J. I. Packer

KNOWING GOD

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE GRACE OF GOD

It is commonplace in all the churches to call Christianity a religion of grace. It is a truism of Christian scholarship that grace, far from being an impersonal force, a sort of celestial electricity received like a battery charge by "plugging in" to the sacraments, is a personal activity—God operating in love toward people.

It is repeatedly pointed out in books and sermons that the Greek New Testament word for grace (charis), like that for love (agape), is a wholly Christian usage, expressing a notion of spontaneous, self-determined kindness which was previously quite unknown to Greco-Roman ethics and theology. It is staple diet in the Sunday school that grace is *God's Riches At Christ's Expense*. And yet, despite these facts, there do not seem to be many in our churches who actually believe in grace.

To be sure, there have always been some who have found the thought of grace so overwhelmingly wonderful that they could never get over it.

Grace has become the constant theme of their talk and prayers. They have written hymns about it, some of the finest—and it takes deep feeling to produce a good hymn. They have fought for it, accepting ridicule and loss of privilege if need be as the price of their stand; as Paul fought the Judaizers, so Augustine fought the
Pelagians, and the Reformers fought scholasticism, and the spiritual descendants of Paul and Augustine and the Reformers have been fighting Romanizing and Pelagianizing doctrines ever since. With Paul, their testimony is, “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10), and their rule of life is, “I do not frustrate the grace of God” (Gal 2:21 KJV).

But many church people are not like this. They may pay lip service to the idea of grace, but there they stop. Their conception of grace is not so much debased as nonexistent. The thought means nothing to them; it does not touch their experience at all. Talk to them about the church’s heating, or last year’s accounts, and they are with you at once, but speak to them about the realities to which the word grace points, and their attitude is one of deferential blankness. They do not accuse you of talking nonsense, they do not doubt that your words have meaning; but they feel that, whatever it is that you are talking about, it is beyond them, and the longer they have lived without it the surer they are that at their stage of life they do not really need it.

No Grasp of Grace

What is it that hinders so many who profess to believe in grace from really doing so? Why does the theme mean so little even to some who talk about it a great deal? The root of the trouble seems to be misbelief about the basic relationship between a person and God—misbelief rooted not just in the mind but in the heart, at the deeper level of things that we never question because we always take them for granted. There are four crucial truths in this realm which the doctrine of grace presupposes, and if they are not acknowledged
and felt in one's heart, clear faith in God's grace becomes impossible. Unhappily, the spirit of our age is as directly opposed to them as it well could be. It is not to be wondered at, therefore, that faith in grace is a rarity today. The four truths are these:

1. **The moral ill-desert of man.** Modern men and women, conscious of their tremendous scientific achievements in recent years, naturally incline to a high opinion of themselves. They view material wealth as in any case more important than moral character, and in the moral realm they are resolutely kind to themselves, treating small virtues as compensating for great vices and refusing to take seriously the idea that, morally speaking, there is anything much wrong with them.

They tend to dismiss a bad conscience, in themselves as in others, as an unhealthy psychological freak, a sign of disease and mental aberration rather than an index of moral reality. For modern men and women are convinced that, despite all their little peccadilloes—drinking, gambling, reckless driving, sexual laxity, black and white lies, sharp practice in trading, dirty reading, and what have you—they are at heart thoroughly good folks. Then, as pagans do (and modern man's heart is pagan—make no mistake about that), they imagine God as a magnified image of themselves and assume that God shares his own complacency about himself. The thought of themselves as creatures fallen from God's image, rebels against God's rule, guilty and unclean in God's sight, fit only for God's condemnation, never enters their heads.

2. **The retributive justice of God.** The way of modern men and women is to turn a blind eye to all wrongdoing as long as they safely can. They tolerate it in others, feeling that there, but for the accident of circumstances, go they themselves. Parents hesitate to
correct their children, and teachers to punish their pupils, and the public puts up with vandalism and antisocial behavior of all sorts with scarcely a murmur. The accepted maxim seems to be that as long as evil can be ignored, it should be; one should punish only as a last resort, and then only so far as is necessary to prevent the evil from having too grievous social consequences. Willingness to tolerate and indulge evil up to the limit is seen as a virtue, while living by fixed principles of right and wrong is censured by some as doubtfully moral.

In our pagan way, we take it for granted that God feels as we do. The idea that retribution might be the moral law of God’s world and an expression of his holy character seems to us quite fantastic. Those who uphold it find themselves accused of projecting onto God their own pathological impulses of rage and vindictiveness. Yet the Bible insists throughout that this world which God in his goodness has made is a moral world, one in which retribution is as basic a fact as breathing.

God is the judge of all the earth, and he will do right, vindicating the innocent, if such there be, but punishing (in the Bible phrase visiting their sins upon) lawbreakers (see Gen 18:25). God is not true to himself unless he punishes sin. And unless one knows and feels the truth of this fact, that wrongdoers have no natural hope of anything from God but retributive judgment, one can never share the biblical faith in divine grace.

