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308 - But For The Grace Of God

1. Introduction

The grace, or favor of God, shown toward mankind defines God's love for humanity and His unwillingness that any should perish. But what is grace, is it confined to the New Testament era and how do we access it? In this lesson we'll answer these questions as we examine the fact that But For The Grace of God we would be lost and without hope.

2. Grace in perspective

The Bible believing world today celebrates the fact that we're living in God's grace because of the sacrifice of Christ for the sins of the world and the gift of the Holy Spirit. When we look at various doctrines that define and describe what grace is and how it affects the lives of believers we see a range of interpretations. These ideas differ in their view of how God's grace manifests in an individual and extends to doctrines about whether one can be eternally lost once they've encountered the grace of God.

As with other subjects in this series we need to take a careful look at the scriptures to find out what they have to say about the matter. In this lesson I'll

- a. Define grace from a secular & religious perspective
- b. Present Christ's statements that define grace
- c. Review the presence of God's grace historically in the scriptures
- d. Discuss grace as a law

Let's take a look at each of these.

3. Defining grace

When asked to define grace, believers offer a number of explanations. The content of these is influenced by the doctrine they were taught at the point of conversion, and their personal experience. Regardless of differences in these explanations, a common denominator is a reliance on internal feelings of joy, relief, assurance and closeness to God. Modern dictionaries reflect these ideas. Webster defines grace as:

- a. Unmerited divine assistance given man for his regeneration or sanctification
- b. A state of sanctification enjoyed through divine grace
- c. A virtue coming from God

Other definitions are provided for a prayer worded before a meal and an attitude or disposition toward others. I want to focus on the first three since they reflect the ideas under discussion in this lesson. I'll briefly discuss each of these and then we'll take a look at what the original language denotes from first century Koiné Greek. I'll also add that each of the first three

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statements in the definition are indicative of doctrinal teachings by different religious bodies that would take a lot of time to discuss fully.

a. Unmerited divine assistance given man for his regeneration or sanctification: As we'll see in a few minutes, grace does include the idea of receiving something from God that is unmerited, or not earned. That this is available to humans is consistent with the scriptures but I want to focus on the last terms; regeneration and sanctification. Both of these statements have scriptural validity if they're understood in their proper context and application. Both of them refer to salvation or the product of obedience to God with the result that one is freed from sin and has a relationship with the Lord. Many who teach various doctrines however understand these terms to refer to conditions that don't meet the criteria for compliance to God's commands regarding how one is saved. In a very short summary some of these ideas reflect Calvin's teaching of Total Depravity, the state in which man was contained following Adam and Eve's sin in the garden of Eden. Calvin taught that those who would be saved would remain in this state of depravity until called by God by his Irresistible Grace which would lead one to Christ and salvation. Once one acknowledges this call it is believed that God through the Holy Spirit changes the sin nature of the individual and cleanses them. This is the idea of a regeneration resulting in being sanctified by God. The grace of God in this instance is the selection, call and cleansing of the individual consistent with God's election of certain individuals before the world began.

Others who teach the freewill election of the Gospel by the individual believe that when one encounters the Gospel and allows the Holy Spirit to act on or enter their heart God cleanses them from sin, changing their spiritual state. Some groups believe that one who has been saved and received this grace from God will be purged internally of their desire to sin and can therefore never be lost. Still others, teach that God acts on the individual sending his spirit into their heart but that soul can be lost should the person grow weak and sin.

In any of these scenarios, the proof that one has been saved is seen as the creation of an inner state of peace while others hold that the sign of being awarded the grace of God manifests through speaking in tongues and other things. I addressed some of these ideas in the previous lesson on the Holy Spirit and I'll touch on them again as we proceed. As we can see this belief relies on the actions of God toward the individual and in some belief systems indicates that one has been specifically chosen by the Lord for service and therefore receives a measure of grace through the Holy Spirit.

b. A state of sanctification enjoyed through divine grace: The second part of the definition can be viewed as a summary of the first. God's grace is sent on the individual who is saved and then benefits from internal cleansing and purification. The result is that one is sanctified, or made holy, by God. The question that we'll answer partially in this lesson and more completely in the upcoming video on salvation, is how does this take place and who's responsible for what part? That may sound confusing, but I think when we take a look at what the scriptures teach we'll clarify things.

