised from the Bible! (We'll see more from James shortly.)

In battling the wrong idea of earning salvation in one of its worst manifestations, Luther and those who took up his cause landed in the opposite ditch. Thus, out of the Protestant Reformation emerged the unbiblical idea that *grace is the opposite of law* and *law is the opposite of grace*. In reality, the opposite of law isn't grace but *lawlessness*—and the opposite of grace isn't law but *disgrace*. We must always read the Bible carefully and not jump to conclusions not supported by Scripture!

Misreading “by grace you have been saved through faith”

Where did these misguided views of Luther and other Protestant Reformers come from? In part they come from misunderstanding Ephesians 2:8-9, which reads: “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.”

These reformers saw this passage as proof that salvation comes by grace through faith and not by works—thus Luther's formulation of *solo fide*, or “faith alone.” But they should have read a little further, as Paul explains in the very next verse: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand *that we should walk in them*” (verse 10)—that is, as noted earlier, “*to be our way of life*” (NRSV).

Luther was correct that we are not saved by works. Nothing that we can or might do, including acts of obedience to God's law, could ever *earn* God's gift of salvation. However, as Paul says plainly, we are created “*for good works*” and “*we should walk in them*”—making good works a regular and habitual part of our lives!

So rather than saying good works are *unnecessary* for a Christian, Paul emphatically states that good works are a *necessary part* of a Christian's life!

What Paul is telling us here is that “by grace”—by God's merciful forgiveness of our sins for which we deserved the death penalty (Romans 6:23)—we “have been saved through faith . . .” What kind of faith is Paul referring to?

The word “faith,” like “grace,” has a broad range of meaning. The specific intention must be discerned from the context. The faith that Paul refers to in Ephesians 2 is an *active, living faith*. Our deep trust that God the Father has personally chosen us and called us into a mutually loving relationship with Him and His Son Jesus Christ in which we are to walk in good works with Their help leads us to live as we believe. (This is explained in greater detail in the next chapter, “What Did ‘Grace’ Mean in the First-Century World?” beginning on page 68.)

This meaning is evident by what Paul writes a few verses later: “He

Grace and Law: Why Are They Inseparable?

The word *grace* is regularly used by some religious people as if it replaces all need to obey God's law. That conclusion is not only inaccurate, it is also diabolical!

Here is the reason: Without law there would be no need for the grace of forgiveness. The word *grace*, as the Greek word *charis* is translated in the New Testament, is generally understood as freely shown “favor”—a gift. In a religious context the word *grace* is used most often for the gift of forgiveness. It refers to how God extends His *favor* to repentant sinners by *forgiving* their former disobedience of His law—their “sins previously committed” (Romans 3:25, NRSV).

Forgiveness is necessary because “every-one who sins *breaks the law*; in fact, *sin is lawlessness*” (1 John 3:4, NIV). If there is no law to break, sin would not exist (Romans 5:13). And if there is no sin, the very idea of *grace* as God's forgiveness has no meaning at all.

Consider that God does not just dismiss our sins, our lawless acts. Nor does He simply ignore them. Rather, “Christ *died for our sins* according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3) so “that He, *by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone*” (Hebrews 2:9).

In other words, it was to make God's *favor*—His *grace*—available to all who repent (by turning away from sin) that Jesus “gave Himself for us, that He might *redeem us from every lawless deed* and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for

good works” (Titus 2:14).

Realize that grace encompasses more than just the forgiveness for past sins. It also includes the *gift* of the Holy Spirit to help us obey God's laws. Indeed, it refers to *all* the free and undeserved gifts of God. It includes His help in initially turning us away from sin and leading us to His truth and way of life, His forgiveness of our past sins and ultimately His granting us the *greatest gift of all*—eternal life in His Kingdom.

But without law, the grace of forgiveness would be meaningless because there would be no way to define sin to be forgiven. Yet without grace, forgiveness of sin for breaking God's law could not be made available to us.

So Jesus died and rose again to make grace available to anyone who is *eager and willing* to “go and sin no more” (John 8:11). Through grace, we can first be forgiven of breaking God's laws and then empowered by the Holy Spirit to obey God's laws from the heart—with the ultimate goal and promise of being able to live for all eternity in perfect obedience.

Thus, law and grace are utterly inseparable. Law is a gift of God's grace of showing us how to live. Law is also necessary to define sin and its consequences to show the need for God's grace of forgiveness. Grace is necessary so sinners can be forgiven and led to obedience to God through the power of the Holy Spirit and the help of Jesus Christ our Savior and High Priest.

Jesus' Identity: Who Gave the Law?

Many people think Jesus of Nazareth came to do away with the law, replacing law with grace—but did He? Few things could be more important to you than understanding this matter! A careful study of Scripture shows that Jesus was much more than most people realize, and this truth has huge implications.

Scripture repeatedly tells us that no one has seen God the Father at any time. The apostle John makes this quite clear in John 1:18: “No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.”

John had just explained in this chapter that he was a personal eyewitness of “the Word” who became flesh as Jesus Christ, so this cannot refer to Him. The “God” whom no one has ever seen at any time thus has to be referring to God the Father.

John repeats this exact same statement in 1 John 4:12: “No one has seen God at any time.”

We also see two such explicit statements from Jesus Christ Himself. Notice John 5:37: “And the Father Himself, who sent Me, has testified of Me. *You have neither heard His voice at any time, nor seen His form.*”

And just to be clear, Jesus again says that no one has ever seen the Father in John 6:46: “*No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father*” (NIV).

Here Jesus plainly says that no one has seen the Father except the One who is from God—this referring to *Himself*. Of all people, He alone has seen the Father. No human being has ever seen the Father.

Yet in the books of the Old Testament period we're told that a number of people *did* see God. They include Abraham (Genesis 12:7; 15:1; 18:1), Isaac (Genesis 26:2, 24), Jacob (Genesis 28:13; 32:30; 35:9-10), Moses (Exodus 3:6; 33:11, 21-23), Aaron and the 70 elders of Israel (Exodus 24:9-11), Joshua (Joshua 6:2) and Gideon (Judges 6:14). So whom did these individuals see when they saw God? The only way we can make sense of this

is to understand that *no man had seen God the Father at any time*.

What they saw as recorded in these many passages, and at other times when God appeared to individuals, was *the Word who was with God and was God* (John 1:1), the One who was born in the flesh as Jesus of Nazareth (verse 14). With this understanding there is no contradiction. The Bible doesn't contradict itself, as “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

Jesus was the “I AM” who spoke to Moses

The One who appeared and spoke to people as God during Old Testament times was the One who became Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself clearly said this, and the people who heard Him knew that was exactly what He meant. Notice this in John 8:57-58, where Jesus was in a heated debate with some of the Jews who opposed Him, and He said that Abraham rejoiced to see His day.

“Then the Jews said to Him, ‘You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?’ Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, *before Abraham was, I AM.*’”

Here Jesus specifically told them of His divine identity—that He existed before Abraham, and then that He was the God who had interacted with people during the Old Testament period. Who did He specifically claim to be?

We find the answer in Exodus 3:13-14, where God appeared to Moses at the burning bush and told Moses that He would deliver the Israelites from their enslavement in Egypt.

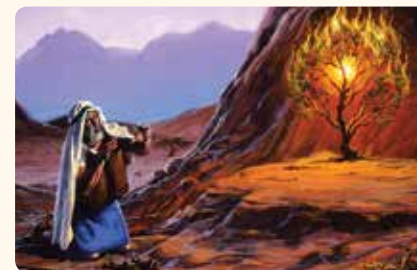
“Then Moses said to God, ‘Indeed, when I come to the children of Israel and say to them, “The God of your fathers has sent me to you,” and they say to me, “What is His name?” what shall I say to them?’ And God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ And He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you.”’”

And 15 centuries later, what did *Jesus* say about who *He* was? Going back to what we

just read in John 8:58, “Jesus said to them, ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, *I AM.*’”

And notice what happened immediately after Jesus said these words: “*Then they took up stones to throw at Him*; but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by” (John 8:59).

The Jews who heard Jesus say these words knew exactly what He meant—that He was



Several times we see recorded in the Gospels that Jesus Christ claimed to be “I AM”—the name God gave when revealing Himself to Moses at the burning bush.

claiming to be the “I AM” who had interacted with Moses. And how did they react? They immediately took up stones to stone Him to death for claiming to be God!

Jesus, Israel's Lawgiver, has not changed

In light of these clear passages, who was Israel's Lawgiver who spoke to Moses, gave him the tablets of the Ten Commandments written with His own finger and ate a covenant meal with the elders of Israel? (See Exodus 24:9-12; 31:18; 34:28-35.) It was none other than the One who became Jesus Christ—He was the same God who gave the law at Mt. Sinai! (To learn more, be sure to read our free study guides *Who Is God?* and *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*.)

This is why Jesus would say in Matthew 5:17: “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill.” The Greek word translated “fulfill”

here is *pleroo*, meaning “to make full,” “to fill to the full,” “to make complete in every particular,” “to render perfect” or “to carry through to the end” (*Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 2005). Jesus didn't come to end the law, but to show us by His perfect example how to *live* that law to its full spiritual intent!

He plainly tells us what should guide our lives: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but *by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God*” (Matthew 4:4, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3). Of course, those words He spoke of were His own!

And Jesus has not changed. As Hebrews 13:8 tells us, “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*” He did not reveal God's law to Israel only to come in the flesh 15 centuries later to do away with that same law—such reasoning is nonsensical and unscriptural!

John, the last remaining of the 12 apostles, wrote near the end of his life: “My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.

“And we can be sure that we know him *if we obey his commandments. If someone claims, ‘I know God,’ but doesn't obey God's commandments, that person is a liar and is not living in the truth. But those who obey God's word truly show how completely they love him. That is how we know we are living in him. Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did*” (1 John 2:1-6, NLT).

