



GOD'S AMAZING GRACE:

The only foundation for Christian living.

Contents

Page	
	Foreword 3
	Introduction 4
	The emphasis on grace in the New Testament 5
	The source of grace 7
	The meaning of grace 7
	Grace and forgiveness 11
	The means of grace 13
	Common grace 16
	Saved by grace 18
	Growing by grace 24
	Grace and law 25
	<i>Romans</i> 26
	<i>Galatians</i> 29
	<i>The purpose of commands and instructions for the Christian</i> 32
	<i>Why our own effort matters</i> 34
	Grace and love 36
	Grace, gratitude and joy 39
	Grace and humility 40
	The misuse of grace 41
	Enduring trials by grace 45
	Serving by grace 51
	Stewards of grace 51
	Gifts and abilities 52
	Grace and ministry 53
	Giving by grace 54

Grace and community	56
Two stories	57
Grace and other religions	59
Appropriating grace	61
Acknowledgement of need	61
Faith	62
Submission	63
The story of a hymn	65
Conclusion	68

Foreword

The invitation to write this foreword brings back happy memories of hearing Dick Tripp preaching many years ago when I was a teenager growing up in Christchurch. One occasion I remember clearly was a sermon in the course of celebrations on the 25th anniversary of our parish church where Dick had been a former vicar. Dick preached the gospel, for he was and is an evangelist – something of a rarity, it has to be said, in Anglican circles – and on that occasion, as always, was a winsome and faithful servant of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Many years later Dick is still preaching the gospel, notably through the written word in his series of Exploring Faith Today books. That gospel has always been the gospel of grace, the promise and assurance of new life in God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, freely and generously made available to all humanity who are invited to respond in faith to the graciousness of God. Here in this book, *God's Amazing Grace*, we find a comprehensive account of the grace of God as 'the only foundation for Christian living'. But it is more than a comprehensive account, it is also a very attractive and moving explanation of the nature of divine grace, the role it plays in our lives as Christians in general, as well as the dramatic way in which many individuals' lives have been transformed when touched by God's amazing grace.

I like the way in which Dick writes graciously about grace! A number of authors he cites, for instance, are the subject of some swirling controversies about this or that aspect of their theological proposals. But Dick offers no criticism or negativity towards these authors, instead he appreciatively mines

their writings for that which is indeed good, pure, and true in their understanding of the gospel of grace.

There are many facets of grace on display here, and I will delay the reader for just one moment more from admiring them for themselves by noting one that is especially important to me: grace is the real and substantive difference between the Christian faith and other religions (p. 62ff). May this and other vitally important aspects of God's amazing grace be better understood as a result of this book.

Peter Carrell *Ministry Educator, Diocese of Nelson*
Registrar and Teacher, Bishopdale Theological College, Nelson

Introduction

A story is told about the nineteenth century evangelist D. L. Moody. On one occasion he was meditating on the theme of grace and was so captivated by the thought that, flinging aside his pen, he dashed out into the street where he accosted the first man he met and demanded: "Do you know grace?" "Grace who?" asked the surprised man.

If we could but get a small glimpse of the amazing story of God's grace as it is presented to us in the New Testament, and really begin to understand its meaning, we would probably all get as excited as Moody did. And our lives would not be the same again. If we were looking for a new title for the New Testament, then a good candidate would be "The Amazing Story of the Grace of God". It may surprise many people to know that, although it has much to say about the *love* of God, there are about four times as many references in the New Testament to the *grace* of God. Whatever the word means, and we will explore that later, it is obviously one of the New Testament's major themes; yet how many of us have been gripped by its message?

Jerry Bridges begins the preface to his excellent book *Transforming Grace*¹ with the words, "The grace of God is one of the most important subjects in all of Scripture. At the same time it is probably one of the least understood." This is very sad, as it is what the world needs and is what, even if unconsciously, so many people are looking for. Our lack of understanding of grace and our inability to live in the light of that understanding surely lie at the root of some of the personal problems we Christians face in our lives. Dr. David Seamands, says in his book *Healing Grace*:

I am convinced that the basic cause of some of the most disturbing emotional and spiritual problems which trouble evangelical Christians is the failure to receive and live out God's unconditional grace and the corresponding failure

¹ NavPress, 1991, ©.

to offer that grace to others. I encounter this problem in the counselling room more than any other hang-up.

Selwyn Hughes, the author of the very popular daily readings *Every Day with Jesus*, which are read by nearly one million people in 130 countries, finishes his book *The Scandal of Grace: God's Amazing Gift*² with the story of a rock festival held at Wembley Stadium. A scene from this particular festival was shown in the documentary made by Bill Moyers about John Newton's popular hymn 'Amazing Grace'. Several bands had gathered for this festival, which lasted for twelve hours. You can imagine the mood of the crowd by the end of that time, many of them high on drink and drugs. The festival concluded with a song from an opera singer by the name of Jessye Norman—a beautiful African American woman. She chose as her song 'Amazing Grace'. Without any accompaniment she began to sing slowly:

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now I'm found;
Was blind, but now I see.*

By the time she reached the last verse a strange power had descended on the stadium. All was quiet.

Hughes concludes by saying:

Non-Christians as well as Christians are amazed by grace. Though they may not realise it, that is what they thirst for. And when it is seen—not just sung—then all the world will fall silent before it. It's amazing. Utterly amazing.

The emphasis on grace in the New Testament

Before looking at the meaning of grace it would be worthwhile noting the emphasis that is put upon it in the New Testament. The Greek word for grace, *charis*, occurs 154 times. It can have meanings such as graciousness, favour, goodwill, gracious deed or gift, thanks or gratitude. However, 127 times it is used of the grace of God, 89 of these occurring in the letters of Paul. To wish for grace to those to whom they are writing is the most common form of greeting in the letters of the New Testament, and a further wish for grace is the most common form of signing off. Paul begins and ends each of the thirteen letters that are traditionally attributed to him in such a manner. As Philip Yancey explains in his popular book *What's So Amazing About Grace?*³, "Knocked flat on the ground on the way to Damascus, Paul never recovered from the impact of grace: the word appears no later than the second sentence

² CWR, 2004, ©.

³ Zondervan Publishing House, 1997, ©.

in every one of his letters.” Frederick Buechner adds in *The Longing for Home*, “Grace is the best he can wish them as grace is the best he himself ever received.”

It is worth noting in passing that “Grace” or “Grace to you” sounded like a standard Greek greeting, but for Paul it was infused with theological meaning. He usually combines it with “Peace” which was a Jewish blessing. Paul combines these to construct a distinctive *Christian* blessing, “Grace and peace”.

Paul can speak of God’s “**glorious grace**” (Ephesians 1:6), “**the riches of God’s grace**” (1:7), and “**the incomparable riches of his grace**” (2:7). He has “**lavished**” this grace on us (1:8). God’s grace is something that “**overflows**” to many (Romans 5:15). We have received “**abundant provision of grace**” (Romans 5:17). John tells us that Jesus was “**full of grace**” and “**out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given**” (John 1:14, 16). A literal translation of this last phrase is “grace after grace” or “grace upon grace”. W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, in their *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, suggest the meaning, “grace pours forth in ever new streams.” William Hendriksen, in *A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, says, “the limitless supply or reservoir indicated by the words *his fullness* would seem to suggest a limitless outflow: *grace upon grace*.”

Harnack, in his *History of Dogma*, asks:

Where in the history of mankind can we find anything resembling this, that men who had eaten and drunk with their Master should glorify Him, not only as the Revealer of God, but as the Prince of Life, as the Redeemer and Judge of the world, as the living power of its existence, and that a choir of Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish, should along with them immediately confess that out of the fullness of this one man they have received grace for grace?

The gospel is described as “**the message of his grace**” (Acts 14:3). The Scriptures are “**the word of his grace**” (Acts 20:32). R. C. H. Lenski, in *The Interpretation of The Acts of the Apostles*, said, “God and the Word of his grace always go together; God lets his grace flow out through that Word.” Paul describes the spread of the gospel simply as “**grace ... reaching more and more people**” (2 Corinthians 4:15). He speaks of understanding the gospel as understanding God’s grace (Colossians 1:6). As the prophets looked forward to the coming of Christ, his sufferings and glory, they spoke of “**the grace that was to come**” (1 Peter 1:10).

And grace will be the hallmark of God’s new creation. Paul indicates that God’s ultimate purpose is to “**show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus**” throughout all the ages of eternity (“**in the coming ages**”—Ephesians 1:7). And it is this grace, that is “**to**

be brought to [us] when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming”, that we are to “set [our] hope on” (1 Peter 1:13).

An old hymn fittingly describes God's grace:

*Its streams the whole creation reach,
So plenteous is its store,
Enough for all, enough for each,
Enough for evermore.*

The source of grace

Though the New Testament writers can describe ordinary people as ministers or stewards of God's grace (Ephesians 4:29; 1 Peter 4:10), and Paul can speak of generous giving as an “act of grace” (2 Corinthians 8:6), the ultimate source of grace is always God the Father, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. As James says, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights...” (1:17). Paul's favourite greeting is “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ” (e.g. Romans 1:7—he adds “mercy” to the list in his letters to Timothy, as does John in his second letter). God is “the God of all grace” (1 Peter 5:10). His throne is “the throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:16). A literal translation of Ephesians 1:6 is: “to the praise of [God's] glorious grace, with which he graced us in the Beloved [Jesus]”. Paul can use the words “Jesus Christ” and “grace” almost interchangeably. Writing to Timothy he speaks of the appearance of Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 3:16), whereas to Titus he says, “the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people” (Titus 2:11). In Galatians 2:20 he can say, “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me”, whereas in 1 Corinthians 15:10 he says, “not I, but the grace of God that was with me”.

The Holy Spirit is called “the Spirit of grace” (Hebrews 10:29) and is listed together with God and Jesus as the source of grace in Revelation 1:4. It is the Holy Spirit in our lives who ministers God's grace to us and makes our experience of it a reality.

Christian social commentator Os Guinness, in *The Dust of Death* writes:

To know God as Creator is significance, to know Him in revelation is clarity of knowledge, to know Him as personal is fulfilment, to know Him in character is order and values, to know Him in grace is freedom, love, joy, peace and adoration.

The meaning of grace

William Barclay, in *New Testament Words*, says that the Greek word for grace was originally a military term. When an emperor came to the throne or

celebrated a birthday, he would give his troops a *donatirim* (donation) or *charisma*, which was a free grant of money, a free gift. They had not earned it as they had their wages; it was given out of the goodness of the emperor's heart. Whatever other meanings the word may have carried in the Greek language, it is this emphasis that is picked up by the writers of the New Testament when speaking of the grace of God. It is essentially something that is unearned. It is also undeserved. I may give someone a gift that is unearned because I think they deserve it. However, grace goes further and gives to the undeserving.

Someone has said that justice is getting what I deserve; mercy is not getting what I deserve; and grace is getting what I don't deserve. In this sense, grace goes beyond mercy, though it does seem that Paul often uses grace and mercy interchangeably without regard to the precise distinction in their respective meanings.

It is unfortunate that the word "grace" has a different meaning in popular speech from that which it has in the Bible. In everyday English usage it generally means "a seemingly effortless beauty or charm of movement, form, or proportion." For this reason, many miss the point when they come across the word in the Bible. So in order to capture the theological significance of the Greek word, traditionally rendered "grace" in English Bibles, the revised global edition of the Contemporary English Version (CEV) now uses the phrase "God's gift of undeserved grace". For example, Romans 3:24 reads: **"Thanks to God's gift of undeserved grace, he freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins..."**

It is this undeserved nature of God's grace that makes it so remarkable and effective in transforming human lives. Karl Barth made the comment that Jesus' gift of forgiveness, of grace, was to him more astonishing than Jesus' miracles. Miracles broke the physical laws of the universe; forgiveness broke the moral rules. "The beginning of good is perceived in the midst of bad...The simplicity and comprehensiveness of grace—who shall measure it?" Or as Miroslav Volf puts it in *Exclusion & Embrace*, in God's way of doing things "the economy of undeserved grace has primacy over the economy of moral deserts." C. Samuel Storms, in *The Grandeur of God*, sums up this undeserved nature of grace as follows:

Grace ceases to be grace if God is compelled to bestow it in the presence of human merit...Grace ceases to be grace if God is compelled to withdraw it in the presence of human demerit...[Grace] is treating a person without the slightest reference to desert whatsoever, but solely according to the infinite goodness and sovereign purpose of God.

We need to focus on this aspect of grace if we are to begin to understand the message of the New Testament. To quote Barth again, from *Deliverance to the Captives*:

By grace you have been saved! Whatever else we do, praying and singing is but an answer to this word spoken to us by God himself...The Bible alone contains this sentence. We do not read it in Kant or in Schopenhauer, or in any book of natural or secular history, and certainly not in any novel, but in the Bible alone.

It is sad that not only the meaning of the word “grace” in popular conversation, but also our early conditioning, can so easily cause us to miss the significance of the word in the Bible. From our earliest years at school we are evaluated and graded into top, middle or lower groups. Test papers come back with errors exposed in red ink. Our success in sporting activities depends on ability and hard work. Work places insist that we pay our way and our income is usually dependent on our ability to earn it. The idea that we could receive from God that which we don’t deserve and could never earn is difficult to accept.

There is an obvious connection between God’s love and his grace. However, the word “grace” puts the emphasis on the undeserved nature of that love. The focus on grace also underlines the fact that God’s desire for our worship and companionship does not result from any unmet need. Primal nature-gods were said to need offerings to appease their darker emotions. However, when God created the world he did not do so because he was selfishly motivated by some deficiency within himself, but simply because he is love, and grace and the desire to give is part of his very nature. It is *our* need, not his, that is God’s concern.

There are two parables (stories told to illustrate a point) Jesus told that give us some insight into the nature of grace. The first is in Matthew 20:1-16. This has traditionally been called the parable of “The Workers in the Vineyard”. Jerry Bridges, in *Transforming Grace*, suggests that it would be better called “The Gracious Landowner” as this focuses on the real point of the story. The story describes how a landowner employs various groups of workers he finds in the marketplace throughout the day. Some work for twelve hours, some for six, some for three and some for only one hour. When pay-time comes, each person receives a denarius, which was the equivalent of a day’s pay. Those workers who have worked for the whole day complain at this. **“ ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.’ But he answered them, ‘Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn’t you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don’t I have the right to do what I want with my own money?’ So the last will be first, and the first last.”**

To get the point of this story, it is important to understand something of the background. This parable comes immediately after Jesus’ encounter with the

rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-30). Jesus told him to sell his possessions, give to the poor, and follow him, and that in doing so he would receive a heavenly reward. Reflecting on this, Peter says, **“We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?”** Like other Jews of his day (and many of us!), Peter was operating on the basis of merit, what was deserved. Jesus does not rebuke Peter for his merit mentality. He assures Peter that God does indeed give rewards, but he operates on the basis of grace, not of merit. In fact grace always gives far more than we have earned—**“a hundred times as much”** (19:29). And to illustrate the point he tells the story of the workers in the vineyard.

Another important factor was the local custom for hiring labourers. This was done on a daily basis. In the labour culture of that day, workers were paid daily. They would go into the marketplace in the early morning and wait there in the hope that someone would give them work. If no one did, then the poor among them and their families would probably go hungry. In paying a full day’s wage to those who had worked for only one hour, this generous landowner was not giving them what they *earned*, but what they *needed*. Those workers who had bargained for a day’s pay got what they had earned. They complained because of the generosity of the landowner.

So it is with God. If we are operating on the basis of merit in our hope of God’s acceptance and reward, then we are in serious trouble. Because of our record, we are as likely to get judgement as reward! However, if we are recipients of his grace, then we can be fully assured that **“God will meet all [our] needs⁴ according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus”** (Philippians 4:19). He will do so on a daily basis. He encouraged us to pray, **“Give us today our daily bread”** (Matthew 6:11). And we have no basis for complaining if we think that God is giving some people a better deal. Martin Luther, in his exposition of Deuteronomy 8:17, 18, wrote about “blessings that at times come to us through our labours and at times without our labours, but never because of our labours: for God always gives them because of his undeserved mercy.”

The other story that beautifully illustrates God’s overflowing grace is the well-known story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. The setting for the story is the muttering of **“the Pharisees and teachers of the law”** (v. 2). They complain, **“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them”**. The Pharisees thought they *deserved* God’s favour because of their supposed good behaviour, therefore they looked down on others who didn’t keep the rules. Jesus responds by telling three stories, the last of which is the one about the Prodigal Son.

⁴ Italics mine.

