



Chapter 6: The story of God's Grace

A. How the story unfolds

1. God Freely Gives

Creation was God's gift. He spoke the worlds into existence, prepared the earth for human habitation, and then created men and women. We made no contribution to creation itself and did nothing to deserve such a great gift. God is gracious, and all his acts toward us are the result of his grace and love.

Some storytellers have imagined that he created the world because he was lonesome. This is totally wrong. God was entirely self-sufficient, fully satisfied with the fellowship and love within himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A loving relationship with the material universe, animals, angels, and even humans can actually add nothing to the perfection that is God himself. Creation was a free gift that he did not have to give, just as his gift of salvation was a gracious gift not imposed on him by any necessity.

2. We Trust in our own Efforts

Among the motives for the first sin in the garden of Eden, and every other sin since, is the desire to do things ourselves, not having to depend on God. The serpent raised questions about God's goodness and the freedom of his grace. Adam and Eve could, he said, establish their own life and not need God any more. Thus was born the self-confidence of making our own decisions, leaning on our own understanding, and trusting in our own fleshly efforts. In light of God's loving grace, this was a horrible mistake. Through this declaration of independence from God we began to take pride in what we can do ourselves.

Nearly every religion in the world is infected with the foundational sin of "salvation by works." Religions are great at demanding various deeds that must be done to secure salvation. It doesn't matter if the religion is ancient or modern, primitive or sophisticated, it will have its legalistic system of do's and don'ts supervised by its religious leaders or priests. And people in their willfulness are eager to show that they can meet the standards in their own efforts.

God reaches out to human pride and delusion by revealing how high the standards have to be for anyone who would try to be good enough without grace. Through the Law of Moses, God spelled out the perfection that is required. After every account of idolatry and unbelief by the Israelites, major additions of new laws are given, adding up to hundreds of commands. To be acceptable by works would take ceremonial perfection, moral perfection, perfection in the mind and heart, even perfection in the desires and thoughts no one can see.

God's purpose in the Law is to demonstrate the impossibility of being or doing good enough. He wants people to give legalism their best shot, and fail, and come humbly to him with the desperate plea, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

Instead of seeing their own lostness and crying out for God's grace, however, people reconstruct the words of God to support a Phariseeism of salvation by works. The Apostle Paul represents Phariseeism at its worst. In Philippians 3 he

outlined his keeping of the Law. Yet, he admitted that he couldn't control his desires and thoughts, bringing him under God's condemnation (Romans 7). Sinful pride seeks to please God by works so as to boast.

3. God Promises His Grace

Moses not only spelled out God's standards, he also warned the people that they would be unable and unwilling to obey God. He directed them to trust in God's grace, not in their own goodness. Later prophets gave the same message, "You cannot measure up on your own because of sin. God will not lower his requirements. The only hope is receiving God's gift of forgiveness by faith."

The great father of the faith is Abraham. At one point in his life he tried to fulfill God's promise of making a great nation by human effort, through having children by Hagar, Sarah's maid servant. This led to tragic results for all. But the high points of Abraham's career were the times when he believed God's promises and humbly received God's gifts. "Abraham believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).

After the people of Israel made the Golden Calf and worshiped it as the God who led them out of Egypt (Exodus 32-34), God threatened to destroy the whole nation and start over by making a great nation through Moses's descendants. Moses interceded for the people, and God spared them. Then Moses asked, "Lord, show me your glory." God took Moses up the mountain and hid him in a cleft in the rock while he declared his most glorious characteristic—that of forgiving undeserving sinners. Even in the covenant of law, grace is the central feature.

King David committed the sins of adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11). His prayer of repentance is recorded in Psalm 51. He didn't claim to be able to make atonement for his sin by sacrifice or good works, but appealed to God's grace. Psalm 32 describes the joy and freedom of God's gracious forgiveness, "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven . . . whose sin the Lord does not count against him."

God repeatedly spoke to proud people that they could only be justified by his free gift. The prophet Habakkuk wrote the often quoted fact, "The just will live by faith." He urged the people of his day to trust in God's provision, and not attempt to accomplish spiritual results by human effort. "For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay" (Habakkuk 2:3).

Throughout the Old Testament times, God demonstrated acts of grace toward his people: provision of manna, sending of the sun and rain, military protection, the privilege of worship and service, spiritual blessings, forgiveness of sins, miraculous intervention. He demonstrated his faithfulness, to provide a precedent for the next act of faith. He is a gracious God who provides everything we need. We don't need to work for it; we need to believe the promises and gratefully receive the gifts.

4. Jesus Brought Grace and Truth

Jesus is the ultimate gift of God's grace. God so loved the world that he gave his Son. The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. God's grace is received in the New Testament by faith, just as in the Old Testament. We, like Abraham, believe God and are credited with righteousness.

Paul wrote to Titus (3:4-7), "When the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us . . . so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."

When John wrote in John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth," he connected Jesus with the experience of Moses who asked, "Now show me your glory." The glory Moses saw was that God is "compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin." That glory was seen in the Son of God in his incarnation.

Ephesians 2:1-10 emphasizes that it can't be any other way. We are dead in sins, with no goodness to offer to save ourselves. But God (as a gift) makes us alive in Christ. We are saved by grace, received through faith, so that no one can boast. God has prepared works for us to do, but they are not works that earn our salvation. They are works that flow out of our unearned salvation.