Obviously Jesus did not come to do away with the law that He Himself had given in the first place. He *did* come to pay the death penalty for all of us *breaking* the law, taking on Himself the penalty we deserved and giving us the opportunity for eternal life in the family of God. In doing so, He upheld the law He had given as a vital part of God's wonderful gift of grace!

[Jesus Christ] came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but *fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household*, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

"In him the whole building is joined together and *rises to become a holy temple in the Lord*. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit" (verses 17-22, NIV).

As members of God's household, in whom God lives by His Holy Spirit, our lives will naturally be characterized by good works, for these reflect the very nature and character of God living in us by His Spirit. In Galatians 5:22-23 Paul described the "fruit of the Spirit" being produced in our lives as "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control." These characteristics will be evident in the life of a Christian led by God's Spirit!

Faith without works is dead

Let's note more of what's said in the book of James, which Luther rejected. Here the apostle James, half-brother of Jesus Christ, made it clear that good works will be evident in the life of a believing Christian. He asks: "What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,' but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?" (James 2:14-16).

James then goes on to answer: "Thus also *faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead*. But someone will say, 'You have faith, and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and *I will show you my faith by my works*. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!

"But do you want to know, O foolish man, that *faith without works is dead*? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar? Do you see that *faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect*? . . . You see then that *a man is justified by works, and not by faith only* . . . For as the body without the spirit is dead, *so faith without works is dead also*" (James 2:17-26).

Both James and Paul make the same point—that the life of a Christian is transformed by faith and a close relationship with God, and through God's Spirit at work developing God's nature and character in him or her. These are the evidence of a person truly becoming converted by God's grace.

We must exert effort in obeying God

We should note that most of today's Protestant teachers embrace the book of James with the argument that James is merely stating that good works will be automatically evident in the life of a Christian, not that there is some required effort on our part to be saved. But our ongoing effort is surely required.

Jesus said we are to "*strive* to enter through the narrow gate" (Luke 13:24)—the Greek term *agonizomai* here giving us the English word *agonize*. Hebrews 12:4 tells us that we are to be "striving against sin," as Jesus did. Paul further says we must "*press* toward the goal" (Philippians 3:14) and truly "*fight*: not as one who beats the air" (1 Corinthians 9:26)—that is, "not just shadowboxing" (NLT). Jesus, Paul and James were all adamant that we must be *doers* of God's law and not hearers only (Matthew 7:21; Romans 2:13; James 1:22).

Again, this does not mean we earn salvation through obedience—for we need God's freely given grace and mercy for the forgiveness of sins we've all committed. No amount of righteous works can buy our way into eternal life in God's Kingdom. But not striving to continue in righteous works after coming to repentance *will keep us out* of God's Kingdom.

This is in no way earning salvation. The strength and even the motivation to obey come from God as another aspect of His grace: "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13)—that is, He gives you "the desire and the power to do what pleases him" (NLT). Yet we can still turn away from Him and lose salvation, in spite of what many claim, and so we must remain faithful (see "Can Those God Has Forgiven Reject His Grace?" on pages 24-25).

It's vital that we continue to remain yielded to God, cooperating with what He is doing in our life—in *real partnership* with Him. As Paul said, "I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily" (Colossians 1:29). We will still sin at times, showing our continuing need for God's forgiveness through Christ, but we must surely repent and continue to strive in obedience (1 John 1:7-2:6).

Understand, then, that continuing in the grace that saves us is conditioned on our ongoing striving to live in obedience to God's law. Yet we are able to meet this condition through continuing to rely on God's grace.

What Did “Grace” Mean in the First-Century World?

“And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:8).

Words have meaning. Some words are difficult to understand when they have been far removed from their original context.

In contrast to its meaning today, the term *grace*—springing from a translation of the Greek word *charis*—held quite a different meaning in its original usage in Greco-Roman times, the era in which Paul and the other apostles and New Testament writers lived and worked.

Paul wove the word *charis* more than 100 times into his letters to individuals and different congregations around the Roman Empire. Greek and Roman converts reading or hearing this word would have understood it in a considerably different context than we would in the 21st century. And their understanding of what Paul and others meant by the “grace of God” could have potentially been quite different from ours. Understanding this first-century context helps illuminate what being under grace actually means to a follower of Jesus Christ. Let’s see why.

Charis (grace) as a standalone word in the Bible could be used as a greeting with high meaning (“Grace and peace be upon you”), as a descriptor of how God conveys powerful favor, as an expression of an undeserved divine act of goodness, and more. That may not sound foreign to us. But to the ears of a Greco-Roman citizen or a Greek-speaking Jew who would be hearing or reading this word in a biblical context, the meaning would describe something we probably don’t typically consider today—a *powerful relationship between a giver of gifts and the recipients of those gifts*. The point? Paul and other New Testament writers often reflected this meaning when they mentioned the word *charis* (grace). Learning more about this relationship gives us greater insight into the meaning of grace in Scripture.

Patrons and clients

Here’s some critical background. In the time of Jesus and the apostles, a

system known as “patronage” existed in the Roman Empire—the physical and cultural setting in which much of the New Testament was written.

In the 21st century, the word *patronage* often evokes a sense of vulgar nepotism or underhanded gifts obtained in an unsavory way (as in “political patronage,” where gifts may be bestowed in exchange for illegal or inappropriate acts).

However, while such political patronage also existed in Paul’s time, patronage generally meant something *far different* then. When they heard the word *charis*, citizens of the Roman Empire would have understood it positively. In addition to meaning gifts of an undeserved nature, a situation involving *charis* (grace) would typically have been regarded as a *good relationship* with lasting mutual benefits, expectations and a new set of powerful dynamics.

Here’s a contrast to consider: In today’s modern world, if someone wanted to start a business or build a home, he or she would probably go to a commercial bank (or similar institution) to secure a loan. The expectation would be for the loan to be paid back with interest. In the Greco-Roman world of the first century, sophisticated commercial banking as we know it today didn’t exist. Wealth in Roman society was concentrated among about 4 percent of the population. These people were the upper-class wealthy aristocrats known as *patricians*. The poorer common citizens were called *plebeians*.

Often wealthy moneylenders would take advantage of others in charging high interest. But there was a better way for help in getting ahead in life. A commoner seeking financial assistance or similar help, such as securing a job, could perhaps find a wealthy person to enter into a relationship with involving *charis* (grace)—the giving of an undeserved benefit or gift from the greater person to the lesser. The person providing the money, support or benefit was known as a *patron* (Latin *patronus*). The person receiving the money or support was then known as a *client* (Latin *cliens*).

Such patronage was even part of the life of the early Church. For example, no separate physical “church” buildings existed during the early decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Some early Church members served as spiritual and physical patrons by opening their private homes to provide meeting spaces for gatherings and Sabbath services.

Paul actually refers to the deaconess Phoebe as “a *patron* of many and of myself as well” (Romans 16:1-2, ESV)—indicating her generous attitude and service to him and others. Luke’s writing of the books of Luke and Acts was evidently supported by a patron named Theophilus (see Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1).

A lasting relationship with defined roles

Becoming the client of a patron in Greco-Roman society was not a light commitment. According to societal rules (recorded by a number of

influential citizens of the day, including Roman notables such as Tacitus and Cicero), when a new client entered into a relationship of dependency with a Roman patron, they entered an agreement and relationship “based on mutual trust and loyalty” (Paul Sampley, editor, *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook*, Vol. 2, 2016, p. 206).

Once that social contract was established, a new set of dynamics came into play. The new client “was expected to show respect and gratitude to the patron, to render certain services to him . . . and to support his political, economical and social activities” (ibid.).

What did the patron do for his client? “The influential patron protected the client’s economical, social and legal interests by letting him profit from the patron’s social connections and by allowing him access to the patron’s resources” (ibid.).

In short, the new client might receive needed funding or other important benefits, but he was now in a lifelong relationship with the patron, who expected a certain *mindset* from his clients, as well as acts of gratitude (works) in return.

The book *Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis*, explains it this way in its cover introduction: “*Charis* (grace) is the word New Testament authors, especially Paul, sometimes used to explain Christ’s gift to people. But what is the nature of the gift? Since the fifth century, a number of Christian scholars have taught that grace is something bestowed by God freely, with little or nothing required in return . . . [Yet] ‘free grace’ is not what Paul and others intended.

“The practice in the ancient world of people granting and receiving favors and gifts came with clear obligations. *Charis* served New Testament authors as a model for God’s mercy through the atonement of Jesus Christ, which also comes with *covenantal obligations* . . .

“Being saved by grace means coming to Christ, being baptized and joining the community of saints [or Christians], and continually living with thanks and praise for God’s gift. All of these expressions of grace are found both in the Greek and Pauline use of the word. Knowing what *charis* means helps us understand what God expects us to do once we have accepted his grace” (Brent Schmidt, 2015, back cover).

Grace and faith

What were the benefits in this relationship to both patron and client? The *charis* (gift of good, translated *grace*) would be made with the understanding that the gift could never be repaid (in the sense of simply repaying a loan). The expectation of the patron was that the client would maintain a high degree of loyalty and gratitude toward the patron. That aspect of the relationship is contained in the Greek word *pistis*,

which is the same word translated *faith* and *faithfulness* in the English versions of the New Testament.

In other words, a client under the Roman patronage system would receive a gift (*charis*) that likely could never be fully repaid in money or goods. The client’s role was to exhibit and demonstrate faithful loyalty (*pistis*), including public demonstrations of gratitude. The exercise of *pistis* reflects grateful trust—a powerful, energetic, living *belief*—that the patron will actually do what he promises to do. This *charis* relationship was important for survival and advancement in the first-century Greco-Roman world—and, as historians confirm, the practice was widespread.