In this story, the son in question has deeply shamed his father, wasted his inheritance, behaved immorally and ends up in a pigpen with nothing to keep him alive other than the food he feeds to the pigs. When he comes to his senses and figures out that even his father's servants are better off than he is, he decides to return, in the hope that he might be accepted back, even if only as a servant. However, his father, who has been looking out for him over the months and years and longing for his return, sees him coming in the distance, runs to meet him, throws his arms around him, kisses him, and then throws a party. He says to the servants, **“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate”** (vv. 22-24). This is all too much for the prodigal's elder brother, who obviously represents the Pharisees and teachers of the law in the story—those who operate on the basis of merit and have little understanding of grace. On hearing the noise of the celebrations and enquiring as to the cause, he takes offence, refuses to go in and so misses out on the party.

God is like the father in the story. As Jesus had indicated earlier in the chapter, **“there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent”** (v. 7; cf. v. 10). When people do come to God through Christ, the reward is always out of all proportion to expectations and always on the basis of grace, never on merit. And this is irrespective of what a person's past may have been.

Grace and forgiveness

It is worth noting the similarity between grace and forgiveness. In fact, the verbal form of the Greek word for grace, *charidsomai*, often means “to forgive” and is so used twelve times in the New Testament. Yancey, in *What's So Amazing About Grace?* says:

The very word forgive contains the word “give” (just as the word pardon contains donum, or gift). Like grace, forgiveness has about it the maddening quality of being undeserved, unmerited, unfair.

Forgiveness involves the willingness of someone to overlook a wrong done and relate to the person who has done that wrong as if it had not occurred. However, grace goes further than forgiveness. This is well illustrated in the story of Jean Valjean in Victor Hugo's classic, *Les Miserables*. Valjean is a prisoner on parole, branded by his past and prison number, who is given food and shelter by a kindly bishop. He rewards the bishop by stealing some valuable silverware from his home, but is caught red-handed by the gendarme, who takes him back to the bishop with the stolen goods. He is stunned to hear the bishop tell the gendarme that the silverware was a gift.

Not only that—the bishop goes back into the house, gets some more silverware, hands it to the thief and feigns surprise that he left some of what he had given him behind. This is more than forgiveness. This is grace upon grace. Valjean is overwhelmed, and the direction of his life is dramatically changed from that moment. His transformation continues until eventually he dies a good and godly man, beloved and serenaded by his adopted daughter and her husband, and welcomed into the presence of God by a shimmering white angel. The musical version of *Les Miserables* is worth seeing. This is the sort of grace that God is offering us, and forgiveness of others is one of the ways we demonstrate our experience of it.

Where there is no grace and forgiveness, the result is bitterness and resentment. The writer of Hebrews has something pertinent to say about this. **“See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many”** (12:15). Harboring grudges only causes troubles and defilement. These are only too obvious in this present world. The antidote is an abundant supply of grace. Like a weedkiller, it goes to the root of bitterness and destroys its power. It is our responsibility to see that we don’t fall short of it. One of the great stories of forgiveness in the Bible is that of Joseph’s forgiveness of his brothers, in Genesis 37, 42-47 and 50. Terry Virgo, in *God’s Lavish Grace*,⁵ says of this story:

No Egyptians were in danger of hearing from Joseph how wickedly his brothers had treated him. He gave them such honour and received them with such evident and unmixed joy that no suspicions arose. He had obtained grace and God’s grace was sufficient for him.

Before moving on, I would like to share two real-life stories that illustrate how our sharing of undeserved grace can impact people’s lives. The first is told in *The Human Journey* by Bruce Wilson concerning a small aboriginal schoolboy who lived in the north of Australia. His white schoolteacher took out her racist feelings on him, constantly beating and berating him. One day he reached breaking point. Tearfully he ran from the classroom and crawled under the toilet block. The teacher called the police who used their dogs to chase him out. Shaking with rage, the teacher began to beat and berate him again, telling him he was “a black nothing, a filthy, lazy abo”.

Another teacher appeared in the schoolyard. Physically pushing the first teacher aside, she quietly asked the boy, “Who are you?” The youngster replied, “I don’t know, Miss.” The second teacher put her arms around his small black body and said, “I know who you are. You’re Harry. I want you in my class.” That is what divine grace is like—the unexpected gift of accepting love. Harry grew up to be a leader of his down-trodden people, whereas he

⁵ Monarch Books, 2004, ©.

could easily have joined many of his race whose despair has often led to alcoholism and early death. The teacher's love gave him new life and dignity.

The other story is told by Rob Parsons in 'Low on Grace', an article in *Christianity*. Some years ago he was invited by Dr R. T. Kendal, then pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, to hear a guest preacher at the morning service and have lunch with him afterwards. On inquiring who the mystery preacher was, he was told, "It's Jimmy Bakker—the disgraced American television evangelist who was jailed for fraud." Parsons continues:

The man I heard preach that day had been broken by his experiences. He has lost his reputation, his ministry, his wife and his living. And he expressed deep sorrow and repentance, not only for what he had been charged with in court, but for some of the ways he had gone about raising money in the first place. He told a little of what life had been like for him in prison. One of his jobs was to clean the toilets, a task for which he wore a special set of old clothes. One day a guard came to his cell and announced that he had a visitor. Bakker was dirty, unshaven and had just got back from his cleaning job, still wearing his latrine duty clothes. He asked the guard if he could have a moment to make himself presentable, but his request was denied.

As he made his way down the corridor towards the governor's office, Bakker wondered who was there to see him. At that time of his life most Christians wouldn't have crossed the street for him, let alone come to visit him in prison. When he entered the room his visitor strode towards him and Bakker found himself engulfed in the warm embrace of Billy Graham. And it was the Graham family who, when he was released, asked him to join them for church. He remembers that they kept a seat for him, next to them, at the front.

Maybe this gives us one clue as to why Billy Graham has been such a successful evangelist.

The means of grace

There are many ways in which we may receive grace. It may come to us through the ministry of others who have received it. We may receive it through meditating on passages of the Bible, or through the worship and sacraments of the Christian fellowship. However, there is only one ultimate means of grace, the cross of Christ. This, of course, does not mean that before the cross God was not gracious. Grace is eternally one of the characteristics of God's nature. In fact, Paul tells us that the grace that comes to us through the cross **"was given to us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has been revealed to us through the appearing of our Saviour, Jesus Christ..."** (2 Timothy 1:9,10). It seems it was the grace of God back in eternity that set in motion the whole of creation, in order that God might have people like you and me to share it with.

There are many glimpses of grace through the Old Testament, but it was not until Christ was made known in his humanity, and particularly through his willing death for our sins, that it was fully revealed. In Titus 2:11 Paul says that the grace of God “**appeared**” with the coming of Christ. This is the same Greek word used in Luke 1:78, 79, “**the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.**” Grace had always been there in the nature of God, but it “shone forth” with the coming of Jesus, and especially through his cross. As Jerry Bridges put it, “Christ’s death was the result of God’s grace; grace is not the result of Christ’s death.” The cross was the means by which it was made possible for us to receive it. Maybe there is some significance in the fact that with the giving of the law at Mount Sinai 3,000 people perished, while at Pentecost 3,000 people were saved (Exodus 32:28; Acts 2:41).

Alan E. Lewis, in his impressive volume *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*, describes the consistency of God’s expression of grace with his eternal nature, like this:

Embodied for us in time by the eternal Son, grace is revealed as everlasting: the consistent, unambiguous expression of God’s nature. It remains, to be sure, God’s free choice to love us and adopt us, not some necessary principle of divine being; but this freely chosen grace confirms and corresponds to God’s true nature; and it is a freedom exercised eternally, not in accidental moments.

It was because God is a gracious God that the cross became a necessity, as there is no way in which we could be the recipients of grace without the offering of God’s Son for our sins. It is the cross that explains the significance of Paul’s statement in Romans 5:21, “**just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness**”. In offering us his grace, God is not being unrighteous in ignoring the fact of sin and evil. At the cross, sin received the full weight of his judgement. Through our identification with Christ in his death, grace can now reign “through righteousness”. Our forgiveness and continued access to his grace is fully consistent with God’s righteousness.

In the book *Why Did Jesus Die? Unearthing the meaning of the Cross*⁶ I have described in detail the significance of the cross, what it achieves and the blessings that flow from it. I won’t go over that again. Here I would mention three very significant “buts” that we find in the letters of the New Testament.

In the first three chapters of Romans, Paul describes in some detail why all the human race, Jews and Gentiles, are guilty under God’s law and have no

⁶ This can be read, together with the full text of my other booklets, on the website www.christianity.co.nz

hope of proving themselves righteous before him. However, half way through chapter 3 he declares, ***“But⁷ now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known... This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ ... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. ... He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus”*** (vv. 21-26).

In Ephesians 2, Paul describes how we were spiritually dead in our sins, subject to the ways of this world and the spirit of evil, slaves to our sinful nature and deserving God’s anger. He continues, ***“But⁸ because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved”*** (vv. 4, 5). He goes on to explain that it was ***“by the blood of Christ”*** and ***“through the cross”*** that this was achieved (vv. 11-18).

In Paul’s letter to Titus he describes how ***“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures”*** (3:3). Then comes the third “but”. ***“But⁹ when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but ... through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life”*** (vv. 4-7). Though the cross is not specifically mentioned here, it is certainly implied.

Another significant word that Paul used is the word “still”, in Romans 5. In verse 6 he says, ***“when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.”*** In verse 8 he says, ***“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** In verse 10 he says, ***“while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son”***. There you have grace! While we were *still* weak, sinners and enemies, we were reconciled.

Although grace is freely and undeservedly given to us, it is not without cost to God. It cost him the cross. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who was executed by the Nazis for his stand against Hitler, called Christianity without the cross “cheap grace”. He wrote:

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without discipline, communion without confession, absolution

⁷ Italics mine.

⁸ Italics mine.

⁹ Italics mine.

without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, and grace without Jesus Christ living and incarnate.

The repentance and discipleship demanded of us are not our means of earning grace, but our necessary response to the cross and to the grace freely offered. In this sense there is a cost to us, but of a different sort. This is illustrated in two stories Jesus told. God's grace, and all that goes with it, is the "**treasure hidden in a field**" for which someone will gladly go and sell all to possess, or the "**pearl**" of such value that someone will sell everything he has to obtain it (Matthew 13:44, 45). The benefits far outweigh any cost to us.

Two simple acrostics emphasise where the cost really lies.

God's	Gift from God
Riches	Received by faith
At	Available to all
Christ's	Centred in the cross
Expense	Extending through eternity

As someone has said, "At the cross, God gave the most precious thing he possessed for the most undeserving people he knew." This truth is vividly illustrated by Christ's acceptance of the repentant thief while hanging on the cross. "**Today you will be with me in paradise**" (Luke 23:43). As Henk Hamsteeg put it in an article in *Challenge Weekly*, "A sin-soaked criminal is received by a blood-stained Saviour. That's the pure definition of grace." And, as Paul declares in Romans 8, his great chapter on the blessings that come to us through the cross, "**He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?**" (v. 32). All things, that is, that are for our good, in time and in eternity (cf. v. 28). Paul argues here from the greater to the lesser. If God has graciously given his greatest gift, his Son to die for us, to meet our greatest need, our need for reconciliation, then this is the guarantee we have that his gracious meeting of our other needs will follow. "**If God is for us, who can be against us?**" (v. 31). Who indeed?

Common grace

Before looking at the grace of God which is available to those who, in repentance and faith, put their trust in him through Christ, it is worth looking briefly at what theologians have tended to call "common grace", that grace which is given to all people, regardless of their attitude to God. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that God "**causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous**" (Matthew 5:45—declared in a hot climate!). John, speaking of Jesus, says, "**In him was life, and that life was the light of all people**" (John 1:4). All that we have and are, our physical life, our mental and spiritual life, our conscience and ability to

discern right and wrong are all given us by the grace of God, as are our gifts and abilities.

If we believe in God as Creator, then we are fully dependent beings. Karl Marx, when barely twenty-six, recognised this in a text that was unpublished during his lifetime, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

A being only counts itself as independent when it stands on its own two feet and it stands on its own two feet as long as it owes its existence to itself. A man who lives by grace of another considers himself a dependent being. But I live completely by grace of another when I owe him not only the maintenance of my life but when he also created my life, when he is the source of my life. And my life necessarily has such a ground outside itself if it is not my own creation.

Marx held firmly to human independence and so denied the existence of God. It is perhaps the prime characteristic of our rebellion against God that we deny this dependence.

Jeff Lucas likens God's second-by-second play with the earth to the work of a passionate artist. In *How not to Pray* he says:

He is very much here, and not only when he is acknowledged or noticed. That helps us to understand why a piece of gloriously inventive music may be written by someone who doesn't know God; we can admire the masterful use of colour and shade on canvas, the work of an artist whose heart is in the far country, and yet who has been kissed, though they don't know it, by the touch of the Creator. Shall we ascribe the source of their creativity to Satan? We must not, because we are living in a God-bathed world.

One of the ways in which the grace of God works is in the restraining of evil. A news report in *Christianity Today* in July 2004, after the exposure of the torture of prisoners in Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison, describes two social experiments. In the summer of 1971, Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo conducted a now-famous prison simulation experiment. Volunteers were recruited and randomly assigned to be "guards" and "prisoners." In a matter of hours the abuse began. The experiment was scheduled to run for two weeks, but Zimbardo cut it short at six days. Not only were the volunteers getting out of hand, but Zimbardo also saw himself changing. He wrote, "I began to talk, walk, and act like a rigid institutional authority figure, more concerned about the security of 'my prison' than the needs of the young men entrusted to my care."

When Youth Direct president Don Smarto taught criminal justice at Wheaton College from 1985 to 1992, he tried to introduce his students to the prison experience by using a simulation like Zimbardo's. To avoid abuse, he and his colleagues built safeguards into the programme, but they hardly expected they would need them. He said, "Keep in mind that the students

were evangelicals from good homes, supposedly all Christians," but "within the first hour the expletives and the foul language would start." Then came the spitting and other vulgar actions. And in the middle of the night, when supervision was at its lightest, student "guards" stripped student "inmates" of their clothes, used handcuffs to pull their ankles into a painful position behind their backs, and made them eat their cold food on the floor."

Like Zimbardo, Smarto concluded, "Anyone is capable of doing anything under the right circumstances." What surprised him most was that the group was not self-policing. If one or two behaved badly, they expected that the rest would exercise some control. That did not happen. "Instead we found groupthink." He said, "I can't explain that one. There is no answer for it."

No doubt, given the right circumstances, we would all sink into moral degradation. It is only by the grace of God that we don't. And there is much good done in the world by those who make no claim to be Christians, which is all the result of this common grace. This is different, however, from the grace that saves us and brings us into a relationship with the living God.

Saved by grace

Salvation and grace are inextricably linked in the New Testament. Consider the following:

"All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24).

"It is by grace you have been saved" (Ephesians 2:5, 8).

"By his grace [he] gave us eternal encouragement and good hope" (2 Thessalonians 2:16).

"Who has saved us...not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace" (2 Timothy 1:9).

"Having been justified by grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:7).

"He suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Hebrew 2:9).

This salvation is by grace, as we see in these quotations; it has nothing to do with what we deserve. In fact, the New Testament constantly emphasises that to find our acceptance with God on the basis of our good behaviour and to do so on the basis of God's undeserved grace alone are two totally contradictory concepts. Consider again the following statements:

"Now to anyone who works, their wages are not credited to them as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to anyone who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4: 4, 5).

Speaking of the Jewish people of his own day, Paul says that **“they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes”** (Romans 10:2-4).

“If by grace, then it cannot be based on works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace” (Romans 11:6).

“We ... have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified...I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing” (Galatians 2:16, 21).

In Romans 11, Paul asks a pertinent question: **“Who has ever given to God that God should repay them?** (v. 35—see Job 41:11). Entry into heaven is a matter of what we have *received*, not what we have *achieved*.

There is both a positive and a negative side to this offer of undeserved grace. The positive side is that, because acceptance by God has nothing to do with merit, there is no moral depth to which a person may sink from which he cannot be saved by the grace and power of God. Jesus has paid for **“the sins of the whole world”** (1 John 1:2). Our God is a God who **“justifies the ungodly”** (Romans 4:5). History abounds with stories of drug addicts, thieves, alcoholics, murderers, prostitutes—you name it—who have found forgiveness and been transformed into joyful and useful citizens by the grace of God given us in Jesus Christ. The following are just a few examples from the many I have collected over the years. The grace of God is nowhere better illustrated than in such stories.

Take the story of Bronwen Healey, reported in *Challenge Weekly*. She was a full-blown drug addict and prostitute; heroin and her life on the streets nearly killed her. She says:

I had a bad habit that, like an animal, needed to be fed. I found myself lost, alone and confused. After many years of being completely addicted to heroin, one doctor was willing to treat me and I got a place in a support house for people trying to break free from the shackles of addiction.

The house happened to be Christian and part of the programme included going to church, prayer meetings and Bible studies. I thought it was ridiculous—until the day I encountered Jesus in a very personal way. He changed my life forever.