3. The spiritual impotence of man. Dale Carnegie’s How to Win Friends and Influence People has been almost a modern Bible. A whole technique of business relations has been built up in recent years on the principle of putting the other person in a position where he cannot decently say no. This has confirmed modern men
and women in the faith which has animated pagan religion ever since there was such a thing—namely, the belief that we can repair our own relationship with God by putting God in a position where he cannot say no anymore.

Ancient pagans thought to do this by multiplying gifts and sacrifices; modern pagans seek to do it by churchmanship and morality. Conceding that they are not perfect, they still have no doubt that respectability henceforth will guarantee God's acceptance of them in the end, whatever they may have done in the past. But the Bible position is as stated by Toplady:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Not the labours of my hand} \\
&\text{Can fulfil Thy law's demands.} \\
&\text{Could my zeal no respite know,} \\
&\text{Could my tears for ever flow,} \\
&\text{All for sin could not atone}
\end{align*}
\]

—leading to the admission of one's own helplessness and to the conclusion:

\[\text{Thou must save, and Thou alone.}\]

"No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law," declares Paul (Rom 3:20). To mend our own relationship with God, regaining God's favor after having once lost it, is beyond the power of any one of us. And one must see and bow to this before one can share the biblical faith in God's grace.

4. The sovereign freedom of God. Ancient paganism thought of each god as bound to his worshipers by bonds of self-interest, because he depended on their service and gifts for his welfare. Modern paganism has at the back of its mind a similar feeling that God is somehow obliged to love and help us, little though we
deserve it. This was the feeling voiced by the French freethinker who died muttering, “God will forgive—that’s his job (c'est son métier).” But this feeling is not well founded. The God of the Bible does not depend on his human creatures for his well-being (see Ps 50:8-13; Acts 17:25), nor, now that we have sinned, is he bound to show us favor.

We can only claim from him justice—and justice, for us, means certain condemnation. God does not owe it to anyone to stop justice taking its course. He is not obliged to pity and pardon; if he does so it is an act done, as we say, “of his own free will,” and nobody forces his hand. “It does not depend on man’s will or effort, but on God’s mercy” (Rom 9:16 NEB). Grace is free, in the sense of being self-originated and of proceeding from One who was free not to be gracious. Only when it is seen that what decides each individual’s destiny is whether or not God resolves to save him from his sins, and that this is a decision which God need not make in any single case, can one begin to grasp the biblical view of grace.

**Not Earned or Deserved**

The grace of God is love freely shown toward guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and indeed in defiance of their demerit. It is God showing goodness to persons who deserve only severity and had no reason to expect anything but severity. We have seen why the thought of grace means so little to some church people—namely, because they do not share the beliefs about God and man which it presupposes. Now we have to ask, why should this thought mean so much to others? The answer is not far to seek; indeed, it is evident from what has already been said. It is surely clear that, once
a person is convinced that his state and need are as described, the
New Testament gospel of grace cannot but sweep him off his feet
with wonder and joy. For it tells how our judge has become our
Savior.

Grace and salvation belong together as cause and effect. “It is
by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:5, 8). “The grace of God
that brings salvation has appeared” (Tit 2:11). The gospel declares
how “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”
(Jn 3:16); how “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While
we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8); how a fountain
has been opened, according to prophecy (Zech 13:2), for sin and
for uncleanness; and how the living Christ now cries to all who hear
the gospel, “Come to me . . . and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28).
As Isaac Watts put it, in his most evangelical if not his most exalted
strain, we are by nature in a state of utter lostness—

But there's a voice of princely grace
Sounds from God's holy Word;
Ho! ye poor captive sinners, come,
And trust upon the Lord.

My soul obeys the sovereign call,
And runs to this relief;
I would believe thy promise, Lord,
Oh, help my unbelief.

To the blest fountain of thy blood,
Incarnate God, I fly,
To wash my soul from scarlet stains,
   And sins of deepest dye.

A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,
   Into thy hands I fall;
Thou art the Lord, my righteousness,
   My Savior, and my all.

The people who can sincerely take Watts’s words on their lips will not soon tire of singing the praises of grace.

The New Testament sets forth the grace of God in three particular connections, each of them a perpetual marvel to the Christian believer.

1. **Grace as the source of the pardon of sin.** The gospel centers upon justification—that is, upon the remission of sins and the acceptance of our persons that goes with it. Justification is the truly dramatic transition from the status of a condemned criminal awaiting a terrible sentence to that of an heir awaiting a fabulous inheritance.

   Justification is by faith; it takes place the moment a person puts vital trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior. Justification is free to us, but it was costly to God, for its price was the atoning death of God’s Son. Why was it that God “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32)? Because of his grace. It was his own free decision to save which brought about the atonement. Paul makes this explicit. We are justified, he says, “freely [with nothing to pay] by his grace [in consequence of God’s merciful resolve] through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement [one who averts divine wrath by
expiating sins], through [becoming effective for individuals by means of] faith in his blood” (Rom 3:24-25 RV; compare Tit 3:7).