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c. A virtue coming from God: Although on the surface this definition seems to be different from the first two it really embodies the same idea. The concept is that grace is a tangible quality that is somehow bestowed on an individual by God. The mechanism by which this is accomplished is believed to be the Holy Spirit as I mentioned earlier. Believers sometimes report feeling fulfilled or changed by their acceptance of Christ and the scriptures. The idea that God infuses us with a quality or attribute we didn't possess prior to believing and essentially changes us creates a problem with what the New Testament says about belief, obedience and conversion. I'll discuss that in more detail in the next lesson, but for now, I'll focus on the general idea that people apply to the idea of grace.

What we've seen in these definitions is the idea that grace emanates from God and is something that he gives without being earned - or unmerited. Grace endows the recipient with inner joy, assistance to achieve perfection and sanctifies believers. The mechanics of how this happens and the identification of one who has received God's grace vary from one religious body to another and becomes complex in the details. But is that really what grace is? To shed some light on that we can take a look at the original Greek text.

The word *charis* (χάρις) is used in several ways in the New Testament. It appears as a greeting and at other times as a general description of blessings or favor received from God or the benefit one receives from others. In an objective sense the word translated as grace describes the condition offered by God that affords us the blessing of redemption. Thayer notes, "**Moreover the word χάρις contains the idea of kindness which bestows upon one what he has not deserved...**" (The New Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D., 1974 J.P. Green, Evangel Publishing Company).

This is also commonly rendered as unmerited favor which is consistent with this definition. Another way of stating this that I've heard more recently is that grace is God's providing what we don't deserve which is also consistent with the definition of the word.

Paul sheds light on what grace is in his address to the Galatians. The churches of Galatia had been experiencing teachers dictating they needed to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses in order to be saved. Paul addresses this throughout the letter contrasting the Gospel message with that of the Mosaic law. The Law had been fulfilled by Christ's sacrifice on the cross, resurrection and ascension to the Father. On the day of Pentecost when the church was established the Law of Moses began to fade and pass away as the writer of Hebrews notes (**Heb 8.13**). Paul begins the letter by expressing his concern that they had fallen away by the false doctrines being circulated.

Paul addresses several aspects of the false teaching and reminds the Galatian Christians that the Law was no longer in effect. Paul states, "**Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.**" Later he adds, "**whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace.**" (Gal 5.4). Paul indicates that grace is a provision

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available to believers supplied by God, contained in Christ, from which one can deviate and be lost. There's more to this discussion than what I can cover here but the bottom line is that the Law was put in place by God to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah. When Christ came into the world and completed the work God sent him to perform, the Law of Moses was fulfilled (**Matt 5.17-18**). The passing of the Law was confusing for many in the first century and remains a problem for believers today at times who don't understand this transition.

For the purpose of our discussion we can summarize some popular attitudes and concepts regarding the Law and the Gospel. The Law was time limited and filled with numerous complicated ordinances and ritualistic activities that defined faithful service for the Hebrews to whom the Law was given. Some view the aspect of Christ's sacrifice, the grace of God, to be a liberation from those aspects of righteous service freeing one from action, or works, on their part. The difficulty that comes up in conversation is the idea that all one has to do is believe and accept Christ after which God sheds his spirit on the individual perfecting and sanctifying them aside from any "works" on the part of the believer. This is partially correct, and the best way to demonstrate what's accurate and what isn't, is to examine Christ's statement that gives us what I think is the best definition of grace.

4. Christ's definition of grace

The idea that grace is "unmerited favor" or a blessing bestowed on those who don't deserve such a gift is accurate but at the same time remains vague. The ambiguity has been filled in over the years by theologians who have taken it on themselves to describe grace not just as a state or provision made by God, but as a summary action and blessing on an individual through the Holy Spirit when one turns to God. Descriptions of what the Holy Spirit does are often stated in experiential and subjective terms that vary from one group of believers to another. The idea of grace in this way of looking at things lies in the domain of the relative and lacks clear definition.