In Greco-Roman society, members of the wealthier class gave gifts or assistance called charis—the Greek word translated “grace”—that the recipients could never repay. When the apostle Paul spoke of grace, he used this well-understood word and model to explain God’s love and giving of good things to us.

What might be a challenge for a 21st-century reader of the Bible to grasp is this: Any first-century Roman or Greek or even Jewish Christian in that world who read or heard a letter from Paul or other apostles mentioning the Greek word *charis* would have instantly understood that word in the relationship of a patron and a client.

So it’s important to distinguish the first-century meaning of *grace* in terms of patronage from the 21st-century definition.

It’s also important to understand that the complex relationship formed in the giving of *charis* or *grace* was *not* a mere transaction. A first-century giving and receiving of *charis* created a powerful and dynamic *relationship*—a positive *connection that lasted a lifetime*. In the New Testament, this *charis* relationship is

underlined by *faith* or *trust* on the human side, as expressed in Hebrews 11:6, that we “must *believe* that he [God] exists and that he *rewards* those who seek him” (English Standard Version)—and there must be continuing *faithfulness*. (To understand more about this, be sure to read “How ‘Grace’ Was Understood in the Time and Culture of the Apostles” on pages 72-73).

The proper response to receiving grace

When the New Testament speaks of grace it reflects elements and applications of this patronage system. This understanding brings out the real power and obligations of a grace-filled relationship with God. The cultural analogy is plain and translates well into our time today: God

How “Grace” Was Understood in the Time and Culture of the Apostles

The Greek word *charis*, commonly translated “grace” in our Bibles, had a specific meaning in the time and culture in which the New Testament was written. It also had a set of other words associated with it that appear many times in the Bible, particularly in the letters of the apostle Paul. Understanding what these words meant in that context aids us greatly in understanding what they should mean in the lives of Christians today.

An excellent explanation of how “grace” would’ve been understood by Paul’s readers comes from the 2012 book *Misreading Scripture With Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*. Authors Randolph Richards and Brandon O’Brien describe a hypothetical but typical situation of that day (pp. 162-164):

“Imagine a young baker named Marcus in the town of Philippi. Marcus learned to bake bread from his father. The family business stretched back to the founding of Philippi five generations back. Marcus’s family was, consequently, one of the founding members of the bakers’ guild. A hundred years ago, his ancestor had retired from the Roman army . . . As a reward, his family . . . had been given Roman citizenship and land in Philippi . . .

“When his father was young . . . a fire destroyed the family bakery. Marcus’s father went to a wealthy widow, a cloth merchant who was also from the province of Lydia, to seek help. Julia Lydia loaned his father the money to rebuild the bakery. Thus began an enduring relationship. Today, Marcus sells all his bread to Lydia, including all the members of her extended household, . . . plus all her other ‘friends’ (the various merchants with whom Lydia does business). These customers give Marcus all the business he and his young sons can handle. He sells his bread at a reasonable price and his family makes a good (though modest) living. Lydia ensures that no one takes advantage of anyone . . .

“Three years ago, the barley sellers raised their prices. All the bakers panicked. Naturally, Marcus asked his patroness to help. She invited the patron of the barley merchants to dinner. During a civilized meal, Lydia mentioned her friend ‘Marcus’ and his difficult situation. The two patrons discussed how they could best help their friends, arriving at a fair price for barley flour. . . . Lydia did what was appropriate as the patron of Marcus the baker.

“Of course such relationships were two sided. Last year, one of Lydia’s slaves awakened Marcus in the middle of the night. Lydia needed a favor. She had received special guests, and she was planning an elaborate dinner party for some wealthy families of Philippi for which she needed special bread to serve at this important banquet. . . . She needed Marcus to cook something special. How could he refuse his patroness? It took all night, but he made sure the bread was ready.

“The ‘rules’ for what was expected of a patron and a client were not painted on Roman city walls. . . . The rules for the truly foundational institutions of society, like family and patronage, went without being said. Everyone knew what the proper behavior was. A good patron solved the problems of his or her clients: assisting with trade guilds, business disputes, refinancing loans and easing tensions with city elders. . . . The patron did ‘favors’ for his clients who then fell under his circle of influence and protection. In return, the client was expected to be loyal (faithful) and was sometimes asked to do things for the patron.”

In this example we see the obligations of both parties involved in the patron-client relationship. The client, the family of Marcus, was in desperate need. This family sought help from a generous patron who extended to the family members a priceless gift—known as *charis*, or “grace”—that they could never repay, enabling them to rebuild their business and lives.

Both parties understood that the one receiving *charis*, or grace, could never repay the gift received. But it was understood that accepting the gift created an obligation from the recipient toward the one giving the gift—that he was forever obligated to do whatever the giver asked and to always act in the giver’s best interests.

The apostle Paul uses this well-understood cultural norm and practice to help us grasp the greatness of God’s love and kindness toward us in extending to us His *charis* or “grace”—the forgiveness of sin, the gift of eternal life and all His other blessings.

And the other side of the coin is also evident—that in return for the priceless gift of God’s grace, we become the equivalents of God’s *clients*—obligated to show loyalty and faith to Him and to do whatever He asks of us. In biblical terms, this is what the Bible refers to as *pistis*—translated as *faith* or *faithfulness*. Like *charis*, Paul uses this word more than 100 times in his letters preserved for us in the Bible.

Richards and O’Brien go on to summarize the relationship between these words and what it means for a Christian’s relationship with God:

“Patronage had its own vocabulary. Words we usually consider particularly Christian terms—*grace* and *faith*—were common parlance before Paul commandeered them. The undeserved gifts of assistance the patron offered were commonly called *charis* (‘grace’ and ‘gift’): The loyalty the client offered the patron in response was called *pistis* (‘faith’ and ‘faithfulness’). Roman philosophers noted that when one received a god’s favor (*charis*), one should respond with love, joy and hope. When Paul sought to explain the Christian’s new relationship with God, then, one of the ways he did so was in terms of the ancient system of patronage—something everyone understood. In other words, it went without being said that *relationship* is the premier and determinative aspect of *charis*, grace” (p. 166, emphasis added).

Dr. David deSilva, professor of Greek and the New Testament and an authority on first-century culture, emphasizes the obligation

of the recipient of grace to act in ways that demonstrate thankfulness and appreciation for what he or she has received. In his book *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation*, he writes:

“The greater the benefit bestowed, the greater should be the response of gratitude. In the ancient world gratitude involved first the demonstration of respect for the benefactor . . . , acting in such a way as to enhance his or her honor and certainly avoiding any course of action that would bring him or her into dishonor Gratitude also involves intense personal loyalty to the patron This is the level of gratitude and loyalty the New Testament authors claim should be given to Jesus and, through him, to God. “Grace,” therefore, has very specific meanings for the authors and readers of the New Testament” (2018, pp. 103-104).

Dr. DeSilva continues: “The proper response toward a patron is gratitude: offering honor, loyalty, testimony, and service to the patron. God’s favor seeks a response of faithfulness (*pistis*) and service from God’s clients. Paul speaks, for example, of the “obedience of faith” (Rom[ans] 1:5; 16:26) as the goal of his mission, calling forth the proper response of those who have benefited from God’s gift.

“The recipients of God’s favor are called to offer up their whole selves to God’s service, to do what is righteous in God’s sight (Rom[ans] 6:1-14; 12:1). This response centers not only on honoring God but also on love, generosity, and loyal service toward fellow believers (Rom[ans] 13:9-10; Gal[atians] 5:13-14; 6:2). The author of Hebrews also calls Christians to remain firm in their trust and loyalty (Heb[rews] 10:35-39; 11), to take great care not to dishonor the Giver nor show contempt for the gift won at such cost While God’s favor remains free and uncoerced, the first-century hearer knows that to accept a gift also meant freely accepting the obligation to respond properly” (pp. 106-107).

Grace is indeed an incredible gift from God—a gift we can never fully repay, and a gift that obligates us to commit our lives to serving God and living in a way that pleases Him.

serves as our divine patron, providing us with undeserved forgiveness, favor and the matchless gift of eternal life, gifts *we cannot possibly repay*.

What should we do in return as clients? Dr. David deSilva, professor of Greek and the New Testament and an authority on first-century culture, explains in the article “Grace” in the *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* what was expected of the clients of a patron then, and how it applies today:

“... The proper response of those who have benefited from God’s gift ... involves the offering up of the believers’ *whole selves to God’s service, to do what is righteous in God’s sight* (Rom[ans] 12:1; 6:1-14). As in the [Old Testament], this response centers not only on honoring God, but on love, generosity, and loyal service toward fellow believers (Gal[atians] 5:13-14; 6:2; Rom[ans] 13:9-10). The giving is free and uncoerced, but the ancient hearer knew that to accept a gift meant accepting also

The “Three Graces”: a First-Century Perspective on Grace in Action

The concept of grace was depicted visually in a motif common in the Greco-Roman world in which the New Testament was written. Aspects of grace were personified as deities, which, though clearly unbiblical, helps to illustrate how *charis*, or grace, was viewed. Dr. David deSilva, professor of Greek and the New Testament and an authority on first-century culture, describes the symbolism and obligations of grace as understood at the time:

“A popular mythical image in Greco-Roman art was the ‘three Graces’ (*Charites*), three goddesses frequently depicted dancing hand in hand or hand over shoulder in an unbroken circle ... [The Roman writer] Seneca explains this image thus: a benefit ‘passing from hand to hand nevertheless returns to the giver; the beauty of the whole is destroyed if the course is anywhere broken’ (Seneca, [*De Beneficiis*, meaning “On Favors”] 1.3.3-4).

“Initiating the circle dance with a gift was a matter of free choice on the part of the giver; *accepting* the gift implies acceptance of the moral obligation to return favor where favor has been shown: ‘The giving of a benefit is a social act, it wins the goodwill of someone, it

lays someone under obligation’ ([*De Beneficiis*] 5.11.5).