Now, as a committed Christian, wife, mother and author, she shares her story whenever opportunity offers. Since 2004 she has spoken in schools, at women’s meetings, in prisons and rehabilitation centres, as well as all

denominations of Christian churches. Her first book, telling her story, has had an amazing response and has challenged and inspired many people into a life-transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. It is called *Trophy of Grace*.

Or consider the story of Bev Adair, reported in *DayStar*. Bev's mother and father were alcoholics. Her mother was a street woman as well. She says:

From my earliest years I lived with violence. I remember knives, blood on walls, being beaten, being locked in cupboards, being used by my mother's men friends (she put me on show for them) and being molested by my Dad. I was often outside in the gutter, picking up my mother and then hiding with her down the garden. We knew if Dad walked home and everything wasn't perfect we'd all get it—especially my mother—and his hobnailed boots could make quite a dent in a body.

When Bev was nine, her father was jailed for molestation. From then on she lived in seventeen foster homes and attended seventeen schools. She experienced further abuse from foster dads. On Sunday morning, 15 April, 1973, she awoke to the sound of clear words that she was convinced were the voice of God. She found a church, prayed with the minister and committed her life to Jesus. The road since has not been easy, but God has been with her each step of the journey. She says:

Today Jesus is my closest friend. He's given me confidence and made a way where there appeared to be none. Stuff happens, but you can build on the truth. Yes it hurts, yes it stinks, yes you shouldn't have done that, yes that was the worst. You can cry and scream and yell. And after it all you can say, "OK God. What now?"

Her work with Christian organisations has taken her around the world. She says, "Every day I'm aware of [God's] grace in my life."

I was impressed with an account in *Challenge Weekly* of Bellavista Bible Institute, which is located in Bellavista maximum security prison in Medellin, Colombia. BLI president Jim Falkenberg described a recent event:

We saw 22 men being baptised in Bellavista's chapel. Most of them were convicted murderers and kidnappers who have come to realise the forgiveness they can have in Christ.

It was touching to see them celebrate their new commitment to Christ, many with tears of joy.

Not so many years ago, an average day saw one to two inmates killed by other inmates. Sometimes their bodies lay for hours before guards collected them. But in 1985 a pastor, who had been an inmate himself, began preaching the gospel inside the prison walls. Almost immediately, the violence subsided. Since 1990, only four inmates have been killed, despite terrible overcrowding—more than 5,000 inmates occupy a space built for only 1,500.

A somewhat similar story is told in *Decision* magazine. Angola Prison is the largest maximum security prison in the USA, with 5,100 men, and has long been labelled the bloodiest. A murder a month was common; and in 1996 there were 346 assaults on inmates, using weapons. The prison is reserved for murderers, rapists, armed robbers and habitual felons with life sentences. Parole hearings are not allowed.

In 1995 Burl Cain became Warden and challenged the chaplains to increase attendance at the prison churches. He also opened the prison to outside ministries. Violence has decreased every year since, and now 2,000 of the inmates are Christians. Cain also invited the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary to open an extension seminary within Angola, and today 120 inmates have degrees in Christian ministry. There are six evangelical churches in the prison, with their own pastors. Over the last two years Cain has sent inmates two-by-two as missionaries to other prisons and violence in those prisons has “slid right down”.

I was particularly impressed with the testimony of one prisoner, who goes by the name of Carolina. He had been in four prisons in three states and was once known as one of Angola’s most violent and dangerous inmates. He says, “To me, God was a fairy tale and anyone who believed in him was a fairy.” Five years ago he signed up for a prison ministry retreat in order to get the free food. He describes his conversion experience while there, as follows:

With no preliminaries, no prayer, no blinding lights or trumpets, God just took the violence and bitterness right out of my heart. I knew it was gone because I’d lived with it for 44 years. I thought I’d lost my mind...Then I heard Jesus say, ‘I love you.’ It sounded like words from speakers at a concert. In every joint of my body I felt Jesus say, ‘I love you.’ I started crying and I cried for two weeks. I hadn’t cried since I was seven years old.

Today Carolina is a humble follower of Jesus. This is the grace of God at work.

The Bible gives us a dramatic account of such a transformation in 2 Kings 21 and 2 Chronicles 33. Manasseh, who reigned over Israel for fifty-five years, was undoubtedly the worst king they ever had. This was in spite of the fact that he had a godly father who was the king before him. **“He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the Lord had driven out before the Israelites. He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed; he also erected altars to Baal... He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshipped them... In the two courts of the temple of the Lord, he built altars to all the starry hosts. He sacrificed his own son in the fire, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the Lord, arousing his anger”** (2 Kings 21:2-6). Not only that, he **“led [the people] astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites”** and **“shed so much innocent blood that he**

filled Jerusalem from end to end” (vv. 9, 16). Tradition declares that he found the prophet Isaiah hiding in a hollow tree and ordered his soldiers to saw both the tree and the prophet in two.

However, Manasseh had a change of heart. He was taken prisoner by the Assyrians and **“In his distress he sought the favour of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God”** (2 Chronicles 33:12, 13). The evidence that his repentance was genuine was that he got rid of all his foreign gods and restored true worship in Jerusalem. In ‘Amazing Grace’, an article published in *Christianity*, Larry Libby comments on this story:

Can you top that! It would be like bringing Hitler out of that bunker in Berlin and making him Chancellor of Germany. Or calling Stalin up from Hades and naming him Secretary General of the United Nations. Or appointing Saddam Hussein as a deacon in your church.

Near the end of a chapter in which he explains the benefits of the cross, Paul writes, **“where sin increased, grace increased all the more...”** (Romans 5:20). Noted Bible commentators R. C. H. Lenski and John Murray both use the term *superabounding* to describe the riches of God’s grace. So a good translation would be, “But where sin abounded, grace superabounded.”

God’s grace, made available to us through the cross, is such that he will remove our sins from us **“as far as the east is from the west”** (Psalm 103:12). He will **“put all [our] sins behind [his] back”**—that is, out of sight and out of mind (Isaiah 38:17). He will **“hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea”** (Micah 7:19). John Bunyan made the comment that it is just as well it is the sea and not a river, as a river might dry up and our sins would be exposed. He will **“blot out”** our sins from the record and **“remember [them] no more”** (Isaiah 43:25). Jerry Bridges points out that the blotting out of transgression is a *legal* act. It is an official pardon from the Supreme Governor. The remembering of them no more is a *relational* act. It is the giving up of any sense of being offended and the promise to never bring them up again, either to himself or to us.

Not all who receive the grace of forgiveness have the opportunity to demonstrate this change of heart publicly. Michael Green, in *You Must Be Joking*, tells of a letter sent by some prisoners awaiting execution in Penang jail to a Rev. Khoo, thanking him for sharing the gospel with them. In it they wrote:

It is through you that we now look death in the face with courage and calmness, for we doubt not God’s promise of forgiveness by the simple act of belief and acceptance. We know that in three and one half hour’s time when

we pass from off this earth, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be waiting with open arms to lead us to our new home in the house of the Father... With our dying breath we once again affirm to you our undying gratitude...

Paul, who had violently persecuted the early church and described himself as once being “**a blasphemer and a persecutor and violent man**” (1 Timothy 1:13), always regarded himself as a particular example of God’s grace, which should be an encouragement to any who think they may have sinned too much to be forgiven. He said, “**The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly... Here is a trustworthy saying that demands full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life**” (1 Timothy 1:14-16). So great was his transformation that he became one of the most effective ambassadors for Christ and for grace that this world has seen.

This amazing grace of God is made available to all who want it, because a short distance from where Manasseh sacrificed his sons in the fire another innocent Son was sacrificed by his Father and consigned to death.

The negative aspect of salvation by grace is that those who do want it must be prepared to admit that they need it and they can do nothing to earn it. As William Temple once put it, “The only thing of my very own which I contribute to redemption is the sin from which I need to be redeemed.” That means we all have to admit our guilt before God. Whether we are big sinners or little sinners is irrelevant. “**There is no difference...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**” (Romans 3:23). Imagine someone standing on the top of the world’s tallest building, looking down on someone on the street, and declaring, “Poor fellow, what hope has he got of reaching the stars!” We have to acknowledge that all the good we may have done or attempted to do is not going to blot out our sins. It was necessary that God himself, in the Person of his Son, should pay for those sins. It is hard for some to accept this, impossible for others. Usually, it is our pride that gets in the way. In the article ‘Suffering and Merit’ in *Tabletalk* magazine, theologian R. C. Sproul wrote:

Perhaps the most difficult task for us to perform is to rely on God’s grace and God’s grace alone for our salvation. It is difficult for our pride to rest on grace. Grace is for other people—for beggars. We don’t want to live by a heavenly welfare system. We want to earn our own way and atone for our own sins. We like to think that we will go to heaven because we deserve to be there.

However, there are no alternatives to salvation by grace. Noted New Testament scholar Gordon Fee has a favourite saying: “Everything outside hell is grace.” There is an old hymn that says, “My hope is built on nothing

less than Jesus' blood and righteousness." This is the only hope we have, and for those who know the true nature of their own heart, it is the greatest news there ever was. It is the sure guarantee of eternal life.

Also, there must be a willingness to *be* transformed so that our goals in life are for God's glory rather than our own. This means a leaving behind, with God's help, of those things which may be dear to us but which get in the way of the best he wants for us. The Bible word for this is "repentance"¹⁰.

Some may object that proclaiming such a message could cause people to think that, providing they trust in Christ for forgiveness, it does not matter how they live. That is always a danger and I deal with it in the next chapter. But here I would leave you with a quote from one of the great preachers of the last century, Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

There is thus clearly a sense in which the message of "justification by faith only" can be dangerous, and likewise with the message that salvation is entirely of grace...

I would say to all preachers: if your preaching of salvation has not been misunderstood in that way, then you had better examine your sermons again, and you had better make sure that you really are preaching the salvation that is offered in the New Testament to the ungodly, to the sinner, to those who are enemies of God. There is this kind of dangerous element about the true presentation of the doctrine of salvation.

Or, as Mark Galli put it in a *Christianity Today* editorial, we can spend so much time worrying about cheapening grace, we end up hoarding it.

Growing by grace

Second Peter ends with the challenge to "**grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ**" (3:18). I expect that "growing in the grace of Jesus" and getting to know Jesus amount to much the same thing. Growing in our relationship with God and Jesus involves growing in our understanding and experience of their grace.

In Romans 5:17, Paul says that "**those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and the gift of righteousness**" will "**reign in life through...Jesus Christ.**" What does it mean to "reign in life?" I suggest it goes something like thisccccccq having a settled confidence that God is in control of things and knows what he is doing; when God seems distant, being able to trust his promises that he is not; learning to love the unlovely; seeking his will in important decisions and trusting him to guide, even when that guidance is not obvious; being committed to that will and to God's glory;

¹⁰ I have explained the meaning of repentance in some detail in the booklet *Repentance: What it is and why you can't get to heaven without it.*

learning to deal, in dependence on God, with habits and attitudes that are hindering one's growth; learning to thank him in *all* circumstances. In other words, "reigning in life" is all about Christian maturity. It has much to do with commitment and trust and understanding what God has revealed of himself in the Bible. And to reign in life, what we need first of all is not a better set of rules, or to try harder, but "**God's abundant provision of grace**".

One of the mistakes we often make in the Christian life is to suppose that, though we are saved by grace alone, our good behaviour in the past having contributed nothing towards our forgiveness and acceptance by God, from then on we have to earn God's acceptance by sticking to the rules. Daniel Rowland, a Welsh revivalist, wrote: "No sooner do we become Christians and accept salvation by grace than there is an impulse in us to earn God's approval, and we set about obsessively trying to please Him by our good works." If we have been brought up by parents who only expressed love towards us when we were good, we may well find it hard to believe that we can be accepted by someone, especially God, without earning that acceptance. However, Paul tells the Christians in Rome that once we have been "**justified by faith**" we not only "**have gained access into this grace**" but we continue to "**stand**" in it (Romans 5:1, 2). Again he declares that we are "**under grace**" and no longer "**under the law**" (6:14). He tells the Galatians that if they are trying to find acceptance by keeping the law, they "**have fallen away from grace**" (Galatians 5:4).

So we continue to be accepted by God on the basis of the fact that Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins on the cross, and not on the basis of our having kept God's laws. This will be true until the day we are presented "**before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy...**" (Jude 24). As John Newton's hymn 'Amazing Grace' puts it, the grace that "taught my heart to fear" is the same grace that "will lead me home." Philip Yancey says, "Grace sounds a startling note of contradiction...and every day I must pray anew for the ability to hear its message." Jerry Bridges, in *The Discipline of Grace*,¹¹ says, "Your worst days are never so bad that you are beyond the reach of God's grace, and your best days are never so good that you are beyond the need of God's grace."

If this is the case, then does it matter how we live as long as we trust Christ for forgiveness? In order to get a balanced perspective on this subject, let's look first at the relationship between grace and law.

Grace and law

Paul gives a good deal of attention to this in two of his letters, to the Christians in Rome and those in Galatia.

¹¹ NavPress, 1994, ©.

Romans

The relationship between law and grace is one of the major themes of the first half of Paul's letter to the Romans. As his arguments are somewhat lengthy and at times not easy to follow, I will focus on a few of his important points in the hope that you may get the overall picture. In the first four chapters, he makes it plain that it is the moral law of God which proves all humans guilty before him and reveals the impossibility of anyone being accepted on the basis of obedience to that law. **"We know that everything in the Law was written for those who are under its power. The Law says these things to stop anyone from making excuses and to let God show that the whole world is guilty. God does not accept people simply because they obey the Law. No, indeed! All the Law does is to point out our sin."**(3:19,20). The law reveals the character of God as it is the expression of his glory, but **"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"** (v. 23). However, God has devised a means whereby we may be regarded as righteous **"apart from the law"** (v. 21); that is, apart from any consideration of how well, or not so well, we have obeyed the law of God. It is by means of the cross that we **"are justified freely by his grace"** (v. 24). This justification, or forgiveness, is **"received by faith"**(v. 25).

In chapter 5, Paul goes on to explain that, having been justified by means of the cross, **"we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand"** (v. 2). Later in the chapter he has an extended passage explaining that this **"abundant provision of grace"** (v. 17), which has **"overflow[ed]"** (v. 15) through the coming of Christ, is more powerful and effective than the sin that entered the world through Adam. By means of it believers can **"reign in life"** (v. 17) or **"reign through righteousness"** (v. 20).

If it is true that we now have access to this overflow of grace and are continually standing in it, does it really matter how we behave and whether we live up to God's moral demands? Does the law now have any relevance for the Christian? These are the questions that Paul deals with in chapters 6 to 8.

First of all, he answers the two questions **"Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?"** and **"Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?"** with a resounding **"By no means!"** (6:1,2,15). J. B. Phillips translates that as, **"What a ghastly thought!"** The reason why it is inconceivable that we should go on living in sin is that, in God's reckoning, our old way of life was nailed with Christ on the cross and we are now united with him in his resurrection life. We are therefore to **"count [ourselves] dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus"** (v. 11). We now have a freedom to make choices that are pleasing to God, a freedom that was not ours when we were without forgiveness and the grace of God. **"Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves**

to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace" (vv.13,14). It is our understanding of his grace that should motivate us to commit ourselves unreservedly to God in order that he may do those things in our lives which bring glory to him and give all the blessings he intends for us. Though we now have *access* to grace, *stand in it* and are *under its influence*, our choices still have consequences. In the last half of chapter 6, Paul enlarges further on the consequences of our choices: either sin, which leads to death, or obedience to God, which leads to righteousness, holiness and eternal life. Now that we are accepted on the basis of grace and not law, you will notice the emphasis that Paul puts on offering ourselves to God as our only reasonable response (vv. 13, 16, 19).

In chapter 7, Paul returns to the theme of our identification with Christ in his death and resurrection. Using the illustration of marriage, he points out that legally, through our identification with Christ in his death, we are set free from the condemnation of the law (pictured here as an overbearing, fault-finding husband who never offers a finger to help), so that "[we] **might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God**" (vv. 1-4). We have a new relationship with new results. The law only offered instructions. Jesus offers life.

In the rest of chapter 7 (vv. 7-25), Paul underlines the fact that though we are no longer condemned by our failure to keep the law, yet it still has a place in the life of the believer. It shows us what true goodness is all about. It is still there as a standard of the kind of behaviour God expects of those who would live in a relationship with him. "**The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good**" (v. 12). The problem is not with the law, but with our self-centred natures. To underline this Paul selects the one commandment of the Ten Commandments that deals specifically with our inward motives, rather than our actions. "**I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'**" (v. 7). He goes on to say, "**in order that sin might be recognised as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful**" (v. 13). As the Reformed theologian J. Gresham Machen wrote, "A low view of law leads to legalism in religion; a high view makes one a seeker after grace."

