

100 BIBLE LESSONS

Give these lessons to people you visit, youth groups, hospital patients, church visitors and new members. Use them in Sunday School, bus ministry, jail services, nursing homes, Christian schools, small discussion groups and many other places. God's Word will answer your questions and help solve your problems.

LESSON 23 – GRACE

INTRODUCTION

"Grace" is a dominant New Testament theme. Salvation is by grace, not works (Ro 11:6; Eph 2:5). Grace releases us from the dominion of sin, for believers are "not under law, but under grace (Ro 6:14). New Testament letters begin and conclude with the wish that grace will be with the readers, and the New Testament closes with these words: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen" (Rev 22:21).

It is clear that if we are to appreciate the message of the New Testament, we need to have some understanding of the concept of grace.

I. GRACE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

The word "grace" seldom appears in the English Old Testament versions. There is no full parallel to this New Testament concept in the Old Testament. The closest parallel seems to be drawn by the Hebrew *hanan*, "to be gracious," "to be merciful" (*hen*, "grace," "favor").

The verb portrays the compassionate response of one who is able to help another person in need. In human society it is often used in statements concerning helping the poor.

The Book of Psalms best illustrates the theological use of this Hebrew term. Ps 51:1 expresses David's appeal to God for forgiveness: "*Have mercy on me [hanan], O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.*" This appeal is uttered out of a sense of helplessness. It turns away from self and looks to God as a loving and compassionate person. God's own nature is the basis on which help is expected. As David says, "*Turn to me and have mercy [hanan] on me, as you always do to those who love your name*" (Ps 119:132).

Our appreciation for God's name leads us to turn to him, but it is his love itself that moves him to respond to us.

When we look through the psalms we gain insight into the weakness that causes those who love God to cry out to Him. The psalmists speak of their distress (Ps 4:1; 31:9), of agony (6:2), persecution by enemies (9:13; 56:1), loneliness and affliction (25:16), disaster (57:1), the contempt of others (123:3), weakness and trouble (41:1; 86:16), and sin (51:1) as aspects of the human condition that hold us in bondage. Only God can act to release us and enable us to overcome the foes within us and around us.

But God is who he is. He is compassionate and loving. We are confident that when we call on God, he will respond. He will act, not because we merit help, but because He recognizes our desperate need and love moves Him to exercise his power to meet our need. This indeed is grace!

II. GRACE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the Greek language, "*grace*" is *charis*. It means a gracious favor or benefit bestowed, and at the same time it means the gratitude appropriate to the grace received. The verb *charizomai* means "*to show kindness or favor.*"

In the New Testament, Paul fastens on this word and develops it as a technical theological term. It is clear that Jesus' teachings provide a solid basis for Paul's affirmation of the grace of God. Jesus shows that God stoops to help the undeserving and pardons the helpless sinner (e.g., Mt 11:28-12:13; 18:21-34; 20:1-16; Lk 7:36-50; 15). But in the Gospels, these actions are not termed grace. Even in Acts, "*grace*" is used in a different way, namely, *to indicate the visible expression of God's power in action*, an expression that marked his presence in the early church.

Yet as the church expanded beyond Palestine and penetrated the Roman world, Paul fastened on *charis* to communicate the truth that lies at the heart of God's saving work in Jesus. To Paul, "*grace*" is a transforming reality. It transforms the way we think about a person's relationship with God. It transforms our present and eternal destiny.

By Jesus' time, Old Testament faith had been seriously distorted by centuries of misinterpretation. The religious Jew relied on his physical descent from Abraham and on his knowledge of the law. Relationship with God was considered an issue of ritual piety and obedience to the letter of the law. The religious man had a claim on God, established by membership in the covenant community and based on his own merits. The sense of helplessness that moved the psalmist to call out to God, pleading only that the Lord show mercy and stoop to meet his needs, was replaced in the religious life of the Pharisees by a smug sense of self-righteousness.

The apostle Paul was thoroughly trained in this way of thinking and in rabbinical interpretation. But he was dramatically converted to Christ on the Damascus road and was driven to reexamine the beliefs of a lifetime. His perspective on a person's relationship with God was transformed, and as Paul was committed to missionary work, he was driven to the word "*grace*" for a way to express the vital difference between human attempts to win God's favor and the way in which personal relationship with God is actually established and developed.

Paul's letters to Romans and Ephesians most clearly show the dramatic perspective that grace provides on God's past and present actions. Let us look at some of the teachings of these books, referring also to Paul's epistle to the Galatians.