“Seneca refers here to one and the same ‘someone.’ A gracious act naturally ought to arouse reciprocal feelings of goodwill and appreciation in the one benefited. Thus ‘favor is ever giving birth to favor’ (Sophocles, *Ajax* 522). At the same time, a gift creates an obligation to respond graciously, such that Seneca can refer to the ‘debt of gratitude’ or ‘owing favor.’ Or, in the words of Euripides (*Helen* 1234), ‘favor is *due* for favor.’

“Gratitude was a sacred obligation, and the client who failed to show gratitude appropriately was considered ignoble ... Those who failed to respond with gratitude, however, or who had insulted a benefactor ‘will not be thought worthy of a favor by anyone’ (Dio Chrysostom, [*Orations*] 31.36, 65) ... Or, in the words of Seneca, ‘Not to return gratitude for benefits is a disgrace, and the whole world counts it as such’ ([*De Beneficiis*] 3.1.1)” (*An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation*, 2018, pp. 102-103).

To summarize, the “three graces” visually represented how grace was understood to

obligation to the giver” (2000, p. 525).

Putting this together with what we have seen earlier, a Christian is expected to commit to becoming a new person, casting off old sinful ways in this new relationship formed from *charis* (grace). As Paul wrote in Romans 12:1 (NIV): “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”

The pathway leading toward the righteous behavior God wants from us is illuminated by His law, which serves as the divine standard of conduct. We as fallible human beings often violate this standard of conduct, no matter how well-meaning we are (Romans 7:18). We also constantly face the unrelenting spiritual pressure of an adversary, Satan the devil, who wants us to step off the path.

function in the first century Greco-Roman world in which the apostle Paul wrote his letters. Grace (*charis*) originated with a generous giver (represented by one of the three graces), was accepted by the recipient (represented by the next of the three graces), who in his or her thankfulness and gratitude in turn extended grace to others (represented by the last of the three graces), and this in turn benefited the original giver. In this unbroken circle, *everyone* was understood to benefit.

Many of Paul’s comments about grace or *charis* are consistent with this view that was common at the time. For example, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:8, “God is able to make all grace overflow to you so that because you have enough of everything in every way at all times, *you will overflow in every good work*” (New English Translation). He notes here that since we have been the recipients of God’s abundant grace, we should extend that grace to others in the form of “every good work.”

In 2 Corinthians 8:7 Paul, encouraging the church in Corinth to give generously to a collection for famine relief he was organizing for Christians in Judea, writes: “But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—*see that you also excel in this grace of giving*” (NIV). Paul

reminds them that since they have received so much from God, they should generously share with their fellow believers who were suffering.

Giving ministerial instruction in Titus 2:11-15, Paul writes: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people ... Jesus Christ ... gave himself for us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, *who are eager to do good*. So communicate these things with the sort of exhortation or rebuke that carries full authority” (NET). Paul tells his fellow minister Titus to instruct people that, having received salvation through God’s grace, they are to be “eager to do good.”

The apostle Peter, writing about spiritual gifts, tells us, “Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve one another as good stewards of the varied grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10, NET). His point is that we express our thanks to God for His gifts by using what He has given us to serve others.

As these and other passages note, we who are the recipients of God’s incomparable gifts of grace are obligated in turn to become people who personify grace and willingly and gratefully extend that grace to others for the benefit and blessing of all. In this way we come to develop and reflect the nature and perfect character of a grace-giving God!

Paul's Greeting of "Grace and Peace"

Today our written communications with other people are so hurried, so instant (think texting, email or social media), that we rarely if ever deeply consider our words' impact and meaning. But personal communications weren't always this way. Writers in early times often put a great deal of thought into the words they used.

The Bible is filled with many such examples. A particularly notable one is the greeting the apostle Paul uses in each of his letters to church congregations preserved for us in the Bible: "*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*" Paul uses this same greeting in the first few verses of each of his letters to the churches, and he uses the same or a very similar greeting when writing to individuals such as Timothy and Titus.

What did Paul mean by this greeting? Since he uses these same words in each of the letters that bears his name, we should pay close attention to them—and what they meant to Paul as well as to his immediate audience.

While Paul's words are similar to the common greeting used in letters among Greek speakers and writers of his day, he had actually coined a new phrase that was infused with deep meaning. With a minor tweak to common wording, and some key expansions, he conveyed some great spiritual truths that hold profound significance for Christians 2,000 years ago as well as today. Let's examine these more closely.

"Grace to you . . ."

Gordon Fee, professor of New Testament studies and author of many scholarly volumes on the Bible, writes regarding Philippians 1:2 in *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: The New International Commentary on the New Testament*: "The traditional greeting in the Hellenistic world was *chairein* . . . meaning simply 'Greetings!' . . . In Paul's hands this now becomes *charis* ('grace'), to which he adds the traditional Jewish greeting *shalom* ('peace,' in the sense of 'wholeness' or 'well-being'). Thus

instead of the familiar 'greetings,' Paul salutes his brothers and sisters in Christ with 'grace to you—and peace.'"

These were not unusual words, but Paul filled them with a new and deeper significance. He greeted his fellow believers with grace and peace *from God the Father and Jesus Christ*. This transcended the common greeting and was exclusively Christian.

Grace, as Paul stated, came from God the Father and Jesus Christ. Paul understood that it is a divine attribute, a uniquely Christian



concept not found in other religions and belief systems. Outside of Christianity and Judaism, no other religion taught of a God who loves, accepts and forgives human beings not based on anything we do, but *in spite* of what we do. God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son lavish Their love on human beings because that is who and what They are. God is love personified (1 John 4:8, 16).

In many ways *grace* summarizes God's interaction with humankind and the message of the gospel or good news.

Paul begins his letters with the unmistakable message that God is a God of grace. So Paul brings greetings of grace to the churches of God to which he wrote. In context, he is saying to them, "May God's abundant and loving grace be with you all."

This apostle well knew that God has reached out to us in grace. As he wrote, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). As the apostle John wrote, "The Word became

flesh and dwelt among us . . . full of grace and truth," and "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:14, 17).

John 3:16-17 adds: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." Through the sacrificial death of His only begotten Son, God forgives our sin and reconciles us to Himself.

God "did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all" (Romans 8:32, NLT). God freely gave His only Son, and Jesus freely gave His own life (John 10:17-18). This supreme love is called *grace*. Grace is the giving of every good thing to those who of themselves deserve *nothing*.

"And peace . . ."

What about the next part of Paul's greeting of "Grace to you *and peace* . . ."—what is the significance of his mention of *peace*?

We're certainly more familiar with the word *peace* than *grace*. Peace is a common word, usually used in the sense of the opposite of war. As wars rage and threaten nations around the world, we regularly hear of the need for peace.

But what did Paul have in mind in using this word? Being Jewish, Paul was very familiar with the Hebrew word *shalom*, meaning "peace," used more than 200 times in the Bible. It was a common Hebrew greeting then and still is today. But *shalom* wasn't a vague wish of greeting or of simply all going well for a person. In Hebrew with regard to God it meant *being reconciled to God and having God's peace in one's heart*.

This is something every person badly needs. Worries and fears prevent many from having inner peace. And sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2), creating conflict between us and Him. It robs us of joy and peace with God (Psalm 51:10-12).

Paul was referring to an inner peace, a sense of well-being and wholeness, as he wrote this

greeting. This peace, he wrote, came "from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." He understood that "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" and "this grace in which we stand" (Romans 5:1-2). So it is actually a peace *from* God and peace *with* God.

Paul mentions grace first, and then peace, for good reason—because peace flows *from* grace. We receive well-being and wholeness after having received *grace* from God. This peace is a profound gift from God. Jesus said: "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:27). Paul wrote that Christ "*is our peace*" (Ephesians 2:14). Through Him and His sacrifice we have peace with God.

That peace should permeate every aspect of the life of a Christian. "Be anxious for nothing," Paul wrote, "but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

"From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ . . ."

In Paul's repeated greeting we see that the source of true grace and peace is both God the Father and God the Son, "the Lord Jesus Christ." Both are the source of divine grace and peace.

Unlike greetings in that day sent in the names of the pagan gods and goddesses, Paul sent Christian believers greetings of "grace to you and peace" from the true God, the one source of true grace and peace. Paul pointed them to the grace and peace available through God the Father and Jesus Christ.

As Professor Fee notes in his commentary on Philippians 1:2: "In a profound sense this greeting therefore nicely represents Paul's larger theological perspective. The sum total of God's activity toward his human creatures is found in the word 'grace'; God has given himself to his people bountifully and mercifully in Christ."

But the application of *charis* (grace) saves us when we stumble and fall. When we repent, we are cleansed of sin and restored to a right relationship with our divine patron, God. Thus, reciprocating in divine faith (*pistis*)—trusting belief and faithfulness—toward our divine patron, we are truly “not under law [under its penalty] but under grace” (Romans 6:14, ESV).

Not abolished in the slightest, the law of God—summarized in the moral code of the Ten Commandments—retains its authority and, as Paul states, is “holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12, ESV). And as Jesus Christ Himself affirmed, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4; quoted from Deuteronomy 8:3).

God’s law thus points the way for us to act in faith and faithfulness—*pistis*—in our relationship begun by our patron who “first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Paul tells us that “when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (Romans 6:10).

Paul profoundly understood that “by grace [*charis*] you are saved through faith [*pistis*] . . . it is the *gift* of God” (Ephesians 2:8, ESV). Anyone hearing these words or reading them in the first century would have made an instant connection to the powerful relationship implied, which requires trust and a response of remaining faithful. (For more on the historical context of this language, see “The ‘Three Graces’: a First-Century Perspective on Grace in Action” on pages 74-75 and “‘Free Grace’—Is It Biblical?” on pages 84-85).