It is our self-centred nature that is the cause of all our problems. "**We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do**" (vv. 14, 15). Paul describes here the struggle that many Christians face who long to live a life pleasing to God. He finishes the chapter with a cry

of despair, **“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”** (v. 24).

In the light of all that Paul has been saying in this chapter, we might well ask the question, “However much we have been motivated to please God by our understanding of the grace of God and our experience of his forgiveness, what is the point of it all if I don’t have the power to live a life that is pleasing to him?” It is important to understand that what Paul has been taking such pains to get across is that what we need is not greater effort or will power, but *transformation*. The possibility of this transformation, which God had foretold 600 years previously when he declared that the day would come when **“I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts”** (Jeremiah 31:33), is what Paul now turns to in chapter 8.

It is significant that the Holy Spirit, the third person of the divine Trinity, is only mentioned twice in the first seven chapters of Romans (5:5; 7:6). However, in chapter 8 he is mentioned nineteen times. Paul declares that the purpose of all God achieved **“by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful humanity to be a sin offering”** was **“that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit”** (v. 3, 4). Reading through this chapter, you will come across phrases such as: **“live...according to the Spirit”** (v. 4), **“minds set on what the Spirit desires”** (v. 5), **“mind controlled by the Spirit”** (v. 6), and **“led by the Spirit of God”** (v. 14). Notice the emphasis on our *thinking*. Later in Romans, he tells us to **“be transformed by the renewing of your mind”** (12:2). The Spirit not only changes our attitudes and our thinking, but can even have an effect on our physical bodies. **“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you”** (8:11).

In other words, the grace of God has not only provided us with the means of forgiveness, but the means of transformation. Simon Gathercole, lecturer at Cambridge University, says: “Trying to obey the law is like trying to climb a sheer rock face with no foothold or handhold, without equipment. It can’t be done.” However, by means of the Holy Spirit, God has provided us with the necessary equipment. It is the Holy Spirit who not only gives us the desire to please God, but the ability to do so. As we learn to commit ourselves more fully to him, depend more trustingly on him and follow his prompting, **“the righteous requirement of the law”** begins to **“be fully met in us”** (v. 4). Later in the chapter he describes the ultimate purpose of this transformation, that we might be **“conformed to the image of his Son”** (v. 29). In a similar passage in 2 Corinthians Paul describes this transformation as follows, **“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his**

image with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (3:17, 18). However much we must co-operate, and however much personal effort we must put into our growth, as we shall see, it is important to note that the work of transformation is God’s work.¹²

Our responsibility is to commit and trust and obey. It is the responsibility of the Spirit to do the work of making us more like Jesus, the one who fulfilled the law in every respect. This is a lifetime process and will only be completed in the life to come.

Paul makes another relevant point in chapter 8. When we are given the Holy Spirit we are adopted (John uses the expression “born”—e.g. John 3:5) into God’s family and are now his sons and daughters. **“The Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship...The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children”** (Romans 8:15,16). If we are his children, then we don’t have to prove ourselves good enough in order to be loved. God loves us, even when we misbehave, simply because we are his children. And when we misbehave, we don’t stop being his children. We are still “under grace”. God is now **“for us”** (v. 31). The cross and the giving of his Spirit prove that. However, as we are his children, he desires the very best for us and is going to use every method he can in order to make us into what he wants us to be. This includes discipline. The writer of Hebrews has an extended passage on our need for discipline (12:7-11). But we can be assured that whatever experiences God allows in our lives, whether joyful or painful, his ultimate purpose is to mould our characters and train us for his service. **“We know that God is always at work for the good of everyone who loves him. They are the ones God has chosen for his purpose”** (Romans 8:28).

Galatians

In Galatians, Paul follows much the same line that he does in Romans, but as the relationship between grace and law is one of the areas where there is so much misunderstanding about the Christian life, I will spend a little time here too.

The Christians in Galatia had understood Paul’s preaching of salvation by the grace of God alone, but they were now being influenced by teachers who were telling them that they had to maintain their relationship with God by obedience to his laws. Paul doesn’t pull any punches. **“I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should**

¹² For other passages that emphasise this, see 1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24; Philippians 1:6; Hebrews 13:21.

preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let that person be under God's curse!" (Galatians 1:6-8).

Notice his statement that turning away from trusting in grace to a gospel based on our acceptance by obedience to law is not just a distortion of the gospel. It is **"a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all."** He also describes it as a desertion from **"the one who called you"**—deserting God himself. He then calls down a curse on those who teach such things. Obviously, this is a matter of no small importance!

In the first two chapters of Galatians, Paul tells how he received his authority and his understanding of the gospel from Christ himself, an authority that was recognised by the other apostles. He then underlines the truth that it is by the grace of God alone we are saved, and not by keeping God's laws. He finishes these chapters with the statement, **"I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"** (2:21). Paul makes it very clear that you can't be saved by a little bit of self-effort and a little bit of grace. Jesus didn't just pay the price for some of your sins and leave you to earn forgiveness for the rest of them. If you and I could have done anything at all to earn our salvation, Jesus would never have gone to the cross.

Paul spends the rest of the letter reinforcing this truth and that our *continued* acceptance by God and usefulness to him is dependent on grace alone from beginning to end. It is foolish to assume otherwise. **"You foolish Galatians! ["You dear idiots!"—J. B. Phillips] Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by human effort?"** (3:1-3). Paul goes as far as to say that if they are hoping to maintain a relationship with Christ on the basis of keeping the law (i.e. by trying to be good enough), they have **"fallen away from grace"** (5:4). This is well illustrated by the behaviour of the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Like the Pharisees mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, he expected to receive all his father's goodies because he had been a good son. When his father welcomed his rebellious brother solely on the basis of grace, he was offended and stayed outside the banquet hall. Though still a son, he missed out on all the blessings of grace. As Philip Yancey puts in *Soul Survivor: How my faith survived the church*:

Like the elder brother in the parable, I can never experience the cleansing flow of God's grace or enter the family celebration if I stand outside the banquet hall, arms folded in a posture of moral superiority. God's grace comes as a free gift, but only one who has open hands can receive a gift.

In practical terms, there are two ways in which I can “fall from grace”. Jerry Bridges puts it like this:

[Grace] can neither be earned by your merit nor forfeited by your demerit. If you sometimes feel you deserve an answer to prayer or a particular blessing from God because of your hard work or sacrifice, you are living by works, not by grace. But it is just as true that if you sometimes despair of experiencing God’s blessing because of your demerits—the “oughts” you should have done but didn’t, or the “don’ts” you shouldn’t have done but did—you are also casting aside the grace of God.

Those who are tempted towards an unhealthy pride in their gifts or achievements need to focus on the first of these statements. Those tempted towards despair need to focus on the second.

Bridges makes another important point when he says:

*The Bible is full of God’s promises to provide for us spiritually and materially, to never forsake us, to give peace in times of difficult circumstances, to cause all circumstances to work together for our good, and finally to bring us safely home to glory. **Not one of these promises is dependent upon our performance.** They are all dependent on the grace of God given us through Jesus Christ.*

In Galatians, as he does in Romans, Paul puts considerable emphasis on the Holy Spirit as the one who does his transforming work in our lives, producing his fruit of “**love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control**” (5:22, 23). As the sap flowing through the branches of an apple tree causes it to produce apples, so, if we maintain our relationship of commitment, trust and obedience to Jesus, the Holy Spirit will produce this fruit. This is similar to the statement of Jesus, “**I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit. But you cannot do anything without me**” (John 15:5). If this fruit is manifest in our lives then we *will* fulfil the law (cf. Romans 13:10, “**Love does no harm to its neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilment of the law**”).

Notice Paul’s statements, similar to those in Romans: “**walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature**” (Galatians 5:16); “**if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law**” (5:18); and “**Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit**” (5:25).

As in Romans, Paul also speaks here of our new relationship as sons and daughters of God. “**When the time was right, God sent his Son, and a woman gave birth to him. His Son obeyed the Law, so he could set us free from the Law, and we could become God’s children. Now that we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts. And his Spirit**

tells us that God is our Father. You are no longer slaves. You are God's children, and you will be given what he has promised" (Galatians 4:4-7).

In Romans, Paul uses the illustration of marriage, death and remarriage to describe our relationship to the law before conversion and our relationship to Christ after conversion (Romans 7:1-4); Whereas in Galatians he compares the status of a minor in a Roman household with that of an older child. **"The law was put in charge of us until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law. So in Christ you are all the children of God through faith"** (Galatians 3:24-26). The phrase "put in charge" in the Greek is *paidagogos*. John Stott, in *Calling Christian Leaders*, says of this word:

The paidagogos was a slave charged with the supervision of a boy during his minority. He was responsible for his dress, food, speech and manners, and would accompany him to school. He was a disciplinarian and was allowed to administer corporal punishment, so that he was often depicted in ancient drawings as wielding a rod.

In Christ we are regarded as mature and responsible children of the Father and are treated as such.

Before leaving this subject, let's summarise some of these truths and reinforce them with other significant passages from the New Testament and comments from other helpful writers on the subject.

The purpose of laws and instructions for the Christian

In the light of all we have said so far, we might well ask the question, "Do the numerous commands and instructions of the New Testament have any relevance for the person who has faith in Christ and has experienced his grace?" Obviously they are there for a purpose! If we are to live lives that are pleasing to God—that is, if we are going to be good and useful children, then we need to know how to do it. Because of our limited understanding, we need clear guidance as to how we can indeed please our heavenly Father and how we can grow into all that God desires for us and has in store for us. That's what the New Testament commands and instructions are all about. Tom Wright, in his excellent book *Simply Christian*,¹³ puts this well:

The rules are to be understood, not as arbitrary laws thought up by a distant God to stop us having fun (or to set us some ethical hoops to jump through as a kind of moral examination), but as the signposts to a way of life in which heaven and earth overlap, in which God's future breaks into the present, in which we discover what genuine humanness looks and feels like in practice.

¹³ SPCK, 2006, ©. This book has been described as the most thrilling attempt to re-express the heart of the Christian faith and the transformation it offers to every area of personal and social life since C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*.

If we keep the rules, life will be a lot more pleasant and useful. Consider the following passages: **“Great peace have those who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble”** (Psalm 119:165); **“If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea”** (Isaiah 48:18); **“The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart...They are more precious than gold...they are sweeter than honey...By them your servant is warned; and in keeping them there is great reward”** (Psalm 19:7-11). The author of Psalm 119 was one who had a great love for and delight in the laws of God. All but four or five of its 176 verses contain a reference to the laws, commands, precepts, decrees, promises, statutes or words of God. Jesus himself delighted to keep all the laws of God. He said, **“Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them”** (Matthew 5:17).

So when Paul says in Romans that we **“died to the law through the body of Christ”** (7:4), and in Ephesians that Jesus, by his cross, was **“setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations”** (2:15), he obviously doesn't mean that God's commands no longer matter, but merely that they are set aside as a means whereby we can make ourselves acceptable to God. After all, Paul has plenty of instructions for the Romans and Ephesians about how they should live!

And God's commands **“are not burdensome”** (1 John 5:3). In referring to his yoke of obedience, Jesus said, **“my yoke is easy and my burden is light”** (Matthew 11:30).

It is grace that provides the motivation for this way of life. Paul has a significant passage on this in his letter to Titus: **“The grace of God has appeared to all people. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good”** (Titus 2:11-14). Note that it is grace which teaches us all this. The word translated “teach” here is the same word Paul uses when he says fathers are to bring up their children in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4). It includes admonition, reproof and punishment given in love for the benefit of the child, as well as instruction. It is encouraging to know that God is the one who accepts responsibility for our spiritual growth and will allow only those experiences that, in his grace, will contribute to that end. Grace “teaches” us not only to be good, but how to say **“No”**—no to those things that would disqualify us for the race and make our Christian lives ineffective. It also makes us **“eager”** to do what is good. And it is grace

that gives us hope and sustains us through the difficult periods as we look forward to the appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Why our own effort matters

Another question we may well ask is: “If we wish to live a life pleasing to God as our response to grace, is it going to require any effort on our part?” The New Testament answer is a very positive “Yes”. Even though we are fully accepted as God’s children, forgiven and standing in his grace, we must still put effort into doing the things God wants us to do. Terms like “struggle”, “strive” and “effort” are common enough in the New Testament (e.g. Luke 13:24; Romans 15:30; Philippians 1:27; Hebrews 12:4). However, it is effort motivated by love for God and our understanding of his grace, not effort made in order to prove ourselves worthy of his favour. As Dallas Willard puts it, “[Grace] is not opposed to effort; it is opposed to earning.” Spiritual disciplines such as prayer, study, meditation on the Biblical writings, sharing and worshipping with God’s people, all have a place in allowing the Holy Spirit to do his work in our lives. However, it is grace alone that provides both the motivation and the resources for growing into all that God wishes us to be and do.

Peter spells this out clearly in his second letter. **“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.**

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness... knowledge...self-control...perseverance...godliness...mutual affection... love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if you do not have them, you are nearsighted and blind, and you have forgotten that you have been cleansed from your past sins. ...If you do these things you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:3-11).

Notice some important points in the above passage. By his grace (his glory and goodness) he has given us **“everything we need”** for living a godly life. By responding to his **“great and precious promises”**, we have received the Holy Spirit and therefore **“participate in the divine nature”**. It is *for this reason* that we are to **“make every effort”** to add to our faith all the other qualities he mentions. The thought of what we have already undeservedly received and our understanding of the resources that are already ours spur us on to make that effort. And note that if we do make the effort, when we eventually arrive in his eternal kingdom, we won’t have to creep in with shame but will receive a **“rich welcome”**—with bells ringing, trumpets blowing—and maybe the

Lord himself to greet us with those wonderful words, **“Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!”** (Matthew 25:21, 23).

Conversely, if we do not make the effort, then **“[we] have forgotten that [we] have been cleansed from [our] past sins”**. In other words, we have forgotten that we have been forgiven at such a cost and with such grace. As believers, we always live in the shadow of the cross. “Discipleship,” says Clifford Williams, “simply means the life which springs from grace.” Or, as Jerry Bridges puts it, grace provides the atmosphere in which discipleship can be practised. When Paul urges the Christians in Rome to **“offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God”**, he does so not because it is their duty or because of what will happen if they don’t, but **“in view of God’s mercy”** (Romans 12:1). He asks for their commitment, but it is a commitment based not on threat or obligation but on heartfelt gratitude. Martin Luther wrote of this passage:

A lawgiver insists with threats and penalties; a preacher of grace lures and incites with divine goodness and compassion shown to us; for he wants no unwilling works and reluctant services, he wants joyful and delightful services of God.

The writer of Hebrews also says we are to **“Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord”** (12:14). The Greek word here for “make every effort” is literally “to run after” or “pursue”.

Similarly, Paul, in likening our Christian pilgrimage to a race, urges us to **“Run in such a way as to get the prize”**, not a fading crown but one **“that will last forever”**. He himself does not **“run like someone running aimlessly”**, but disciplines his body **“so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize”** (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Terry Virgo compares grace with the moving walkways one often finds in airports. No doubt there are times when our own efforts achieve nothing and all we can do is rest in complete trust that the walkway will get us where we need to go. Most times, however, if we are able-bodied, we can make more significant progress by striding along while taking advantage of the added momentum provided by the walkway.

Selwyn Hughes says, “Grace is the strength God gives which enables us to live or do as Jesus would do were He in our situation.”

Jerry Bridges gives a good balance when he says:

One of the great paradoxes of the Christian life is that we are fully responsible for our Christian growth and at the same time fully dependent upon the Holy Spirit to give us both the desire to grow and the ability to do it. God’s grace

does not negate the need for responsible action on our part, but rather makes it possible.

And finally, D. A. Carson sounds a warning in *For the Love of God*:

People do not drift toward holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate towards godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.

Grace and love

Another way of looking at the subject of Christian growth is to consider the connection between grace and love. God has always existed as a Trinity of persons with love constantly flowing between the Father, Son and Spirit.¹⁴ He created us because he desired to share that love with others. His whole purpose in creating the world and sending his Son to die for us was that he might shower his love upon us. What he longs for most of all from us is our love in return. When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment was, he replied, **“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”** (Matthew 22:37). He was quoting from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6:5). This is not a command that we must endeavour to keep for fear of what will happen if we don’t. Love cannot issue from such a response. As John tells us, **“perfect love drives out fear”** (1 John 4:18). This love comes only in response to his love. **“We love because he first loved us”** (1 John 4:19). The Puritan John Owen wrote a book entitled *Communion with God*, in which he made this statement: “The greatest sorrow and burden you can lay on the Father, the greatest unkindness you can do to him is not to believe that he loves you.” However, it is our understanding of the cross and the awareness that we have his *undeserved* love, *even* when we mess things up, and that he longs for nothing but the very best for us, which prompts us to love him in return.