There are concepts and ideas related to how God works that are harder to understand than others. There are some things that we have to accept as stated and limit our speculations because we can't understand them as Solomon brings out (**Ecc 3.11**). But there are some things that may not be readily understood but can be learned when we take a closer look at what the scriptures say. Grace is one of those things and we have an insight provided to us by Christ himself.

When Nicodemus came to Christ he acknowledged that Jesus was from God due to the miracles he performed. Christ's response is interesting since we don't have a record of a question being asked by Nicodemus. Christ stated, "*Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" (**John 3.3**). Nicodemus, confused, then asked how a man who was old could enter his mother's womb a second time not recognizing the spiritual nature of Christ's question.

In the following verses Christ explains the nature of being born again as involving the

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“*water and the spirit*” (John 3.5). Still confused, Nicodemus asks, “*How can these things be?*” (John 3.9). Christ responds, “*Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?*” (John 3.10).

In the explanation provided by Christ is the statement that the “*Son of man must be lifted up*” describing the way in which he was to die. The reason for this is also provided. “*That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*” (John 3.15). Then, Christ states why the Son of man would be lifted up, or crucified, as a sacrifice in one of the most well known passages in the scriptures. “*For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*” (John 3.16). I’ve discussed this encounter in great detail in a previous lesson so I won’t review it all here. Summarizing that we can see:

- a. Entry into the kingdom of God was by being born again
- b. Being born again involved water and the Spirit
- c. Being born again is coupled with belief in Christ
- d. Christ was lifted up or crucified as the final sacrifice for sin
- e. Christ was provided as this sacrifice because God loved the world

Putting this all together we find that Christ, the Messiah, came into the world according to God’s will. He was the fulfillment of the Law in that he offered the final sacrifice for sin for all time, past, present and future. Christ’s sacrifice was a provision God made for anyone, or “*whosoever*” as recorded by John, would believe in Christ. The nature of this belief has to be understood.

It’s not enough to accept the story of Christ as factual. There’s more to it. Christ is deity who left heaven (Phil 2.7) to come into the world. Christ’s presence in the world was brought about by an action of the Holy Spirit who created the body that housed the spirit of the son of God. When Christ died and was placed in the tomb, it was God who raised him from the dead (Acts 2.24, 32). The belief we need to have is in Christ as a representative of the power of God and the love he has for humanity, that he was willing to sacrifice his son for the sake of others who had done nothing to deserve such consideration. This is a functional definition of the grace of God.

John’s statement includes the fact that anyone who wishes to be saved can do so through believing on Christ which is to believe in the power of God. Paul notes this fact in his address to the Athenian philosophers when he states that God, “... *hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us...*” (Acts 17.26-27). Christ was provided as the sacrifice for sin for any and all who desire to turn to God. This mirrors Ezekiel who stated, “*Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord*

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GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live?" (Ezek 18.23). Ezekiel also wrote, **"As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live..." (Ezek 33.11).**

From these passages we find that God isn't the angry deity waiting to rain vengeance on helpless mortals but is the God of creation who desires his created being to return to him. This also reflects fulfillment of the prophetic promise made in the garden of Eden as the Lord imposed consequences on Adam and Eve. **"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."** (Gen 3.15). This was God's promise of salvation to come in the future. Sin entered the world when humans decided to violate God's commands. God, by virtue of being the creator, could have destroyed the couple for their transgression but he didn't. God was under no obligation to the created being to save them at all. But he would. Christ didn't have to come into the world but it was his father's will and he did. The fact that Christ was ordained as the sacrifice for sin, and God promised salvation, is in and of itself the sphere of protection if you will that we know as grace. From Christ's statement to Nicodemus and the passages I've cited here we see that this provision is available for all who desire it and will follow God's instructions.

