



# TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

EXPOSITIONS OF CHALLENGING SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

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FROM SOLA SCRIPTURA PUBLICATIONS

ISSUE 111 (Mar./Apr. 2018)

## GRACE: THE GREATEST THEME

EPHESIANS 2:7–9

**T**HAT IN THE AGES TO COME HE MIGHT SHOW THE EXCEEDING riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

Once in awhile we depart from our usual “*tough text*” to examine an otherwise critical text, issue, or subject. Well, in this issue we turn to the greatest theme of Scripture: **grace**. For the last couple of years I have entertained the notion of a book on this theme. Whether or not that ever comes to fruition, I at least offer this article, which is actually a chapter in the forthcoming two-volume exposition of this great epistle.

As I shared on the morning I delivered the first message that comprises that chapter, in fact, I had been looking forward to this passage for weeks, “chomping at the bit” in anticipation of the ride ahead. Having examined the *reality* and *results* of our sin in verses 1–3, as well as the *causes* and *consequences* of our reconciliation in verses 4–6, we were prepared to revel in the *character*, that is, the true nature of our reconciliation to God.

This passage truly is the highest peak of the mountain range called Ephesians. Ponder a moment: what is the *symbol*, the *mark*, the *distinctive trait* of our reconciliation, as well as biblical Christianity itself? These three verses provide the answer—**grace**. I never utter this word, in fact, that I do not feel I have stepped onto hallowed ground. It is positively captivating. *No other word in the entire vocabulary of Christian Theology more epitomizes the Christian faith than does this simple word.* It truly is the “focal point” of the epistle and is why it has been called “The Epistle of Grace,” for there is more about **grace** in Ephesians than in any other book of the Bible, even Romans.

Some 130 years ago, in one of the greatest sermons he ever preached, which was based on Ephesians 2:8 and titled “All of Grace,” Charles Spurgeon began with these words:

Of the things which I have spoken unto you these many years, this is the sum: Within the circle of these words my theology is contained, so far as it refers to the salvation of men. I rejoice also to remember that these of my family who were ministers of Christ before me preached this doctrine, and none other. My father, who is still able to bear his personal testimony for his Lord, knows no other doctrine, neither did his father before him . . .

I preach the doctrines of grace because I believe them to be true; because I see them in the Scriptures; because my experience endears them to me; and because I see the holy

result of them in believers. I confess they are none the less dear to me because the advanced school despises them: I should never think it a recommendation of a doctrine that it was new.

Those truths which have enlightened so many ages appear to me to be ordained to remain throughout eternity. The doctrine which I preach to you is that of the Puritans: it is the doctrine of Calvin, the doctrine of Augustine, the doctrine of Paul, the doctrine of the Holy Ghost. The Author and Finisher of our faith himself taught most blessed truth which well agreed with our text. The doctrine of grace is the substance of the testimony of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

*Amen! Grace is our Theology.* In a sense, the word **grace** sums up all biblical Theology. Of all the theological words we could discuss—redemption, reconciliation, justification, sanctification, glorification, election, and many more—none cuts to the heart of our theology like **grace**. Today’s redefining of the Gospel is not the Gospel at all, for it is not the Gospel of Grace. With that in mind, we turn to three principles concerning **grace** in this expanded issue of TOTT: its purpose, plan, and proof.

### The Purpose of Grace (2:7)

**That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.**

Before dealing specifically with its two-fold purpose, let us first examine the term **grace** itself—we *must begin here*.

### The Definition of Grace

In a day when **grace** is challenged by religion, it is essential that we define *exactly* what this term means, for it lies at the very heart of Christianity. It is, indeed, as theologian Lewis Sperry Chafer calls it in his book on the subject, *The Glorious Theme* (Zondervan). Without **grace**, in fact, Christianity is just another religion with absolutely no difference in its basic essence than any other. No other religion or faith uses the word **grace** as does Christianity. No other religion is based *exclusively* on **grace**.

That said, however, few words are more misunderstood, misused, or misapplied than **grace**. Two people can be discussing grace but mean two entirely different things. Other words in this category are “election,” “predestination,” “foreknowledge,” and others, but **grace** is at the heart of every one of those, as well as other concepts, so to misunderstand **grace** is to be totally clue-

less as to what biblical Christianity and its doctrines are about. In the same sermon mentioned above, Charles Spurgeon illustrated such confusion:

Among those who dwell around us, we find many who are as altogether strangers to the doctrine of grace, and those never dream of present salvation. Possibly they trust that they may be saved when they die; they half hope that, after years of watchful holiness, they may, perhaps, be saved at last; but, to be saved now, and to know that they are saved, is quite beyond them, and they think it presumption.

Spurgeon was right. People are strangers to the real meaning of grace. In one way or another, they pervert its true meaning.

To dispel such problems, let us look closely at the meaning of the English word **grace** as well as the Greek and Latin words behind it. If I may, I would prepare our minds by saying that what follows is *definitive*. This is not opinion, rather fact concerning the meaning of these terms. And no misreading of Scripture or faulty interpretation of a text can negate these meanings.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tells us that **grace** comes from the Latin *gratia*, which means “favor, goodwill.” It goes on to say that grace is “an exceptional favour granted by some one in authority. . . . Favour, favourable or benignant [i.e., kind] regard or its manifestation (now only on the part of a superior); favour or goodwill, in contradistinction to right or obligation, as the ground of a concession.” Finally, it adds that “in scriptural and theological language” **grace** is “the free and unmerited favour of God as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowing of blessings.” Webster agrees: “Unmerited divine assistance given humans for their regeneration or sanctification.”

At this point, we see that the essential concept in grace is that it is a kindness or favor granted by one to another that is not only free, but also *not grounded in any way in the receiver*. Let that soak in for a moment. The very foundation of grace is that it is freely bestowed by God and has *nothing* to do with the recipient.