But how do we express our love for God? The connection between love and obedience is significant here. Jesus said, **“If you love me, keep my commands”** (John 14:15; see also vv. 21 and 23). John says, **“This is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commandments are not**

¹⁴ For further information on this point, see my booklet *Understanding the Trinity*, and the chapter, ‘The cross and the love of God’ in my book *Why Did Jesus Die? Unearthing the meaning of the Cross*.

burdensome" (1 John 5:3).¹⁵ We show our love by seeking to please him. Paul sums this up well in his second letter to the Christians in Corinth: **"For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, ... that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again"** (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15). "Compel" is a strong word and often has a negative association. But here its meaning is positive. In *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Charles Hodge wrote that the love of Christ "coerces, or presses and therefore impels. It is the governing influence which controls the life." Kenneth Wuest, in his expanded translation of the New Testament, beautifully captured the flavour of this word as Paul uses it:

For the love which Christ has [for me] presses on me from all sides, holding me to one end and prohibiting me from considering any other, wrapping itself around me in tenderness, giving me an impelling motive.

As Jerry Bridges says, "Duty or guilt may motivate us for awhile, but only a sense of Christ's love for us will motivate us for a lifetime."

It is the love of Christ coming to us through the cross that motivates us to love him in return and express that love by committing our lives to him, choosing to live for him and doing the things that please him. And it is our motivation that God is primarily concerned with, rather than how well we perform.

The basic difference between living by law and living by love is described delightfully by the Catholic writer Nancy Mairs in her memoir *Ordinary Time*. She tells of her years of mutiny against childhood images of a "Daddy God," who could only be pleased if she followed a list of onerous prescriptions and prohibitions:

The fact that these took their most basic form as commandments suggested that human nature had to be forced into goodness; left to its own devices, it would prefer idols, profanity, leisurely Sunday mornings with bagels and the New York Times, disrespect for authority, murder, adultery, theft, lies, and everything belonging to the guy next door...I was forever on the perilous verge of doing a don't, to atone for which I had to beg forgiveness from the very being who had set me up for the trespass, by forbidding behaviours he clearly expected me to commit, in the first place: the God of the gotcha, you might say.

Mairs broke a lot of those rules, felt constantly guilty, and then, in her words, "learned to thrive in the care of a God who asks for the single act that will make transgression impossible: love."

¹⁵ This emphasis on obedience growing out of love occurs also in the Old Testament, particularly in the book of Deuteronomy. See 6:1-8; 10:12, 13; 11:13, 22; 19:9; 30:6-8.

I once read a story told by a qualified counsellor. A client had come to him with a problem. He had led an immoral life and now had fallen in love with a good woman who loved him and whom he wished to marry. However, he was worried that he might well fall into his old habits again and hurt the woman he truly loved. He wondered also whether he should tell his new friend about his past.

The counsellor told him about a man with a similar problem, who had shared the following story. This man had decided to share his past with his lady friend. When he did, she put her arms around him and said something like this: “Of course I don’t want you to go back to your old ways, and if you did I would be hurt. But if you do give in to temptation at any time, you may well be too ashamed to come back to me, or think that I would not accept you back. However, your home is here in my arms and I want you to know that I am now offering you forgiveness for anything you might do in the future.” As the counsellor told this story, his client had been sitting with his head in his hands. When he finished, the man looked up and said, “My God! If anything could keep a man straight, that would.”

The grace of God works like that. The more we grow in our awareness of it, the more we will love him in return and desire to please him, and the more contrite we will be when we let him (and ourselves) down. Paul, writing to the church in Thessalonica, commends them because they “**love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia**” but urges them “**to do so more and more**” (1 Thessalonians 4:10). When he writes to them some time later, he commends them again because “**the love all of you have for one another is increasing**” (2 Thessalonians 1:3). In the same letter he says, “**May the Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace¹⁶ gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good word and work**” (2:16, 17). It is the *undeserved* nature of his love, in particular, that prompts us to love him in return, share that love with others, and gives encouragement and strength in word and work. How this grace works in providing us with the incentive to love and worship God is beautifully expressed by theologian James Packer, in his excellent and popular book *Knowing God*:

What matters supremely is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it — the fact that He knows me. I am graven on the palms of His hands, I am never out of His mind. All my knowledge of Him depends on His sustained initiative in knowing me. I know Him because He first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when His eye is off me or

¹⁶ Italics mine.

His attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when His care falters.

There is, certainly, a great cause for humility in the thought that He sees all the twisted things about me that my fellow humans do not see (and am I glad!), and that He sees more corruption in me than that which I see in myself (which, in all conscience, is enough). There is, however, equally great incentive to worship and love God in the thought that, for some unfathomable reason, He wants me as His friend, and desires to be my Friend, and has given His Son to die for me in order to realise this purpose.

It is not that God's laws are unimportant, as we have seen, but it is only one who loves who can fulfil the law. Paul goes as far as to say, "**Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law**" (Romans 13:10). All the dos and don'ts we find in the Bible are simply the way in which true love will express itself towards God and our neighbour.

Christianity is meant to be a religion of love relationships. It begins with God's love for us. Terry Virgo puts it like this:

David said, "He rescued me because he delighted in me" (Psalm 18:19). That is one of the greatest truths in the whole Bible. God is delighted with you. When God whispers into your ear, "I am delighted with you", it's almost too much to bear.

I once looked up "delight" in the dictionary. It said "great pleasure and satisfaction" but I wasn't too pleased or satisfied with that! So I searched for it in a thesaurus. This is what I found: "laugh, smile, get a kick out of, hug oneself, rave, bask in, enjoy, wallow, have fun, exhilarate, relish, elate, thrill, ravish, intoxicate, entrance, enrapture, purr." Isn't that wonderful? When God looks at you he purrs with delight!

Have you ever fallen in love? You are in a room full of people and suddenly you realise, "She saw me!" The Bible says, "You have stolen my heart, my sister, my bride: you have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes" (Song of Songs 4:9). Or have you ever seen parents with their first baby? "Isn't he wonderful? Doesn't he look just like me? Did you see that? That was his first smile." God purrs over his people just like that.

Grace, gratitude and joy

The New Testament has a good deal to say about thanksgiving and joy. Joy is sometimes specifically linked to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives (Acts 13:52; Romans 14:17; Galatians 5:22; 1 Thessalonians 1:6).

I have a strong impression that it is those Christians who best understand the grace of God, and all that they have been freely given in Christ, who are the most grateful and the most joyful. Such people are also the most generous, as we shall see later. Karl Barth said, "Grace and gratitude belong together

like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice and echo. Gratitude follows grace as thunder follows lightning.”

C. S. Lewis, in *The Four Loves*, put the connection between grace and joy like this:

It is easy to acknowledge, but almost impossible to realise for long, that we are mirrors whose brightness, if we are bright, is wholly derived from the sun that shines upon us. Surely we must have a little—however little—native luminosity? Surely we can't be [mere] creatures.

He goes on:

Grace substitutes a full, childlike and delighted acceptance of our Need, a joy in total dependence. We become 'jolly beggars'.

In a similar vein, Robert Farrar Capon says, in *Parables of Grace*:

Grace is the celebration of life, relentlessly hounding all the non-celebrants in the world. It is a floating, cosmic bash shouting its way through the streets of the universe, flinging the sweetness of its cessations to every window, pounding at every door in a hilarity beyond all liking and happening, until the prodigals come out at last and dance, and the elder brothers finally take their fingers out of their ears.

In Philemon 7, the word normally translated “grace” is translated “joy”. They are closely related.

Grace and humility

Without humility it is unlikely that we are going to exemplify many other truly Christian virtues. Humility is not a matter of denying what we are or what we may have achieved in life. It comes as a result of a clear understanding of all we owe to the grace of God. In 1868, Josiah Bull wrote of converted slave trader John Newton when he was Vicar of Olney:

Some men excel in one virtue more than another. But Newton's character was beautiful in its entirety. It rested on a solid foundation—the initial Christian grace of humility, and of this grace he was a most striking example. He never for a moment forgot that by the grace of God he was what he was.

In *Living Below with the Saints We Know* Brian Hathaway wrote, “The doctrine of grace humbles people without degrading them and exalts them without inflating them.”

I don't think I have read a better description of this relationship between grace and humility than noted theologian James Packer gave in an interview published in *Decision* magazine entitled ‘A Conversation with J. I. Packer: Really Knowing God’:

I realize that all of my Christian life from beginning to end is His gift of grace. I'm still a sinner and I can only live by being forgiven by the mercy of

God day to day. That has become a bigger and bigger thought for me. As I look over the 62 years I've been a Christian, one of the great things that God has been teaching me the whole time from start to finish—and is teaching me still—is that Christians grow down, downward into humility rather than upward into any form of achievement or success. If God gives achievement and success, those are His gifts and we should be thankful. But, if we are going to talk about growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ that all of us are called to pursue, the thing to grasp is that growing in grace, growing in the knowledge of Jesus Christ, is growing downward into humility in which one claims less and less for oneself. We become more insistent in saying, "Look it's entirely God's grace to me. It isn't in the least my effort, my volunteering, my performance. Anything that I've managed to do right is by His grace.

Understanding grace keeps us humble. It works the other way also. **"God opposes the proud, but shows favour [or "gives grace"] to the humble"** (James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5). Deuteronomy 8 is a grim reminder of what happens to a people who forget God's kindness, and who think that every success they have enjoyed is by their own merit.

The misuse of grace

There are two ways in which the grace of God can be misused. If not fully understood it can lead to *legalism*. This is an overemphasis on man-made rules, rather than on those qualities so often emphasised in the New Testament, which lead to loving relationships. It was one of the problems the Galatian Christians were facing. **"Now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces? Do you wish to be enslaved by them all over again? You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you"** (Galatians 4:9-11).

The Christians in Colossae had a somewhat similar problem. **"Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: 'Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!'"** These rules, which have to do with things that are destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (Colossians 2:20-23). Jesus also had something to say about this (Matthew 15:1-9). We should, however, adjust our behaviour in certain circumstances, so that we do not unnecessarily offend those who are stuck on some rules which we believe are not essential to our faith. Paul has good advice in such circumstances in Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8.

Legalistic churches tend to be those where the pastor, the elders, or maybe the congregation as a whole decide what behaviours are acceptable and what are not, rather than letting the New Testament be the guide. Such churches tend to make people judgemental rather than loving. They look too much to the pastor or other Christians for guidance on how to live, rather than building relationships with the Lord himself. Legalism feeds either our pride or despair. Any thought that God loves us because of our success in keeping his commands will make us either proud of our achievements or despondent because of our failure, and it will make us judgemental towards those whom we don't think have done as well as we have.

Like the Pharisee in the story Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9-14), legalistic people get their self-esteem by comparing themselves with others. As Dominic Smart puts it in *Grace, Faith and Glory: Freedom in Christ*,¹⁷ "Legalism becomes the tool for spiritual oppression and abuse, for control over others and for the elevation of our own status." Significantly, the legalistic Scribes and Pharisees were among those who put Christ to death. Legalism takes away love as a motivation. Paul reserved some of his strongest language for those who were legalistic. He calls them "**hypocrites**" and "**agitators**" and says they "**will have to pay the penalty**" (Galatians 2:13; 5:10, 12).

The grave of a certain worthy woman had the following epitaph, "She spent her life in serving others. Now she has rest, and so have they".

Martin Luther put it like this:

No one can be good and do good unless God's grace first makes him good; and no one becomes good by works, but good works are done only by him who is good. Just so the fruits do not make the tree, but the tree bears the fruit. ... Therefore all works, no matter how good they are and how pretty they look, are in vain if they do not flow from grace.

The law by itself cannot change the heart and it is the heart that is our problem. Jeremiah says, "**The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure**" (17:9). The words here translated "beyond cure" would be better translated "desperately sick". The Hebrew word *anash* is a medical term. It is "**out of [our] hearts**" (Mark 7:21) that evil things come. We need the open heart surgery that grace provides. The law can make bad people behave better (see 1 Timothy 1:9) but it cannot make us good. And it denies God the glory that is rightfully his in forgiving and transforming us. It also robs God of that further glory which comes from enjoying him. As John Piper says, we glorify God by enjoying him forever.

A further problem caused by legalism is expressed by Dominic Smart:

¹⁷ Authentic Lifestyle, 2003, ©.

The legalistic life of works is turned in upon itself in self-examination, self-doubt, self-castigation, self-satisfaction. But the life of faith, by which we depend on the grace of God and submit to the Lordship of Christ alone gives us a new focus: God himself. We are turned outward, upward, Godward.

Whereas legalistic people tend to be less open and honest about their failings, a true understanding of grace frees us to be more open with God and with others. We don't have to rationalise and excuse our sins, as we are all equally dependent on grace. Any goodness we might have is solely the result of grace.

It may not always be easy to keep the balance between our experience of grace and our desire to please God out of gratitude by keeping his commands, without falling into the trap of legalism. Samuel Bolton, in *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, recognised this when he wrote:

It is a hard lesson to live above the law, and yet walk according to the law. But this is the lesson a Christian has to learn, to walk in the law in respect of duty, but to live above the law in respect of comfort, neither expecting favour from the law in respect of his obedience nor fearing harsh treatment from the law in respect of his failing.

A story that vividly underlines the difference between legalism and grace is told by James B. Torrance in *Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*. He was visiting a friend, Roland Walls, in the Community of the Transfiguration, in Roslin village, a few miles out of Edinburgh, and noticed a piece of sculpture in the garden. His friend told him the following story about it:

A young sculptor, brought up among the Exclusive Brethren, one day confessed to the fellowship that he was gay. As a result, he was asked to leave the Assembly. In his distress, he found his way to the Roslin Community, where Roland found him on his knees in prayer in the chapel. The young man poured out his story and unburdened his heart. At the end of their conversation, Roland simply put his arms around him and gave him a hug! That hug symbolised everything for the man. He knew he was loved, accepted, forgiven. He went back, found a block of sandstone and carved out a figure of the two Adams. They are kneeling, embracing one another. Christ lays his head on the right shoulder of fallen Adam, and fallen Adam lays his head on the right shoulder of Christ, the second Adam. The only way in which one can distinguish between the two Adams is by the nail prints in the hands of Christ. That sculptor saw himself in fallen Adam, and in that symbolic hug he saw himself accepted in Christ, the second Adam.

If we could catch just a brief glimpse of the awesome holiness of God, we would be forever cured of any idea that we could possibly win his acceptance

by obedience to his laws.¹⁸ There is only one way to live with God, and that is by faith in Jesus Christ, who is **“our righteousness, holiness and redemption”** (1 Corinthians 1:30). Nothing less than the blood of Christ, offered to us by grace, can cover the guilt and shame of sin.

Those who are stuck in their legalistic and superior attitudes do not know how to react when confronted with grace. Walter Wink tells of a black South African woman who was walking on the street with her children when a white man spat in her face. She stopped and said, “Thank you, and now for the children.” Nonplussed, the man was unable to respond.

By his own example, Jesus challenged us to look at the world through what Irenaeus would call “grace-healed eyes”.

The other extreme is *licence*, believing that because I am accepted by God anyway, it doesn’t matter too much how I live. Jude speaks of **“ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a licence for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord”** (v. 4). Paul warns the Galatians, **“You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘love your neighbour as yourself.’ If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other”** (5:13-15). Legalism is sinful, but so is lawlessness—so much so, that the Bible declares that **“sin is lawlessness”** (1 John 3:4).

The antidote to both these extremes is greater understanding of grace, and particularly of the cost of that grace. As Jerry Bridges says in *Transforming Grace*:

Although grace is part of the essential nature of God, the extending of His grace to us cost Him the most expensive price ever paid, the death of His own dear Son. So grace is never cheap. It is absolutely free to us, but infinitely expensive to God.

If I have any appreciation at all of what the cross involved for God, then I would shun any thought whatever of descending into moral licence. And if I have any understanding of the undeserved nature of that grace, which now comes to me at such cost, I would never be a candidate for licence. Godliness matters. However, as we have seen, our reasons for seeking to live a life pleasing to our heavenly Father are important. Tom Wright, in his extremely thoughtful book *Evil and the Justice of God*,¹⁹ puts a very good perspective on this:

¹⁸ There are many passages in the Bible that speak of God’s holiness—e.g. Exodus 19:23-25; 1 Chronicles 16:29, 30; Isaiah 6:1-5; 29:23; Revelation 15:3, 4.

¹⁹ SPCK, 2006, ©.