To clarify a bit more, grace isn't a description of actions or changes brought about in the believer when they turn to the Lord, it's a statement of the availability of the means to be saved. Christ is the embodiment and manifestation of the grace of God and faith and obedience are the mechanisms that bring us into direct contact with that grace. Grace is therefore a description of what God has made available for those who desire to be saved and accept it. I'll address this in more detail in the next lesson but for now we need to understand that **John 3.16** isn't the Gospel plan of salvation, it's a definition of God's grace.

Another difficulty that comes up is the concept that the new law through belief in Christ is an era of grace that is different from what we see under previous spiritual ages. What we need to understand is that God's grace didn't just appear in the first century with Christ, it's always been there.

5. Grace in the biblical narrative

I've had discussions with believers who have the idea that the era of grace that we live in now began with the first century and Christ. Turning to the scriptures we find this isn't the case. God's grace has been in place throughout the narrative.

We can begin with statements that precede creation that we find in the New Testament. Paul mentions this in his epistle to Titus reminding him of the **"hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began..." (Titus 1.2).** The reality revealed here is that God ordained Christ as a sacrifice for sin before creation. We can see God's application of grace, or unmerited favor, in the first instance of sin.

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God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (**Gen 2.17**). When Satan approached Eve, initiating a series of decisions that culminated in her violation of God's will, and later Adam following suit, they were in violation of God's directive and therefore the consequence of death. The sanctions placed on the pair by God didn't immediately end their lives (**Gen 3.14-19**). The conditions under which they lived changed drastically as we see in the narrative. In the statement of those conditions was God's prophecy of the coming of the one who would bruise the serpent's head which took place when Christ rose from the dead effectively destroying Satan's power (**Gen 3.15**). Grace was evident in God's prophecy of the future and in the nature of the consequences the Lord imposed.

Grace is at work in the life of Noah as the world turns to evil and humans choose to forget God. We find that "*Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.*" (**Gen 6.8**). Noah acted in faith, built the ark and he and his family were preserved, perpetuating humanity.

Abraham lived among idolaters but had faith in God and left Ur of the Chaldees as directed by God (**Gen 12.1**). Abraham's offspring later became the family that brought the Messiah into the world. The call of Abraham, preservation of the nation and the birth of Jesus are all elements of God's grace at work.

Joseph, great grandson of Abraham, was sold into slavery in Egypt but later revealed to his brothers that this was God's way of preserving the family (**Gen 50.20**). This family remained in Egypt for four hundred and thirty years (**Ex 12.40**) but returned to the land of Canaan where they established the nation blessed by God to bring the Messiah into the world. All of this is an expression of the grace of God.

The history of Israel shows how God preserved the nation, punished them for their rejection of him and then restored a remnant that fulfilled the prophecies of the Messiah. All of these things are aspects of God's grace at work to provide for, preserve and fulfill his promise to make a way of salvation.

There's no aspect of the unfolding of God's plan to save us that doesn't include his grace. Earlier I noted that Christ is the provision set in place for the sin of the world. God's grace manifested in the act of making this provision, concealing it until the proper time and then revealing all through Christ, the apostles and the written word. Grace is an integral part of the biblical narrative and without it we wouldn't be here. I'll talk about this last part in more detail in the next lesson.

6. Grace as a law

One aspect of the concept of grace and the prevailing attitude toward God's provision for salvation is the idea that since we're under grace, that doesn't constitute a law. There are those who acknowledge the rigorous requirements of the Law of Moses and the strict nature of keeping

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it but contrast that with the Gospel emphasizing our freedom from such tedious practices. Some will simply reject the idea that the New Testament should be viewed differently stating “we’re under grace not a law”. This is usually stated when one rejects the idea of being baptized for the remission of sins and other things the New Testament commands stating that those are works, and we’re not saved by works. But is that accurate? Is the Gospel, the doctrine of the New Testament, a law?