Since the above definitions often use the word “favor,” it would be prudent for us to define it as well. The *Oxford Dictionary* again states that “favor” comes from the Latin “*favēre*, to regard with goodwill, side with, show kindness to, protect.” It goes on to define it as: “Exceptional kindness; gracious or friendly action due to special goodwill, and in excess of what may be ordinarily looked for . . . out of goodwill, freely.” Here again, like **grace**, “favor” speaks of an extraordinary kindness that is freely given to one by another. Inherent in both words, therefore, is the idea that the kindness is given freely, without any merit on the part of the recipient.

Let us stop there for a moment. To add anything to grace, which is what all religion tries to do, is to deny the etymology of the word. *To say that works must be added to grace is to deny the very word itself.*

Even deeper is the Greek *charis*. In Classical Greek it meant “that which affords joy, pleasure, delight”<sup>2</sup> and from there several meanings developed: grace, favor, thankfulness, gratitude, delight, kindness, etc.<sup>3</sup> Originally, then, the word didn’t carry the idea of something “unmerited” because Greek philosophy (which is at the root of our western culture) believed in human merit and self-sufficiency. Even then, however, the Greeks thought they needed “a little help,” so they prayed to their gods for favors and gifts.

It was, therefore, in the NT that *charis* was transformed. While some of the meanings from the Classical Greek *are* found, the NT usage is unique because *NT grace is coupled with the person and work of Jesus Christ*. If you remove Christ, and therefore

**grace**, all you have left is another religion. You have many ethical principles for living, but all you have is mere man-centered religion.

John 1:17, for example, declares: “Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” Does that say grace and truth came by religion or works? No, for the ultimate manifestation of God’s grace is Jesus Christ. Throughout the NT, in fact, grace is coupled with Christ. This transformation of *charis* is summed up by Greek scholar Kenneth Wuest:

In pagan Greece, the word referred, among other things, to a favor done by one Greek to another, out of the spontaneous generosity of his heart, without hope of reward. Of course, this favor was always done to a friend, not an enemy. When the word is used in the [NT], it takes an infinite leap forward, and acquires an additional meaning which it never had in pagan Greece, for this favor was done by God at the Cross, not to one who loved Him, but to one who hated Him.<sup>4</sup>

So, based on our word study and our present text, I offer this biblical, theological, and etymological definition of grace:

*Grace is the unmerited favor of God toward man manifested primarily through the person and work of Jesus Christ, apart from any merit or works of man.*

If I may be so bold, if anyone defines grace differently than that (or similar to that), let them be accursed (Gal. 1:8-9). Anyone who does not preach that doctrine of grace is a false teacher. Many verses of Scripture substantiate that definition. Especially pointed is Romans 11:5-6: “Even so, then, at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace. And if by grace, then is it no more of works; *otherwise grace is no more grace*. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace . . .” (emphasis added). To speak of grace plus works is to redefine grace as something other than grace. Consider just two other passages (emphasis added):

While by the proving of this ministration they glorify God for your professed subjection unto the *gospel of Christ*, and for your liberal distribution unto them, and unto all men, and by their prayer for you, who long after you for the exceeding *grace of God* in you. Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable *gift* (2 Cor. 9:13-15).

That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in Him, according to the *grace of our God* and the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thes. 1:12).

There are some beautiful pictures of God’s grace in the OT. My favorite, in fact, is the story of how King David showed kindness to Mephibosheth, the crippled son of his friend Jonathan (2 Sam. 4 and 9). In that beautiful story we read that Mephibosheth was crippled by a fall (4:4), David desired to show him kindness, and David did so for Jonathan’s sake, just as God showed grace to man for Christ’s sake (9:1). We see further that this kindness was not earned by Mephibosheth (9:1); rather he was sought for by the King (9:1, 5), which pictures unmerited favor. David also sent others to fetch him (9:5), a picture of evangelism. We then see several results: Mephibosheth revered the King (9:6), became a servant (9:6), was given riches and security (9:7), was made a son of David the King (9:11), and his crippled condition was hidden when he sat at the King’s table (9:13).<sup>5</sup>

While that is a wondrous story, it still cannot compare with the NT usage of **grace** because that usage involves Christ. When we see the word **grace** in the NT, we need to realize that it is

immediately identified with Christ, rooted in His Divine person and finished work. If we add anything to that, we have negated it and even blasphemed it.

### The Twofold Purpose of Grace

Why did God show such extraordinary, such astounding grace toward us? There is a twofold reason.

*First*, to glorify Himself. How arrogant man is! While it's easy to see that unbelievers are arrogant and self-sufficient in their rejection of God's salvation, we miss the fact that even *believers* can be arrogant regarding God's purpose in saving them. The usual view of why God saved us is He loves us; that is, He saved us primarily for *our* benefit. Now while it is quite true that God loved us, it is quite wrong to say that this was the *primary* reason He saved us. Why? Because this view pictures us as God's ultimate purpose when in truth *God's purpose in saving us was to ultimately bring glory to Himself*. We saw this truth many times in Ephesians 1; we saw that *God's ultimate purpose is to restore the unity between God and man so man can glorify Him*. That is why we read that glorious phrase: "to the praise of the glory of his grace." Oh, let us come down from the pinnacle of theological arrogance. God's focal point is primarily His own glory. Any other view is human pride and theological arrogance, for we have elevated man's good over God's glory.

All this is in view in verse 7. Note carefully the words **he might show**. The Greek here vitally important.<sup>6</sup> **Show** is *endeiknumi*, "to demonstrate or prove"; more importantly, it is in the *middle voice*. The active voice means the subject is performing the action, and the passive voice indicates that the subject is being acted upon. The middle voice, however, indicates that *the subject is receiving the benefit of the action or that the subject is acting in its own interest*. As one Greek authority puts it, "To show one's self in something."<sup>7</sup> In fact, wherever this word is found in the NT it appears in the middle voice. Therefore, God's purpose is: *to show and demonstrate Himself*. So, looking at the context we see that God "raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (v. 6) **that in the ages to come he might show [Himself]**. First and foremost, God showed grace toward us. It wasn't because of our goodness. It wasn't because we had something to offer Him. It wasn't because of some talent we might be able to contribute to ministry. It was because *He wanted to display Himself*, to demonstrate who He is and what He alone can do. Why did Paul write to the Corinthians, "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31)? Because since God displays His glory, we should also demonstrate it in all that we do.