So grace, we see, is not contrary to God’s law in the slightest. Grace *requires* God’s law to define the standard of conduct for the deep relationship inherent in a bond established by *charis*. In fact, it is through grace that God has given His law, forgives us for breaking it and empowers us to continue in it. The relationship of *charis* is evident in God’s “incomparably great power *for us who believe*” (Ephesians 1:19, NIV).

What a fantastic illumination of the profound depth of a grace-powered relationship with God Almighty, one that will last for all eternity! No wonder then that the Bible itself closes with this encouragement from Revelation 22:21 (NLT): “May the *grace* [*charis*] of the Lord Jesus be with God’s holy people. Amen.”

How Can You Grow in Grace?

“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

In the book of Mark we find the story of a blind man named Bartimaeus. Here is how the story goes: “Now they came to Jericho. As He [Jesus] went out of Jericho with His disciples and a great multitude, blind Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, sat by the road begging. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, ‘Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!’ Then many warned him to be quiet; but he cried out all the more, ‘Son of David, have mercy on me!’” (Mark 10:44-48).

Bartimaeus was threatened to stay quiet! The crowd told him to keep his mouth shut—but then Jesus heard his cries.

“So Jesus stood still and commanded him to be called. Then they called the blind man, saying to him, ‘Be of good cheer. Rise, He is calling you.’ And throwing aside his garment, he rose and came to Jesus. So Jesus answered and said to him, ‘What do you want Me to do for you?’ The blind man said to Him, ‘Rabboni, that I may receive my sight.’ Then Jesus said to him, ‘Go your way; your faith has made you well.’ *And immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus on the road*” (Mark 10:49-52).

This blind man who couldn’t see could, in a different way, *see much more* than those around him with physical sight, having far greater discernment.

He recognized Jesus as “Son of David”—a term used in that day for the long-awaited Messiah. He announced Jesus’ character, His person, His act, as “*mercy*.” Jesus then told him, “Your faith has made you well.” His faith allowed him to see what the many could not see—that God is a God of mercy!

Bartimaeus announced a profound and life-changing truth.

Trusting in God’s mercy

Trusting in God’s mercy and grace implies ceasing from making any excuses for your behavior. The moment you trust in God’s mercy, you give up all apologies and excuses. You don’t try to justify why you sinned.

If you are on trial before a civil court, so long as you plead with excuses and try to justify your actions, you appeal to justice. But if you go before the court and plead guilty, offering no justification or apology whatsoever,

you throw yourself on the mercy of the court.

So it is then in God's realm. Trusting in mercy is a final giving up of all reliance on justice. You have no more excuses, and you make none. You need God's grace and mercy—and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ—if you are to avoid the death sentence you have earned and, instead, receive God's priceless gift of eternal life.

How do you respond to God's mercy and then approach His throne of grace?

The gift of grace

The apostle Paul reminded the Ephesian brethren: "*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).

Eternal life comes as a result of God's grace and mercy. It is His gift, unearned and undeserved on our part. No one will ever be able to boast that he or she has earned or deserves the gift of eternal life.

But let's add some balance to the equation. As blind Bartimaeus showed us, God is not only the God of justice but also the God of *mercy*. Look at the last part of the second of the Ten Commandments: ". . . but showing *mercy* to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Exodus 20:6).

God balances justice—and His insistence on us keeping His commandments—with *mercy*, by considering what is in the heart. So long as that possibility exists, God is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9).

We can be thankful that God considers our *attitude*. One who is willing to "*sin no more*" is eligible for mercy instead of condemnation—as Jesus told the woman caught in adultery in John 8:11. Jesus showed judgment—she was clearly a sinner—but also grace and mercy: "*Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.*"

The right response to God's grace and mercy

There's a lesson here as to the right response to God's grace and mercy. As the recipients of God's grace and mercy, the right approach after we are forgiven is to "*sin no more.*" We should obey God's laws according to their full spiritual intent, not by doing only the bare minimum of what is explicitly stated.

Jesus Christ made clear the importance of the spiritual intent of God's law with several examples in His famous Sermon on the Mount. He explained that not only should we not murder, breaking the sixth of the Ten Commandments, but we should not even view or treat others with contempt, as this violates the spirit of this command (Matthew 5:21-26).

He followed that up with another example, pointing out that God's command against committing adultery extends to lusting for another

person, as this is committing adultery in one's heart and mind (verses 27-30). Through the remainder of this chapter He gave other examples showing He was certainly not abolishing God's law, but rather was extending its spiritual intent—requiring *an even higher level of obedience* not just in actions, but also in thoughts!

Throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus shows that God's law serves as *our continual guide* toward attaining truly righteous thinking and behavior. That law—and Christ's magnification of it in this message—helps define what it means to actually be one of His followers, a true Christian.

The word *grace* is regularly used by some religious people as if it replaces all need to obey God's law. That conclusion is terribly wrong. Here is the reason: Without law—which *defines* sin—there would be no *need* for the forgiveness of grace. Grace refers to how God extends His *favor* and *benevolence* to others, including to repentant sinners by forgiving their former disobedience of His law—their sins previously committed. This is necessary because "everyone who sins *breaks the law*; in fact, *sin is lawlessness*" (1 John 3:4, NIV). If there is no law to break, then sin would not exist (Romans 5:13). And if there is no sin the very idea of *grace as God's forgiveness* has no meaning at all.

The gift of the Holy Spirit

It is God's grace and mercy that allows us to be pardoned for our sins when we repent, accept the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, are baptized and receive God's Spirit. We then receive the promise of the gift of eternal life.

Grace, as we have seen throughout this study guide, encompasses *much more* than just forgiveness for past sins. It also includes the *gift* of God's Holy Spirit to help us obey God's laws, which define sin and God's standard of required behavior. Indeed, it refers to *all* the free and undeserved gifts of God. It includes His help in initially turning us away from sin and leading us to His truth and way of life, His forgiveness of our past sins and ultimately His granting us the *greatest gift of all*—eternal life in His Kingdom!

God's Holy Spirit is essential in our goal of eradicating sin (to learn more, be sure to read our free study guide *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*). The key to solving the problem of sin is the help we receive through Jesus Christ and God's Spirit. Jesus was born not only to make possible forgiveness of the past, but to help us conquer the pulls of sin, the entrenched habits that are so difficult to dislodge from our lives.

He is our merciful High Priest in heaven, interceding with the Father on our behalf—sitting at the Father's right hand. "Who is he who condemns?

It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us” (Romans 8:34). Yet He and the Father are also near to us, and will even live in us through the Holy Spirit to help us change.

What must we do?

Acts 2 records the founding of the Church in Jerusalem on the Feast of Pentecost. Many among the crowds were convicted of the fact that

Are You a Friend of God?

In the hours before His death by crucifixion, Jesus made a remarkable statement to His disciples: “No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you *friends*” (John 15:15).

Jesus, as the Bible clearly reveals, is the very Son of God. While on earth, Jesus existed as God in human form.

What does it mean to be a friend of God?

To be called a friend of God means to be in good graces with God. Jesus said that He had delivered truth and understanding to His disciples (John 15:15), and they had not only accepted it but fully *embraced* it. They embodied what the prophet Amos taught: “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3).

The apostles and disciples were prepared and committed to obey and do what Jesus taught them. “You are My friends if you do whatever I command you,” He told them (John 15:14). And Jesus had commanded obedience to God’s laws. Indeed, we have seen that He is the One who had given the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament.

The patriarch Abraham was called God’s friend (2 Chronicles 20:7; Isaiah 41)—a friendship James 2:22-24 says came because Abraham’s faith produced righteous works of obedience (see also Genesis 26:5).

Jesus told His disciples that a distinguishing and visible sign of their friendship with Him would be how they kept what He summarized as a “new commandment”: “A new com-

mandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35).

This strongly reflects what Jesus declared was the greatest commandment: “The first of all the commandments is . . . you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with *all* your soul, with *all* your mind, and with *all* your strength.’ This is the first commandment. And the second, like it, is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor *as yourself*.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31; quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18).

So, in Jesus’ own words, we are to first love God with everything we have, then we are to follow on with love for each other. These great commandments are further spelled out in the Ten Commandments, with love fulfilling God’s law (see Romans 13:8-10; 1 John 5:3).

It might sound easy, but it’s not. Tragically, we all fail—to one degree or another—every day (1 John 1:8). But being a friend of God, being in the good graces of God, opens the door for God to shower us with grace, with forgiveness, with restoration, with redemption, with reconciliation (verse 9; 2:1-2). God our Father wants to lavish us with gifts! (Luke 11:13). He knows our physical needs and through His grace supplies them (Luke 12:22-34). When we stumble, God lifts us through His personal and loving intervention the Bible calls *grace*.

their sins had led to the death of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, and they asked Peter and the other apostles what they needed to do. Peter’s response in Acts 2:38 was clear: “*Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*” (Later, in Acts 8:17, we see that this Spirit is conveyed through the laying on of hands by true ministers of God.)

Then Peter added something else: “For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, *as many as the Lord our God will call*” (Acts 2:39). God calls or chooses people by His grace (Galatians 1:15; 2 Timothy 1:9), but He isn’t calling everyone now. As Paul wrote in Romans 11:5 (NIV), “at the present time *there is a remnant chosen by grace.*”

If you are reading and understanding this right now, *God is likely calling and choosing you by His grace* for an incomparable, almost incomprehensible future!

And what is that future? Paul tells us in Ephesians 1:4-6: “Even before the world was made, God had already chosen us to be his through our union with Christ, so that we would be holy and without fault before him. Because of his love God had already decided that through Jesus Christ he would make us his children—this was his pleasure and purpose. Let us praise God *for his glorious grace, for the free gift he gave us* in his dear Son” (Good News Translation).

Our future in the family of God

God’s plan is for you to be a member of His eternal, immortal spirit family! In 2 Corinthians 6:18 the apostle Paul quotes God as saying, “*I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters*, says the Lord Almighty.”

