

Week 16

Salvation: God's Purpose of Grace

Key Verse

Ephesians 2:8-10 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

+ Introduction

Jesus described salvation as a never-ending fountain, saying, *"whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never be thirsty; but the water that I will give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up to eternal life"* (John 4:14).

If salvation is the kind of eternal life fountain Jesus describes, we must wonder, "how does that work?" What kind of engine makes such a fountain possible? The answer, according to the Bible, is found within God himself. In this lesson, we will consider the great "engine" of salvation: **God's grace**.

+ The Blueprints of Grace

Grace may be defined as "**undeserved favor**." Other words like "unmerited" or "unearned" work here too. The point is clear: grace describes a gift or favor from God.

Like a ray from the sun, a gift moves in one direction only – from giver to receiver. No payment is required (that would be an exchange or trade), and a gift needs no reason. It can be small or great, but its value does not depend on whether someone receives it. Everything about a gift depends on the giver.

The Bible reveals God as the ultimate Giver of *"every good thing given and every perfect gift"* (James 1:17). From the warmth of the sun's rays to a restful night's sleep, from a fine strand of pearls to a perfectly cooked filet mignon, from an answered prayer to the full pardon and forgiveness of our sins – God is the Giver. And if we are honest, we cannot claim one drop of deservedness to these gifts. **Whatever God gives is all of grace.**

From where does grace come? Scripture explains that it comes from God. When God revealed Himself to Moses at Mount Sinai, He proclaimed, "*The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious...*" (Exodus 34:6, ESV, emphasis added). The Hebrew word for "gracious" in Exodus 34:6 ("*kha-noon*") is used throughout the Bible to describe only one person: God. This tells us that grace is a unique element of God's being in relation to creation. Graciousness may be imitated but never replicated. **God alone is gracious.**

When did grace begin? The productivity guru Stephen Covey wrote, "begin with the end in mind," but God had a head start on everyone in this department! The Bible reveals that God planned to be in the grace business even before He created everything. Consider a few passages that indicate **God always intended to be gracious:**

PSALM 25:6 "*Remember, Lord, Your compassion and Your faithfulness, For they have been from of old*" (emphasis added, where "from of old" literally reads "from eternity" or "from everlasting").

2 TIMOTHY 1:9-10 "*...God,... saved us and called us....according to His own purpose and grace, which was granted to us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus...*" (emphasis added).

1 CORINTHIANS 2:7-8 "*...but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood...*" (emphasis added).

EPHESIANS 1:4 "*...God....has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him.*" (emphasis added – more on this passage in lesson 19 on divine election).

TITUS 1:2 "*...eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago...*" (emphasis added, "long ages ago" literally reads "before eternal times").

So, grace is a gift, it comes from God alone, and He planned it long ago. This should come as no surprise from the One who says of Himself:

ISAIAH 46:9-10

"...I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like Me,
Declaring the end from the beginning,
And from ancient times things which have not been done,
Saying, 'My plan will be established,
And I will accomplish all My good pleasure;"
(emphasis added)

Before looking at God's grace in action, we should finally notice that **God's grace is thoroughly relational.** Consider three ways:

1. God planned to be gracious in a Triune relationship with Himself. Jonathan Edwards describes it this way:

"Some things were done before the world was created, yea from eternity. The persons of the Trinity were...confederated in a design, and a covenant of redemption. In this covenant the Father had appointed the Son, and the Son had undertaken the work; and all things to be accomplished in the work were stipulated and agreed." ¹

This gracious "covenant of redemption" – made in relationship among God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit is the basis for everything that came afterward – including creation and salvation. ²