*Second*, God showed grace toward us to demonstrate kindness to man. We must not leave out this principle, but we must again be careful about theological arrogance. God wanted to show **kindness**, but this is also merely an outworking of the first aspect. What is the primary reason He shows this kindness?—so we can know the riches of His grace in the ages to come. God wants us to know Him; He wants us to know how great a God He is. Again, this is not primarily for *our* benefit but for *His*. Think of it! All that God has done throughout history, even our salvation, has been to glorify Himself. Oh, does this not indeed knock us off our theological "high horse"?

Now, some believers misunderstand this principle; they think that such a view paints God as being selfish and self-centered and that if this principle is true, God then violates his own standards of humility. But the problem is that they are looking at God *from man's imperfections* instead of looking at Him *in His perfection*. God is perfect; He is absolutely holy, righteous, and just. In that

perfection He is *worthy* of praise and glory, and no one knows better than He of His worthiness. Alexander Maclaren offers this beautiful illustration: "As an artist in his noblest work paints or chisels simply for love of pouring out his soul [and no one criticizes him for it], so, but in infinitely loftier fashion, the great Artist delights to manifest Himself, and in manifesting to communicate somewhat of Himself."

There truly is a beautiful balance in this principle. *First*, only God is worthy of praise and all He does brings glory to Himself. *Second*, one evidence of the glory He is worthy to receive is that He loves us and has shown mercy and grace toward us. There we have God's purpose—to glorify Himself. But at the same time He shows kindness to man, for that too, above all else, brings glory to Him. Why did God save us? Because He wanted to show kindness. But why did He want to show kindness? To display His glory.

Now consider *how* God shows Himself—through **the exceeding riches of His grace**, as we've seen in Ephesians 1. But further, *how long* has He been doing it?—**in the ages to come**. What a statement! While there are a couple of other views as to the meaning of this phrase,<sup>8</sup> I must agree with John Calvin's comment (*Ephesians* commentary): "It was the design of God to hallow, *in all ages*, the remembrance of so great goodness." Indeed, if I may put it this way: *for all time, eternity to eternity, God displays His glory, His greatness, His goodness, and His grace through the holy person and finished work of Jesus Christ*.

### The Plan of Grace (2:8a)

**For by grace are ye saved through faith;**

In that wondrous statement—**For by grace are ye saved through faith**—is found the most important truth about God's salvation to be found in all Scripture. Paul presents two thoughts.

#### Salvation Is By Grace

Of course, we examined this back in verse 5, but we reiterate here that the words **by grace** dramatically show the source of salvation. *Man has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with his salvation*. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes,

We are Christians entirely and solely as the result of the grace of God. Let us remind ourselves once more that "grace" means unmerited, undeserved favour. It is an action that arises entirely from the gracious character of God. So the fundamental proposition is that salvation is something that comes to us entirely from God's side.<sup>9</sup>

The phrase "entirely from God's side" is pivotal. As we'll see, the teaching that says grace is "God's side" in salvation and faith is "man's side" is in error. Salvation is *entirely* of God. Harry Ironside captures this truth as well: "We are not saved because we prayed so earnestly, repented so bitterly, turned over a new leaf, made restitution for past sins, tried to do good, kept the law and obeyed the sermon on the mount, or anything else that we could do, but we were saved by grace, and grace is God's unmerited favor to those who merited the opposite."<sup>10</sup> Ironside hits on the real issue—*grace verses works*. We'll come back to this later, but grace and works are diametrically opposed in salvation. In the same sermon mentioned earlier, Spurgeon declared:

There can be no present salvation unless it be upon this footing—"By grace are ye saved." It is a very singular thing that no one has risen up to preach a present salvation by works. I suppose it would be too absurd. The works being unfinished, the salvation would be incomplete; or, the salva-

tion being complete, the main motive of the legalist would be gone.

Indeed, you will never hear someone who believes in salvation by works say, "Well, I am now sure I possess salvation; I'm sure I'll go to heaven." Why? Because they do not know; they can *never* know because they can never be sure they have done enough works. In contrast, God has done *everything* that has to do with providing salvation. Paul then adds something else.

### Salvation Comes Through Faith

Many Christians are unknowingly guilty of saying, "Salvation is by faith; we are saved by faith." But that is incorrect; we are saved *by grace through faith*. Some feel that this is just arguing over semantics, but this is *not* semantics; it's doctrinal Truth. We can put this critical distinction this way: *grace* is the *cause* of our salvation while *faith* is the *channel* of our salvation. Or, as Spurgeon said in another sermon, "Grace is the fountain and the stream: faith is the aqueduct along which the flood of mercy flows down to refresh the thirsty sons of men."<sup>11</sup>

Any definition of **faith** is incomplete without a consideration of its object. Faith is a verb, so without an object, the entire concept is incomplete. In contrast to today's meaningless "faith in faith" concept, saving **faith** has as its object "the Lord Jesus Christ." As James Boice observes in his exposition of Ephesians, **faith** is not subjective feelings, wishful thinking, optimism, or self-confidence.<sup>12</sup> Rather **faith** is *a total trusting and committing of oneself to Christ as Savior and Lord*.