We need to define what a law is and then we’ll take a look at the New Testament and what it says about itself. Law can be defined as “**A rule of conduct or action prescribed or formally recognized as binding or enforced by a controlling authority**” (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, Merriam-Webster Inc., Springfield, Mass, 1983). Now we can take that definition and compare it to characteristics of the text of the New Testament.

a. **A rule of conduct:** the New Testament details how one should conduct themselves and provides examples of that conduct

b. **Action prescribed:** the New Testament directs us to act and conduct ourselves in a specific manner often referring to qualities of being faithful, godly, kind, honest, as well as a number of other terms used to describe human behavior. The text also prescribes limits to our activities and the environments in which we should involve ourselves.

c. **Formally recognized as binding:** the New Testament expresses consequences and blessings for acting in accordance with God’s instructions or violations of his word. Believers recognize that following God’s word obligates one to act in a prescribed manner at all times preserving not only personal image and integrity but the image and integrity of God in the eyes of those around us. It is a binding contract between God and those who adopt his conditions.

d. **Enforced by a controlling authority:** Believers acknowledge, respect and regard God’s role as supreme authority in all things. The supreme authority, god, has the ability to judge, bless or withhold blessings depending on decisions we make and how we conduct ourselves. The New Testament affirms that God is aware of our thoughts and actions as well as our intentions.

Based on this definition we see that the New Testament meets the criteria to be regarded as a law. Other statements in the scriptures point to the fact that the word recorded in the first century is indeed a law.

The prophet Jeremiah, speaking of a time when God would issue new directives, states, “*Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those*

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days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts...” (Jer 31.31-33). The writer of Hebrews applies this to the revelation of the Gospel in the first century stating, “*For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people...*” (Heb 8.10). The writer refers to the passing of the Law of Moses and reasons for that and quotes Jeremiah to show that a new “*covenant*” or “*law*” would be introduced.

James refers to the body of doctrine we recognize as the New Testament as a law in his epistle. James provides insight into this in several statements in his epistle.

“But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.” (Jas 1.25)

“If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors.” (Jas 2.8-9)

“So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty.” (Jas 2.12)

Christ spoke of the word that he was revealing stating, “*He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day.*” (John 12.48). One is judged by law. The word recorded has come from God, Christ and the Holy Spirit. The fact that we are to be judged in accordance with that word implies it is indeed a law.

John speaking of false teachers, describes the word in terms that imply it constitutes a law. John writes, “*Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son.*” (2 John 9). If we look at our definition of a law we find that the doctrine of the New Testament meets the criteria easily.

We can add one more element to this as well. Luke records Paul’s presentation to the Athenian philosophers and his statements about Christ as the agent by whom God will judge the world. Paul states, “*... he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.*” (Acts 17.31).

If we compare these passages, and many more that are available, we find that the doctrine of the New Testament meets the criteria of being a law. It specifies:

- a. A code of conduct,

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- b. Prescribes actions & limits on those actions,
- c. Is recognized as formally binding
- d. Will be enforced by a controlling authority

The New Testament represents the final will and revelation of God to humanity. Christ began the final revelation by coming into the world and preaching the coming kingdom. After Christ ascended to his father, the Holy Spirit guided the apostles and inspired writers to record the message and has preserved that through God's providence. The doctrine contained in the New Testament is the unfolding fulfillment of God's grace being made available to all who will listen and obey. It embodies a new law, unlike the Law of Moses, not as a replacement of the Law but it's completion. Today the family of God is made up of people of all nations, races and ethnic groups who are united by the singular body of faith containing and expressing the grace of God and how we can access it.

7. What we've learned

- a. Grace is a word that was used in several ways in the first century
- b. Christ defined grace as the expression of God's love toward humans
- c. Christ's sacrifice embodies the fullness of God's grace
- d. Christ's sacrifice, and therefore God's grace, is available to all
- d. The Gospel meets the criteria for a body of law
- e. The New Testament is referred to as a law by the prophets and in the epistles
- f. The new law - New Testament - is that by which we'll be judged

8. Next

God's grace has been poured out and made available to humanity but how do we access that grace and therefore God's saving power. In the next and final lesson in this series we'll take a look at the process by which one renders obedience and becomes a child of God as we review **The Biblical Doctrine Of Salvation.**