Christian ethics does not consist of a list of 'what we're allowed to do' and 'what we're not allowed to do'. It consists, rather, in the summons to live in God's new world, on the basis that idolatry and sin have been defeated at the cross and that new creation has begun at Easter—and that the entire new world based on this achievement is guaranteed by the power of the Spirit. Romans 8:12-17 thus invites Christians to live as Exodus people, not to dream of going back to slavery in Egypt but to work hard at putting to death all that is in fact deadly, and at living the renewed life which the Spirit creates in and for those who are led by that Spirit. Among the clearest statements of this theme is Colossians 3:1-11: 'if you are risen with the Messiah, seek the things that are above, where he is'—which means, in very practical terms, that all the things which deface human life here and now, particularly anger and bitterness on the one hand and sexual immorality on the other, must be done away with.

Christian freedom under grace is indeed a reality. Paul says, **“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery”** (Galatians 5:1). Popular writer Charles Swindoll says, “Most Christians have been better trained to expect and handle their sin than to expect and enjoy their freedom.” However, it is not freedom to do as we please. Swindoll sums up the true nature of this freedom:

Free from what? Free from oneself. Free from guilt and shame. Free from the damnable impulses I couldn't stop when I was in bondage to sin. Free from the tyranny of other's opinions, expectations, demands. And free to what? Free to obey. Free to love. Free to forgive others as well as myself. Free to allow others to be who they are—different from me! Free to live beyond the limitations of human effort. Free to serve and glorify Christ.

As Yancey says, if we truly grasped God's grace, then, “we would spend all our days trying to fathom, not exploit, God's grace.”

Enduring trials by grace

Another strong emphasis in the New Testament concerning the blessings we receive from grace is the ability to cope with the pressures and trials that life so often brings our way. Whether it be the supplying of our daily needs or the giving of sufficient strength in times of unusual pressure, we are constantly told that the grace of God is adequate for the situation.

Two words Paul uses to describe the experience of one who has learned to live daily in dependence on the grace of God are “content” and “sufficient”. In his letter to the Philippians, he expresses his appreciation for the concern they have shown for him in his imprisonment. He says, **“I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have**

plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength.” (4:11-13). The words “gives me strength” could equally well be translated “makes me able”. The emphasis is not so much on Christ giving strength to achieve anything, but Christ enabling us to cope in any situation. Paul had “**learned the secret**” of coping, no matter what experiences he faced. Whether dealing with the stresses of ordinary daily living or enduring extraordinary pressures, he knew the secret of contentment.

Another who had “learned the secret” was Fanny Crosby, author of over 8,000 hymns. Made blind accidentally in infancy, she was only eight years old when she wrote:

*Oh, what a happy soul I am,
Although I cannot see,
I am resolved that in this world
Contented I will be.
How many blessings I enjoy
That other people don't!
To weep and sigh because I'm blind,
I cannot, and I won't.*

Second Corinthians is a great letter on the subject of facing suffering and trials. In his first chapter Paul speaks of being “**under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself**” (v. 8). In chapter 12 he mentions a severe affliction, which he describes as “**a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me**” (v. 7). Whether this was some chronic infirmity or not, we cannot be sure. It may have been the infirmity he mentions in his letter to the Galatians where he refers to an illness that apparently severely affected his eyes (4:13-15). Three times he prayed for deliverance. However, God’s response was, “**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness**” (2 Corinthians 12:9). It was Paul’s awareness of this grace and his dependence upon it that enabled him to say, “**Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest upon me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak then I am strong**” (v. 9, 10). It is clear from this passage that God’s grace, in this context, has more to do with the free supply of strength from the indwelling Spirit, than the mere offer of forgiveness.

Here we see a most important principle. Our weaknesses and difficulties can give us a positive advantage if, through them, we learn to depend on the grace of God. In *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Philip Hughes wrote, “Every believer must

learn that human weakness and divine grace go hand in hand together.” He goes as far as to say:

Indeed, the abject weakness of the human instrument serves to magnify and throw into relief the perfection of the divine power in a way that any suggestion of human adequacy could never do. The greater the servant’s weakness, the more conspicuous is the power of his Master’s all-sufficient grace.

And this is not an easy lesson to learn. As John Calvin said in his *New Testament Commentaries*:

Men have no taste for it [God’s power] till they are convinced of their need of it and they immediately forget its value unless they are continually reminded by the awareness of their own weakness.

So often we fail to experience the contentment with all the experiences of life that Paul had found, no doubt either because of our unwillingness to face up to our own weaknesses, or because of our lack of trust in the goodness of God and the availability and sufficiency of his grace. It is trust and submission and the awareness that whatever God allows in our lives, he is fulfilling his loving purpose of transforming our characters and building his kingdom, that enable us to experience the peace and contentment of which the New Testament speaks (see Romans 8:28-30; Hebrews 12:4-12). The seventeenth century Puritan Samuel Bolton wrote in *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*:

God has thoughts of love in all He does to his people. The ground of his dealings with us is love (though the occasion may be sin), the manner of his dealings is love, and the purpose of His dealings is love. He has regard, in all, to our good here, to make us partakers of his holiness, and to our glory hereafter, to make us partakers of His glory.

Can we believe it, even when we don’t understand what is happening to us or why? **“We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him”** (Romans 8:28). It has always been Satan’s strategy to get us to question God’s goodness (see Genesis 3:1-5; Job 1:6-11). His methods have not changed.

This understanding of the need to face our own weaknesses and realise that the permanent victories in life come only from grace is a lesson that has been well learned by many in Alcoholics Anonymous and the Recovery Movement. Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA, reached the unshakeable conviction, now a canon of twelve-step groups, that an alcoholic must “hit bottom” in order to climb upward. He wrote to his fellow strugglers:

How privileged we are to understand so well the divine paradox that strength rises from weakness, that humiliation goes before resurrection: that pain is not only the price but the very touchstone of spiritual rebirth.

Paul urges Timothy to **“be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus”** (2 Timothy 2:1). It is not being strong in dependence on our own resources, but in confidence in God’s ability to see us through. When Paul was **“under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure,”** he added, **“this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead”** (2 Corinthians 1:8, 9).

The availability of this grace to all believers is wonderfully expressed by the writer of Hebrews. He (or she!) declares, **“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God’s throne with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need”** (4:14-16). In my book *Why Did Jesus Die? Unearthing the meaning of the Cross*, in the chapter ‘The cross in the Gospels’, under the subheading “Gethsemane”, I have given good reasons why Jesus can empathise with our weaknesses. As the nineteenth century Scots theologian Dr John Brown said in *An Exposition of Hebrews*:

The truth is, He not only can be touched [with our weaknesses], but cannot but be touched. The assertion is not, It is possible that He may sympathise; but, it is impossible that He should not.

Notice that the throne of God, which was once the throne of wrath and judgement (Revelation 6:15,16) and the throne of fear and awe (Isaiah 6:1,5), is now the **“throne of grace”**. It is a throne we can **“approach ...with confidence”**. Indeed, the way is now open to live twenty-four hours a day in his presence and we are welcome to **“draw near...with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith”** (Hebrews 10:19-22). Like a loving father who enjoys the presence of his children, God longs for our company. It is the **“blood of Jesus”** (v. 19), now our high priest, that makes the difference.

The writer of Hebrews tells us we may receive “mercy” and “grace” from this throne (4:16). Paul often seems to use these two words interchangeably. However, J. L. Dagg, in *Manual of Theology*, says they are usually distinguished as follows: “[God’s] goodness, exercised toward the unworthy, is called grace; toward the suffering, it is called pity, or mercy.” Louis Berkhoff elaborated further on mercy in his *Systematic Theology*, as follows: “It may be defined as the goodness or love of God shown to those who are in misery or distress, irrespective of their desert.”

One of the most remarkable testimonies I have come across of depending on the grace of God to cope with suffering is that told in the January 2008 issue of *Decision* magazine by Irmhild Barend. Irmhild is the editor of *Entscheidung*, their German edition. In November 2004 she had a fall which

injured her spine and left her unable to use her legs and arms. She describes her physical situation as follows:

I was always a swift person—quickly moving, thinking, acting, helping. Now others have become my hands and feet. For every small task, I have to ask for help: a runny nose, hair falling on my face, an itch on my ear—a thousand movements of the hand that I always took for granted and now can't do any more ... and never can do again. I've become a transparent person; almost nothing is left that I can call completely my own.

However, she is thankful that “God protected my head and put his angels around my mind” and leads a most active life, editing manuscripts, writing articles, attending meetings and counselling others. The Lord gives many opportunities to share her faith and give encouragement to others. She says, “24 hours a day are usually not enough for me.”

She tells how much the prayers of others have meant to her and shares the following secret of her wonderfully positive spirit:

*Only God knows how He talks to any one of us. That has to be sufficient for me. In the Bible there are three words that have come to mean a lot to me: **forgiveness, salvation and grace.** Grace is my keyword. Every morning God's grace is available to me, and I experience it anew.*

What grace to have faith in Christ and to lay myself in God's hands again and again, to rely on the fact that He knows how I feel because He surrounds me on every side (Psalm 71:21).

It's so amazing to talk about the adventure called faith. Even though I cannot use my fingers and hands, God uses me. That is my great joy!

Annie Johnson Flint, author of some of our well-known hymns, was another who learned to draw on this supply of grace. As a young adult she suffered from rheumatoid arthritis that left her progressively crippled and eventually unable to rise from her bed. To alleviate pain and discomfort, she rested and slept on soft pillows. Her body developed serious bedsores and finally she suffered the ravages of cancer. Yet her attitude through all the struggles with pain and confinement was that of submission, faith and trust in God to give her the grace and strength she needed. With pen pushed through gnarled fingers and held by swollen joints, she continued to write her verses, which provided solace and comfort for herself, her friends, and the world. The following are two of her verses:

He giveth more grace as our burdens grow greater,
 He sendeth more strength as our labors increase;
 To added afflictions He addeth His mercy,
 To multiplied trials He multiplies peace.
 When we have exhausted our store of endurance,

*When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
 When we reach the end of our hoarded resources
 Our Father's full giving is only begun.
 His love has no limits, His grace has no measure,
 His power no boundary known unto men;
 For out of His infinite riches in Jesus
 He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.*

*God hath not promised
 Skies always blue,
 Flower-strewn pathways
 All our lives through;
 God hath not promised
 Sun without rain,
 Joy without sorrow,
 Peace without pain.*

*But God hath promised
 Strength for the day,
 Rest for the labour,
 Light for the way,
 Grace for the trials,
 Help from above,
 Unfailing sympathy,
 Undying love.*

John Blanchard, in *Truth For Life: A Devotional Commentary on the Epistle of James*, says:

So he [God] supplies perfectly measured grace to meet the needs of the godly. For daily needs there is daily grace; for sudden needs, sudden grace; for overwhelming need, overwhelming grace. God's grace is given wonderfully, but not wastefully; freely but not foolishly; bountifully but not blindly.

And there is more to come in the future. Peter tells us to “**set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming**” (1 Peter 1:13). God's grace will never run out, even when “we have been there ten thousand years”, as Newton's famous hymn, ‘Amazing Grace’, has it. We are living in between the ages, the “now” and the “not yet”. “**Now we are children of God, and what we will be has *not yet*²⁰ been made known**” (1 John 3:2). As John Stott says in *Calling Christian Leaders*:

²⁰ Italics mine.

Fundamental to New Testament Christianity is this ambiguity of the church. We are living between the times, between what he did when he came and what he will do when he comes again, between kingdom come and kingdom coming, between the 'now already' of kingdom inaugurated and the 'not yet' of kingdom consummated.

In the meantime, there is nothing better we can do to please him than to trust him fully to supply whatever we need for all that he expects of us.

And we must never forget the undeserving nature of this grace. It is underlined in the story of the healing of the centurion's servant in Luke 7:1-10. The Jewish elders pleaded earnestly with Jesus: "This man deserves to have you do this" (v. 4). Their emphasis is on *deserving*. However, the centurion himself had a different attitude: "I do not deserve to have you come under my roof" (v. 6). Even so, his request was granted.

Serving by grace

Stewards of Grace

One of the strong emphases in the Bible is that God's grace is not given to us merely for our own benefit, but is something that is to be shared with others. It could even be said that it is given to us for the very purpose of benefiting others. When God appeared to Abraham at the very beginning of Israel's spiritual history, he made him two promises: "**I will bless you...and you will be a blessing**" (see Genesis 12:1-3). In his excellent and challenging book *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace*,²¹ Miroslav Volf says of this passage:

*The same double blessing is given to us. If we just enjoy good things without passing them on, if we are blessed without being a blessing, then we fail in our purpose as channels. We **are** givers because we were made that way, and if we don't give, we are at odds with ourselves.*

This thought comes through strongly in Paul's statement, "**I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish**" (Romans 1:14). In the original Greek this is literally, "I am a debtor". A debtor is someone who has received something, by whatever means, that really belongs to someone else. What Paul had been given by God he regarded as belonging to all, and therefore he was obliged to pass it on.

Charles Wesley captured the motivation for this giving in a famous hymn:

*Oh, that the world might taste and see
The riches of his grace!
The arms of love that compass me
Would all mankind embrace.*

²¹ Zondervan, 2005, ©.

Consider Peter's words: **"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. If you speak, you should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If you serve, you should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen"** (1 Peter 4:10,11). Note the following significant points about this passage. First, we are "stewards" of God's grace. A steward is entrusted with something that does not belong to him and it is his responsibility to faithfully use it for the benefit of others. Second, God's gifts come to us in many different forms. The phrase "God's grace in its various forms" could be literally translated "the many-coloured grace of God". Third, it is only God who can enable us to use whatever gifts we have been entrusted with in the manner that he desires. Fourth, the ultimate purpose for doing so is not that we should be honoured, but that God should receive glory and praise.

Gifts and abilities

Paul has several passages in his letters where he lists various gifts that God gives to believers (e.g. Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; 27-31; Ephesians 4:7-13). These are no doubt only sample lists of all the diverse gifts we may receive. They may be natural abilities, inherent in our DNA, or they may be gifts developed within us by the more direct operation of the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 12:7, 11), but they are all granted to us by the grace of God. In fact, for Paul, the giving of grace and the giving of gifts are the same thing (Romans 12:6; Ephesians 4:7,8). This precludes the thought of any pride in the fact that we may have been given gifts that others haven't. Jerry Bridges goes as far as to say:

To the extent you are clinging to any vestiges of self-righteousness or are putting any confidence in your own spiritual attainments, to that degree you are not living by the grace of God in your life.

You will note the strong emphasis in these passages on using these gifts for the benefit of others and for building up the family of God. They are to be used **"for the common good"** (1 Corinthians 12:7), **"to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ"** (Ephesians 4:12,13). There is, indeed, just one gift amongst all those that Paul mentions which benefits only the person who uses the gift—the gift of speaking in tongues. This is why Paul regards it as a lesser gift (1 Corinthians 14:1-5). He urges the user of the gift to pray for the added gift of interpretation, so that it may benefit others (vv. 12,13). We are to develop and use these gifts for the purpose for which they were intended, and **"eagerly**

desire the greater gifts" (1 Corinthians 12:31) so that we may better serve others.

Grace and ministry

There is a great deal in the New Testament letters linking grace with our ministry to others, whatever form that ministry might take. Paul, who blazed a trail for Christ across a major part of the Roman empire and who could be said to be the most effective evangelist and church planter of all time, was very conscious of the fact that he owed his gifts and effectiveness solely to the grace of God. Consider the following passages: **"For by the grace given me I say to every one of you..."** (Romans 12:3); **"I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles"**(15:15,16); **"I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ"** (Ephesians 3:7,8). **"By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise master builder"** (1 Corinthians 3:10); **"I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me"** (15:9,10). You will note in this last passage that Paul attributes both what he was and what he was able to achieve to the grace of God.

Warren Myers, who had a very fruitful ministry with the Navigators in South East Asia, wrote about this last passage early in his life:

Hard work without [God's] grace can accomplish nothing, and though God could do anything without us, he has chosen to include us. So the sandwich is God's grace that makes us what we are, hard work and God's grace enabling us to do what he wants. We realise that this is the secret of a fulfilled and successful time, a fulfilled and successful family, and a fulfilled and successful ministry. God is good!"

John Calvin, in his *New Testament Commentaries*, sums up very well what Paul is saying here:

For having said that something was applicable to himself, he corrects that and transfers it entirely to God; entirely, I insist, and not just a part of it; for he affirms that whatever he may have seemed to do was in fact totally the work of grace. This is indeed a remarkable verse, not only for bringing down human pride to the dust, but also for making clear to us the way that the grace of God works in us. For, as though he were wrong in making himself the source of anything good, Paul corrects what he had said, and declares that the grace of God is the efficient cause of everything. We should not imagine that Paul is

merely simulating humility here. He is speaking as he does from his heart, and because he knows that it is the truth. We should therefore learn that the only good we do is what He does in us; that it is not that we do nothing ourselves, but that we act only when we have been acted upon, in other words under the direction and influence of the Holy Spirit.