Contrary to popular opinion, faith does *not* save us. A person can have faith in anything. For instance, you are probably sitting in a chair as you read these words. In a sense, you are putting faith in that chair; you are putting your weight on it fully believing it will hold you up. But does that faith have anything to do with spiritual salvation? Will sitting in church, being confirmed, being baptized, or observing a sacrament save you? *No!* It is what we place our faith *in* that makes the difference. What saves us is God's **grace** manifested in the person and work of Christ; we merely put **faith** in that grace and through that channel receive salvation. Many say, "Oh, I have faith in God," but they turn right around and try to work their way to heaven. That is a blatant contradiction, as we will see in our third principle.

### The Proof of Grace (2:8b–9)

**. . . and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.**

After seeing the etymology of the English word, not to mention the transformation of the Greek *charis*, one would think this is enough to show, even to the most critical skeptic, that salvation cannot be earned. But Paul, by the Spirit's control, realized that man's ignorance demands that God be even clearer. Not only does he tell us what grace *is*, he goes into more detail to tell us precisely what grace *is not*. This truly is the pivotal principle, so with three thoughts Paul proves that grace is unmerited and unearned.

### Salvation Has Nothing to Do with Us

Paul not only says that salvation is by grace, but adds the phrase, **that not of yourselves**. Theologian John Murray states the case very well:

When [Paul] says "and that not of yourselves," he is reminding us of the true nature of grace, that its whole urge and explanation reside in God. It may be easy to give formal assent to this text. Every evangelical Christian will do so. But how

ready we are to shy away from its implications! In reality we deny the truth here asserted when we introduce at any point in the whole span and process of salvation a decisive autonomy on the part of man. If salvation at any point is contingent upon some contribution which man himself makes, then at that point it is of ourselves, and to that extent it is not of grace. Paul's definition "and that not of yourselves" is thereby effaced and the true nature of grace is denied.<sup>13</sup>

That is the heart of the matter. *Grace that is not all grace is no grace*. Grace means God has done it all; if He does not do everything, it is not grace.

There is a common teaching today that, "Christ's crucifixion is a proof of our worth." In other words, God could see worth in us so He bought us. But as we observed in verses 1–3, such teaching is patently false and is a heretical distortion of grace. The cross is not proof of *our worth* but *God's grace*. We were undeserving and even dead. Where is the worth in a corpse?

One key, if not *the* key to this passage, lies in the debate over the words **that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God**. The debate is: to what exactly does **it** and **that** refer? Do they refer to grace, faith, or just the whole concept of salvation in general? Perhaps Charles Hodge puts the answer best:

What is said to be the gift of God? Is it [the whole concept of] salvation, or faith? To say that faith is the gift of God best suits the purpose of the passage. The object of the Apostle is to show the unmerited nature of salvation. This is most efficiently done by saying, "Ye are not only saved by faith in opposition to works, but your very faith is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." The other interpretation makes the passage repetitive. To say, "Ye are saved by faith; not of yourselves; your salvation is the gift of God; it is not of works," is saying the same thing over and over again without any progress.<sup>14</sup>

Holding this view, a more contemporary expositor is equally sound here:

Some have objected to this interpretation, saying that "faith" (*pistis*) is feminine, while "that" (*touto*) is neuter. That poses no problem, however, as long as it is understood that "that" does not refer precisely to the noun "faith" but to the act of believing. Further, this interpretation makes the best sense of the text, since if "that" refers to "by grace you have been saved through faith" (that is, to the whole statement), the adding of "that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" would be redundant, because grace is defined as an unearned act of God. If salvation is of grace, it has to be an undeserved gift of God.<sup>15</sup>

To be fair, I should mention what Greek scholar Daniel B. Wallace writes to the contrary: "While it is true that on rare occasions there is a gender shift between antecedent and pronoun, the pronoun is almost always caught between two nouns of different gender. One is the antecedent; the other is the predicate [nominative]."<sup>16</sup> Wallace goes on to cite a couple of examples. While I highly recommend Wallace's work, I must respectfully disagree in this case. It is a weak argument to say "almost always" because it leaves room for exceptions. R. C. Sproul also disagrees: "The rules of Greek syntax and grammar demand that the antecedent of *that* be the word *faith*. Faith is not something we conjure up in our own effort, or the result of the willing of the flesh. Faith is a result of the Spirit's sovereign work of regeneration."<sup>17</sup>

If I may also submit, "faith" being feminine is actually irrelevant, simply because both "grace" and "salvation" are also femi-

nine. The Greek alone, therefore, does not prove the issue, which even Wallace admits.<sup>18</sup> (Sadly, Adam Clark, John Wesley, and other Arminians strenuously held onto this argument simply because to admit anything else would destroy their system.)

At any rate, the main thrust of the above quotations is that to say that **it** and **that** refer to grace or the whole concept of salvation results in the verses being redundant. Paul's central concept is that we have been saved by grace, which he states plainly in the first clause. Is he then going to just repeat the same thing by saying "grace is a gift of God," or "salvation is a gift of God?" No, he has already said that. What is Paul trying to get across here? He's emphasizing that even "faith" is a gift of God.

Ponder it this way: How can two unsaved people sit under the same Gospel message, hear the preacher pour out his heart, listen to the message of sin, wrath, and salvation, and then one person believe and the other not? The answer is simple when we realize that left to themselves neither person would believe, but one does because God gives him the faith to do so. Because they are both dead (Eph. 2:1-3), neither can respond until God gives them the power.

