

525 What Is Grace?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

When you mention to some people that salvation is a gift, they think that this is too good to be true. They figure they must earn their way to heaven by doing some great thing. They can't imagine God giving us something so wonderful as forgiveness of sins and heaven. We often hear the word "grace," but this word can be overworked. We're asking the question, "What does it mean to be saved by the grace of God?" We hope you'll listen closely and tell a friend about this program.

Someone has taken the word "G-R-A-C-E" and made the acrostic "God's Redemption At Christ's Expense." This is a fairly accurate description of grace. The word grace (*charis*) means "favor." One who has the love, blessing and favor of another may be said to be in the "good graces" of his benefactor. The distinguishing factors of God's grace are twofold: (1) that God's grace is given as a gift and is not earned; and (2) that God's grace is undeserved. Usually we think of having to earn a place of favor with others, but God gives us his favor as a gift.

God's grace is a gift and not earned. In Rom. 4:4, Paul says "Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." Grace is not a wage for our labors, a prize for our winning a competition, or an award for our meritorious efforts. It is a gift. When a man can earn no wage, can win no prize, and deserves no award, yet receives a wondrous gift, he has been given unmerited favor or undeserved kindness. This is what God in his love has done for us.

Ephesians 2:1-10 helps us to understand how God has loved us and saved us. Paul said, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." Sin causes a person to be spiritually dead. It is not merely an inappropriate act; sin kills one spiritually.

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus." I have found that the most wonderful sections of the Bible begin with the word "but." We were dead, but that is not the end of the story. God rich in mercy and love saved us by his grace.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10). We are saved by grace through faith. It takes both. We are not saved by grace alone or by faith alone, but by grace through faith. Grace reflects all that God does in our lives to bring us home to Him. Faith reflects our response of trust and love and obedience to the grace that He has given us.

God's grace works through our faith. God desires that we appreciate and understand his great gift by responding to him in faith. Paul said in Titus 3:3-5, "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our

Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit." God chose to wash us and renew us as an act of loving kindness. How?

This washing that regenerates and renews is when we are born again in baptism. By faith, when we repent and are baptized, God washes us clean from sin and causes us to be born again into His family. The faith that matters to God is a faith that is willing to trust God enough to accept God's teaching, God's gift, and God's blessing by obediently responding. In Galatians 3:26-27, the Bible says, "for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."

This means that the faith that saves, the faith that Paul had in mind, which responds to grace is an obedient faith. We are sons of God by faith, but this is a faith that will repent and be baptized. For it is in baptism that we are born again and that we "put on Christ." In baptism God grants to us all the blessings and favor that goes with being a Christian. What a great God we have! Baptism is not, as Paul said, some work we do to earn salvation. It is how we lovingly obey Him in faith, because He asks us to be baptized.

Obedience is not the same thing as earning. Let's say I had a treasure worth \$10,000 hidden in my backyard. I told you that I would give it to you, provided you go and dig it up. Do you really believe that the few minutes of digging earned that \$10,000 for you? You see, you met a condition for a gift by obeying my words. You didn't earn the gift, you received it by doing what I asked you to do. That's how it is in salvation. We don't earn salvation by repenting or being baptized; we merely comply with God's gift.

In Numbers 21, the children of Israel while wandering in the wilderness came to the land of Edom, where they grumbled and spoke against God, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this miserable food." The Lord became angry and "sent fiery serpents among the people and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. The people repented and confessed their sin. They asked Moses to intercede for them with God, and Moses asked God to remove the serpents. #A

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery *serpent*, and set it on a standard; and it shall come about, that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, he will live." And Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on the standard; and it came about, that if a serpent bit any man, when he looked to the bronze serpent, he lived (Numbers 21:8-9). Now all they had to do was look by faith on the serpent. They did not earn their healing, but they did have to comply with God's instructions. Obeying is not the same as earning. Obedience is an act of faith and trust that God will keep his promises.

