

Treasuring God as Gracious

By David de Bruyn

John Newton was a slave trader in the 18th century, who during a violent storm cried out to God for mercy, and was saved. He would later write the words of one of most beloved hymns – Amazing Grace. Have you ever stopped to ask, “What is so amazing about grace?” Why shouldn’t we call it simply ‘good grace’ or ‘nice grace’ or even ‘wonderful grace’? Why ‘amazing grace’. Seeing why grace is amazing, and why we ought to love and treasure God all the more for it, is what we want to look at today.

Grace, in the Bible translates the Hebrew word ‘chein’ and the Greek ‘*charis*’. Both refer to favour given to someone. Most often, it is favour to an inferior - being good to someone less than yourself, someone undeserving of the goodness.

God’s grace is His love stooping down. In fact, the Hebrew word comes from a root meaning to bend down, to stoop. God cannot love us as equals, because we are not His equals. In fact, the moment God created the universe He was being gracious. He was sharing Himself with creatures that though innocent, were less than Himself. It was an act of grace. And of course, when sin entered the picture, it only made the grace of God seem even greater, that He would continue to seek the wellbeing of creatures that had forsaken Him and rebelled against Him.

And what is the wellbeing of His creatures? The answer is that He is the wellbeing of His creatures. God is the centre of His universe. He is the life of His universe, to the degree that if His creatures are separated from Him, the worse their situation. Therefore grace is when God shares **Himself** with those who are less than Him, and how much more, with those who have previously rejected Him.

So grace is God’s decision to be good to us, to be kind to us, to seek our wellbeing and for joy and happiness being mediated to us. It is His love penetrating the effects of our sin, pushing through our rebellion, and seeking us out. Grace is that part of God’s character that wants to pardon the sinner, release the prisoner, set the captive free, heal the broken-hearted, heal the sick, save the perishing, seek and find the lost – even when these conditions and predicaments were brought about by disobeying God. Grace is the wonderful heart of God that loves us not because of what we are, but because of what He is. And Paul wants us to rejoice in God as gracious. He wants us to treasure God as gracious. To do so, He will focus on three things which highlight the grace of God.

God’s Grace Requires No Merit in Us

In order to magnify God’s grace, Paul does something which might take us by surprise- He reminds us what terrible sinners we are before salvation. He really pulls no punches as he describes in Romans 1, the depravity and sinfulness of man. Why would he do this?

The answer is that you will never see the point of grace, and thereby treasure God as gracious, until you truly see the depth of your sin. You will never feel the thrilling feeling of gratitude and relief, and adoring gratitude for God, if you do not see what it really meant for God to save us. If you minimise your offence, you minimise the grace of your pardon.

If I came up to you and said, “I just sold my house to pay off your R50 000 fine”, you would probably look at me in a strange way, and conclude that I am rather strange. ‘What R50 000 fine?’, you will think. But if I first come to you and explain that you unwittingly drove through a special zone set apart for disabled pedestrians, and the fine you incurred was R50 000, and then I told you that I had sold my house to pay off your debt, what would your response be? Great gratitude and relief and thankfulness. Grace becomes clear when we see what we did wrong, what we owed God, what the offence was. Until we see that, we will not think it very much of God to have saved us, we may in fact think we rather deserved saving.

So the key is to see ourselves as God sees us, to read God’s verdict and agree with it, to see ourselves through His eyes. And that’s exactly what verses 1 to 3 are – man from God’s perspective.

He is Spiritually Dead.

That means, from birth, he is separated from the life of God. He is unresponsive to God. As a corpse is to colour and smells and sounds, so we are to God before salvation. Now, how much joy would you get out of a corpse? How much merit is there in a corpse?

He is Sinning Continually

‘Wherein in time past ye walked in sin’. What does it mean to walk in sin? Walking implies the repetition of steps. Steps repeated again and again make up a walk. To walk in sin means to be a habitual, continual sinner. Sin, by definition, is anything contrary to the nature of God. Man, before salvation, acts in contradiction of God’s nature. Not as an exception, but as a rule. He violates the nature of God with a purposeful, habitual life of disobedience to God’s law. Picture having your very nature, your desires, and your will being consistently contradicted by someone. This is man before God. If it weren’t enough that he is a corpse to God, he does the opposite of what might win him God’s favour. He is going down on the points scale as far as merit goes.