This truth is confirmed many times in the pages of the Bible. For example, in Revelation 21:7 God tells us, “He who overcomes shall inherit all things, *and I will be his God and he shall be My son.*”

Paul writes in Romans 8:14 that “as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are *sons of God.*” Verses 16-17 go on to tell us that God’s Spirit within us “bears witness with our spirit that *we are children of God*, and if children, *then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ . . .*”

A staggering truth is revealed here. Our future is not to sit around heaven strumming on harps for all eternity, but to be “*heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.*” What does this mean? Hebrews 1:2 tells us that God has appointed Jesus to be “*heir of all things.*” Hebrews 2:8 adds that God’s future plan for man is to “*put all things in subjection*” under us—and though we don’t see that yet, as further explained here, it is certainly coming, with Jesus leading the way.

What must happen before we can inherit all things with Jesus Christ? The apostle John gives further details in 1 John 3:1-3: “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, *that we should be called children of God!* Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, *but we know that when He is revealed, we shall*

“Free Grace”—Is It Biblical?

As we have seen in this study guide, *grace* is a free gift from God and a reflection of His loving nature and character. But we have also seen that the fact of grace being a free gift has been misunderstood, misapplied and misused by those who argue there are no requirements for continuing in it.

The abuse of the concept of grace began early, only a few decades after Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection and the founding of the early Church. False teachers spread the idea that God’s grace made obedience to God’s law unnecessary. Because God’s grace brings forgiveness, they argued, we can continue in sin and God will forgive no matter what.

But this was a hideous perversion of God’s grace! Jude, the half-brother of Jesus Christ, blasted this lie in his epistle to believers: “I felt I had to write and urge you to *contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints*,” he wrote regarding those who had twisted God’s grace into a different and dangerous message. “For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are *godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord*” (Jude 3-4, NIV).

These “godless men” were abusing the mercy and forgiveness that comes through God’s grace, turning it into “*a license for immorality*”—permission to sin. By continuing in sin rather than abandoning an evil lifestyle, and teaching others to do the same, they denied Christ by their actions—turning their back on the sacrifice of our Master and Lord who gave His life for the sins of all mankind.

Clearly this is *not* what God and the New Testament writers intended by grace. As explained in the previous chapter, accepting God’s grace placed serious obligations on the recipient (see “How ‘Grace’ Was Understood in the Time and Culture of the Apostles” on pages 72-73). These included, as scholar David deSilva notes, “demonstration of respect for the benefactor . . . acting in such a way as to enhance his or her honor and certainly avoiding any course of action that would bring him or her into dishonor . . . [and] intense personal loyalty to the patron, even if that loyalty should lead the client to lose his or her physical well-being, wealth, reputation, or homeland” (*An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation*, 2018, pp. 103-104).

Put simply, in thanks and gratitude for receiving God’s grace, we are expected to live a godly life of humble obedience, surrender and total dedication to Him, regardless of the cost.

Other recent scholars have come to see the real meaning of grace as understood by the biblical authors, placing it in stark contrast to the erroneous view that has permeated religious thinking for centuries. One of these is Dr. Brent Schmidt, who in his 2015 book *Relational Grace: The Reciprocal and Binding Covenant of Charis* summarizes the problem and the correct view of and response to God’s grace:

“A number of Christian intellectuals, scholars, and priests have taught that grace is something freely bestowed by God with no particular relationship with, or dependence upon, the actions of the person receiving it. Ancient documents, however, provide evidence that

be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

John tells us here that our future is to “be like Him”—like Jesus Christ, now resurrected as a glorious spirit being. And what is He like now in His resurrected state? We find a description in Revelation 1:12-18 (NLT), where John saw Him in vision:

this particular notion of the term *charis* is at variance with the understanding of grace before Christ and during the first few centuries after Christ. The meaning commonly understood by a broad range of cultures up until the fifth century was that grace was the essence of a two-way, unequal, reciprocal, binding agreement between two parties in which both were obligated to each other. In other words, grace was not ‘free’ [—at least in the sense of having no conditions for continuing grace].

“The practice in the ancient world of high-ranking people granting favors to their subordinates served New Testament authors as a model for God’s loving bestowal of his benevolence and mercy on humanity through the Atonement of Jesus Christ. On reception of God’s gift, humanity becomes vertically obligated to God and accepts a reciprocal duty *to do everything possible to demonstrate gratitude, including keeping his commandments*.

“Both God and humanity are bound by this relationship of grace, which is known as a covenant. *Charis* in ancient Greek texts and in the New Testament denoted covenants in an ideal state of equality that obligated recipients to express joy, thankfulness, and generosity in the spirit of justice. Unfortunately, this ancient understanding of grace was somewhat obscured by Augustine and other early medieval theologians who were heavily influenced by neo-Platonic philosophy. These authors recast the notion of a reciprocal form of grace to something which was freely bestowed by God and did not depend on or expect any reciprocity in terms of service to God.

“During the history of Christianity, a few figures challenged this tradition of free grace,

but were dismissed, so their notions of reciprocal grace were downplayed within the larger Christian tradition. Misunderstanding the classical meaning of grace in the modern era has led to much confusion. This medieval and modern understanding of grace—‘free grace’—is one used today by several Christian groups . . .

“Passages in ancient Greek and Roman literature, inscriptions, and papyri demonstrate *charis*’s reciprocal connotations in the Mediterranean ancient world . . . *There is not one use of charis* that unmistakably reflects the aforementioned view of free grace in any ancient Greek text, including the letters attributed to Paul. Although prominent scholars for centuries have anachronistically translated *charis* as completely ‘free’ and without obligation in their translations, there is no ancient evidence to support . . . claims of nonobligatory, free, or unconditional grace. In contrast . . . *charis/grace is obligatory*.

“Some popular, modern notions of grace have drifted far away from the ancient context of grace, which *always implies reciprocity, obligation*, and various forms of covenants. Thankfully, a number of Christian theologians have sought to understand the ancient meaning of *charis* and advocate at least questioning the popular understanding of grace today” (pp. 201-203, emphasis added).

Grace encompasses many things, but as seen here it is foundational to a life transformed by God’s gifts and built on a relationship of gratitude, surrender and commitment to God. A close reading of the Bible’s many mentions of grace shows this to be the true understanding of the biblical writers and their first-century audience.

“When I turned to see who was speaking to me, I saw seven gold lampstands. And standing in the middle of the lampstands was someone like the Son of Man. He was wearing a long robe with a gold sash across his chest. *His head and his hair were white like wool, as white as snow. And his eyes were like flames of fire.* His feet were like polished bronze refined in a furnace, and *his voice thundered like mighty ocean waves . . .*

“*And his face was like the sun in all its brilliance.* When I saw him, I fell at his feet as if I were dead. But he laid his right hand on me and said, ‘Don’t be afraid! I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look—I am alive forever and ever!’”

When John tells us in 1 John 3:2 that “*we shall be like Him*, for we shall see Him as He is,” this is the kind of spirit power and glory we will share with Him! (To learn more about this, be sure to read our free study guide *Why Were You Born?*)

Paul tells Church members in Galatians 3:26 (NLT) that “*you are all*

The Apostle Paul on Struggling With Sin Yet Still Under Grace

How does grace interact with the law of God? How do we reconcile grace and law? Two major gifts of grace are the unmerited mercy God grants us by His loving nature and His spiritual law the apostle Paul said he took “delight in” (Romans 7:22).

Paul highlighted the human struggle we experience. He knew that even those with God’s Spirit still had human nature and have to resist the selfish pulls of the flesh while seeking to obey God’s law. Paul summed up this struggle when he wrote: “I love God’s law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?” (Romans 7:22-24, NLT).

He gives the answer in what immediately follows in verse 25: “Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God’s law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin” (verse 25, NLT). Continuing on in chapter 8 he says: “So now there is no condemnation for

those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death” (Romans 8:1-2, NLT).

All Christians will struggle with temptation and sin throughout their physical lifetimes. Although God’s Holy Spirit helps us resist the pulls of our selfish-oriented nature, that nature will continue to trend toward sin. We must always be vigilant and strive against the pull of our sinful, selfish desires. But Paul says here that when we sin, we need not fear that we are condemned by God, that there is no more justification and grace. His relationship with us is not broken unless or until we deliberately and irrevocably sever it.

This means that if we have repented and come under grace and then slip up and sin, we are still under grace and do not immediately return to being under the penalty of the law. Though continuing to struggle with committing sin as Paul did, we are not condemned with each new sin. Rather, as Paul says, there remains “no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus” (verse 1). With every sin and subsequent

children of God through faith in Christ Jesus,” and John 1:12 tells us that “as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become *children of God*, to those who believe in His name.”

This is the astounding future God has planned for those who accept and act on His amazing gift of grace—to become His immortal spirit family, changed to glorified spirit beings, just as Jesus Christ now exists as a glorified spirit being!

But how does this happen? How do we receive this gift of eternal life? What must we do?

What should grace motivate us to do?

As we have seen throughout this study guide, grace is neither a license to continue a life of sin nor an excuse or means to discard the spiritual law of God. “The law is holy, and the commandment holy, and righteous, and good,” Paul tells us (Romans 7:12). We are no longer under the penalty

repentance a Christian does not repeatedly drift back and forth between being under death and under grace. We remain under grace, with “no condemnation,” as God still accepts Christ’s sacrifice as our atonement.

Yet Paul qualifies this in Romans 8 by explaining that this remains so only if we continue in the process of living according to the Holy Spirit in following God’s law. That means continuing to repent, confessing our sins to God (1 John 1:9), seeking forgiveness and restoration, and striving with God’s help to obey Him. Otherwise, through neglect leading to willful sin and rejection of God, we would return to being under the law’s penalty of death—spurning Christ’s sacrifice and insulting the Spirit of grace, from which there is no return to repentance (Hebrews 2:1-3; 6:4-7; 10:26-31; see also “Can Those God Has Forgiven Reject His Grace?” on pages 24-25).