In Romans 3, Paul quotes the Old Testament to show that all people are sinners. Law offered no way of salvation, for law stands as humanity's silent accuser, making us conscious of our sin (3:19-20). So in Jesus, God acted to reveal a righteousness that has no relationship to law. This is a righteousness that comes from God and through faith in Jesus is given to all who believe (3:21-22). Because all have sinned, only God's spontaneous and decisive act in Christ--an act of grace--could win our redemption (3:23-26).

Then Paul, in Romans 4, reviews sacred history. He shows that Abraham's relationship with God was not based on his works but on his faith. Law and all human achievements are ruled out as avenues to a felicitous relationship with God. That can come only through faith in God, who has promised to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. This whole process--the promise and the faith--are rooted in grace (4:16).

Romans 5:15-21 again portrays salvation as a gift that comes to us through Jesus and is an expression of God's grace.

Romans 11:1-6 argues that the concept of grace in no way contradicts Old Testament revelation, which was so badly misunderstood by Israel. God has always acted freely, and those who have found a personal relationship with God have not found it by works but in grace.

Ephesians 2:1-11 sums up the human condition and holds up the essential elements expressed by "*grace*." Mankind lies "*dead in ... transgressions and sins*" and follows "*the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air*" (2:1-2). But "*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*" (2:4-5). This comes to us "*through faith--and this not from [ourselves], it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast*" (2:8-9).

The affirmations grace makes about God and human beings stand in bold contrast to the normal human approach to relationship with the Lord. Grace holds that human beings are helpless, so locked in sin that their state can only be represented as death. Grace declares that God is merciful and loving and that He is able to act to meet our deepest need. Grace teaches that God has acted in Jesus to bring us forgiveness and new life through his atoning sacrifice on Calvary. Because of motives rooted deeply within his own character, God has reached out in Jesus to save sinners.

For the religious people of Paul's day and for all people of every time, the message of grace is a powerful warning of our absolute need, and it is an affirmation of the overwhelming love of God that acts in Jesus to meet our need and provide forgiveness and life.

The grace affirmed in the New Testament is always mediated by Jesus. This grace is a dynamic force that does more than affect our standing with God by crediting us with righteousness. Grace affects our experience as well.

In Romans 6, Paul traces something of the transforming impact of grace. He shows that when we are united with Jesus, we are removed from the realm of law, with its emphasis on works, and are established in the realm of grace. Grace is marked always by God's enabling work within us to overcome our helplessness. We yield ourselves to God and trust Him to do what we are unable to do. This walk of faith releases us from the domination of sin, and we become slaves to God, doing his will and reaping the benefit of holiness (6:22).

Romans 6 shows us that grace is not simply a basic orientation to relationship with God. It is also a practical approach to living the Christian life. This aspect of grace helps us to understand the warning found in Gal 5:4, that those "*who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; [they] have fallen away from grace.*" Any attempt by believers to struggle toward a life of goodness by works of the law means a return to the futile way of religion. It involves reliance on ourselves and an abandonment of reliance on Christ, who alone can enable us to live righteous lives. We cannot approach Christian experience from the old perspective, for grace and religion are contradictory. We can only live by full commitment to the way of grace and all that grace involves.

CONCLUSION

The biblical concept of grace is much greater than is suggested in the common definition of "*unmerited favor.*" "*Grace*" is a word that expresses a radical view of life and of relationship with God.

Grace teaches that God's attitude toward us is one of acceptance and love; knowing God's heart, we can "*approach the throne of grace with confidence*" (Heb 4:16) with every sin and need.

Grace is a dramatic statement about the human condition. Each person is helpless, trapped in sin and incapable of pleasing God or winning his favor.

Grace is a proclamation. It is the triumphant announcement that God in Christ has acted and has come to the aid of all who will trust Him for their eternal salvation.

Grace is a way of life. Relying totally on Jesus to work within us, we experience God's own unlimited power, vitalizing us and enabling us to live truly good lives.

The message of grace found in the New Testament calls us to a completely different outlook on relationship with God and on spiritual achievement than is found in any religion of human invention. Understanding the nature of grace, we decisively reject any confidence in ourselves, and we trust ourselves totally to Jesus, who alone is able not only to declare us truly righteous men and women of God but also to make us so.

Adapted from the teaching of Lawrence Richards; Expository Dict. of Bible Words; Lesson Maker.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What will God show in the future eternal state? ([Eph. 2:7](#))
2. What is the means of salvation? ([Eph. 2:8](#))
3. Where does salvation come from? ([Eph. 2:8](#))
4. Why can no one boast in his own salvation? ([Eph. 2:8-9](#))
5. Why was your position hopeless before becoming a Christian?
6. When did you receive the gift of new life?
7. How would you describe God's grace to you?
8. Why hasn't anyone deserved God's grace, mercy, or riches?