He is Selfishly Consumed

It says we followed the course of this world. That is not the world as in the physical world; it is the system of belief and practice which is in opposition to God. John describes it in very strong terms:

“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world.” (1Jo 2:15-16)

Notice the similarity with verse 3 of Ephesians 2:

“Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.”(Eph 2:3)

Worldliness-This is a value system which exalts and enshrines selfishness. Living for the pleasure of my own physical experiences, my own appearance and image, and for my own glory – this is the system of worldliness. This system is repugnant to God to the point that the Bible says if you love this system – you don’t love God. Living in this selfish way is not of the Father. And this is how we were before we were saved. Not only does he live in sin, but he chooses a way of life, an overall philosophy at odds with God. He lives for soul-destroying wasteful things. Hear God’s anger at this kind of exchange:

“Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the LORD. For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.” (Jer 2:12-13)

He has even less merit in God’s eyes than before.

He is Satanically Inspired

He follows the prince of the power of air. He is a sheep of God’s arch-enemy. He imitates and submits to the Greatest Offender of all – the Devil. As if he is not in bad enough shape – being spiritually dead and stinking to God, man persists in sin, being a child of disobedience, embraces the philosophy God hates – selfish worldliness, and he follows the lead and guidance of God’s arch enemy.

“Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do.”(Joh 8:44)
“He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil.” (1Jo 3:8)

After all this, it is not simply that man has little or no merit in God’s eyes; it is that he has *de-merit*. He is, as verse 3 puts it, a child of wrath by nature. Everything he is and does only stores up more and more anger from God. God does not rejoice in the works of the unbeliever. Though He loves them, their continual warping of His image in them, provokes His anger more and more.

So its fitting that Paul’s description of us is simple – children of wrath. That term suggests we are the offspring of judgement, in other words, what we will inherit is God’s anger. It is what is coming to us.

We are in the right place when we begin to see the justice of hell. We are beginning to see the beauty of grace when we see the wretchedness of sin, and our deserved punishment. There is a vast difference between the man who sees his sin, and the man

who sees the sinfulness of sin. The man who simply sees his sin is like Pharaoh who said, "I have sinned". He is like Judas who said, "I have sinned". He is like King Saul who said, "I have sinned". He simply acknowledges the fact of his sin, and even that there are consequences for his sin. But he does not see the sin for what it is – an offence to God, deserving his judgement. The heart that is coming to see grace is the heart that says like David did, "I have sinned *against the LORD*". We see it in the heart of the people of Nineveh, who after Jonah's preaching we read the king of Nineveh decreed:

"And he cried out and said in Nineveh by the decree of the king and his great ones, saying, Do not let man or beast, herd or flock taste anything; do not let them feed, nor drink water. But let man and animal be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God. And let them each one turn from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? He may repent, and God may have pity and turn away from the glow of His anger, so that we do not perish." (Jon 3:7-9)

The point of this is to see that grace is magnified when we see what kind of people we were. When we see the sinfulness of our sin – that we were spiritually dead, sinning continually, selfishly consumed and satanically inspired, we should expect the next verse to read about God's flaming judgement. But the wonderful thing is, the next word in verse 4 is 'But', "But God". Not, "And God destroyed". "But God". This is grace brought down to its simplest form. We are told... "but God, being rich in mercy". Mercy is not giving us what we do deserve. The wrath, the anger, the fiery judgement in hell is giving us what we deserve. God's mercy is not in short supply. He is wealthy in mercy. He has abundant supplies of mercy. And from that great supply of mercy, in Jesus Christ, He withheld what we deserved. But if mercy is not giving us what we deserve, grace is positively, giving us what we don't deserve.

And that's the next pillar in what magnifies God's grace.