2. God wired human beings for a relationship that receives grace. King David meditated on this when he sang: *"When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have set in place; What is man that You are concerned about him? Yet You have made him a little lower than God, And You crown him with glory and majesty!"* (Psalm 8:3-5). Human beings respond to God's grace through the will, which is where choices are made. ³
3. God's most gracious gift is a relationship with Himself. In the Old Testament, He gave Himself to Israel, saying, *"I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people."* (Leviticus 26:11-12). In the New Testament, God sent Jesus Christ to dwell among His people and reconcile their relationship to Himself through Jesus' substitutionary death (Romans 5:10). After Jesus' death and resurrection, God and Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to dwell in believers (2 Timothy 1:14) as a "down payment" on the blessedness that awaits them: an eternal unhindered relationship with God (Ephesians 1:14). ⁴

Scripture describes this relationship in 1 Corinthians 13:12: *"Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I also have been fully known."* Having a relationship with the Triune God in this way is truly an "indescribable gift" (2 Corinthians 9:15).

✦ The Grace Everyone Experiences: Common Grace

If grace is a gift from God, planned long ago, experienced in relationship, we must ask who gets it. Does everyone experience a relationship with God? To this, we can say both "yes" and "no." We can say "yes," because God created and sustains every person. We can say "no," because many people know nothing of the infinitely closer *personal* relationship that comes through believing in Jesus Christ and being indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Obviously, the second relationship – the saving relationship – is the best kind. But the first relationship is important. It's the relationship each of

us had with God before we repented of sin and believed in Jesus. It is the relationship countless millions of non-Christians have today, and it is still a gift from God. Let's consider the elements of God's "non-saving" or **common grace**.

1. **Creation** – God's power and goodness are clearly expressed in whatever He creates (Romans 1:20). The universe—and the earth in particular—are places of indescribable beauty, immeasurable bounty, and immense possibilities (Psalm 65:5-13; Psalm 104; Psalm 111:2-3). God made the universe in such a way that there is order and a degree of predictability that enables all humans to flourish (Psalm 148:1-6). And for those elements that are less predictable (like rain), God promises to give to both the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:44-45). God's gift of creation is for everyone.
2. **Humanity** – All humans bear the *"image of God"* (Genesis 1:26-31). So, they have innate value regardless of who they are or what they do. Like Jesus Christ, all people have a body and a soul.⁵ The Bible is crystal clear that human life is sacred and should not be taken lightly (Genesis 4:10-11; Genesis 9:6). The gift of bearing God's image is for everyone.
3. **Other Gifts** – Even after being corrupted with sin, people can procreate, make a living, produce culture, and generally *"go their own ways"* (Acts 14:16; Genesis 4:1-2; Genesis 4:17-22). Moreover, most people have a degree of capability that reflects God's creativity and goodness, such as:
 - a. intelligence, including language, reasoning, and an ability to distinguish truth from error;
 - b. morality, including law, conscience, restraint, and an ability to distinguish good from evil;
 - c. creativity, including art, industry, skill, and an ability to distinguish beauty from ugliness;
 - d. society, beginning with the family, community, cooperation, and the ability to distinguish friends from enemies;
 - e. spirituality, which includes all human endeavors to respond to these gracious gifts from God.

These gifts are held "in common." They extend to everyone and everything God made. Indeed, *"the Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works"* (Psalm 145:9).

✦ The Grace Christians Experiences: Saving Grace

Common grace gives us a category for understanding how God is good to everyone and why everyone is capable of *some* goodness. But as we saw in our lesson on sin, everyone has a problem

that cannot be solved by common grace. Indeed, human sinfulness wreaks havoc on the God-given gifts described above. People pollute creation, brutalize other humans, and deploy their gifts for evil ends. So, just as everyone receives common grace, everyone also abuses it. What can be done?

God, in His goodness, does not leave these abuses unpunished. He has appointed a "day of wrath" when He will punish human sins (Romans 2:5-11). In view of this, perhaps the most significant elements of God's common grace are the "*riches of His kindness, tolerance, and patience*" toward guilty sinners (Romans 2:4). However, God has something greater still to offer guilty sinners: **saving grace**.

"Saving grace" is simply another way of describing God's gift of salvation, which includes the blessing of being "justified" or counted righteous (see last week's lesson). If common grace delivers earthly blessings to unbelievers and believers alike based on God's goodness, saving grace delivers eternal blessings to believers based on Jesus Christ's death and resurrection.