Some so-called Christian groups still try to pervert the Gospel to a system of works, listing do's and don'ts as a basis of being acceptable to God. But God rejects them as not a gospel at all, insisting on "grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone." The Biblical gospel is the only place where the story of grace is told.

5. Spirit Transformation

The "happy ending" of this story in the Bible is that God takes unacceptable sinners who throw themselves completely on his grace and transforms them into saints who can be dispensers of his grace to others. We make disciples by letting the same grace that saved us go to work on other people.

Our new birth is a gift of grace, not a result of works. Our growth in Christian maturity is a gift of grace, not a result of works. Our reproduction of faith in others is a gift of grace, not a result of works. Colossians 2:6 commands, "As you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, so continue to live in him." Galatians 3:3-5 puts it more strongly, "Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

The "flesh" (human effort to please God by outward actions) and the "Holy Spirit" (God's power to transform us from the inside) are in a constant war, according to Galatians 5:16-26. Only by grace can we live the Christian life. Romans 8:9-13 tells us we have an obligation to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and to learn to think

like God does so that the power of grace can be released to change us. The ultimate expression of the place of grace in God's plan may be in the doxology found in Ephesians 1:6, everything is "to the praise of the glory of his grace."

B. Scriptures for further study in tracing the story through the Bible

1. God Didn't Choose You because of You

In Deuteronomy 7-9 God warns the Israelites that he did not choose them because of their numbers (7:7-11); or their strength (8:10-18); or their goodness (9:4-6). He chose them because of his own sovereign grace.

2. "I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice"

Hosea 6:6 calls Israel to trust in the grace of God, not in their religious ceremonies. Jesus quoted that verse in Matthew 9:9-13 to underscore the importance of receiving grace and extending grace to others. (See also 1 Samuel 15:13-23.)

3. Show Me Your Glory

Moses asked for and saw God's glory on Mt. Sinai (Exodus 33:18-34:7). God's "glory" is his compassionate, gracious, forgiving character. After seeing this revelation Moses's face shone, requiring him to cover his face (34:29-35).

4. Your Army is Too Large

Gideon was called by God to lead the Israelite army against the invading Midianites, but his outnumbered army was considered too large (Judges 7:1-8). God knew they would boast of their victory so he reduced the size from 32,000 to 300 men so the victory would be acknowledged as a gift from God.

5. "If I Was Hungry, I Wouldn't Tell You"

Psalms 50:7-15 gives God's announcement that he doesn't need anything from his people. The truth is that we need everything from him. "Call on me in your need and I will answer you; and in that way I will be honored."

6. Without Cost

The promise of God's free gift is given in Isaiah 55:1-13. Don't waste your money and effort trying to earn God's favor. Accept it as his gift. Revelation 21:6-7 gives the fulfillment (to drink from the water of life) for those who overcome by faith.

7. No Eye Has Seen, No Ear Has Heard

Isaiah 64:1-9 declares that it is unheard of for a God to act on behalf of sinful people. Yet that is who God is. Paul quotes this in 1 Corinthians 2 to show that the gospel is all about God's gift, not our human reasoning or effort.

8. "Someone Shut the Temple Door, Please"

Malachi 1:7-11 urges Israel to implore the Lord to be gracious. Only God's grace can turn the people from their sins. Because the offerings and sacrifices are being abused as an excuse for sin, God asks that someone please close the door to stop the hypocritical ceremonies.

9. Two Men Praying

In Luke 18:9-14 we have Jesus' parable of two men praying side by side in the temple. The Pharisee boasts of his goodness while the tax collector begs for God's mercy. Only the tax collector leaves the temple justified, because salvation is by grace.

10. Human Righteousness is Garbage

In Philippians 3:1-11 Paul lists things he could boast about according to the flesh. All these credentials he gives up as rubbish. Instead, Paul wants to know Christ and be found in his righteousness through faith.

11. Saved by Grace

Ephesians 2:1-10 tells us that we are dead in sins and that God is rich in mercy. We can only be saved by his grace, received through faith. God designed salvation so that none of us can boast.

12. God's Promise, Not Our Performance

Galatians 4:21-31 compares effort to be righteous by works to Hagar the slave woman and her son Ishmael. Righteousness by believing God's promise is like Sarah the free woman and her son Isaac. Romans 4, Colossians 2, Hebrews 10, and other places give the message of grace by other Old Testament comparisons.

13. Fine Linen, Bright and Clean

Revelation 19:6-8 describes the clothing given to saints to wear in Christ's triumphant celebration as clean linen. It represents the righteous acts of the saints, but is clearly a gift to them, rather than anything they have earned.

C. Discussion Questions

1. How does our society work against the acceptance of God's grace with sayings like "There's no free lunch," "We don't take charity," and "You get what you pay for"? What sayings can be used to counter these "works" related arguments? How can our acts of compassion and generous gifts prepare people to accept God's grace?

2. Were you, like many Christians, brought up with legalism in your home church? Were you taught to grow by keeping the law? How can we overcome the religious lies we were trained in? How can we help each other grow in grace (2 Peter 3:18) and put to death our confidence in the flesh?

3. Memorize 2 Timothy 2:1. Reflect on areas of your life where you need to be stronger (weakness to temptations, fear of sharing your faith, slowness to grow, ignorance of the Bible, etc.). How can a better understanding of God's grace give us the strength we need?

4. Trace the story of grace through the Bible. It appears in the stories, the Proverbs, the sermons, the prophecies, and the instructions.