So it’s vital that we continue to repent and submit to God and the righteousness of His law. It’s in this way only that, as Paul said in Romans 6:14, “sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (see “You Are Not Under Law, but Under Grace” on pages 52-53).

Continuing in Romans 8, Paul further explains the process whereby God’s grace of ongoing forgiveness and help through Christ empowers

obedience and makes us free: “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (verses 2-4, English Standard Version).

The “Spirit of life” works in us, giving us the strength to make steady growth in spiritual character and overcome sin. With Christ in us (Galatians 2:20), the one who condemned sin in the flesh through a perfect unblemished human life, we live a Spirit-led life. As we obey the law of God with the help of His Spirit, the “righteous requirement of the law” is fulfilled in us. Thus, Christ helps us live a life of faith according to the law and produce righteous works of faith.

This new life we live in the grace of God is shown by the fruits of righteous works. So then grace, God’s kindness and goodness toward us, motivates us to change and helps create the desire to receive the divine nature, the mind of God. Grace, then, is inseparable from law, and law is inseparable from grace. Both work to produce righteousness in a child of God, keeping us free from sin and death.

demanding of the law, which is death; we are under grace (Romans 6:14).

So what should grace motivate us to do? As we saw in the preceding chapter, grace should motivate us to *thanks and complete loyalty to the One who gave us grace*, seeking to please and serve Him *with all of our being*.

Notice what Paul said about the role of grace in who he now was and the work he did: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but *I labored more abundantly than they all*, yet not I, *but the grace of God which was with me*” (1 Corinthians 15:9-10).

The grace of God brought Paul to a peace with God the Father and Jesus Christ. But it also led him to change from one who persecuted the Church to one who proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of God. It led him to dedicating his life *to serving God with his whole being!* (See “The Apostle Paul: an Example of God’s Grace in Action” on pages 56-57).

Grace should lead us to a change in thinking and actions, otherwise known as *repentance*. As Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “Do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that *the goodness of God leads you to repentance?*” (Romans 2:4). “Goodness” here is derived from the word *chrestos*, which can mean “gracious,” being related to the Greek word *charis*. The grace of God can and must lead you to change your life!

Grace leads to a transformed life

God’s Word clearly spells out what the life of a person transformed by God’s grace should look like. Again Paul, the biblical writer who wrote about grace more than any other, plainly spells it out for us.

He wrote to the church in Corinth in 2 Corinthians 9:8 that “God is able to *make all grace abound toward you*, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, *may have an abundance for every good work*.” Grace, says Paul, gives us everything we need so that we can “*have an abundance for every good work*”! Grace should clearly produce good works in our lives!

This is even more clearly stated in Ephesians 2:9-10 (NIV): “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. *For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*”—or, as this is also translated, “to be our way of life” (NRSV). Again we see the clear expectation that receiving God’s grace leads to “good works.”

Paul clearly didn’t hold the modern view that once one is saved by God’s grace, there’s nothing more to do and one has a free ticket to salvation. On the contrary, he knew that God’s grace creates a *greater obligation*

to demonstrate our appreciation and thankfulness because now “*we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works*.”

As seen in the preceding chapter, Paul viewed God as the ultimate patron who gives gifts of grace, and we as the recipients are obligated from that point forward to always show complete loyalty and devotion in return. It was unthinkable to do otherwise. How strikingly different from the huge misconception that grace frees us from any obligation to obey God!

The purposes and goals of grace

Grace has several specific goals and purposes, Paul told his fellow minister Titus in Titus 2:11-14: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, instructing us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts and to live in a sensible, righteous, and godly way in the present age, while we wait for the blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people for his own possession, eager to do good works” (CSB).

Let’s notice some of the specific points Paul makes here:

- *The grace of God brings salvation.*
- *The grace of God instructs us to deny godlessness and worldly lusts.*
- *The grace of God instructs us to live in a sensible, righteous and godly way while we await our great hope of the appearing of Jesus Christ.*
- *Jesus Christ came not to free us from the law, but to “redeem us”—to pay the ultimate price (His death) for our lawlessness, sparing us from the penalty of eternal death.*
- *Jesus Christ came to cleanse—to purify—for Himself a people who belong to Him.*
- *Having been redeemed and purified for Christ, we are to be “zealous for good works.”*

What a vastly different view from the common misconception of grace!

Paul then concludes this instruction to Titus by telling him in verse 15, “*Proclaim these things*; encourage and rebuke with all authority.” Paul wanted to be sure Titus understood these things and made them a key part of his own teaching!

Called to a holy life

All of this, of course, ties back into God’s ultimate plan and purpose for us—to give us eternal life in His Kingdom, that we may be part of His family forever. This great promise will be fulfilled at Jesus Christ’s return, of which the apostle Paul foretold:

“We will not all die, but *we will all be transformed!* It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, *when the last trumpet is blown*. For when

the trumpet sounds, *those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed. For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies*" (1 Corinthians 15:51-53, NLT).

This will be the ultimate fulfillment of God's grace. The apostle Peter encourages us to keep our minds focused on this promised future: "Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, *set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming*" (1 Peter 1:13, NIV).

Peter also emphasizes that we must live a transformed life—a *holy life*—if we are to receive this gift of salvation. He continues: "As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, *so be holy in all you do*; for it is written: '*Be holy, because I am holy*'" (verses 14-16, quoting Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2).

Paul points out that for us to live "a holy life" leading to salvation is what God had planned for us from the beginning: "For God saved us and called us *to live a holy life*. He did this, not because we deserved it, but

Forgive as You Are Forgiven

People often think of God's grace in terms of His mercy—His showing of compassion and particularly His forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Yet God's grace involves far more than this—indeed, *all* of His good gifts to us. Nevertheless, His merciful forgiveness is an important part of the grace He bestows. And a condition of our receiving and continuing to receive His forgiveness through grace is that we ourselves must be merciful, forgiving as we are forgiven.

Psalms 37:21 says that "the righteous shows mercy and gives." Echoing the Lord's requirement that we "love mercy" in Micah 6:8, Jesus said that mercy is one of "the weightier matters of the law" (Matthew 23:23).

In the Beatitudes opening His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Later in the same message, He gave an outline for prayer known as the Lord's Prayer, telling us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12). This is speaking

of what is owed for having done wrong.

Luke records this line elsewhere as "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us" (Luke 11:4). After relating the Lord's Prayer outline in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus immediately called attention to this particular aspect, declaring: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

So it's vital that we not bear grudges but, instead, intentionally let go—not holding on to hurts and becoming bitter. And Jesus said we are to keep on forgiving even with repeated sins, as God does with us (Luke 17:3-4; Matthew 18:21-22). This does not mean everything can be smoothed over with every offender in complete reconciliation, and there is not space here to delve into specific circumstances, but we must strive to maintain a forgiving heart.

because *that was his plan from before the beginning of time—to show us his grace through Christ Jesus*" (2 Timothy 1:9, NLT).

Staying the course with the help of God's grace

God never says this path will be easy (Matthew 7:13-14; Luke 13:24). But He does say it will be worth it!

Paul, imprisoned and beaten many times for his faith, was able to stay positive in the midst of tremendous trials, declaring: "For I consider that *the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us*. For the earnest expectation of the creation *eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God* . . . And we know that *all things work together for good to those who love God*, to those who are the called according to *His purpose*" (Romans 8:18-19, 28).

Life will be a struggle as we strive against sin and the pulls of our selfish nature, as well as a world that increasingly rejects God and is hostile to His way of life (see "The Apostle Paul on Struggling With Sin Yet Still Under Grace" on pages 86-87).

Jesus went on in Matthew 18:23-35 to give a parable of a servant who owed a master a vast fortune but couldn't pay—with the servant and his family to be sold as a consequence. The servant begged for time to pay, and the master amazingly had compassion, released him and forgave the debt.

But this servant then went and grabbed a fellow servant who owed him an amount that, while substantial, was nevertheless nothing compared to what he himself had been forgiven. This fellow servant begged for more time to pay, but the first servant threw him into debtor's prison! When this was reported to the master, he was furious, saying, "Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?" (verse 33). And the master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured to pay in suffering the vast amount he owed.

Note that this servant actually reincurred the debt he had been released from and now had to pay because of his own failure to be forgiving. This is a serious warning to Christians who have received God's grace. As

Jesus concluded, "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" (verse 35).

The apostle James would later write: "For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy" (James 2:13). We should not be focused on treating others as they deserve, for what would this mean for us? What do *we* deserve? Thankfully, as James then adds, "Mercy triumphs over judgment"—and so should it be in our treatment and forgiveness of others. The apostle Paul likewise said that we are to be "forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32; compare Colossians 3:13).

Once more we see that grace does not come without critical obligations. As we have been forgiven, so are we to be people who extend forgiveness to others. If we ever got to the point where we ceased to be forgiving, God would also cease to forgive us. Let us never go down that path, but rather always remember God's great undeserved merciful grace toward us and continue to forgive as we are forgiven.

This is nothing new. It has always been that way for God's faithful servants. Hebrews 11 lists many examples of courageous men and women of faith who persevered against great odds and often at the cost of their lives. They were able to do this with God's help, just as He promises His help to us in all of our struggles in this life. Hebrews 4:16 tells us to "*come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.*"

God is willing and wants to help us! And Peter assures us that He will: "*And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast*" (1 Peter 5:10, NIV).

Along with our great hope, we have God's promise of encouragement and strength in 2 Thessalonians 2:16-17: "May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and *by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope*, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word" (NIV).

What now?

Now that you've seen what the Bible really teaches about grace, what next? What will *you* do?

Regardless of your status or condition in life, you have been the recipient of God's grace in some of its many forms. James 1:17 tells us, "*Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above*, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning."