The most compelling presentation of saving grace is found in the letter to the Ephesians, where the Apostle Paul writes to fellow Christians:

EPHESIANS 2:8-9 *For **by grace** you have been saved **through faith**; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created **in Christ Jesus for good works**, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (emphasis added)*

Working backward through this passage, we should notice four critical elements about God's gift of salvation:

1. Salvation has a *purpose*: "**for good works**." God does not call sinners into a saving relationship so He can put them in a collection on His shelf. He puts saved people to work! Christians are on an infinite journey of "walking in" good works that bring glory to God.
2. Salvation is about a *position with a person*: "**in Christ**." Jesus told His disciples, "apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). The "good works" God purposed for Christians are impossible if Christians are not "created" and remaining "in Christ."
3. Salvation has a *process*: "**through faith**." God uses means and processes for most of the things He does. The human process by which God creates a Christian (i.e., positions them "in Christ") is "through faith." Like the wire that connects your home to a power line, faith (or "trust" is another helpful word) is the conduit that connects a person to the power of God for salvation. Being positioned in Christ, and walking in good works, *proceed* from trusting in God and His Gospel promises.⁷ Faith/trust is an act of the will, but the will to place faith in God does not come from human power.

Salvation is *powered*: "**by grace**." The purpose, position, and process of salvation can do nothing without power. This brings us back to grace. God's "undeserved favor" is the powerplant that enlivens our will to faith, positions our faith in Christ, and sends us

walking in good works. Because it is from Almighty God, saving grace is an endless power supply, and it is a gift from Him.

Since Satan loves to twist God's Word (Genesis 3:1; John 8:44; 2 Peter 3:16), many people have fallen prey to sinful misunderstandings of salvation. They say or think things like this:

1. "Good works are the power for my salvation." Many people make the mistake of trying to earn God's favor. But note how Ephesians 2 says salvation is *"not as a result of works, so that no one may boast."* Saving power belongs to God. It is "the gift."
2. "Christ processes life with me and makes me feel better." Over the last hundred years, heretical theologians talked about how God and Jesus were "in-process" with humanity.⁸ This therapeutic view minimizes God, Christ, and the danger of sin in our lives. People don't need to "process" with Christ. They need to be positioned in His righteousness. They need to be *"created in Christ Jesus."*
3. "Faith is a position, and the person I need to believe the most in is me!" Some people have fallen into the trap of thinking that they just need to "have faith" without regard to the object of their faith. Usually, they end up trusting that whatever they think, feel, or desire is the best course for their lives. They make a god of themselves, but God's salvation is *"not of yourselves."*
4. "Grace is the purpose of my salvation." This kind of thinking can lead to a lifestyle that has none of the "good works which God prepared" for believers. If grace were the purpose of salvation, we might ask *"Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?"* But since it is the power of salvation, Scripture answers the question for us: *"May it never be!"* (Romans 6:1-2)

Such sinful misunderstandings ultimately cheapen the saving grace of God. Although God offers salvation freely – *"not as a result of works"* – it was not free. God paid for His people through Christ "with His own blood" (Acts 20:28).

✦ Receiving and Responding to God's Grace (Application)

Since grace is a gift from God, applying these truths to our lives is straightforward: we should simply receive every gift that God offers us on His terms. We cannot earn God's gracious gifts any more than we could earn a Christmas gift, but we can receive it with joy.

In addition to receiving God's gracious gifts, there are several appropriate responses to the things we have learned:

1. Knowing how God showers all people with "common grace," Christians can **appreciate the good things unbelievers do**. Christians may enjoy good art, literature, and music created by non-Christians. They can employ the skills of non-Christian doctors,

lawyers, and engineers. They can gain wisdom from non-Christian friends and mentors. They can even pay their taxes with a clear conscience, knowing that God institutes human authority (Romans 13:7).