God's Grace Rewards Us With His Love for His Son

In verse 4 we read, because of His great love with which He loved us. That is one of the most explicit references to God's love for us in the Bible. And it is not a small love. It is not a reluctant love. It is a great love. The message of the Gospel is that God, as glorious as He is, loves us. He could have written us off. But in His love for us, He still wishes for men to know and enjoy His glory, as it was before the fall of Adam. And His love is a gracious love. It requires no merit in us before it sets its love upon us. In fact, it chooses to overlook our demerit by providing us with merit in Christ. Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, died and rose again, so that our demerit – our sin would be paid for, and His merit as God's perfect Son would become ours by faith.

You cannot separate grace and Jesus Christ. When you think God's grace, you should think Jesus Christ. Because God, coming amongst us as a man, was grace. His mission of redemption was grace. His death on the cross was grace. All God's acts of loving grace culminated and consummated in Jesus Christ. That's why John wrote,

"For the Law came through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." (Joh 1:17)

God's grace is Him rewarding us with His love for Jesus Christ. What does that mean? It means God chose to approach sinners who had no merit in themselves, and in a kind, gracious desire for their wellbeing, He enabled them to become objects of His love as opposed to objects of His wrath. Salvation is where God places us in Christ, and now all that God does for the Son, He does for us.

Just notice how our predicament was reversed by God's grace in Christ. We were dead in trespasses and sins. Verse 5 says, even when in this state, He made us alive with Christ. In Jesus Christ, He gave us life, eternal life – the life of Christ Himself. Now we are no longer separated from God, unresponsive to the things of God. Suddenly we have spiritual eyes and ears, a taste for spiritual things; we can feel the things of God. We can respond to God, relate to God. Just as God raised up Jesus, He joined us in His resurrection at salvation, and regenerates us.

We were in bondage to Satan and the world. His realm and the vain life in the world, that was all we had. In place of that, in Jesus, God has...

“And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:” (Eph 2:6)

Verse 20 of chapter 1: “Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places,” In place of that, God gives us an inheritance with His Son.

He saved us from our death, from our captivity to this world and to the Devil. But also, in place of the wrath and anger we were to face in hell, He now deals with us kindly:

“That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.” (Eph 2:7)

God's kindness to Jesus Christ is now showered on us. All the love the Father has for the Son is directed to us when we are 'in Christ'. Mercy would be to not judge us. Mercy would be to simply free us from captivity. But grace not only frees us, it rewards us. Mercy withholds anger, but grace showers kindness.

One thing to consider is the tone of this passage. God's love is not a reluctant, cold thing. Instead, God's love is God joyfully desiring our highest and best good. When someone does you a favour, and they do so miserably or reluctantly – do you call that love? No, love, at its heart, rejoices over the one it loves. Love is zealous. God desires the good of His people. He is happy about our happiness.

“The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing.” (Zep 3:17)

God's love is this: He has chosen that His glory and our happiness should be joined together. God's love is Him gifting us with Himself, in spite of us. He rewards us with Himself in Jesus Christ. As John Piper put it: God's love is not God making much of us. It is God enabling us to make much of Him. It is His sharing of Himself with us. But Paul wants us to savour God's grace in all its fullness. He wants us to know that there is nothing we can do to merit grace, but also there is nothing we can do to compensate grace.

God's Grace Requires No Compensation from Us

In verse 7 Paul says God will be gracious to us for all eternity. And that leads Him to say: because you were saved by grace, and you are kept by grace, and your future is by grace. Verse 8 – you were saved by God's grace through faith. Through faith, God's grace came to your life – it was not your own doing. You didn't merit it or earn it, and now you can't pay it back.

Verse 9 – Grace is not by works. 'Works' is human effort; human ingenuity to try and do for themselves what only God can do for them. As Paul says:

"But if by grace, then it is no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it is of works, then it is no more of grace; otherwise work is no more work." (Rom 11:6)

If no man merits or earns or pays off His salvation, no man can boast in His salvation. It is purely of God. Grace does not regard what you are – your merit, nor does it regard what you can do – your works. Indeed, as Paul says for we are His work! He is not our work! We are His Work. He created this new work in us in Jesus Christ, so that now we can do good works which God ordained we should do. Working is always a response to what God has done. It is never something done to merit grace. There is no grace given to the one trying to earn salvation. Paul goes out of his way to emphasize while you were dead – He saved you.