Again, Paul tells us that in Christ we have “redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace” (Eph 1:7). The reaction of the Christian heart contemplating all this, comparing how things were with how they are in consequence of the appearing of grace in the world, was given supreme expression by the one-time president of Princeton, Samuel Davies:

*Great God of wonders! all thy ways
Display the attributes divine,
But countless acts of pardoning grace
Beyond thine other wonders shine:
Who is a pardoning God like Thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?*

*In wonder lost, with trembling joy,
We take the pardon of our God;
Pardon for crimes of deepest dye,
A pardon bought with Jesu’s blood:
Who is a pardoning God like Thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?*

*O may this strange, this matchless grace,
This God-like miracle of love,
Fill the wide earth with grateful praise,
As now it fills the choirs above!
Who is a pardoning God like Thee?*
2. **Grace as the motive of the plan of salvation.** Pardon is the heart of the gospel, but it is not the whole doctrine of grace. For the New Testament sets God’s gift of pardon in the context of a plan of salvation which began with election before the world was and will be completed only when the church is perfect in glory.

Paul refers briefly to this plan in several places (see, for instance, Rom 8:29-30; 2 Thess 2:12-13). But his fullest account of it is in the massive paragraph—for, despite subdivisions, the flow of thought constitutes essentially one paragraph—running from Ephesians 1:3 to 2:10. As often, Paul starts with a summary statement and spends the rest of the paragraph analyzing and explaining it. The statement is, “God... has blessed us in the heavenly realms [the realm of spiritual realities] with every spiritual blessing in Christ” (v. 3).

The analysis begins with eternal election and predestination to sonship in Christ (vv. 4-5), proceeds to redemption and remission of sins in Christ (v. 7), and moves on to the hope of glorification in Christ (vv. 11-12) and the gift of the Spirit in Christ to seal us as God’s possession forever (w. 13-14).

From there, Paul concentrates attention on the act of power whereby God regenerates sinners in Christ (1:19; 2:7), bringing them to faith in the process (2:8). Paul depicts all these items as elements in a single great saving purpose (1:5, 9, 11), and tells us that grace (mercy, love, kindness: 2:4, 7) is its motivating force (see 2:4-8); that “the riches of God’s grace” appear throughout its administration (1:7; 2:7); and that the praise of grace is its ultimate goal (1:6, compare 1:12,14; 2:7). So we believers may rejoice to
know that our conversion was no accident, but an act of God which had its place in an eternal plan to bless us with the free gift of salvation from sin (2:8-10); God promises and purposes to carry his plan through to completion, and since it is executed by sovereign power (1:19-20), nothing can thwart it. Well might Isaac Watts cry, in words as magnificent as they are true:

_Tell of his wondrous faithfulness,_
_and sound His power abroad;_
_Sing the sweet promise of His grace,_
_and our performing God._

_Engraved as in eternal brass_
_the mighty promise shines;_
_Nor can the powers of darkness raise_
_Those everlasting lines._

_His very word of grace is strong_
_as that which built the skies:_
_The voice that rolls the stars along_
_Speaks all the promises._

The stars, indeed, may fall, but God's promises will stand and be fulfilled. The plan of salvation will be brought to a triumphant completion; thus grace will be shown to be sovereign.

3. **Grace as the guarantee of the preservation of the saints.** If the plan of salvation is certain of accomplishment, then the Christian's future is assured. I am, and will be, "kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation" (1 Pet 1:5 KJV). I need not
torment myself with the fear that my faith may fail; as grace led me to faith in the first place, so grace will keep me believing to the end. Faith, both in its origin and continuance, is a gift of grace (see Phil 1:29). So the Christian may say with Doddridge:

*Grace first inscribed my name,*
*In God’s eternal book:*  
'Twas grace that gave me to the Lamb>Who all my sorrows took.

*Grace taught my soul to pray,* And pardoning love to know,  
'Twas grace that kept me to this day,  
And will not let me go.

**A Proper Response**

No apology is needed for drawing so freely on our rich heritage of “free grace hymns” (poorly represented, alas, in most standard hymn books of the twentieth century); for they make our points more piercingly than prose could ever do. Nor need we apologize for quoting yet another of them as we turn, by way of conclusion, to think for a moment of the response which the knowledge of God’s grace should draw forth from us.

It has been said that in the New Testament doctrine is grace, and ethics is gratitude; and something is wrong with any form of Christianity in which, experimentally and practically, this saying is not being verified. Those who suppose that the doctrine of God’s grace tends to encourage moral laxity (“final salvation is certain anyway, no matter what we do; therefore our conduct doesn’t
m atter”) are simply showing that, in the most literal sense, they do not know what they are talking about.

For love awakens love in return; and love, once awakened, desires to give pleasure. And the revealed will of God is that those who have received grace should henceforth give themselves to “good works” (Eph 2:10; Tit 2:11-12); and gratitude will move anyone who has truly received grace to do as God requires, and daily to cry out thus—

Oh! to grace how great a debtor
   Daily I’m constrained to be;
Let that grace now, like a fetter,
   Bind my wandering heart to Thee!
Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,
   Prone to leave the God I love
Take my heart, oh, take and seal it,
   Seat it for Thy courts above!

Do you claim to know the love and grace of God in your own life? Prove your claim, then, by going and praying likewise.