God calls into his service those who are neither worthy nor adequate and he makes them so. We can well say with Isaiah, “**all that we have accomplished you have done for us**” (26:12).

Giving by grace

Paul considers the matter of giving to be such an important subject that in his second letter to the Corinthian church he gives two chapters to it— chapters 8 and 9. It is significant that he mentions grace seven times in these chapters (8:1,6,7,9,19; 9:8,14). First, he describes the generosity of the Christians in Macedonia. He says, “**We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches**” (8:1). He describes how “**in the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability**” (vv. 2,3). As in the case of the grace of God supplying strength to face trials, grace here encompasses the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in moulding our characters and prompting our motivations. Charles Hodge, in *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, said in reference to this passage:

The sacred writers constantly recognise the fact that the freest and most spontaneous acts of men, their inward states and the outward manifestations of those states, when good, are due to the secret influence of the Spirit of God, which eludes our consciousness.

Such was the Macedonian Christians’ awareness of the abundance of God’s grace that they had received (though in their case it was spiritual blessing rather than earthly possessions), that they desired to share their material possessions with those whose need was greater. And they considered it a privilege to do so. “**They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the Lord’s people**” (v. 4).

He puts this example of giving alongside other evidences of God’s grace that the Corinthian Christians had shown in their lives: “**Since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving**” (v. 7).

Paul then points to the example of Jesus: “**For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich**” (v. 9). Jesus demonstrated his undeserved love for us by choosing a life of poverty. This

could apply to his leaving the riches of his Father's presence in glory in order to share our earthly experiences, or it could mean that he deliberately chose a life of poverty during his earthly existence. As far as we know, all he owned when he died was the clothes he wore. James Dunn, in *Christology in the Making*, suggests that the comparison is between the richness of his communion with God, expressed in his *abba* prayer in the garden, and the poverty of his desolation on the cross. I expect Paul intends it to encompass all meanings.

In a verse that has aptly been described as "the verse of the five 'alls'", Paul says, "**And God is able to bless you abundantly** (literally: "make all grace abound toward you"), **so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work**" (9:8). It seems that Paul is saying here that if we have learned to depend on God's undeserved goodness to meet all our needs (not our wants!), then we have no excuse for not living a life of abundant generosity. God provides for our need *in order that* we may be generous. And if generous, God can enable us to be *more* generous. And if we do not share generously, there is little point in God giving generously!

This demonstration of God's grace will lead to praise to God and gratitude towards ourselves: "**Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, people will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!**" (9:13-15).

If God should bless us in the matter of material possessions, we must always recognise that this is due to his grace and for a purpose. Moses gave the Israelites the following warning as they were poised to enter the "land of milk and honey". "**You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth.**" (Deuteronomy 8:17,18). Jesus said, "**From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked**" (Luke 12:48).

Miroslav Volf emphasises how true fulfilment in life can only come as we learn this secret of drawing on the resources that the grace of God provides, and sharing them with others:

A Christian, concluded Luther in The Freedom of the Christian, "lives not in himself, but in Christ and his neighbour...He lives in Christ through faith, and in his neighbour through love."

*But shouldn't one live "in oneself"? Isn't that what the self is supposed to do? Not really. It's just what the self **likes** to do. The self will lose itself if it simply lives in and for itself. It will seek only its own benefits, and the more it seeks its own benefits, the less satisfied it will become. That's the paradox of self-love: The more you fill the self, the more it echoes with the emptiness of unfulfilment. Living in itself and for itself, the self remains mysteriously unsatisfied and insatiable. Since God creates the self to be indwelt by Christ, that self will be fulfilled only if it draws the living water from the wellspring of love's infinity and passes it on to its neighbours.*

Perhaps another way we could put it is this: because God is a giving God, we can only find fulfilment as we allow him to transform us into his likeness.

Grace and community

Understanding and acceptance of the grace of God is the best possible foundation for developing intimate relationships, whether it be in the closest of all relationships, that of marriage, in ordinary family relationships, in friendships, in church fellowships, in the relationships between communities, or even in the relationships between races and nations.

The reason given by Peter for husbands being considerate towards their wives is that they are both "**heirs...of the gracious gift of life**" [literally: "the grace of life"] (1 Peter 3:7). Their equal value in God's sight is based on the fact that they are both recipients of his undeserved goodness. And where relationships have failed, it is still grace that can provide healing and hope for future relationships. Rubel Shelley says in *Divorce and Remarriage: a Redemptive Theology*:

By grace, people who have failed at marriage and who have divorced for the worst or most trivial reasons may be redeemed from guilt. People who have destroyed marriages through their adulteries can be pardoned. People whose hearts and behaviours have been cold, hard, and unfeeling can be made whole. And this is by forgiveness and renewal from above — not through another divorce, not by the penance of celibacy, and not by unringing the bell of harm already done. What law cannot do, grace accomplishes. What law cannot undo, Christ's blood forgives. What our legalistic interpretations have confused, the redemptive presence of the Holy Spirit can sanctify.

The gospel story, which emphasises that we are all flawed human beings and all potential recipients of his grace, puts us all on the same level. "**There is no difference²² between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus**" (Romans 3:22-24). Jerry Bridges, in

²² Italics mine.

Transforming Grace, uses the Grand Canyon to illustrate this theme of “no difference”:

The canyon averages about nine miles in width from rim to rim. Suppose one person could leap out about thirty feet from the edge while another can leap only six feet. What difference does it make? Sure, one person can leap five times as far as the other, but relative to nine miles (47,520 feet!), it makes no difference...Both leaps are absolutely worthless for crossing the canyon. And when God built a bridge across the “Grand Canyon” of our sin, He didn’t stop thirty feet or even six feet from our side. He built the bridge all the way.

As the saying goes, “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.”

If there is any place where the grace of God should be manifest, it is in the local Christian fellowship. Churches where the grace of God is proclaimed and practised, where loving, forgiving relationships are the order of the day, are likely to be growing churches where visitors feel welcome and at home. Walter Brueggeman, in his 1989 Lyman Beecher Lecture at Yale University, spoke of the church as a “space for grace” and called the church to be a people who “create poetry in a prose-flattened world”. One organisation from which we can learn something is Alcoholics Anonymous. Philip Yancey, in one of his insightful Back pages in *Christianity Today*, ‘Lessons from Rock Bottom’, tells how he was struck by an observation from an alcoholic friend of his, who said:

*When I’m late to church, people turn around and stare at me with frowns of disapproval. I get the clear message that I’m not as **responsible** as they are. When I’m late to AA, the meeting comes to a halt and everyone jumps up to hug and welcome me. They realise that my lateness may be a sign that I almost didn’t make it. When I show up, it proves that my desperate need for them won over my desperate need for alcohol.*

Two stories

In his book *Grace Choices: Walking in Step with the God of Grace*,²³ Jeff Lucas tells two delightful stories that wonderfully illustrate the transforming power of a community where the grace of God is proclaimed and practised. They are as follows:

Are we building church where real humans—and thoroughly proficient sinners—are genuinely welcomed, and allowed to journey rather than instantly being fed into an ever churning discipleship machine? The church that I am privileged to be part of in Colorado had two opportunities to extend such a welcome.

Nicky was a stripper, a bright pre-law student who had discovered that men can be stupid enough—her words—to pay large sums of money to watch

²³ Authentic Media, 2004, ©. Used by permission.

women undress. Over a period of months, the man who cut her hair and fixed her nails befriended her and never 'made any moves' — something that surprised her and prompted her to ask why. Wasn't he attracted to her? Larry, the hairdresser, gently let her know that he was a Christian and that his motives were honourable: would she like to go to a church meeting with him?

Nicky sat through her first service whispering and muttering behind cupped hands into the patient Larry's ear. Apparently she thought that the speaker had been given advance notice that she was going to attend, seeing as he seemed to be speaking directly to her. How else was he to know what was going on in her life, and be able to speak so clearly into her situation? Larry whispered that it was probably God working overtime: no one had supplied the preacher with advance intelligence. At the end of the meeting she made a public response to Jesus Christ. She read the New Testament twice through that week, and eventually called the pastor, who was somewhat surprised to be getting a call from a stripper. She was about to change career.

"I've been reading that Corinthian book", Nicky said over the phone. "Have you read that one?" The pastor affirmed that he had indeed read Paul's first epistle to his friends at Corinth. "It says there that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. That means that Jesus doesn't want me to work as a stripper, does he?" With a cough, the minister agreed: that would be right.

"I've also read that bit where it says that God will provide for all my needs in the Matthew book. So...he will take care of me if I stop stripping, won't he, with my rent and student debts and all..."

The pastor assured Nicky that God would indeed honour her for making obedient choices, and God did: some years later she is still faithfully serving the Lord. Her baptism was interesting, in that around thirty of her friends from the club, including bra-less strippers in micro-skirts and some rather beefy bouncers walked down the centre aisle and parked themselves on the front row. Twelve of them came to Christ that night. One of the church people was unimpressed, made an appointment to see the pastor, and said, "You've ruined our church by allowing these people here." I would have been tempted to floor her with a rebuke, but the pastor was wiser than I: "I know. I don't know what to do. Will you help me to sort this all out?" The lady thought it over, and ended the meeting by saying, "Oh well, I suppose we are just going to have to love them." And to her credit, she did just that. But notice that both sinners and saints — on their different journeys — were allowed space to grow and travel.

Then there was George, a huge, hard man who loved to fight. He had a well-earned reputation for foul language and mean behaviour, and so tattooed his life message on his knuckles: the left fist had a word that began with 'f', and the right hand concluded the message; 'off'. He wore his message to the world, straight from the heart, on his hands. For some reason he decided to come to a

church meeting, and sat with his fists under his chin, glowering at everybody. An older lady walked right over to him and said, "I don't believe I've met you before. May I give you a hug?" Before he could answer, she threw her arms around this big bear of a man. He said nothing, and couldn't because the tears just poured out of him, his muscled shoulders shaking as he wept like a baby.

A new Christian, he still had his unfortunate message on those gnarled knuckles, which usually only created an issue when he raised his hands in worship. But he was unable to find a job—no employer wanted to hire a man with those words scrawled in crude black ink upon his body. Finally George asked for help, and an offering was taken so that he could have laser surgery to eradicate that old message for good. On the day of his baptism, he held his hands high as he stood in the tank and, weeping again, he shouted, over and over, "I'm clean, I'm clean!" Neither of these true stories could have happened in a church that was committed to looking for a better class of sinner.

Grace and other religions

During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world were discussing whether any one belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time, until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. In his forthright manner, Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."

It seems that most religions have a mixture of ungrace and grace, with the emphasis too often on ungrace. Philip Yancey, in his impressive and timely book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* describes the "virulent strain of ungrace [that] shows up in all religions":

I have heard eyewitness accounts of the recently revived Sun Dance ritual, in which young Lakota warriors fasten eagles claws to their nipples and, straining against a rope attached to a sacred pole, fling themselves outward until the claws rip through their flesh. Then they enter a sweat lodge and pile high red-hot rocks until the temperatures become unbearable, all in an attempt to atone for sins.

I have watched devout peasants crawl on bloody knees across cobblestone streets in Costa Rica and Hindu peasants offer sacrifices to the gods of smallpox and poisonous snakes in India. I have visited Islamic countries where "morals police" patrol the sidewalks with clubs, looking for women whose clothing offends them or who dare to drive a car.

Too often we have also seen ungrace rear its ungodly head in Christian communities.

Grace sometimes appears in religions other than Christianity. Bruce Nicholls, in his AFFIRM booklet *Is Jesus the Only Way to God?*, writes:

Glimpses of grace are found in every religion for there is an awareness among all people of the majesty of God, the Creator (Romans 1:20) and of the law of conscience (Romans 2:14-15). In moments of true self-knowledge men and women despair of finding God by their own effort and cry out to God for mercy. This awareness of shame and guilt is itself evidence that the living God through the Holy Spirit is at work in every human heart calling them back to God. It is a sign of grace.

Two examples of the sign of grace are sufficient. The Southern Vaishnavite faith since the days of Pillai Lokachari (1264-1327) have believed that salvation is by grace alone. Lokachari's guiding scripture was the Charama Sloka (verse) from the Gita where Krishna says, "Abandon every duty, come to me alone for refuge. I will release you from all sin" (18:6). Yet even here grace became a crutch to salvation. Apart from the cross the true meaning of grace cannot be fully understood. The second example comes from the Pure Land school of Japanese Buddhism, where instead of strict asceticism implicit faith in the name of Amida Buddha (the Buddha of Infinite Life and Light) ensures the grace of Enlightenment.

However, C. S. Lewis was right when he pinpointed grace as the distinctive difference between Christianity and other religions. The death of Jesus for our sins is the only sure basis for grace. If the Christian doctrines of the personal nature and holiness of the triune God are true, and human sin and rebellion are as serious as the Bible declares, then we can do nothing to save ourselves from certain judgement. However, the God of love has made our salvation totally possible by taking upon himself the consequences of our sin. On this basis alone, through repentance and faith in Christ, we can be assured of salvation now and for eternity. Other religions must either deny the personal nature of God or minimise his holiness and the consequence of human sin.²⁴ They offer no sure basis on which we can be certain of forgiveness. As the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner said in his classic book *The Mediator*:

All other forms of religion, not to mention philosophy, deal with the problem of guilt apart from the intervention of God and they therefore come to a cheap conclusion. In other religions human beings are spared the final humiliation

²⁴ I have explained more on these subjects in the two booklets *With So Many Religions, Why Christianity?* and *Who Am I? Finding My True Identity As a Human Being and as a Child of God.*

of knowing that the mediator must bear the punishment instead of us. They are not stripped absolutely naked.

However, as Yancey puts it, “Calvary broke the logjam between justice and forgiveness. By accepting onto his innocent self all the severe demands of justice, Jesus broke forever the chain of ungrace.”

Grace in Christianity is totally undeserved, freely offered and guaranteed to those who accept it. **“In love he predestined us for sonship through Jesus Christ...to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves”** (Ephesians 1:5,6).

Appropriating grace

Paul urges the church members in Corinth **“not to receive God’s grace in vain. For he says, ‘In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.’ I tell you, now is the time of God’s favour, now is the day of salvation”** (2 Corinthians 6:1,2). How can we receive God’s grace in vain? A few verses earlier, in the previous chapter, Paul has said that through the cross **“God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their sins against them”** (5:19). There is a sense in which sin has already been fully atoned for, and in that sense it could be said to have already been “received”. However, Paul still urges his hearers to **“*be*²⁵ reconciled”** to God (5:20). If the benefits of grace are to be mine, there are still things I have to do, otherwise all that Christ has achieved on my behalf is of no value to me personally. I would suggest that three things are necessary on my part: acknowledgement of need, faith, and submission. And these not only have to do with receiving forgiveness, but also with my growth as a Christian and my ability to meet the trials of life with confidence and even joy.

Acknowledgement of need

The first step towards a personal experience of the grace of God, whether it be for forgiveness, or the need of strength for service, or in the face of trials, must always be the acknowledgement of my need of it and my dependence on him. This does not always come naturally, as we are all infected with an independent streak and a desire to do things our own way. Simone Weil was a French intellectual who joined the Free French and who died of tuberculosis complicated by malnourishment when she refused to eat more than the rations of her countrymen suffering Nazi occupation. She left a record of her journey toward God in her journal and scattered notes in which she concluded that two great forces rule the universe, gravity and grace. Gravity causes one body to attract other bodies so that it continually enlarges by absorbing more and more of the universe into itself. Something like this same force operates in human beings. We want to expand, to acquire, to swell in

²⁵ Italics mine.

significance. It was the desire to “be as gods”, after all, that led Adam and Eve into sin. Emotionally, Weil concluded, we humans operate by laws as fixed as Newton’s: “All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.” Most of us remain trapped in the gravitational field of self-love, and thus we “fill up all the fissures through which grace might pass.”

Yancey uses the illustration of the “dry drunk”:

Alcoholics use the term “dry drunk” to describe an alcoholic who stops drinking but remains in denial, refusing to admit he has a problem. Dry but miserable, he makes everyone around him miserable also. He still manipulates others and pulls the strings of codependency. Yet because he no longer drinks, he no longer has intervals of happiness. Family members may even try to get such an alcoholic to drink again, for relief; they want their “happy drunk” back. Author Keith Miller likens this person to a hypocrite in church, who changes the outside but not the inside. Real change, for the alcoholic as well as for the Christian, must begin with admitting the need for grace. Denial blocks grace.

When it comes to being forgiven and accepted as a member of God’s family, then the need is for the acknowledgement of guilt. As C. S. Lewis put it, “a man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness.” Ignatius of Loyola, one of the most grace-laden leaders in Christian history, wrote several years *after* his conversion, “The most important gift I have received from God during my spiritual journey is to know that I am a sinner.” However, there must also be the willingness for God’s grace to begin its work of transformation in my life and character. The Bible term for this is “repentance”, a willingness to change, or at least be changed. “Christ accepts us as we are,” wrote Walter Trobisch, “but when he accepts us, we cannot remain as we are.”