All that we have and are is a gift of God's grace. And He wants to give you more!

Are you humble and teachable enough to accept His instruction and willing to do what He says? Proverbs 3:34 says God "*scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble.*"

Humility is a trait God values highly, because He knows He can work with those who know they have a need for Him and want to humbly serve Him. In contrast, those who aren't humble don't realize how empty their lives are without God and a relationship with Him!

The apostle Paul had to deal with such people in the church in Corinth in the first century. In 1 Corinthians 6:1 he told them, "As God's co-workers we urge you *not to receive God's grace in vain.*"

Clearly some there were in danger of having received God's grace in vain. They did not appreciate God's many wonderful gifts. They did not understand the depths of God's love, care and hopes for them. But saddest of all, *they did not allow grace to change their lives*. The rest of Paul's letter is filled with the evidence of this as he recounts their many problems and failed and failing lives.

So again, what will you do? Will you, as Peter encourages us to do in 2 Peter 3:18, "*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*"?

It is possible to grow in the favor and blessing of God the Father and Jesus Christ. We must understand that further blessings and gifts come from God "because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight" (1 John 3:22). As we walk with God, relying on Him to help us in ongoing obedience, we ourselves become instruments of His grace to bless others (1 Peter 4:10)—returning grace to Him in grateful thanks and devoted service, becoming more and more like Him.

So yes, we can indeed *grow* in grace, as we see from the many positive examples in God's Word. Or we can go in the opposite direction and *alienate ourselves* from God's grace. Think on this deeply.

Our hope and prayer is that you will choose to follow God's encouragement in Hebrews 12:28: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, *let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably* with reverence and godly fear"!

Free for the Asking!



Does the Bible Really Say That?

There's much in the Bible that you rarely see taught or discussed in most churches—and much that people assume is in the Bible but really isn't!

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- To discover the incredible biblical truth of what the Bible reveals about God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, request ***Who Is God?***

- Many believe that the New Covenant does away with any need to obey the Ten Commandments and other laws of God. Is this true? Be sure to read ***The New Covenant: Does It Abolish God's Law?***

- Who was Jesus Christ, really? What did He teach? What was His message? Who and what did He claim to be? Discover the truth in ***Jesus Christ: The Real Story***.

- For more information about repentance and conversion—and the incredible purpose of your life—request your free copy of ***Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion***.

- To understand which day is the biblical Sabbath—the day set aside in the Bible for regular weekly rest and worship services—request your free copy of ***Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest***.

You'll also learn why God wants His people to assemble together and why this most neglected of the Ten Commandments is so important to our relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ.

- Did you know the Bible tells us to observe seven yearly festivals that teach us about God's plan for mankind? To learn more, request your free copy of ***God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind***.

- What is the true gospel Jesus Christ taught and commanded His Church to proclaim to the world? Is it possible that most of Christendom accepts and teaches a different gospel from the one Jesus Christ taught? Request your free copy of ***The Gospel of the Kingdom*** to discover the answers.

- The foundation of right human behavior is found in the Ten Commandments. But why are they so important? Do they have a deeper meaning that most people miss? Be sure to request your free copy of ***The Ten Commandments***.

- The popular holidays of Christmas and Easter do not come from the Bible. What are their origins? Where did their trappings, such as decorated trees, Santa Claus, rabbits and colored eggs, originate? Be sure to request ***Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Observe?*** to learn the surprising answers!

- If you would like to learn more about our beliefs, download or request ***Fundamental Beliefs of the United Church of God***.

All publications are provided free as an educational service in the public interest. Download or request them at ucg.org/booklets.

WORLDWIDE MAILING ADDRESSES

NORTH, SOUTH AND CENTRAL AMERICA

United States: United Church of God
P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027
Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax: (513) 576-9795
Website: ucg.org E-mail: info@ucg.org

Canada: United Church of God—Canada
Box 144, Station D, Etobicoke, ON M9A 4X1, Canada
Phone: (905) 614-1234, (800) 338-7779
Fax: (905) 614-1749 Website: ucg.ca

Caribbean Islands: United Church of God
P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027
Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax: (513) 576-9795
Website: ucg.org E-mail: info@ucg.org

Spanish-speaking areas: Iglesia de Dios Unida
P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A.
Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax: (513) 576-9795
E-mail: info@ucg.org

EUROPE

Benelux countries (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg):

P.O. Box 93, 2800 AB Gouda, Netherlands
British Isles: United Church of God
P.O. Box 705, Watford, Herts, WD19 6FZ, England
Phone: 020-8386-8467 Fax: 020-8386-1999
Website: goodnews.org.uk

Eastern Europe and Baltic states: Head Sõnumid
Pk. 62, 50002 Tartu Postkontor, Estonia

France: Église de Dieu Unie—France
127 rue Amelot, 75011 Paris, France

Germany: Vereinte Kirche Gottes/Gute Nachrichten
Postfach 30 15 09, D-53195 Bonn, Germany
Phone: 0228-9454636 Fax: 0228-9454637

Italy: La Buona Notizia, Chiesa di Dio Unita
Casella Postale 187, 24121 Bergamo Centro, Italy
Phone and Fax: (+39) 035 4523573
Website: labuonanotizia.org

E-mail: info@labuonanotizia.org

Scandinavia: Guds Enade Kyrka
P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A.
E-mail: norden@ucg.org

AFRICA

Cameroon: United Church of God Cameroon
BP 10322 Bessengue, Douala, Cameroon

East Africa, Madagascar and Mauritius:
United Church of God—East Africa
P.O. Box 75261, Nairobi 00200, Kenya
E-mail: eastafrica@ucg.org Website: ucgeastafrica.org

Ghana: P.O. Box AF 75, Adenta, Accra, Ghana
E-mail: ghana@ucg.org

Malawi: P.O. Box 32257, Chichiri, Blantyre 3, Malawi
Phone: +265 (0) 999 823 523 E-mail: malawi@ucg.org

Nigeria: United Church of God—Nigeria
P.O. Box 2265 Somolu, Lagos, Nigeria
Phone: 8033233193 Website: ucgnigeria.org
E-mail: nigeria@ucg.org

South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia and Swaziland: United Church of God—Southern Africa
P.O. Box 73606, Lynwood Ridge 0040, South Africa
Phone: +27 79 725 9453 Fax: +27 (0)86 572 7437
Website: south-africa.ucg.org

E-mail: UnitedChurchofGod.SA@gmail.com

Zambia: P.O. Box 23076, Kitwe, Zambia
Phone: (0026) 0966925840 E-mail: zambia@ucg.org

Zimbabwe: P.O. Box 594, Mutare, Zimbabwe
Phone: +263 773 920 614 E-mail: zimbabwe@ucg.org

PACIFIC REGION

Australia and all other South Pacific regions

not listed: United Church of God—Australia
GPO Box 535, Brisbane, Qld. 4001, Australia
Free call: 1800 356 202
Fax: 07 55 202 122

Website: ucg.org.au E-mail: info@ucg.org.au

New Zealand: United Church of God
P.O. Box 22, Shortland St.

Auckland 1140, New Zealand
Phone: Toll-free 0508-463-763

Website: ucg.org.nz E-mail: info@ucg.org.nz

Tonga: United Church of God—Tonga
P.O. Box 518, Nuku'alofa, Tonga

ASIA

All except Philippines and Singapore:

United Church of God
P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A.
Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax (513) 576-9795
E-mail: info@ucg.org

Philippines: P.O. Box 4774
MCPO, 1287 Makati City, Philippines
Cell/text: +63 918-904-4444
Website: ucg.org.ph E-mail: info@ucg.org.ph

Singapore: United Church of God—Australia
GPO Box 535, Brisbane, Qld. 4001, Australia
Website: ucg-singapore.org
E-mail: info@ucg.org.au

ALL AREAS AND NATIONS NOT LISTED

United Church of God
P.O. Box 541027, Cincinnati, OH 45254-1027, U.S.A.
Phone: (513) 576-9796 Fax: (513) 576-9795
E-mail: info@ucg.org

Author: Scott Ashley *Contributing writers:* Gary Antion, Bill Bradford, Peter Eddington, Victor Kubik, Darris McNeely, Tom Robinson, Michael Snyder, Donald Ward
Editorial reviewers: Jorge de Campos, Aaron Dean, Dan Dowd, Robert Dick, Len Martin, Justin Palm, Rainer Salomaa, Mario Seiglie, Randy Stiver, Anthony Wasilkoff, Robin Webber
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If You'd Like to Know More...

Who we are: This publication is provided free of charge by the United Church of God, an *International Association*, which has ministers and congregations throughout much of the world.

We trace our origins to the Church that Jesus founded in the early first century. We follow the same teachings, doctrines and practices established then. Our commission is to proclaim the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to all the world as a witness and to teach all nations to observe what Christ commanded (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).



Free of charge: Jesus Christ said, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). The United Church of God offers this and other publications free of charge as an educational service in the public interest. We invite you to request your free subscription to *Beyond Today* magazine and to enroll in our 12-lesson *Bible Study Course*, also free of charge.



We are grateful for the generous tithes and offerings of the members of the Church and other supporters who voluntarily contribute to support this work of proclaiming the gospel to the world (Matthew 28:19-20). We do not solicit the general public for funds.

However, contributions to help us share this message of hope with others are welcomed. All funds are audited annually by an independent accounting firm.

Personal counsel available: Jesus commanded His followers to feed His sheep (John 21:15-17). To help fulfill this command, the United Church of God has congregations around the world. In these congregations believers assemble to be instructed from the Scriptures and to fellowship.

The United Church of God is committed to understanding and practicing New Testament Christianity. We desire to share God's way of life with those who earnestly seek to follow our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our ministers are available to counsel, answer questions and explain the Bible. If you would like to contact a minister or visit one of our congregations, please feel free to contact our office nearest you.



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