2. Also related to common grace, Christians can **join unbelievers in conserving** the gracious gifts they share in common, including (but is not limited to) nature, technology, art, morality, food, family, and good government.
3. Knowing that God offers saving grace to anyone who will repent and believe the Gospel, Christians **should boldly proclaim the Gospel to unbelievers**. Since God's grace does not depend on how beautifully, compellingly, or even how boldly we present the Gospel ("*not as a result of works*"), we can trust Him to supply the power for a person to put their faith in Him. Christians only need to be clear on what the Gospel message is and share it.
4. Also related to saving grace, **Christians should live out the purpose** for which God saved them. To do this, they must remain positioned in Christ by keeping their faith/trust in Him alone, relying on His grace. Knowing that God supplies the power for salvation should fill Christians with humility, joy, and worship (Romans 12).
5. As good as it is, no one is saved by common grace, so **non-Christians must receive God's saving grace**. No matter how happy, content or "blessed" an unbeliever feels, they are storing up wrath for themselves unless they repent and believe the Gospel.

+ Conclusion

People across Asia turn their lights on and rarely think twice about the electricity source. Their appliances, heating, air-conditioning, and other fixtures run – and that's all they need to know. But people who live near the Jinsha River in western China know the source of their power precisely. For them, the river is a source of energy, food, recreation, and even livelihood. In terms of megawatts, the Jinsha is the most power-productive natural feature in the world. Twenty-five dams harness the river's energy into hydroelectric stations. Only eight countries produce more power than this single river.⁹

On a scale we cannot fathom, God's grace works something like the Jinsha. Many people receive blessings from Him – even if they do not realize from where they come. But for those who draw near – through faith in Christ – God's grace is a power that springs up into eternal life.

+ Sources

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¹ Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. I. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974, p. 534.

² The "covenant of redemption" is sometimes called the "*pactum salutis*." It was a mainstay doctrine of evangelical churches until the 20th century, when it was either discarded or forgotten. The doctrine most clearly emerges from John's Gospel, where Jesus frequently refers to His salvation mission as something that originated in eternity past (John 17:1-5; 10:17-18; 6:37-38; John 12:27; see also Zechariah 6:13; Psalm 2:5-11; Psalm 110; Luke 22:29). A good modern resource on the covenant of redemption is J.V. Fesko *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*. Fearn-Ross Shire, UK: Christian Focus. 2016.

³ The "glory and majesty" with which God "crowns" humans hearkens God's command for people to "rule over" creation (Genesis 1:26, 28). Such authority is impossible to exercise without the unique human characteristic of "will" or "choice making," illustrated in Adam working/guarding Eden, naming animals, and – sadly – sinning against God (Genesis 2-3).

⁴ For more on God's gift of himself, see Roy Kearsley, "Grace," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, eds. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1988, p. 281.

⁵ Of course, in addition to his body+soul *human* nature, Jesus has a *divine* nature, which cannot be partitioned. Miraculously, Christians are said to be "partakers of the divine nature" through the promise of the Gospel (2 Peter 1:4). For more on the doctrine of divine simplicity, see James Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017, pp. 37, ff.

⁶ Except for creation in Genesis 1, there are few things – if any – that God appears to do "immediately" (i.e., without any mediating elements). This takes nothing away from His sovereignty over all things, it merely displays His creative power. Regeneration (John 3:5-8) and resurrection from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:51-52) appear to be exceptions, where God immediately changes a person (first from spiritual death to spiritual life, then from physical death to physical life).

⁷ Biblically, placing faith – or trust – in God always assumes removing faith or trust in other things. This is why Jesus called people to "*repent* and believe the Gospel" (Mark 1:15), and why churches call people to "repentance and faith."

⁸ For good critiques of "Process Theology" and its younger cousin "Open Theism," see Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, eds, *Still Sovereign*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000.

⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesconca/2017/08/10/the-biggest-power-plants-in-the-world-hydro-and-nuclear/?sh=7fb8f1882c88>