Further, faith *must* be of God, for if we say that faith is of ourselves, then faith becomes human merit, as much a human work as partaking of a sacrament or just "being a good person." *Faith* does not determine salvation; *grace* determines salvation. God has done it all. As John MacArthur puts it: "When we accept the finished work of Christ on our behalf, we act by the faith supplied by God's grace." Where does our faith come from? *From grace*. Several other Scriptures strongly substantiate this principle (emphasis added in all):

And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, *except it were given unto him of my Father*. (Jn. 6:65)

And when [Apollos] was disposed to pass into Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him: who, when he was come, helped them much which had *believed through grace*. (Acts 18:27)

For unto you it is *given* [granted] in the behalf of Christ, not only to *believe* on him, but also to suffer for his sake. (Phil. 1:29)

Addressing not only this repeated emphasis in Scripture, but the whole issue in general, theologian Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote this powerful statement:

So conclusive is this passage relative to man's inability in the field of saving faith that much has been attempted in the way of exegesis which proposes to make the salvation the gift of God, rather than the faith which receives it. When thus interpreted, the phrase "through faith" is practically eliminated and serves no purpose. The contrast which the passage sets up between faith and works becomes a contrast between salvation and works, for which there is no ground either in Scripture or reason. If the passage stood alone in the Word of God, declaring a truth not elsewhere propounded, some reason might be assigned to such exegetical attempts which divest of its assured meaning; but, when rightly interpreted, it stands out as but one of many of the same general character.

Though much Scripture of an indirect nature might be cited, enough has been presented to establish the doctrine of man's natural inability to exercise saving faith. Were men able to move themselves toward God, there would be no provision from God for this need.<sup>19</sup>

Something else that many do not consider is that if *our* faith is the basis of salvation, what if we one day choose not to believe anymore? Taken to its logical conclusion, this view results in a lack of assurance and security, which if we might interject is exactly what many Christians lack. But if *God* has done it all, if God gives us faith, there is total security.

Another often quoted verse is John 1:12: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power [i.e., right] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name." Many Gospel preachers quote this verse, but they stop without quoting the very next one: "Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, *nor of the will of man*, but of God" (emphasis added). Where did we get the will to believe? In ourselves? No, because we were dead. Rather it was God's grace that gave us the will to believe. Man's will has nothing to do with salvation, not even with believing. It is all of God. Were we born again *because* of our will? No, thank God, we were born again *in spite* of our will. Beloved Puritan commentator Matthew Henry (1662-1714)—who could read the Bible when he was only three years old, and of whose commentary Spurgeon said, "Every minister ought to read it entirely and carefully through once at least"—said it well:

We do not become the children of God as we become the children of our natural parents. Grace does not run in the blood, as corruption does. It is not produced by the natural power of our own will. As it is not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, so neither is it of the will of man. It is the grace of God that makes us willing to be His.<sup>20</sup>

Another writer, this time a Greek authority, writes:

God does not merely give to both Jews and Gentiles the possibility of faith; He effects faith in them. Eph. 2:8 makes it especially plain that all is of grace and that human merit is completely ruled out. To understand the Pauline and then the Lutheran doctrine of justification it is essential to make it clear that faith is not a new human merit which replaces the merit of works, that it is not a second achievement which takes the place of the first, that it is not something which man has to show, but that justification by faith is an act of divine grace. Faith is not the presupposition of the grace of God. As a divine gift, it is the epitome and demonstration of the grace of God.<sup>21</sup>

Before going on, we can answer this controversy about faith even more simply: when we read, "By grace are ye saved," is this not enough to show that *everything* is from God? If *everything* is not from God, then why do we need grace at all? If I can do *something*, why does God have to do *anything*? In the final analysis, then, it really doesn't matter how you read the verse grammatically. Theologically, salvation, from beginning to end and everything in between, is of God. As R. C. Sproul wrote:

Does [that] refer to salvation? Or does [that] refer to faith. Is Paul saying that salvation is a gift of God? Or is he saying that faith is a gift of God. Although Greek scholars argue about which of these is the preferred rendition of the Greek text, theologically it really doesn't matter. In both ways of reading that sentence, we have to come to the conclusion that faith is a gift of God. It is not an expression of human achievement, or of human effort, or of human ability. This is why every believer should be praising God daily for the fact that he has received as a gift not only the salvation that comes through faith, but the gift of faith itself.<sup>22</sup>

To that we must say, *Amen*. A common notion on the relationship

of grace and faith is that, "Grace is God's part and faith is man's part," but such a notion is shallow sentimentality and theological foolishness. Yes, man believes, but even his faith must originate in God's power, not his own. Salvation is not partly God and partly you; it is *all* of God.

### Salvation Is a Gift

Here is a beautiful thought. **Gift** is *dōron*, which, along with the related word *dōrea*, refers to "a complimentary gift."<sup>23</sup> It's used in Luke 21:1 where money is being cast into the treasury for the support of the temple and the poor (cf. Matt. 15:5). A synonym, *didōmi*, is used in that often-quoted verse John 3:16, and means "to give of one's own accord and with good will."

A **gift** is such a nice thing to receive, is it not? The whole idea behind a gift is that it is unearned; it's given out of love. In contrast, think about the money you receive each week from your employer. Is that money a gift? Certainly not; you worked to earn it. But our salvation is a **gift**; it is unearned, undeserved, and given out of unfathomable love.

The story is told of a man who came eagerly but very late to a tent revival, where he found the workmen already tearing down the tent. Frantic at missing the meeting, he asked one of the workers what he could do to be saved. The Christian workman replied, "You can't do anything. It's too late." Horrified, the man said, "What do you mean? How can it be too late?" The workman rightly answered, "The work has already been accomplished. There is nothing you need to do but believe it."<sup>24</sup> All the work has been done. Salvation is a **gift**. And as noted earlier, even the faith to believe was part of the **gift**. Spurgeon dealt with this truth in his sermon "All of Grace":

Even the very will thus to be saved by grace is not of ourselves, but is the gift of God . . . I ask any saved man to look back upon his own conversion, and explain how it came about. You turned to Christ, and believed on his name: these were your own acts and deeds. But what caused you thus to turn? What sacred force was that which turned you from sin to righteousness? Do you attribute this singular renewal to the existence of a something better in you than has been yet discovered in your unconverted neighbor? No, you confess that you might have been what he now is if it had not been that there was a potent something which touched the spring of your will, enlightened your understanding, and guided you to the foot of the cross.

That should, indeed, prompt us to declare *solī deo gloria*—to God alone be the glory. This leads to Paul's final thought.