Faith

Faith is simply trusting God to do what he says he will do. Miroslav Volf has this to say about it:

Notice what faith doesn’t do. It doesn’t wrest Christ from a God who is unwilling to give. It doesn’t earn Christ from a God who wants something in return. Faith isn’t some strange, empty work we do for God so that God will give us Christ...faith is our hands open to receive Christ whom God has given. If I am giving you a present, all you need to do is open your hands, and it will be yours. God gives, faith receives. And because God gives even before the hands of faith open to receive, faith never goes away empty handed. To have faith is to have Christ and, with Christ, a new life and forgiveness of sins.

When it comes to receiving grace for daily needs, then faith is trusting in God’s unchanging love, wisdom and faithfulness. He is aware of my

situation, his love for me is unshakeable and his wisdom is such that he knows what can best meet my need. Those who trust in Jesus have the wonderful privilege of daily access to “**the Father**”, “**the throne of grace**” and “**the Most Holy Place**” (Ephesians 2:18; Hebrews 4:16; 10:19-23), and as God delights in our company, he desires us to take advantage of it. His response to our need may not be always what we want or expect, but he always has our best long-term interest at heart.

And this faith is not just passive. It may result in positive action and often should. In ‘Gutsy Guilt’, an article in *Christianity Today* on the subject of sexual failure, John Piper writes:

This faith will fight anything that gets between it and Christ. The distinguishing mark of saving faith is not perfection. It is not that I never sin sexually. The mark of faith is that I fight. I fight not with fists or knives or guns or bombs, but with the truth of Christ. I fight anything that diminishes the fullness of the lordship of Jesus in my life. I fight anything that threatens to replace Jesus as the supreme treasure of my life.

Although the article is on sexual failure, his comments are relevant to many situations. This brings us to our next point—submission.

Submission

Submission to God involves the willingness to accept whatever he chooses to give or to withhold. Jerry Bridges, in *Transforming Grace*, tells how, after the death of his first wife, a friend sent a sympathy card on which she had written the following verse, apparently from an ancient hymn, which he put in his notebook and often meditates on when he prays:

Lord, I am willing
 To receive what You give,
 To lack what You withhold,
 To relinquish what You take,
 To suffer what You inflict,
 To be what You require.

To take such an attitude involves the recognition that when it comes to my relationship with God I have no *rights*. Grace is the only secure foundation for that relationship and the only basis on which I can enjoy it. Jerry Bridges spells it out clearly as follows:

He is sovereign in every area of life. God as our Creator has the right to endow each of us at birth with different physical and mental abilities, with different temperament characteristics, and with different natural talents. He also has the right to give each of us different spiritual gifts. Not only does God have the right, it is obvious He exercises it. We are not created equal, nor are we given equal opportunities throughout life. Each of us has his or her own unique set of circumstances; those of some people being much more favourable

than others. Since God is under no obligation to any of us, He is free to bless some more than others as He chooses. He has the right to do what He wants with his blessings.

All the rights belong to God (see Matthew 20:15, Luke 4:25-27 and Romans 9:20,21). As Bridges says, “We will never win the battle of ‘rights’ with God. He cares too much about our spiritual growth to let that happen.” This is where faith and submission go hand in hand. I am not going to submit my life and situation fully into his hand unless I believe he has my best interests at heart, and the cross is the guarantee of that.

Sharon Dyer in *Women’s Touch, An Inspirational Magazine for Women*, puts it like this:

*At first I thought
that to love God meant
carefully following
commandments,
precepts,
exhortations —
making sure my life shaped up
and measured up.*

*But now I realise
submission is more than doing
and acting.
It’s knowing God’s heart,
cherishing His Word,
caring so much
about His kingdom
that I delight to obey.*

Peter says: “**All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favour [or “grace”] to the humble and oppressed’** [Proverbs 3:34]. **Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you**” (1 Peter 5:5-7). The Old Testament prophet Micah declared, “**What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God**” (Micah 6:8). It is this kind of trust and submission that leads to peace of mind and contentment. Psalm 131 has always appealed to me in this respect:

*My heart is not proud, Lord,
my eyes are not haughty;
I do not concern myself with great matters
or things too wonderful for me.
But I have calmed myself*

*and quieted my ambitions.
I am like a weaned child with its mother;
like a weaned child I am content.
Israel, put your hope in the Lord
both now and forevermore.*

The well-known story of the Prodigal Son that Jesus told in Luke 15, which we described earlier, gives us a wonderful picture of what grace is all about and what can happen when we submit to the Father's will. The boy who had so disgraced his father was willing to acknowledge his sin and declare that he was unworthy to be restored to his original position in the household (v. 21). He was also willing to submit to his father's decision regarding his future (v. 19). To what extent his repentance was sincere, or driven by his desperate need (vv. 16,17), we can only imagine. However, his acceptance back into the family by his father was far beyond what he deserved or expected. That is just a small picture of the love that awaits those who put their life and future into the hands of their heavenly Father and rely on his grace alone.

The story of a hymn

In his book *Amazing Grace*²⁶ Steve Turner tells the story of John Newton's hymn of the same title, which he calls "the world's most enduring song." Newton's story is a remarkable example of the grace of which he later wrote. Joining the navy at an early age, at one time he entered the services of an English slave trader in Sierra Leone. He was so badly treated that even slaves in chains felt pity for him and brought him a little of their own scanty meals. Morally, Newton had sunk about as low as one could get. Eventually rescued by the captain of an English trading vessel, he later wrote of the journey home, "My life, when awake, was a course of most horrid impiety and profaneness. I know not that I have ever since met so daring a blasphemer: not content with common oaths and impressions, I daily invented new ones."

It was on this journey home, when they were off the coast of Newfoundland, that on 10 March, 1748, they experienced a storm so powerful the crew felt there was little hope of survival. During the struggle to keep the ship afloat, passages of the Bible came flooding back into Newton's mind. "I thought there never was, nor could be, such a sinner as myself, and that my sins were too great to be forgiven." However, that evening the ship was still afloat and Newton began to have hope and began to pray. He thought of Jesus whom he had so often derided—his life, his death—a death for sins not his own but, "for the sake of those who in their distress should put their trust in him." Ever since the day of that storm, Newton never failed to remember the

²⁶ Lion Hudson, 2002, ©. As declared on the back cover, "Never before has the tale of one song been told so extensively and so enthrallingly."

grace of God towards him, for “On that day the Lord sent from on high and delivered me out of deep waters.”

It took some years for Newton’s faith to mature. He spent the next few years as the captain of a slave trader ship. He was deeply ashamed of this, writing later, “I hope it will always be a subject of humiliating reflection to me, that I was once an active instrument in a business at which my heart now shudders.” In 1764 he was ordained an Anglican clergyman and licensed as curate-in-charge at Olney, Buckinghamshire. He was to become a mentor and supporter of William Wilberforce in his battle to abolish the slave trade. It was in his attic study at Olney in 1772 that John Newton penned the words of the hymn, now known as ‘Amazing Grace’:

*Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

*’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!*

*Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
’Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.*

*The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.*

*Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.*

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But GOD, who called me here below,
Will be forever mine.*

The modern version is usually shortened with some change of wording. Today’s popular tune was associated with the words in 1835 in the United States. In the early 1970s, the song became absorbed into secular culture. It

has undergone several incarnations over the years as hymn, spiritual, gospel classic, folk song, civil rights anthem, pop hit, heavy metal number and bagpipe tune. It is popular at funerals. Judy Collins would cover four verses and a repeat first verse in four minutes and four seconds. Soul singer Aretha took two stanzas and wrung every meaning out of them over a period of fourteen minutes. Two New York art collectors have collected 3049 unique versions, in twenty-one different genres of music, that were donated to the Library of Congress in Washington DC. The bagpipe version has been the best-selling instrument single of all time in Britain. It has been used in commercial advertising, cartoons and political speeches.

No doubt the tune has much to do with the song's popularity, but it is the truth expressed in the words that strikes a cord in human hearts all over the world, whether or not those who sing it, and those who hear it, fully understand the amazing grace of God which inspired it.

Turner tells the story of Sherman Whitfield, who had a good degree and a well-paying job working for a chemical company. He said, "I felt pretty good about Sherman Whitfield. I felt that I had pulled myself up by my own bootstraps, that I was the captain of my soul, that I was the Man."

However, things started to go wrong. His wife sought the counsel of a local preacher and one afternoon Whitfield returned home to find this preacher intimate with his wife. He ran out of the house with Sherman in hot pursuit. "I had heard about the preacher's one-to-one sessions," he said, "but I hadn't realised just how personal they were." His marriage broke up, he began drinking heavily all day, every day, and his work performance deteriorated. He said, "I was devastated, I was hurt, I was broken...I told my running buddies that I was thinking of going to church and they said, "No, Sherman, it couldn't have got *that* bad."

He did go to church one evening. He heard the word of God preached and at the end of the sermon the choir got up and started singing:

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)

That saved a wretch like me!

I once was lost, but now am found;

Was blind, but now I see.

In Whitfield's words:

*When he got to the "wretch" part of it, I said, Wait a minute! He's in the wretch saving business? I said, I qualify. I **qualify!** I was not used to going to church and so I didn't understand all the protocol of how you get saved, yet when they got through singing the song I was sitting right at the back and I stood up and raised my hand. The preacher looked at me. I don't know if he thought the church was on fire or what but he said, sir, can I help you? I said, I want that Jesus that you're talking about. I want the one that can save a*

wretch. So he asked me to come on down. I gave my hand to the preacher and I gave my heart to God.

Since that time “all things have become new.” God has sent me a new wife, sent me a new life and a couple of years after that I ran into this preacher, the one that I had run after when he was with my wife, and all the hate, all the anger, all the things I imagined I was going to do to him, just melted away. I went up to him and I shook this hands. I hugged him. I loved him. Only a Jesus can make that kind of difference.

Turner says:

It's impossible to know [Newton's] story and not to wonder how he would feel if he were to be transported into the twenty-first century and hear the lines he wrote in his attic at Olney being sung on the street corners of London, in the folk clubs of New York, at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin, on the mountainsides of Kenya, and in the secret churches of China; to hear the phrases he put together coming from the mouths of rock singers, mourners, antiglobalisation protesters, and Christian worshippers of every denomination in every country in the world.

Conclusion

After urging the Christians in Corinth “**not to receive God's grace in vain**” (2 Corinthians 6:1), Paul goes on to say, “**Now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation**” (v. 2). We are living in the “age of grace” when this grace is available to all who will receive it. However, the idea that God can freely forgive the worst of sinners who genuinely turns to God in repentance and faith is a scandalous thought. While he was battling with cancer, James Van Tholen preached a moving sermon called *Surprised by Death*, which was reported in *Christianity Today*, in which he said:

How could I have believed in the God of grace and still have dreaded to meet him? Why did I stand in this pulpit and preach grace to you over and over, and then when I myself needed the grace so much, why did I discover fear where the grace should have been?

I think I know the answer now. As the wonderful preacher John Timmer has taught me over the years, the answer is that grace is a scandal. Grace is hard to believe. Grace goes against the grain. The gospel of grace says that there is nothing I can do to get right with God, but that God has made himself right with me through Jesus' bloody death. And that is a scandalous thing to believe.

Scandalous, yes—but true, and underlined again and again in the New Testament.

However, it is sadly true that we can neglect to avail ourselves of it. The seriousness of resisting that grace and all that God longs to do in our lives is

underlined by the writer of Hebrews. Having emphasised the consequences faced by those who rejected the law of Moses in Old Testament days, he goes on to underline the greater seriousness of rejecting the crucified Saviour and the pleadings of the "Spirit of grace" in this present age, when we know so much more about God's love and grace. **"If two or more witnesses accused someone of breaking the Law of Moses, that person could be put to death. But it is much worse to dishonour God's Son and to disgrace the blood of the promise that made us holy. And it is just as bad to insult the Holy Spirit, who shows us mercy [literally: "the Spirit of grace"]. We know that God has said he will punish and take revenge. We also know that the Scripture says the Lord will judge his people. It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God!** (Hebrews 10:28-31). This resisting of the Spirit of grace is, I believe, what Jesus was referring to when he spoke of the **"blasphemy against the Holy Spirit"** which **"will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come"** (Matthew 12:31, 32). If I refuse to accept the one means that God has provided for my forgiveness, at infinite cost to himself, there is no other refuge.

If you are one who has not yet come to Jesus or experienced this grace, and yet desires to be fully reconciled to God, then you may like to begin the journey by praying a prayer something this:

God, I accept the fact that you created this universe because you are a creative and loving God and your great longing is to enjoy a relationship with us, your very special creation.

I am sorry that we have spoilt that relationship by our many acts of disobedience.

I accept that you sent Jesus to pay the price of that disobedience by his death on our behalf, and that through his death and resurrection we can be fully reconciled to the Father.

Thank you, Jesus, for your great love.

I understand that I can do nothing to earn this salvation but it is by your grace alone.

Lord, I am coming home. I am sorry for my sins. I repent of them. I now accept your forgiveness and submit my life to Jesus as my Saviour and Lord.

Come into my life and begin the process of moulding me into all you planned that I should be and directing me in the path you have chosen for me.

Enable me to accept fully all that you have done for me and to be open to all that you want to do. Enable me to live daily in dependence on your grace. Give me the courage and strength to live worthily of your love and to follow wherever you lead, so that when I stand before you in person I may hear those words, “My Father has blessed you! Come and receive the kingdom that was prepared for you before the world was created” (Matthew 25:34).

Amen.

If you should make this kind of commitment, then dig into the New Testament, which tells us much about how we can enjoy this relationship with God and experience this grace on a daily basis. It also has much to say about the grace that will be given to us in the future when God decides to call us home. Look around for others from whom you can learn and with whom you can share the journey.

The preacher John Henry Jowett wrote in a letter on his fiftieth birthday:

I want the next 10 years to be full of ripened service. I long to be able to expound the Word with greater power, but oh! the thing is so big that I seem as one who lifts a pebble from the shore, or one heather bell from these wide-spreading moors. The Book becomes increasing wonderful to me. Every added experience in life gives me a new lens and deeper things are unveiled, but I suppose there is no bottom to the sea of grace and that is the reason why we shall never lose our surprise through all eternity.

There is a story in the Old Testament in 2 Samuel 9 that beautifully illustrates the grace of God and our dependence on it. David had been a bosom friend of Jonathan, son of King Saul. After Saul and his sons had been killed by the Philistines, and David had been accepted as king of all Israel, he desired to show kindness to anyone from Saul’s family who had survived, “for Jonathan’s sake”. He was informed that Jonathan had a son, Mephibosheth, who had been crippled in both feet at the age of five when fleeing from the Philistines. So Mephibosheth—crippled and destitute, unable to care for himself—was brought into David’s house and “ate at the king’s table”. In fact, the chapter declares four times that he ate at the king’s table, and in three of those instances it says he *always* ate at the king’s table. Not only this, but David restored to him all the land that had belonged to his grandfather Saul.

Why was Mephibosheth treated as one of David’s sons? It was because of his relationship to David’s friend, Jonathan. In a similar way, though morally crippled and with no claim whatsoever to God’s mercy, we are fully accepted by the Father and invited to share the banquet when we put our trust in Jesus. As Mephibosheth was not only accepted into the family, but also provided

with all his daily requirements as well as other privileges, so salvation in Christ carries with it the assurance of provision for our daily needs in this life and for eternity in our Father's forever family.

This passage in 2 Samuel 9 both begins and ends with the statement that Mephibosheth was crippled in both his feet. He never reached the stage where he could make it on his own. Neither do we.

Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters: and you who have not money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy?

Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.

Isaiah 55:1,2.

Books that I have found useful in exploring this topic.

What's So Amazing About Grace? Philip Yancey. Zondervan Publishing House, 1997.

Transforming Grace: Living confidently in God's unfailing love, Jerry Bridges. Navpress, 1991.

The Discipline of Grace: God's role and our role in the pursuit of holiness, Jerry Bridges. Navpress, 1994.

Grace Choices: Walking in step with God's grace, Jeff Lucas. Authentic, 2004.

God's Lavish Grace, Terry Virgo. Monarch Books, 2004.

Free of Charge: Giving and forgiving in a culture stripped of grace, Miroslav Volf. Zondervan, 2005.

The Scandal of Grace, Selwyn Hughes. CWR, 2002.

Grace, Faith and Glory: Freedom in Christ, Dominic Smart. Authentic Lifestyle, 2003.

Amazing Grace: John Newton, slavery and the world's most enduring song. Lion, 2002.

The Grace Awakening, Charles Swindoll. Word Publishing, 1990.