So if we were doing nothing worthy of grace before salvation, what makes people think they can do something worthy after salvation to keep their salvation? Our salvation is kept in Christ. We are sealed in Him by the Holy Spirit. What we do now, is the work that God is doing in us and through us for His glory. It is not to keep grace, or to preserve it, or to remain in a meritorious state so as to remain saved. That would leave room for boasting. God is clear, your works after being saved are not to keep your salvation, they are simply part of His work. Your works will still be by His grace, giving Him all the glory for your salvation and your sanctification. Grace is the bridge between God's glory, and our good. If the choice was God's glory or our good, it is obvious it would be God's glory that would win out, and we would have no happiness. But God's loving grace has united His glory and our good.

How do we respond to God's grace? What must we do with grace?

Well, there are four things you can do with grace:

- 1) **You can neglect grace.** You can refuse it altogether, by denying what God says you are. You can say I don't need grace; I'm fine as I am.

Heb 2:3: "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him;" (Heb 2:3)

If you neglect grace, you will not escape God's anger.

2) You can insult grace.

Heb 10:29 says: "Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto[insulted] the Spirit of grace? (Heb 10:29)

The writer is speaking about believing Jews who would turn their back on the salvation Christ provided and turn back to the rituals and dead works of Judaism. To do that would be to insult grace. It would be like saying I don't need the sacrifice of Christ, I will provide my own way. All false religion, all humanism, all self-help psychology is an insult to grace. It says I have a better way than Jesus Christ. Those who insult grace by trying to bribe God with good works, or those who turn to things other than His Son to save them – insult His grace. The Bible describes the result of this being sore punishment.

3) You can abuse grace.

"For, brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another." (Gal 5:13)

I Peter 2:16 tells us not to use our freedom as a cover-up for evil. This is abusing grace. It is saying, 'Christ has set me free,' and then returning to sin. It is saying, 'God is so forgiving, let me prove that by sinning without restraint. If grace abound the more I sin, let me sin all the more.' Our salvation, our freedom is not to be used to sin. Let me say that anyone who thinks that salvation is a ticket to heaven that allows us to live as we please here, is probably not saved. Now certainly grace is abused to some degree whenever we sin. But a persistent, rebellious sin against the patience of God does not sound like someone who has truly been saved. Such a person needs to hear 1 John 3:6:

"Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him."

4) You can gratefully receive grace.

The Bible tells us that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Gratitude is the true test of humility. Someone who is truly grateful, not merely politely grateful, reveals they are humble. If you are grateful for God's grace, you are confessing some things about yourself – you needed God's help, you were sinful, you were destitute of goodness, you were helpless without God. You admit what God said about you is true and what He promised is true. You are expressing humility and faith. And gratitude is a joyful, humble experience, that feels the

wonder and the awe of having been favoured. In fact the English words grace and gratitude find their root meaning is the same word. To be grateful is to be grace-filled – to have a grace-attitude, a grace-itude. A grateful person is a grace-aware person.

The two opposites of gratitude are complaining or boasting. When pride lacks something, it says, “I ought to have this! Why has it not been given to me! I demand that this be given to me!” Complaining - complaining usually reflects a proud heart that believes it deserves more than it is getting.

When pride has something, it says, “Well, of course! I did it! I earned it! I made it! I deserve what I have because I pulled myself up here by my own bootstraps!” When you or I are complaining, or boasting we are not in humility. But true gratitude says, “I did not deserve this and I could not earn it, or keep it, but I am so glad I have it”. And another test of humility is stewardship.

When there is pride, the attitude to something you have received will be careless or haphazard. But when you acknowledge something as an undeserved, unearned gift, you will be very careful how you handle it. You will be a steward, one who manages something for their master. Just think of how the concept of grateful stewardship can affect how you see your wife, or your husband, your children, your job, your church, your health, your body, your possessions; but of all things – your salvation, your relationship with God. The humility that treasures God as gracious will be a grateful steward. It will say, I did not deserve this relationship with God, I did not earn it, and I cannot keep it. But I am so thankful for it, and by His grace, I wish to grow in my relationship with Him so as to treasure Him more. That’s what it means when we treasure God as gracious.