In John 9, Jesus encountered a man who was born blind. Jesus wanted to heal this man and show the power of God, so He spat on the ground, and made clay of the spittle, and applied the clay to his eyes, and said to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which is translated, Sent). So he went away and washed, and came *back* seeing (John 9:6-7). Now who would argue that washing in a pool is the same as earning our eyesight? The man earned nothing, but he believed strongly enough to do what Jesus told him to do. Faith is not merely accepting. It is trusting enough to do what the Lord asks us to do!

Let me make it very clear that the Bible does not teach that baptism is how we earn salvation. But the Bible does teach that baptism is necessary to salvation—just as looking on the brass serpent was necessary; and just as washing in the pool of Siloam was necessary.

There are times when God tests us to see if we really love Him and believe in Him. These tests are God's conditions, not ours. He gave them to us. We didn't invent them. Meeting God's conditions says to Him, "We trust You enough to do whatever you ask of us. We know you will keep your promises."

What I do not understand is why anyone, who sees how wonderful the grace of God is, would think they could test that grace by changing the conditions or by setting those conditions aside? Some people think the grace of God means I can respond to Him anyway I want. They consider grace to mean there are no conditions at all. Do you think the blind man would have argued about doing it his own way, if he really wanted to see? Do you think the Israelites would have argued about looking on the serpent? Why would anyone argue about repentance or baptism today? Wouldn't it be better to obey? #A

The New Testament contains the new covenant of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. This new covenant contains the promises of God and what God expects of His people. In this covenant God is a benefactor who gives more to us than can ever be repaid. If we count our blessings, they include salvation, continued forgiveness of sin, eternal life, the right to pray, and sonship. If we could live for thousands of years, we could never repay God for what He has done for us. God does not expect repayment. God expects love, loyalty and obedience from His children.

Jesus said, "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). In verse 21 Jesus said, "He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him." It's not legalism or works righteousness or anything else but love. Paul said, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6). When we love the Lord and want to please Him, we are willing to do everything He asks and do it the way that He wants it done.

So, when the Lord asks us to believe in Him, we are willing to trust Him and His word completely.

When the Lord asks us to repent of our sins, love leads us to turn away from anything that is offensive to God. All sin offends God. We couldn't imagine continuing to offend the God who has been so good to us and blessed us.

When Jesus asks us to confess Him before others, we will gladly say to the world that Jesus is the Son of God. He is Lord and Christ!

When Jesus says to us, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved," we believe.

We are going to be baptized because that's the will of the One we love. We don't want to half-love the Lord. We don't want to leave out any of His commandments. We can't say we love God if we pick and choose we commandments we'll obey and ignore the others. Love wants to please God in every respect. If the baptism of the New Testament is immersion, and it is, then I wouldn't want to be baptized any other way. Paul said, "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4).

If the baptism of the New Testament is one of faith and accompanied by baptism (and it is), then I won't baptize babies, but those old enough to understand and commit themselves. When Philip preached the gospel in Samaria, "they were being baptized, men and women alike" (Acts 8:12). In fact, no passage of the New Testament teaches that babies are to be baptized. Grace and love means I want to do only those things that please God and not myself. Won't you give yourself to the Lord today by obedience to the gospel?

Every law God ever gave to man was for his own good. God doesn't give us laws to punish us or to afflict us. He doesn't make up foolish laws just to prove that He is the boss. No God gives us His laws to keep us from troubles in life. Even the law of God is gracious to us. As a loving parent His only concern is for our welfare. When we realize that, we will look at God's law not as a straightjacket but as a blessing. When I give homework to my students at Nashville School of Preaching, I don't do it to be mean but to help them grow spiritually in their knowledge of God.

Titus 2:11-14 says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds." God wants to bless your life richly! Will you let Him?

Where are you in your life? Do you have a close, loving, peaceful relationship with God? Do you have peace of mind and heart inside? God hasn't left you; it may be that you have left God. The greatest need of our time is to know God and to draw close to Him again by listening and obeying His Word. Won't you do that?

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