### Salvation Is Not of Works

Again, saying the word *grace* should be enough, but tragically it is not. In fact, even with the added phrase, **Not of works, lest any man should boast**, there are many who resort to their own works, their own religion, instead of God's grace alone. There is, indeed, a dramatic contrast between "religion" and "Christianity." We can put it in at least two ways:

- Religion is *works-oriented*; Christianity is *grace-oriented*.
- Religion tries to *earn* salvation; Christianity *gives* salvation.

"Religion" is no less than an insulting slap upon the face of the Lord Jesus. He has offered salvation as a **gift**, but the reply from the religious man is, "Oh, no, I must do *something*." We hear it countless times in countless ways: "I must earn it;" "I must work for it." Would we not be hurt and insulted if someone replied in

that way to a gift we gave them out of love? One might say, "Oh, well, thanks, but I owe you one." Another might insist, "I'll pay you back." *No!* It's a gift. How much more then is our Savior insulted and grieved at the works-oriented salvation of Roman Catholicism, false religion, cults, and liberal Protestantism? Spurgeon thundered this in his sermon, "All of Grace":

Some try to lay hold upon salvation by grace through the use of ceremonies; it will not do. You are christened, confirmed, and caused to receive "the holy sacrament" from priestly hands, or you are baptized, join the church, sit at the Lord's table: does this bring you salvation? I ask you, "Have you salvation?" You dare not say "yes." If you did claim salvation of a sort, yet I am sure it would not be in your minds salvation by grace; for those who are most addicted to the performance of outward rites are usually the last persons to enjoy any assurance of being saved by grace: they do not even look for such a thing. The more they multiply their rites and ceremonies, the more they quit the notion of grace, and the more they lose the true idea of salvation.

What a statement! No works-oriented person can ever say, "I am there."

*At the very heart of the Protestant Reformation*, in fact, was the issue of grace versus merit. While far from perfect, what the Reformation was all about was whether salvation was received through a mixture of faith *plus* works, or by faith *alone*. Roman Catholicism of the day taught the former, and the Reformers taught the latter. That was, indeed, what compelled John Calvin to write in his commentary on Ephesians:

Hence we see, that the apostle leaves nothing to men in procuring salvation. In these three phrases,—not of yourselves,—it is the gift of God,—not of works,—he embraces the substance of his long argument in the Epistles to the Romans and to the Galatians, that righteousness comes to us from the mercy of God alone,—is offered to us in Christ by the gospel,—and is received by faith alone, without the merit of works.

That was truly what the Reformation was about; that was the issue then, and *that is still is the issue today*. There are even so called "*Protestant Churches*" that still teach faith plus works, but that is, of course, a staggering contradiction because one of the things they should be "protesting" is salvation by works. Typical statements of such teachers are: "It takes more than believing to be saved," and, "Baptism, not faith, washes away sins giving individuals access to salvation," and, "Faithful living must be maintained after baptism in order to achieve salvation."<sup>25</sup> Such teachers cite James 2:17 as "proof": "Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone," a verse, along with its context, that clearly teaches that works are the *result* of salvation, not the cause.

So just as the Reformers insisted, we need to renew our biblical conviction that salvation comes by grace alone (*sola gratia*), through faith alone (*sola fide*), in Christ alone (*solī Christo*), and to God alone be the glory (*solī deo gloria*). That word *alone* is the key. Religion always wants to add something to grace.<sup>26</sup>

How full of meaning and how packed with application are the words, **Not of works, lest any man should boast!** The Apostle Paul makes it clear that no man can **boast**: "I earned my salvation" or "I bought my forgiveness." The latter claim was offered through the "indulgences" of Roman Catholicism in Martin Luther's day; people could purchase forgiveness of sins, even sins not yet committed. Most of his famous "95 Theses" that he nailed to the church door in Wittenberg dealt with indulgences, and it

was that act that ignited the Reformation.

**Boast** is *kauchaomai*, “to boast, vaunt oneself, be proud.”<sup>27</sup> Paul uses it some 35 times in his letters. He rebuked the Corinthians, for example, “For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory [*kauchaomai*], as if thou hadst not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). In other words, what do we have that we didn’t in one way or another receive? Why do we **boast** as if we did it ourselves? So, Paul tells us that we in no way can boast that our salvation is in any way whatsoever a result of any **works** we can do. People boast about Confirmation, Baptism, Church Membership, Holy Communion, keeping the Ten Commandments, living the Sermon on the Mount, giving to charity, and living a moral life. Some people even **boast** about their faith (regardless of what that faith is in). But all boasting is rooted in **works**, not grace.

I once read an illustration contrasting grace and works that recounted a scene that seems to occur every year during the final game of the NCAA basketball tournament. We’ve all seen it—that one young player standing at the free-throw line with one second left to play, dribbling the ball nervously. If he makes these two shots, his team wins, he’s a hero, and he’ll have something to boast about and relive for the rest of his life. But if he misses, he’s the goat of the game and his college, and will probably be in therapy when he’s 40. That’s the difference between grace and works. Man operates on the basis of **works**, on whether or not he can **boast** about sinking those free-throws. But God operates by grace; it’s not a matter of *our* performance but *His*; He has already done it all—He already won the game.

Our entire society, in fact, operates according to man’s performance. Early in their education, children learn that they are evaluated by their performance and thereby put into categories. Soldiers earn their ranks. Employees earn their positions and salaries. The Ford Corporation, for example, has a scale of 27 levels, Level 1 denoting clerks and secretaries and Level 27 reserved for the Chairman of the Board. An employee must be at level 9 to get an outside parking place, 13 to get a window, a plant, or an intercom in their office, and 16 before their office can have a private bathroom. Not to mention that most all of us, at one time or another, have said, “I need a vacation; after all, I’ve worked hard and I’ve earned it.”

In the end, therefore, it all boils down to what each of us can **boast** in. I shall never forget the evening I stood and talked to two Mormon men for three hours, constantly coming back to *grace alone*. The younger and more impressionable of the two finally said, “I just can’t believe it’s all of grace; I just can’t believe I don’t have to do something.” By his very nature, man wants to be able to **boast**. By our nature, we all want to be able to say, “I have done this; I have accomplished that; I have earned what I have.” But that is not grace, and that is not salvation.

Paul knew all too well about boasting. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones observes, “There was never a more self-satisfied person or a more self-assured person than Saul of Tarsus.”<sup>28</sup> Indeed, he was proud of everything, proud he was a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, his religion, his morality, his knowledge, and his works (Phil. 3:4–6) but now considered it all “dung” (v. 8). He now says none of us have anything to **boast** about. As he again wrote to the Corinthians, “He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:31). And to the Galatians he declared, “But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world” (Gal. 6:14).

Ponder this: If you were \$500,000 dollars in debt and some-

one came to you with a check for that amount and said, “Here, take this to cancel your debt; you don’t have to do anything to get it; just reach out and take it,” would you have anything to boast about? Could you go around bragging that you were smart enough to take the check? Could you boast that you had the motor skills to reach out and grasp that object? Of course not. Likewise, we have nothing to boast of in our salvation. It is all of God’s grace.<sup>29</sup>

As we saw in our study of the reality of sin in 2:1 (chapter 9), Romans 3:23 declares: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” Sin is missing the mark of God’s glory; that is, we shoot for the mark of God’s glory but miss it every time.

Think of it this way: At its widest point, the Grand Canyon is eighteen miles wide rim to rim, its average width is ten miles, and its minimum width is only 600 yards at Marble Canyon. Now let’s assume several people try to jump the canyon at that minimum width, which works out to be a mere 1800 feet. Perhaps one person can jump only ten feet but another twenty feet. Perhaps someone else can even match the current world record long jump distance of 29 feet, four and one half inches.<sup>30</sup> Or let’s even assume by some super human feat that one jumper went 1,799 feet, 11 inches. Do any of them make it? No. What difference is there between ten feet and 1,799 feet, 11 inches? None whatsoever. All have fallen short and died! That is why we need grace.

Some theologies define grace as, “God making up our deficiencies; that is, since we can’t save ourselves totally, God just makes up what we lack.” But did God build that bridge part of the way across the canyon of Hell and then expect us to jump the rest of the way? No, we have nothing to **boast** in; He has done it all. Theologian Charles Hodge says it well:

That the guilty should stand before God with self-complacency and refer his salvation in any measure to his own merit is so abhorrent to all correct feeling that Paul assumes (Rom. 4:2), as an obvious truth, that no one can **boast** before God. To all who have any correct understanding of God’s holiness and of the evil of sin, this is understood intuitively; and therefore, a free salvation—a salvation which excludes all **works** as a ground of boasting—is the only salvation suitable for the relation of guilty people to God.

That is precisely why we went into such detail to define grace at the beginning of this study. *To say that we must add our works to God’s grace is the most contradictory statement we could ever make.* Any theology that mixes grace with works or faith with merit, no matter how sincere the motive, is apostate, plain and simple, and is to be cursed (Gal. 1:8–9).

Having said that, does that mean that **works** have no place whatsoever in the believer’s life? Does that mean that works are meaningless and irrelevant? Absolutely not, as Paul makes clear *in the very next verse* (2:10): “For we are his workmanship, *created in Christ Jesus unto good works*, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (emphasis added). Good works do not produce salvation, but salvation most certainly produces good works.

This is also what James meant when he wrote about faith and works. *True saving faith produces good works as an evidence of what God has done solely by grace.* As he asks, what evidence of true saving faith is it if a Christian brother or sister is naked and hungry and comes to our door but we respond, “Oh, well, God bless you,” and then shut the door (2:15)? No, as proof of our salvation, we will bring him in, cloth him, and feed him. Those who pervert the Gospel, however, say, “By bringing him in, giving

him a suit and a meal, we have contributed to our salvation and that will help us get to heaven." But that is **works**, not grace.

Oh, let us say it again in closing: we can **boast** of nothing because *it is all of grace*. As commentator R. C. H. Lenski writes, "When we consider what it cost God to save us by His grace through faith, namely the sacrifice of His son on the cross, it should be plain why he wants all human boasting excluded. . . . To know what grace is, and to have saving faith in that grace, is to glory only in the Lord." Oh, how wondrous is our salvation! Why? Because it is a gift of God's grace!

In his book, *How God Saves Men* (Philadelphia: The Bible Study Hour, 1955, 7–9), Donald Grey Barnhouse recounts one of the most graphic pictures of salvation by grace I've ever read and that touches my soul every time I read it. He tells the story of Henry Moorehouse, a social worker in the slums of 19<sup>th</sup>-century London, and a little girl he befriended. As he was headed home one evening, he saw the little girl exit a basement store carrying a pitcher of milk, only to see her a few steps later slip, fall, and drop the pitcher, shattering it and spilling the milk into the filthy gutter. Broken hearted, the poor little one began to cry. Moorehouse approached and tried to console her but to no avail. All she could say was, "My mommy'll whip me." Confidently, Moorehouse then said, "No, little girl, your mother won't whip you. I'll see to that. Look, the pitcher isn't broken in many pieces." He then stooped down, picked up the pieces, and began fitting them back together. The little girl had seen pitchers mended before, so she hopefully stopped crying as he worked. But then, working too roughly, Moorehouse knocked it apart, and the little urchin started crying again. Renewing his promise, Moorehouse said, "Don't cry, little girl. I promise you that your mother won't whip you." Setting to work again, he got all of it back together except for the handle. He then gave it to her so she could attach the handle, but, of course, it fell apart again. This time her tears could not be stopped. So Moorehouse picked her up, carried her to a shop that sold crockery, and bought a new pitcher. Still carrying her, he went back to where she had bought the milk and had the new pitcher filled. Finally, after asking her where she lived, he carried her there, set her down on the step, handed her the pitcher of milk, and asked, "Now, do you think your mother will whip you?" With a radiant smile, she answered, "Oh, no sir, it's a lot better pitcher than we had before."

Oh, my Dear Christian Friend, *that* is what God has done in His grace! Once a whole creature, man was destroyed by a fall, shattered beyond repair. In his own efforts, he has tried through the ages to put the pieces back together but has failed miserably. God had to intervene, not by just *fixing* the old pitcher, where the cracks would show and leak, but by *creating* a new one. And just as that little girl could not pay Moorehouse for his kindness—since she didn't have anything!—neither can man purchase salvation. It is all of grace, all because God desired to show undeserved kindness. That is why **grace** is hallowed ground.

## Grace

*Grace.* What a wondrous word it is to hear!  
What staggering thoughts it brings to mind!  
Delivering us from dead works and fear,  
It has opened wide the eyes of the blind.

*Grace.* There's surely no more glorious theme,  
Best defined as unmerited favor,  
Transforming us from sinners who blaspheme  
To the saints of God who give Him honor.

*Grace.* No greater word can any man speak,  
No fuller expression of God's glory.

Tis God's gift to the dead, not merely weak,  
The true heart of the salvation story.

One day we shall see our Lord face to face.  
And eternally praise Him for His Grace.

Dr. J. D. Watson  
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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 61 (published 1915). Second paragraph appeared in the version published in "The Sword and the Trowel" (January 1887).

<sup>2</sup> *Thayer's Lexicon*, 675.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Brown (Ed.), *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan), Vol. 2, 115.

<sup>4</sup> *Kenneth Wuest's Word Studies* (1 Timothy 1:1).

<sup>5</sup> For a full message on this passage, see chapter 44, "The King and Mephibosheth: A New Testament Portrait," in the author's book *Truth On Tough Texts* (Sola Scriptura, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> *Endeixētai*; third person singular, aorist tense, subjunctive mood, middle voice of *endeiknumi*.

<sup>7</sup> *Thayer's Lexicon*, 213.

<sup>8</sup> See William Hendrickson, *NT Commentary: Exposition of Ephesians* (Baker, 1967), for those insignificant opinions (119–120).

<sup>9</sup> *God's Way of Reconciliation* (Baker, 1979), 130 (emphasis added).

<sup>10</sup> Ironside, *Ephesians* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1977), 107.

<sup>11</sup> *Faith: What Is It? How Can It Be Obtained?* (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, Vol. 27, 1881).

<sup>12</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians* (Baker, 1979), 66–67.

<sup>13</sup> John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: Volume 1, The Claims of Truth* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 120 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>14</sup> Charles Hodge, *Ephesians* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1964), 63.

<sup>15</sup> John MacArthur, *Ephesians* (Moody, 1986), 61. Gordon Clark adds, "Grammatically, neuter demonstrative pronouns, even in the more precise classical Greek, often refer to feminize nouns, especially to abstract feminine nouns. Hence it is false to say that *touto* [that] cannot mean faith" (*Ephesians*, Trinity Foundation, 1986, 73).

Also J. N. Darby: "I am quite aware of what critics have to say here as to gender; but it is equally true as to grace, and to say, "by grace... and that not of yourselves," is simply nonsense; but by faith might be supposed to be of ourselves, though grace cannot. Therefore the Spirit of God adds, "and that [not it] not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." That is, the believing is God's gift, not of ourselves. And this is confirmed by what follows, "not of works." But the object of the apostle is to shew that the whole thing was of grace and of God—God's workmanship—a new creation. So far, grace and faith and all go together" (*Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, [London: G Morrish], n. d.).

<sup>16</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the NT* (Zondervan, 1996), 334.

<sup>17</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown* (Baker Books, 1997), 156.

<sup>18</sup> Wallace, 335. His full comment reads: "The issues here are complex and cannot be solved by grammar alone. Nevertheless, syntactical considerations do tend toward one of the [other views]."

<sup>19</sup> *Systematic Theology* (Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), III. 216–217.

<sup>20</sup> Emphasis in the original. Calvin also: "Ought we not then to be silent about free-will, and good intentions, and fancied preparations, and merits, and satisfactions? There is none of these which does not claim a share of praise in the salvation of men; so that the praise of grace would not, as Paul shows, remain undiminished" (*Commentaries*).

<sup>21</sup> H. Hanse in *Theological Dictionary of the NT*, ed. Gerhard Kittel,

trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1967), IV. 2.  
<sup>22</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Ephesians* (Christian Focus, 1994), 55. Lloyd-Jones agrees: "It is not a question of grammar, it is not a question of language . . . And there is a sense in which it really does not matter at all, because it comes down to much the same thing in the end. In other words, what is important is that we should avoid turning faith into 'works'" (*God's Way of Reconciliation*, 135).  
<sup>23</sup> Colin Brown, Vol. II, 40.  
<sup>24</sup> Cited in MacArthur, *Ephesians*.  
<sup>25</sup> Quotations from a newspaper article written by a Church of Christ teacher in the town where the author pastors (*Rio Blanco Herald Times*, Meeker, Colorado, November 21, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> Calvin writes this pointed observation, "The papists will not in any way freely and wholly yield and give to God the praise of their salvation, but keep back some part of it, usually half or more, to themselves" (*Sermons On Ephesians*, 159).  
<sup>27</sup> Colin Brown, Vol. I, 227.  
<sup>28</sup> *God's Way of Reconciliation*, 133.  
<sup>29</sup> Adapted from Ray Stedman, *Our Riches in Christ* (Discovery House Publishers, 1998), 98.  
<sup>30</sup> Set on August 30, 1991 by American Mike Powell at the World Championships in Tokyo.

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